

Episode 97:
A Symphony of Serpents

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[0:00]

M: Hello and welcome to Be the Serpent, a podcast of extremely deep literary merit with your classy and sophisticated hosts Alexandra Rowland, Freya Marske, and Jennifer Mace. On today's episode we're discussing the film [Amadeus](#), the fanfic "[String Theory](#)" by [toft](#), and Ryka Aoki's [Light from Uncommon Stars](#).

[Intro music plays]

A: Hello and welcome to Episode 97: A Symphony of Serpents. I'm Alex and I play, like, a little bit of guitar and an even smaller amount of mountain dulcimer? Look, don't ask me questions, it was an impulse pandemic purchase.

F: I'm Freya and I am a chorister who had a brief childhood flirtation with the euphonium.

[M chuckles]

A: Hmm.

M: Oh, I, I need video. Um, I'm Macey and I play piano and orchestral clarinet including E Flat and bass and am a chorister Alto 1. I play a little bit of guitar, some recorder and recently harp.

[Serpents laugh]

A: Macey!

F: Okay then.

A: Recently harp, yes, we agree on recently.

F: Am I allowed to backtrack and say that I am a Soprano 2?

M: That's acceptable, that's allowed, we're all right with the sop2s, they're not quite—

A: I think I'm a mezzo soprano?

M: That's a **range** not a **part**.

F: That's a **voice type** not a **part**.

A: Well, I don't know, I've never been on a choir.

F: I think you would be a sop2.

M: You would either be a sop2 or an Alto 1.

F: Mm.

M: Depending on your preference between harmony and melody. Generally.

A: And what are we?

F: Oh yeah! We are three red headed fantasy authors...

[M laughing]

A: And today if we can manage to get past one of the more gremlin openings of our four year run, we might be talking about music today, we'll see how that goes...

M: Yay!

A: Um, and like music in fiction and so forth, the madness of creating art...

M: DundundUUUUN.

A: But before we get into all of that, fellow Serpents, what have we been reading lately?

F: Continuing my romance novel streak, I read a very thematically appropriate romance novel, [The Hellion's Waltz](#) by Olivia Waite. This is the third of her [Feminine Pursuits](#) f/f Regency Romances and in this one, one of the protagonists is a pianist and piano tuner because her father makes pianos and her family owns a musical instrument shop. And the other main character is a silk weaver and the entire book is a [Leverage](#) con.

M: WE LOVE THAT!

F: Yeah, if that sounds like something you'd be into!

A: What are they heisting?

F: They are trying to get money out of a terrible man who has made life quite awful for the women workers of the village.

A: Mokay, is this F/F? Or M/F?

F: It's F/F.

M: It's the one after [the bees one](#), right?

F: Correct! It starts with [the astronomy one](#), then there's the bees one, and this is the music and fabric one.

M: Eeeee!!

A: We love that.

F: So if this sounds like something you'd like you're going to enjoy this. It's very sweet, the romance is lovely and it's all about finding someone who helps you believe in yourself.

M: Historical lesbians with jobs!!

F: Yes! Yes. It's quite nice to see people with jobs in romances, she says, writing books about people without jobs. The other romance that I read is [the new Cat Sebastian](#). So this is an M/M historical set in the 1960s. And it is a road trip romance about a very prickly, grumpy man and a sunshine man with terrible self esteem who end up road-tripping from Massachusetts all the way to California after they both graduate from University and along the way they get to know each other and snipe a lot and share beds in motel rooms, and go sightseeing, and fall in love. It's very low plot, very low angst, but it's got some lovely character work and I loved the romance in that one. On a non-romance note, I read a book that's been sitting on my shelf for quite a while, I think it came out at the very very beginning of this year or even last year?

M: It was last year, I think.

F: Yeah, it was a pandemic release because it kind of got swallowed. But it's [The Angel of the Crows](#) by Katherine Addison, that is Katherine Addison of *The Goblin Emperor* fame.

M: Yes! Beloved!

F: And this is a completely different book. It has some of the same kind of styles of character interactions in it. This book began its life as [Sherlock](#) wing!fic. There is an afterword which explains to the population what wing!fic is—

A: Wonderful.

F: —and that this began its life as *Sherlock* wing!fic and that's pretty much everything you need to know about it? It is very much Sherlock Holmes fanfiction in which the Sherlock character is an angel, but I love the worldbuilding in this so much, this idea that angels are given names and meanings by the parts of the world they have dominion over so there's the angel of, you know, Kings Cross Station, or the angel of this tiny pub—

A: Oh, principalities!

F: Yeah, and if the place that you are having dominion over gets destroyed, you lose your name and you become a Nameless Angel who loses all of their personality and memory.

A: Mm, cool.

F: And Sherlock introduces himself, well, the character's called Crow, introduces himself to the Watson character who's called Doyle, just, confusingly, as "I'm the Angel of London" which is not a thing! There is no angel of London. But they move in together and become buddies and go around solving crimes! So it touches on a lot of the classic Sherlock Holmes stories from the

Arthur Conan Doyle books and I had a really great time with this. I'm in the mood for whodunits, I loved all the nods to classic Sherlock and Sherlock Holmes books and I just, I just wanted to live in this world forever, I think Katherine Addison's worldbuilding gift is so good.

A: Yeah. I have such a fondness and, like, nostalgia for wing!fic from the time I spent some of my misspent youth in the [Good Omens](#) fandom as a teenager.

F: This is not taken in a sexy direction, like it doesn't turn in a sexy—

A: Oh, what a shame!

F: —I know, such a shame! But still, really enjoyable, I'm glad I finally picked it up.

M: I actually dropped a wing!fic into last month's Patreon recs, in fact, which was Sam Wilson wing!fic in which he literally has wings, [Hollow and Honeycomb](#) by [antistar_e](#). Very good.

F: That's a good, that's a good thematic use of wing!fic, for Sam.

A: Dear listeners, if you want more fanfic recs by Macey, consider supporting us on Patreon for the last, like, month or so?

M: Yeah, we will be closing it down at the end of the year for obvious reasons but there is a backlog so if you sign up now you can go through three years...

F: Yeah, pay for a month, save the past three years of Macey's amazing fanfic recs!

M: There's just so many of them, so many words y'all. Anyway we were doing an episode should we continue?

F: Macey! What have you been reading?

M: I have been reading BOOKS, you guys, I've been reading books!

A: Congratulations, we love this for you.

M: I have read two books that are not our tentpole in these past two weeks and the first one was a non-fiction book called [Symphony for the City of the Dead](#) by M. T. Adderson which is a non-fiction about Shostakovich and his life under the post-WWI early Russian communist regime and then all the way through WWII, because he was from the city of Leningrad, which of course underwent a horrific siege during the beginning three/four years of WWII and people were starving to death. And that whole time, he was busily composing what became the *Leningrad Symphony* which was a huge tool for propaganda and for bringing people around to the idea of supporting Russia, who used to be their enemies.

F: So just some cheerful, light, bedtime reading.

M: Well, it was fascinating, particularly some of the stuff around artists under an oppressive regime that might declare you to be subversive at any given time. Right? So very interesting stuff about what it meant to be a musician and how can music—which has no words to it—be

viewed as treacherous to the state. So, fascinating stuff but NOT light. You are right. But a very, very readable book, not at all a history text, it was very much telling it as a story, you know, complete with midnight escapes over frozen tundra and, like, over a lake that would only let you through at certain times of the year...

F: Oh, nice.

A: I think that's just what happens in Russia.

M: That's just how Russia is! What are you gonna do about it! What else? I also read a book called [The Dawnhounds](#) by Sascha Stronach which I came across in the aftermath of the NZ Worldcon because this was one of the ones that was really talked about as exemplary of modern New Zealand fantasy writing and it was a fascinating, strange, very, very queer novel about a city that is sort of overtaken by mushroom technology and a young woman who becomes a police officer to try and save the other street rats like herself but comes to realise that she's complicit in a corrupt system and ends up fighting back. Complete with like, immortal gods and the instruments of gods who die again and again and get resurrected. There is a very, uh, who is the lover from [the immortality movie](#) who is under water and dies again and again and again? Coin? Quinn?

A: Oh. Quynh? Something like that, it's on the Charlize Theron—

F & M & A (simultaneously): —[The Old Guard](#).

M: There we go.

F: Yes, Quynh.

M: Yeah so one of them ends up in a situation like that, for example. So lots of weird and horror-y and cool stuff. And then, I read a novel-length [Naruto](#) self-insert fanfic.

F: Ah, back to your roots.

M: Back to my roots! It's called [Compass of thy Soul](#) by [Umei no Mai](#) and I bring this one up because you could see it as that or you could see it as a historical Japanese warring states period novel about silk weaving and politics.

A: Okay.

M: And so it has tons and tons of really intricate detail around the homecrafts needed to maintain a household and grow and sell silk and fabric in that period.

A: Mm.

M: And so, absolutely brilliant fic, very little Naruto knowledge needed. And that's what I've been reading!

A: Very cool! I have been continuing my big quilt project so, more podcasts. I am all caught up with [Campaign Skyjacks](#) which breaks my heart.

M: They'll make more, they'll make more.

A: It's just so easy to listen to. They'll make more but it's like, every week or every other week, though.

M: Aw.

A: But, fortunately, they do have a spin-off series that is more YA. It's about this group of teenagers who get jobs for the first time in this airship, and they're mail carriers.

M: That's cute.

A: Which is very cool and it's called [Skyjacks: Couriers Call](#) and it's really adorable and really sweet and it's kid friendly so if you know any kids who are into podcasts maybe recommend this one to them. I also watched a comedy show on Netflix, Hannah Gadsby's [Douglas](#) which was very funny and which made me super happy because for the first time in my life, I got to be included as a nonbinary person in that joke where, like, the comedian will be like "the men in the audience will be feeling this way, and the women in the audience will be feeling this" and then she followed it with "and the nonbinary people in the audience will be blah blah blah" and I was like, WOW, Cool!! Inclusion!! So that was very, very happy. I started watching another television show called [The Wilds](#) and I'm not sure how I feel about it. It's sort of how— you know in [Lost](#) where they get— I've never seen *Lost*, but I know about *Lost*—

M: Right because gifs on tumblr happen.

A: Gifs on tumblr happen, exactly. So it's about a group of teenage girls who, their plane crashes and they get stranded on this desert island and they have to do stuff to survive, and you find out, on the first episode, that this was on purpose and they're there as a sort of social experiment and they're being spied upon the whole time? And they're making some not very smart survival decisions?

[M laughs]

A: So I'm a little bit critical of their ability to handle this, they keep building their camp below the high tide mark on the beach?

M: But— What— Even a city kid would figure that one out after the first tide.

A: Yeah, well, here's the thing, apparently the tide didn't come in until day five?

M: That's not how the fucking moon works!!

A: I know.

F: Okay so they were moved to a different planet.

A: And like, you can see the sand that they're on is low tide sand because it's hard and it's packed down and it's not dry, right?

M: And you've got a tide line above it.

A: There's nice, clear dunes right above them, why not move the camp thirty feet that direction? Anyway.

F: It is giving you some emotions, even if those emotions are like, please leave the sand.

A: And I do want to say content warnings for pretty much everything in this show cause it's pretty dark and hard to deal with. Like, character death, mutilation, sexual assault, and all things, all the things.

F: Is this an American show?

A: It is an American show, it just came out on Amazon Prime recently, I think. And finally I read a Victoria Goddard piece, a short story called '[In the Company of Gentlemen](#)' which is an outsider's perspective of one of the famous adventures of the Red Company who are traitors and sort of folk heroes and used to travel around singing revolutionary songs and pushing over cows, I guess, and getting into trouble.

M: Sounds very [Lymond](#).

A: It is very Lymond, it's extremely Lymond. Yes.

M: Also now I want to see if you could get Lymond drunk enough to go cow tipping.

F: Absolutely he would. Although it would turn out that he hasn't gotten drunk, everybody else got drunk and the cow tipping is part of a large scheme which I'm almost certain possibly happens in the second book?

[15:05]

M: There was some sheep rustling that was secretly a way to defeat an army.

F: Yes. There's some sheep stuff.

A: There's a cow raid in the first book, I remember.

F: Yeah.

M: Yup. [laughs] Anyway, we're 15 minutes through the episode, y'all!

A: This is normal, this is our normal timescale for how long it takes us to get here. Freya.

M: OK, yeah. Freya, tell us things. Tell us things about angry composer gentlemen.

F: Alright! So moving into our episode on music. The first tentpole is a fanfic that is very close to my heart, I reread this and I thought, aww, I've reread this so many times over the years, and I read it at the very, very beginning of my getting into this fandom, which is [Stargate: Atlantis](#), when I went on a binge. Read huge amounts of *Stargate: Atlantis* fanfic because it was such a

big fandom back in the day, there were heaps of people writing in it that I really liked, there were. So this is “String Theory: A Concerto for Violin in D Minor” by Toft. And this is a non-Stargate AU, so it’s a non-sci-fi AU of a sci-fi canon, in which Rodney McKay, the cranky genius scientist, is instead a cranky genius conductor of orchestras and composer. Who goes talent scouting an orchestra to look for someone who they’re thinking of hiring and ends up instead seeing John Sheppard, who is playing... was it second desk in the first violins?

M: He was second seat in the first...

F: Second seat in the first, yeah. I can’t remember what a desk is called. Which one’s desk and which one’s...

M: So he has to lead the orchestra if the first is off being a soloist.

F: Is off doing soloist, yes. And he sees him instead, and sees his potential, and ends up saying, “Right, this is the person who is gonna play the new violin concerto that I am composing, we have to get him as a soloist.” And it’s a relatively short story about how they get John to come and play the concerto and they fall in love, but it’s got a lot of things in it to do with mental health and the role of music as a career to these people, and I think it is a really good translation of the canon personalities into that sphere.

M: Right. Because I think that one of the themes that early canon had that kind of maps to this is John Sheppard as this person who is very constrained in a role that wasted him. And that’s definitely what this fic is doing, this fic is saying, you know, violin as a concert instrument is a fascinatingly uniform thing to have to play. If you as a violinist are having artistic merit as an individual, you’ve fucked up. Your job is to sound exactly identical to everyone else in your section so that the section sounds loud enough, because the violin is too quiet. And John just isn’t good at that. They see him, Rodney sees him in the very first scene, playing violin and everyone’s looking at him as a little bit of a fuckup. He’s technically good but he’s clearly not interested, the conductor of that orchestra doesn’t appreciate him, and the second that he steps up to play a duet with the soloist, he gets to have his own voice, he shines. And I think we see this, John in canon is just terrible at military hierarchy!

F: Yes, he’s very bad at military.

M: But when he’s put in as the commander— Right, but suddenly you give him charge of something and the ability to make his own decisions, he makes absolutely batshit nonsense ones, but they’re amazing.

F: And his value, at least at the beginning of the *Stargate* series, is that he has the right gene to be able to activate all this ancient technology.

M: He’s a battery, kind of.

F: Yeah, so there’s this untapped potential that he has that then allows him to step into this role. Except in this story, the untapped potential that John has is in his ability to translate Rodney’s music that he’s written.

A: Yes.

F: Which is very nice. And it just has so much to say about Orchestras with a capital O.

[M sighs dreamily]

F: As hotbeds of strange, genius, and irascible people.

M: But yes, musician is not just a job but an identity, I see, here.

F: Yes, I quite liked that, and I think that's something that we're gonna see in all the tentpoles in this episode. But this idea that something that everybody in this story thinks of themselves as a musician, it's not just their day job, it's what they think about when they go home, it's how they connect to other people, it's how they form interpersonal and romantic connections, like there's something very romantic about the fact that Rodney sees in John the person who is gonna translate this music that is expressing something that he is otherwise finding inexpressible.

F: He's written this symphony, this concerto, about his own personal experiences because he can't put them into words, and then he trusts John to translate that fully, and then at the end of it he says, "I'm gonna write you a symphony." Which is, in context, it's the "I love you" of the story.

M: Yeah. And I think one of the things that really worked for me as well for translating this is that composing, not always, but there's large pieces of composing that are basically maths. Right? Because, you know, which intervals are you using, what— How are you modulating this particular theme, the variations, all of this, so on and so forth.

M: And the way that Rodney talks about composing in this work is very much like, think of where you are in the universe, what's the maths, what are the patterns, and how do the patterns interweave? In a very mathematic, sine curve kind of way. And he's very aware that he is not good at the emotionality. He's not good at the passion. So it's not just that he's trusting John to manifest what he's created, it's that he's trusting John to kind of create these feelings that he wasn't able to.

A: Mm-hmm.

M: Right? Because writing music, writing sheet music on a book, doesn't intrinsically convey emotions. I can play you my favorite Tchaikovsky, and I can make it angry or I can make it sad, and you will hear the difference.

A: Yep.

M: Because it's different when you play it differently. And John has that.

A: Speaking of emotional musicians—

F: So much emotion.

[M laughs]

A: The next tentpole that we have is the film *Amadeus* from, when was this from, 198...7?

M: 86?

A: Or something like that.

F: Something like that.

M: I wasn't able to find the original, I had to watch the remastered version.

A: I watched the director's cut.

M: Yeah, that one.

A: Which was, like, two and a half hours long, which was...

F: Oh. I don't actually know which version I watched, I was just like, the one I have the DVD of. It is quite long.

A: Yeah. Why is it this long, it doesn't...

F: There's just so much opera.

A: So much opera.

F: I feel like they could have cut—

[M giggles]

A: They could have cut so much opera, yeah. I definitely, towards the end, any time there was opera onstage, I started skipping past it. I was like, I don't care about this.

M: I just took out a video game to play in those bits, but it's fine!

A: There you go.

M: It's very clearly that the director paid a lot to record those scenes with all of the extras, and the costumes, and everything, and it's like, "I'm bloody putting it in, I'm putting it back the fuck in!"

A: Yeah, for sure.

M: "You can't stop me!"

A: Anyway, this film is about Mozart. [laughs] Well, technically it's about Salieri.

M: Nobody cares about Salieri.

A: Who was his— Macey please. Let me get through this. [laughs] It's about Salieri, who was Mozart's... frenemy, I think would probably be the best word to describe it?

[M giggles]

A: And it's told through this framed storyline. Salieri has had this mental breakdown and tried to kill himself because he has this guilt for quote-unquote "killing Mozart," he's ranting and screaming about how he killed Mozart. And so he's taken to this hospital, and a priest comes to hear his confession, and Salieri kind of confesses to him the whole story of his entire lifelong relationship with Mozart.

F: With musical accompaniment.

A: With musical— yeah.

M: This poor fucking priest.

A: This poor priest.

[M & F laugh]

A: Having to listen to this guy. Yeah, and Salieri very much goes through this kind of arc of this love-hate relationship with Mozart, because he wants so badly for his music, his own music, to be worshipping God and having God speak through him. And he can't quite manage to hit that divine inspiration. And Mozart comes along and just does it effortlessly. And so Salieri very much loves him and hates him for that, and is jealous, and is also very glad that he's in the world making this beautiful music, and complicated, complicated professional feelings.

M: I feel like I would tag this Salieri/Mozart, rivalry (unrequited).

F: Yes.

A: [laughs] Yes.

F: That's correct.

M: Because Mozart's like, "Who, him? Who?"

A: "Oh, we're buddies, right?"

M: Also Mozart is a fuckboy in this! I think that's fair.

F: Oh yeah, completely. Terrible human being. But I think my favorite part is at the very beginning, where Salieri is playing the priest his melodies and the priest is like, "Mmmmm, haven't heard that..." And then he plays this little bit of Mozart and he's like, "Oh yes! Yes, I love that one! Was that you?" And he's like, "No." This reminds me of the scene in [Shakespeare in Love](#) where at the auditions, everybody's using Marlowe to audition.

A: Yes!

F: And Shakespeare's sitting there in this enormous snit about it. Until finally someone comes over and says something from one of his plays.

A: ["And burnt the topless towers of Ilium."](#) yeah.

[M laughs]

F: Yeah, it's got that whole creative, yes I really admire you, but you have to be the one who's really well-known. I want to be blazing my mark on the world and along comes you.

A: You.

M: There's also this really interesting undertone, because Salieri is super devout, so he's like, "God, I've given you everything, I've been chaste my entire life! And I'm Italian and so you know how much that hurts me!"

A: Yeah. [laughs]

F: I got very curious about the history of this film and the play, the stage play, that it was based on and things, and sort of went into a deep dive on Wikipedia about the background and the history that it's based on. And apparently the play was torn to shreds by actual music historians, who were affronted.

M: Oh yeah. [giggles]

F: They were like, there is no evidence that they had a rivalry! Salieri was married and had mistresses and many kids! And other guys like, it's fiction.

M: It's all completely fiction.

A: It's fiction.

M: It's funny though.

F: It's very much about music, about being the person who wants to create music. And the way politics works in small groups of musical people.

M: Oh, that's for real! The bit where Salieri is trying frantically to stop Mozart from getting a particular student because she's a princess and then he'd be well-known, and there's all of these musicians bad-mouthing each other behind each other's backs and then saying nice things to their face, and I'm like, I see you!

F: And a five minute argument about why or why not an opera should be in German.

A: Yeah, yeah.

M: Oh God. [laughs]

A: There's some very funny lines too.

M: Oh yeah.

A: Where everybody's telling Mozart, "We don't know why we don't like this. There's too many notes. That's the problem. There's too many notes."

M: That's the problem! [laughs] There's just too many notes.

A: Which, OK, that's fair, Mozart does have a lot of notes!

M: He does!

F: It very much speaks to the trial of being attacked by an editor, or not even an editor, just someone who's giving you money who doesn't necessarily know things.

M: Yes, that!

F: Just cut a few and it'll be perfect! And I'm like, ohhh, that speaks to the writer in me.

M: Just cut some. And I think the funniest thing is the emperor, who has the most power and control of the flow of money, thinks that he knows everything about music and is actually terrible!

A: Yeah.

M: And it's the funniest thing. Because it's so true.

F: Yeah, it's about that patron relationship, but it's also about the world of people producing opera.

M: Right.

F: And I think, to go on a little diversion here, that I of course in the course of preparing for this episode went away and read the two Discworld books about music as well. So I reread [Maskerade](#), which is of course [Phantom of the Opera](#) fanfiction, but it's really about this idea of opera as this liminal space for the fantastical. If there's anywhere that music is gonna slip in, it's in this place where everything is allowed to be larger than life and it's agreed upon that realism has no space.

A: Yeah.

M: Right.

F: And I think that one of the things *Amadeus* does well as a film is it leans sooo hard into that. It lets the theatricality, and larger than life, and who cares what's real of opera, bleed out into the entire movie.

M: The wigs.

F: The wigs!

A: Yeah.

F: And just the fact that you never are quite sure where performance starts and ends. There's so much musical performance in it, there's this real blurred line between what's diegetic music and what isn't. There's so much Mozart music used, and sometimes it's just because someone is playing Mozart's music in the scene, but sometimes the Mozart's music is being used to soundtrack whatever is going on in a very thematic way. And it blurs, which was really effective.

M: And they use large chunks of the ["Requiem"](#) throughout the last half an hour of the film and it's supremely affecting.

F: Ohhh, I agree.

M: Because a big part of the late plot is basically that Mozart is almost haunted and tormented by this piece. Because Mozart never finished his requiem, other people finished it for him. But it's still one of the most performed and adulated requiems. Which, you know, not to assume everyone has Catholic cultural backgrounds, the requiem is a set of texts, a liturgy basically, for the dying, that many classical composers set to music in many different ways. So there's the [Fauré requiem](#), there's the Mozart requiem, and Mozart's is one of the best known. And Freya, you've sung it, right?

F: I've sung it quite a few times. I love the Mozart requiem.

M: It's so good!

F: Every time I'd hear it I was like, oh, I can hear the second soprano part! And that scene, the other really effective scene where Mozart is almost exhausted to death, and Salieri is trying to get him to finish it because Salieri intends to claim it as his own work, and Mozart—

M: Which is always a stupid plan.

F: Oh, it's a bit stupid, yeah. But Mozart is just sitting there, clearly almost completely ragged, and his brain is still producing this music, perfect on the first draft. And Salieri is torn between this absolute adoration, and anger and frustration as he's getting it down. He's doing the notation and Mozart is just going, "OK, so this is what the bass is doing, [fast paced musical noises] and then coming in here, this is what..." And watching that mind work, even if it's a heightened version that wouldn't have been how it worked in real life, was so, so good.

M: It was, and especially that it was the "Confutatis" there. Ah, such a good choice for that, because it has such big contrasts between the two. Anyway.

F: But then the next scene, you get to see the funeral carriage of Mozart.

M: Yeah.

F: And you hear that come together—

M: Mm-hmm!

F: —that thing that you’ve just seen being composed piecemeal, you suddenly get blasted with the entire effect of it... ahh. It’s a good film, it won a lot of Academy Awards and I think they are well-deserved.

[30:07]

M: I had some snark about the fact that the subtitles—

F [laughing]: Yes, Macey’s subtitles snark.

M: Tee subtitles! When we first go into the room at the asylum where Salieri is living as like, “[piano music],” and I’m like, “Eh? That doesn’t sound like piano, that’s a plucked instrument,” and then we zoom in on Salieri playing a harpsichord. And I was like, “That’s not... a piano...”

F: You should write a stern letter. Dear Editor, I have a complaint.

M: But pianoforte was like, new and cool then, and anyway, it’s fine. Everything’s fine. You sit on a throne of lies.

F [pure condescension]: Mm-hm. Mm-hmm.

A: Macey, how about you tell us about the next tentpole, to get us away from the throne of lies?

M: Sure, sure, let’s do that. So the next tentpole is a book by Ryka Aoki. And it is, I believe her debut?

F: Debut novel.

A: I believe so.

M: Debut novel. I think there’s been novellas or something—

F: She’s published poetry before, but I think this is her debut novel.

M: Poems. But this is *Light From Uncommon Stars*, which is a— in which the queen of Hell has to claim one more soul for the devil, one more violinist, in order to reclaim her own music, and she has about one year left to do it. And she casts around and is dissatisfied with all of the violin prodigies that she comes across. Until, in a park one day, she stumbles across a homeless runaway transgender girl called Katrina, who just wants to play video game music on YouTube. And Suzuki, the queen of Hell, is immediately like, “This one. I want *this one*.” And her adjudicant from hell, her devil friend is like “But why?”

A: Shizuka. Her name is Shizuka.

M: Shizuka? I think that’s—

A: You said Suzuki.

M: Oh, no, because that’s the brand—

F (simultaneously): That's the brand of a piano.

A: Yeah.

[laughter]

M: There we go, that's... I'm like "that's in my head as."

F: Yes, it's a thematically apt name.

M: There we go. Brain. And there are a lot of other things that happen in this book, including an entire plot involving refugee aliens, who have a donut shop.

A: Yes.

M: But there's just so much in here around music, and the way in which, for some people, it's just something that kind of burns inside you that you have to do, that art is. And I think that a lot of our writer listeners have that same burn for writing. I think it's a thing across the arts, right? But it's something that really burns in Katrina, that she just knows that she needs this. And so she sacrifices many things, and has a lot of pain, perhaps, because of it. But in the end, because it's a book, she shows everyone that it was worthwhile.

F: Mm. I think this— I really like that this has a lot to say about the pure desire to just produce music.

M: Mm-hm.

F: Like, Katrina really wishes that she could just be her music—

M: Right.

F: And her music would be enough to get her the attention— that would speak to the people that she wants to speak to.

M: Right.

F: But she is hampered by the societal expectations on the person producing the music.

M: Yuup.

F: Because she is not feminine enough. She's not the type of person that they want her to be.

A: She's not playing the sort of music that they want her to produce. Yeah.

F: She's not producing the right kind of music. And you know, it's all about her struggle to remain true to her desire to just produce the music that she wants, because she knows it's going to speak to the people that she wants to reach.

A: Yeah.

F: And I think some of the most effective writing in it is about how people feel when they are both playing and hearing music that is speaking to them as nothing else can, which I really liked.

A: Yeah, I do want to provide a content warning, yeah, for this. There is some on-the-page sexual assault. There is some on-the-page, quite a lot of on-the-page, hate. Transphobia. I think those are the two big ones?

M: I would say child abuse.

A: Child abuse. Yes. And references to it. And, yeah.

M: A little homophobia.

A: A little homophobia

M: Just for flavor!

A: Yeah, yeah. But all of the main characters are very warm and accepting and defensive of Katrina, and they band together around her to like, give her the space that she needs, and the security and safety that she needs, to be able to sort of blossom into the musician she's meant to be. So it's very sweet.

M: Right.

F: Mm. And I like the contrast between *Amadeus*'s unbearable Catholicism of Salieri, and his attempt to make a deal with God, that he will be God's voice and he will produce this wondrous music in worship of God, you know, and he will be chaste in return.... That's contrasted here with this, this very traditional idea of making a deal with the devil for musical genius—

M [with relish]: Yeahhh.

F: —which is really embedded in—sort of folklore and myth.

M: Particularly the devil as a violinist.

A: Yeah

F: Yes, exactly. Like the whole "[Devil Went Down to Georgia](#)"...

A: I was just about to say, is Macey going to give us a... a corner?

M: Macey has a fic rec, if you like. There's a short series called [The Devil Went Down to Georgia \(And Then Went Down on Johnny\)](#).

A: Ayyyy.

M: Particularly... The main fic is not finished, and I don't know if it will be. But there is a one shot that's finished called "[Bluegrass Covers of the Song of Solomon](#)"—

F: That's a great name.

M: —by notbecauseofvictories, and that's really well-written. It's a great name.

F: That's a very good name.

A: It's very cool.

M: But I also, in *Light From Uncommon Stars*, found it interesting how secular the devil was? Like, there was absolutely zero implication that because the devil exists, God exists.

A: Yeah.

F: Yeah, that's true.

A: And it was very funny, the end... Actually, I'm not going to spoil what happens at the end, but you know what I'm talking about

M [giggling]: It was very funny. Yes, it was very funny.

A: The very funny thing at the end, yes.

M: I was like "What? What is happening? Why is this happening?" It was very *Good Omens*-y.

F: And the last thing I wanted to say is that this one, out of all of them, also involves the creation of musical instruments.

[noises of agreement from A & M]

F: There's a little bit of a subplot based in a luthier shop about the creation of violins and—

M: ...modifications...

F: —altering or fixing violins, and there's so much thematic resonance with a lot of the queer and trans themes—

[more noises of agreement from A & M]

F: —about shifts and changes made to the body, in order to give you the voice and the self that sounds the truest, that is the truest to your soul.

M: And I think that specifically, it being violin matters a lot, because there's a point that they make in the book, which is that a 100 year-old piano is a beater.

A: Yeah.

M: A 100 year-old violin is just getting started. And it's not because they have a shorter lifespan, or anything in particular? It's like, a piano gets worse with age, a violin improves.

A: And I think that you mentioned... many episodes ago, in a completely unrelated episode, I don't even remember what it was about. But you mentioned at some point that violin is the closest instrument to human singing, is that right?

M: To human voice. Yeah. Closest in timbre and range and, and range of tone, all of that. Yes, absolutely.

F: So I like that.

M: So it is frequently the instrument that is used, then, to represent almost-singing. And that's definitely something that we see in *Light From Uncommon Stars* is that it's talked about explicitly as Katrina finding her voice.

A: Right.

F: But also even the person who's working on it has the same obsession, with getting things right, that all the other musicians do.

M: Mm-hm! [laughs]

A: Yeah. Wonderful. So, a trope that is quite common in fiction about musicians... I think I've seen this trope more referenced to musicians than I have for any other artists, and I wonder if you guys have theories as to why. But it's that trope of 'art as madness and suffering.' How like, you can't make beautiful, lasting art without destroying something of yourself or paying a horrible price for it, etc, etc. Thoughts?

[38:03]

M: I would argue ballet.

A: Okay.

M: I would argue the movie, [Black Swan](#).

A: I've seen it a little with ballet as well. Yes, there is a YA book that I read when I was a child called [Aria of the Sea](#), which was very much that.

M: But also like dance in general, because a really good dancer starting in childhood modifies their body in such a way that it is physiologically different.

A: Yeah.

F: I think any narrative about dance very much makes that concrete. Like there is damage. You can see the damage. You can feel the damage. But I think what Alex was referring to here is that trope made internal.

A: Right.

F: This idea that to be a great musician, to be a great composure, to be a great artist—

A: You have to be mad or suffering.

F: Yeah, it has to have a toll on your brain somehow.

A: And when I see it with writers, the way that I see it is mostly like: “Oh yes, the starving writer living in a garret. And, um, wearing a ratty sweater—

F: Drinking gin.

A: Drinking gin, right.

M: I think—because you ask here, “Where does it come from? Why are we obsessed with it?” And I wonder. It almost feels like—Okay. Let me ramble a little bit and then we’ll see if you guys can bring me back to making sense.

A: Okay.

M: I feel that music specifically is the genre of arts where we most want to believe that it is talent not practice.

A: Hm.

F: Hm.

A: I think it feels most otherworldly as well.

F: I was about to say, it feels the most ineffable. Like it’s hard to explain where it comes from.

M: And it’s not fucking true. Like, I have practiced piano 30 minutes a day from the age of six to the age of eighteen. That’s why I can play the piano. I am not a talented musician. I am a skilled musician but not concert skill. People who are concert skill are practicing two hours a day. And that’s skill, not talent. Like, this is actually why I world-built *Catalyst* the way that it is with the duel magic system. Because I’m so angry about so many people praising me for having a talent—

A: Hm.

M: —that is actually a skill. But this is the rambling. But back to the point: why does this connect to the art of madness and suffering? I think that we believe that these gifts from nowhere must have a price.

A: Hm.

M: And so a musician who has this “ineffable gift,” as you say, Freya, that we most want to believe just sprang from nowhere—was just divinely whatever’d—we believe there must be suffering to pay for it. Because anything else just feels too unfair.

F: And narratives like Mozart’s are where this comes from. Mozart wrote “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” at the age of five. Wrote a symphony at the age of eight. Was touring Europe, you know. Clearly, there is some element of talent there. Now it might just be a very, very good ear.

M: Well, but no. Mozart was fucking Paolini—not the— [M stammers]

A: You wanna try rephrasing that?

[M laughs]

M: Mozart was Christopher Paolini. So Christopher Paolini, fine writer. First novel published at 18. Why? Because of his family situation.

F: But these narratives come of, like, prodigy.

M: Yes.

F: We like that story.

A: Right. It's marketing. It's marketing.

M: It is. You're exactly right, Alex. It's marketing. So I wonder if that's part of it. You get this with painters too. Van Gogh, who I feel like is the single individual with this narrative.

A: It does happen a little bit with the painters as well, but it seems more rare with painters. Like, cause we can talk about, for example, Leonardo da Vinci, right? Who was an absolute genius, right? And nobody ever goes, "Oh yes, and he was this tortured soul!"

M: But we do say he's mad.

A: Well, sure. But that was more—

M: But like a different kind of mad.

A: A different kind of mad. But that was more because his brain worked in such a fascinating and interesting way. Not so much the kind of mad that's like self destructive.

M: Yeah.

A: Yeah, so like I was thinking about this a lot in college. Like I had this whole epiphany when I was lying—I went to visit a friend of mine and she put me on an air mattress in the living room to sleep. And it was a very leaky air mattress and so like after an hour or so—

M: Oh, so you slowly descended.

A: Yes, descended. And then after an hour or so I would end up lying flat on the floor. And during one of these lying-flat-on-the-floor sessions in the dark, I was thinking about being a writer. And how there is this sort of cultural expectation that it will be hard and it will hurt you and that you have to pay a cost for your art.

F: And you were thinking, "I would like to be a writer who has a mattress. A real mattress."

[M wheezes with laughter]

A: I would like to be a writer who has a mattress, yes. And I would love to be a writer whose art saves their soul. And I was thinking like [Scheherazade](#) and that's how I came to like—why I

wanted to be a storyteller, not a writer. And after that was when I started writing the [Chant](#) books.

F: That's a bit more lofty than my theory of, "I want to be able to afford a real mattress. Living in a garret is not for me!"

[F and M giggle]

A: Well, that as well.

M: And speaking of storytelling!

A: Yes. Good transition, Macey! Very good.

M: Thank you! One of the episodes that we had not a million years ago was an episode on bards. So why, dear Serpents? Why is the music episode not the episode on bards?

A: You're right. I thought of this as well. I was like, this could be a garbage bard but he's not.

M: He's not. Music without words and what bards do I think are—they interact. They are connected but they are also different. Because music without words—or music with words like a lot of opera that you're not expected to be understanding as words—does still tell a story. Right? Music transcends language. It does not always transcend cultural reference. Right, because the ways that we understand Western ideals of major and minor keys, and what those imply, a lot of that is taught. Not all of it. Like, if you're having someone play music with fast-paced notes, pretty much anyone from any culture is going to experience that as being, like, exciting, like moving. Rather than something slower.

F: You see, for me it feels like it's halfway between a language that you learn. Which is like, music theory, or music appreciation, can be taught. And clearly Macey has a better grounding in this particular language than myself or Alex.

A: Sometimes Macey locks you in her car on the way to the airport—

M: [laughing] Listen!

A: —and narrates Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto!

F: But it's halfway between that and visual art. Where five different people can see something and get something totally different out of it.

M: Yes, it's exactly that!

F: So you can potentially have five different people listen to one piece of music without words or with, you know, incomprehensible words, and feel something different or get something different out of it. And it's not entirely the same because you probably do have the intention of the composer to produce a particular emotional state. But it may not be as universal as they are aiming for.

M: But there was something super interesting in the Shostakovich book that I mentioned at the beginning of the episode where he writes a piece that comes across to the peasants and the people of the city and the factories as slightly mocking and subversive, but comes across as nationalistic to the leadership.

A: Mm, fancy!

M: Right? And you can say different things to people in different contexts. And I sometimes think about, you know, all of the things that I miss when I listen to [Hamilton](#) because I don't have the background in what it's referencing. Right? So you speak in different ways to different people.

[45:45]

F: Okay, my question that I posed was: If a musician character is *not* a bard, what other character archetypes can a musician serve in a story?

M: I... I have a taxonomy that I think is like, one useful way to think about it. Particularly for a narrative. Which is that there is a big difference between the musician who's there to be stared at—

[A hums]

M: —and the musicians who are not. So the soloist at the front of the orchestra, or the fascinating example from bandom of Fall Out Boy, where their singer is not the frontman, but the guitarist is the frontman who is there to be stared at, right?

A: Mmm.

M: And I think that is a different personality type. And the fascinating thing in *Light From Uncommon Stars* is that Katrina doesn't want to be looked at—

A: Yeah.

M: —but her position—like, the type of music— the type of musician that she is, a soloist, means that she doesn't have a choice.

F: Mmm.

A: Right.

M: She would probably rather be the backing player, like, as a social position. But that's not the music she creates.

A: And... something that just now occurred to me about the musicians versus bards thing— 'cause I felt like— I felt like I hadn't quite gotten an answer about "why is a musician not a bard". And I think that it's kind of similar to the writer versus storyteller divide? Because the bards are more like, it's more of a folk thing. It's more of a, like, a common kind of... who you're reaching out to. And musicians are more elevated, and there's more prestige around them? And they're

also more like, set in one place. Whereas bards you expect to sort of go out into the world. Yes, Macey?

M: I've had a horrible metaphor realization.

A: Okay.

M: It's Catholicism versus the Baptists. And I will explain, architecturally. It's the architecture of Catholicism versus the architecture of a Baptist tabernacle.

F: Okay, that makes sense. Yes.

M: Thank you Freya. Thank you.

A: I'm not sure I quite get it. Please go a little bit further.

F: It's the amount of gilding.

M: Well also— but no, not just that. It's—liturgically speaking—it is required that in a Catholic church—

A: Oh, I see!

[F hums]

M: —of reasonable ceremony, there is a barrier between the laity and the clergy.

A: Yes, I see what you mean.

M: And in the Baptist tradition, there is not. There is interaction.

A: Yes, yes, yes. Yes yes yes.

M: I argue that a bard is there for interaction and mutualism—

A: Yes.

M: —and a musician is performing across a gap.

A: Yes, yes. You're absolutely right. Yes, I am now with you.

F: Mmm. Yep.

A: Yes. I was like, "Where are you going with this?" Yes, absolutely.

[M laughs]

F: I would say that you could also have a character who is not a performer, but for whom music is a treasured hobby—

M: Yes.

[A hums]

F: —to an extent that it is part of how they think of themselves, but it might be something they only do for themselves.

A: Yeah.

F: I think you can still have that kind of character. Like Macey!

A: Yes, yes, yes.

F: Yeah.

M: Like Macey, with her harp! That she cannot play.

A: You're learning, you're learning! But anyway, we can go back to the taxonomy. Did we finish the taxonomy?

M: Well, I think that's one dimension of it. I think another one with musicians is that the choice of instrument says a huge amount, narratively speaking.

A: Hmm. What does— what does *harp* say about a character?

M: Harp says that they're hippy-dippy. Um...

A: Okay.

M: Which is not really me. For me, harp says, "I have chronic RSI and can't hold a guitar".

A: Sure.

M: That's why I have a harp.

F: Mmm. And—

M: But, like, I am not a character.

A: Right.

F: Exactly.

M: You know what I mean?

A: Yeah.

F: Yeah. Like, the reason I played euphonium was because they put all of the most musically "gifted" people—and by "gifted" in quotation marks, it was they tested the entire year on basic musicality, picked the top 25, put us in a room with a lot of instruments, and it was me and one other girl who got a sound out of the euphonium. So they said, "Congratulations, you are now carrying around a very heavy brass instrument for two years".

M: Sitting here, as a horrible orchestra kid who spent far too long with far too many instruments— Freya is a born flautist.

A: Yes.

F: Ah! Interesting.

M: Alex, mandolin, or some such.

A: I— well, yeah, I do play guitar a little bit.

M: But I feel like, a cool weird guitar.

F: I feel like this is astrology.

[All three laugh]

A: Yes, this is kind of astrology.

M: Absolutely.

F: This is the equivalent of you being like, “You’re a Pisces.” It’s like, “Mmm... flautist.”

M: No but like, Freya’s a born flautist.

A: Yeah, yeah. I would agree with that. I would agree with that. I think that I would be—

M: You could be an oboe if you felt like being edgy.

F: Okay!

A: Well, I mean, I also have these enormous hands.

M: Right.

A: Which you’re very jealous of.

M: So you could— you could be double bass. I could see you as a double bass, actually.

F: Ooh, yeah!

M: That would be good. ‘Cause you’re tall. So you wouldn’t look stupid.

A: I am tall. I am tall. I think there’s a lot of—

M: Tiny people playing double bass are very funny.

[A laughs]

F: Well, I mean—

A: Those are options.

F: —when I first put the euphonium on my lap—

[M cackles sympathetically]

M: Oh, Freya!

F: —the mouthpiece came up to my forehead, and they had to be like, “Oh, this tiny girl. She can make a sound, but she can’t physically play it.” So they got me a baritone, which is like, a euphonium that’s been shrunk by fifty percent.

[M wheezes]

F: And I had to play that in year 5, until I grew enough to have a proper euphonium in year 6.

A: Adorable.

F: Anyway, in the last few minutes, I wanted to move us on to some discussion of use of music in science fiction and fantasy, a little bit more generally.

A: Yas. Yes, yes.

F: Um, so, I was trying to think of books that use music as the basis for a system of magic.

M: Mhm.

F: And I’m pretty sure there are quite a few, and I can think of a couple of YA titles that I’ve heard about but haven’t read.

A: Mhm.

F: But the one that first came to mind for me was the [Crystal Singer books](#), by Anne McCaffrey.

M: Yas, Killashandra!

A: Yes, yes.

F: Yes! Which I read in primary school, I’m pretty sure, and loved the hell out of. ‘Cause they had a very trashy romance in them.

M: Not only “music is magic”—I mean, science fiction magic, because it’s McCaffrey—um, but, perfect pitch as a magical power.

[F hums]

A: Yeah.

F: ‘Cause yeah, that’s the one that feels really ineffable. Like, you can’t actually be— you can be *taught* good pitch—

[A hums]

M: But you can't be taught perfect pitch.

F: —but you can't be taught having perfect pitch, mmm.

M: Right, right.

A: There was also kind of a— it was kind of ambiguous, but in [Space Opera](#) by Cat Valente, there was this scene towards the end which, they sort of invoke music to like, do some like, powerful sci-fi bullshit. Um... which was very cool.

M: Well, and Pratchett, as Freya was saying earlier, particularly in [Soul Music](#), uses— doesn't precisely use music itself as a source of magic, but uses his standard belief magic as engineered by the music, right, um—

F: Well this one— this is one where it's actually external. So *Soul Music* is— music exists. But there is this one particular type—this idea of what is rock and roll—of a type of music that is a power, or a god, almost. Which escapes into the Discworld, but it's come from somewhere else. And the implication is it was from our world, and has accidentally slipped into a parallel universe which is the Discworld. And because the Discworld has that belief system of "Anything that can be paid attention to by people can rocket itself up into a god-like magical power"—

M: Right. Right, right.

F: —and it's about the influence of music on a society. And it's very— it's making so many statements about things like Beatlemania—

M: Yes.

F: —and, you know, the power of a rock concert to move people in a particular way. I caught two new jokes when I reread it this time.

A: Oh did you? Which ones?

F: Yeah, ah, I'm trying to remember. I think one of them was— one of them was the Def Leppard one, which I had not caught before.

M: Ay!

F: And one of them was, I think, it was a reference to The Velvet Underground. It was like, something like, every time I read it, I've heard of a couple more classic rock bands.

M: Yeah.

A: Yeah, yeah.

F: And so I suddenly start catching more references.

A: That's wonderful.

F: So good.

M: And I want to say, the [Isavaltá series](#) was another that had a portal fantasy... one of the really cool portal fantasies, because it's from a historical period in our world, to a Russian folklore inspired royal court with high fantasy song magic.

F: Mmm.

M: So that was really cool.

F: I'm trying to think about fairy tales where music is important. Obviously [The Little Mermaid](#)—

[M hums]

F: —is an important one, 'cause it's the idea of this beautiful singing voice as being, you know, someone's soul, almost, or someone's main method of communication, is the beauty of her voice. Especially in singing. And, uh, is it [The Goose Girl](#) that has the thing with the magic harp? Or is that— might be just [Jack and the Beanstalk](#)—

M: No, "[Bonny Swans](#)"... um, Bonny Swans.

F: Bonny Swans. And Jack and the Beanstalk, there's like a magic harp and things like that. Like harps— I think harps aren't necessarily a character choice, but they are very classic as an archetype for a magical object in and of themselves.

M: Right. And one of the things— when I put that I had rented a harp up on Twitter, a friend, Marissa made a joke immediately saying—

F [laughing]: Oh, that's right. About, "Has anyone seen your sister."

M: "I am now concerned for the health of your sister." Because of course, the myth of the Bonny Swans is that a sister pushes her little sister to drown in a river because she's courting the same man as the older sister. And the bones of the girl are pulled out and turned into a harp, which tells the story to the girls' father, and gets the older sister killed!

F: Yes!

M: So everyone's dead, and everything's fine, because that's *how folklore*.

F: And if you want to read that one in recently released book form, I recommend [Sistersong](#) by Lucy Holland.

M: Oh! I should.

F: It is—

M: I love that song, there's a great Loreena McKennitt [song](#).

F: It's— it's basically Bonny Swans meets [Hild](#). Like, it's early Medieval English history, meets Bonny Swans.

M: Wow.

F: You'll love it.

A: That's your shit, Macey.

M: Yeah, that's my shit! That's my shit.

A: Does it have weird mushroom stuff in it, Freya?

F [scoffs]: I can't remember, but there's definitely—

M: Are there forests?

F: I talked to you, that you both would really like this. 'Cause it also has *hieros gamos*.

A: Mmm.

F: Like, the relationship between the king and the land is broken, stuff.

A: Yeah, yeah.

M: I see I see I see. Very important.

A: Wonderful, wonderful.

F: Yeah. And it has— like, one of the three sisters is actually a trans man as well. It's really good.

M: I did want, before we entirely ended, 'cause I think we've covered a little bit of this already—

A: Yep.

M: —to talk briefly about film music?

A: Okay!

M: Because I feel like a lot of people find, quote unquote “classical music” to kind of be alienating. I guess that's a fair thing to say. Like, there's just so much, and it's hard to feel like you know where to start. And it's hard to figure out that song I heard that goes, “*duh duh duh dum*.” What is that?

A: Yeah, and it has— it has all that propaganda of like, prestige around it.

M: Right!

F: Mmm.

A: Where like, “Oh, this is fancy music for fancy people. And you have to be smart to understand it.” That *is* very alienating.

M: It is! And I'm just like, it—

F: It carries class markers, like opera, especially.

M: Yes!

A: Yes, yes yes yes.

M: And it's so funny, 'cause a lot of it is just like, "This is some overworked dude who was being bullied by his boss, who just fired something out really quickly." And now—this is Bach, right—

[F hums]

A: Yeah.

M: —and now it's prestige. But um, there is— in the colloquial meaning of the word *classical*, I see no difference between that and, you know, the *Harry Potter* film score.

A: Yeah! Yeah.

M: Or the music that Ramin Djawadi does for things like [Game of Thrones](#), or for [Westworld](#).

A: Yes! Yes, yes, absolutely. I agree.

M: And I love that stuff. I think it's super cool. Um, and, I just wish that, you know... You can go listen to just albums of that, and it's amazing.

F: But it's also like— I feel like it's the equivalent of the, "having a rich patron" for today's classical music.

[M + A both hum]

M: Yeah!

A: Yeah, it is.

F: For classical composers. Because it's very hard for a classical composer to make a living if you're just relying on like, choral— you know, chorus' commissioning something from you for the opening of a church, or something. Whereas, film—

M: Oh, there's no money!

F: There's no money! No no!

M: There's no money!

A: Zero dollars.

F: There's film! Film studios! That's where the money is.

M: I was lucky enough in Dublin WorldCon to be on a panel about music in genre with a composer for TV.

A: Oh!

M: And one of the things that he said that was very frustrating is like, directors come in having shot a scene, and only then start telling you to do the music. And they already have had a backing track on that the whole time. And so they will come to you and say, “Like this, but different.”

A: Um...

F: Whereas one of my favorite musical experiences I've ever had was going to one of the Sydney Opera House's [*Lord of the Rings*](#)—

M: Oh, oh wow!

F: —performances, where they showed the movie.

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah, with the orchestra.

F: And then they had the orchestra playing the music live.

A: That's so cool.

F: And I went and saw [*The Two Towers*](#) one of that in the Sydney Opera House's main auditorium. It was incredible.

M: Because, if you ever— do an experiment, dear listeners. Next time you're watching a horror movie or something with deep suspense, put it on mute. For a bit.

A: Yeah.

M: And see how much less affecting and less scary it is without the soundtrack.

A: Without the screechy violins in the background, putting the hairs up on the back of your neck.

F: Yeah, it's almost just like that— like a held tone—

[M imitates a high pitched wobbly Horror Noise, which has the effect of tensing one's shoulders up]

A: Yeah.

F: —can be very, very...

A: Yeah.

F: This is why I don't watch horror movies! Because I am very easily manipulated by soundtracks!

[All three Serpents laugh]

F: Whereas, books — I've never read a book that gave me nightmares, that I've had to put down because it was too scary—

M: Right, right.

F: —'cause I was like, "Eh, there's no music. This is fine."

A: This is fine.

[M laughs]

M: It is! I watch them on mute. It's easier.

A: Well, with that [stammers]—

[F + M chuckle]

A: —cool life hack, I think that we shall call it the end of the episode.

F + M: Yes.

A: Dear listeners, you may now give us your standing ovation.

[Outro music plays]

[59:08]

M: Hey everybody. Thanks for joining us for this episode of Be the Serpent, a podcast of extremely, extremely deep literary merit. Music means an unspeakably large amount to me. And after these last few years, listeners, I think perhaps that you know that. Music peeks out from the scenery of movies and TV—it soothes, or entices, or threatens us; it gives us space to mourn. And the act of creating music is simultaneously something intensely personal—intensely intimate—and a gift that we give to others. I'm not sure I'd still be here today if I didn't have my piano, my songs, my gremlin orchestral clarinet buddies over the years... And I'm so delighted we found these wonderful tentpoles to share with you today.

M: We have some even more exciting topics to talk about in upcoming episodes. On the next episode, two weeks hence on November 3rd, we'll be discussing ghosts! That's right, it's the Halloween Episode! If you want to prepare in advance, one of our tentpoles is Aiden Thomas' book, [Cemetery Boys](#). So if you have a friend who's into stuff like that, maybe give them a heads up?

M: In the meantime, feel free to continue the conversation with us. Questions? Comments? Breathless adulations? Contact us at serpentcast@gmail.com, @serpentcast on Twitter and Tumblr, and if you enjoy the podcast, please consider supporting us on [Patreon](#). And don't forget to send in your Extravaganza questions.

M: Oh, and by the way — do you play an instrument? You should. I bet it'd sound beautiful, your music.

1:00:37

What We're Into Lately

[*The Hellion's Waltz*](#) by Olivia Waite
[*Peter Cabot Gets Lost*](#) by Cat Sebastian
[*The Angel of the Crows*](#) by Katherine Addison
[*Symphony for the City of the Dead*](#) by M. T. Adderson
[*The Dawnhounds*](#) by Sascha Stronach
[*Compass of thy Soul*](#) by [Umei_no_Mai](#)
[*Campaign Skyjacks*](#)
[*Skyjacks: Couriers Call*](#)
Hannah Gadsby: [*Douglas*](#)
[*The Wilds*](#)
['In the Company of Gentlemen'](#) by Victoria Goddard

Other Stuff We Mentioned

[*Leverage*](#)
The other two [*Feminine Pursuits*](#) books by Olivia Waite
[*Sherlock*](#)
[*Good Omens*](#) by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett
[*Hollow and Honeycomb*](#) by [antistar_e](#)
[*The Old Guard*](#)
[*Lost*](#)
[*The Lymond Chronicles*](#) by Dorothy Dunnett
[*Stargate: Atlantis*](#)
[*Shakespeare in Love*](#)
[*Doctor Faustus*](#) by Christopher Marlowe ("topless towers of Ilium" quote)
[*Maskerade*](#) by Terry Pratchett
[*The Phantom of the Opera*](#)
"Requiem" by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
"Requiem" by Gabriel Fauré
"Devil Went Down to Georgia" by The Charlie Daniels Band
[The Devil Went Down to Georgia \(And Then Went Down on Johnny\)](#) series by notbecauseofvictories
[*Black Swan*](#) (2010)
[*Aria of the Sea*](#) by Dia Calhoun
Catalyst by Jennifer Mace (unreleased)
[*Scheherazade*](#) (character)
[*A Conspiracy of Truths*](#) by Alexandra Rowland
[*Hamilton*](#) (musical)
Fall Out Boy (band)

[Crystal Singer](#) series by Anne McCaffrey

[Space Opera](#) by Catherynne M. Valente

[Soul Music](#) by Terry Pratchett

Beatlemania

Def Leppard (band)

The Velvet Underground (band)

[Isavaltá](#) series by Sarah Zettel

[The Little Mermaid](#) by Hans Christian Andersen

[The Goose Girl](#) from [Grimms' Fairy Tales](#)

[Jack and the Beanstalk](#)

"[Bonny Swans](#)" traditional ballad

[Sistersong](#) by Lucy Holland

"[The Bonny Swans](#)" by Loreena McKennitt

[Hild](#) by Nicola Griffith

Johann Sebastian Bach

Harry Potter film score

Ramin Djawadi's musical scores for [Game of Thrones](#) & [Westworld](#)

[The Lord of the Rings](#) by J.R.R. Tolkien

[The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers](#)

For Next Time

[Cemetery Boys](#) by Aiden Thomas

Content Warnings

Attempted suicide (in *Amadeus* and brief mention of it in the discussion)

On-the-page sexual assault, on-the-page hate transphobia, child abuse both explicit and referenced (in *Light From Uncommon Stars*)