In *Listen to This*, Alex Ross explores the value of music in a transient life. In a world that is seemingly indifferent to our existence, where we struggle to somehow inject significance into our lives, Ross believes that music gives us meaning. It has a way of allowing us to glimpse the inner workings of our nature, to express the inexpressible, to be heard by others. This relationship between our mortality and the significance of music in our lives reveals Ross’s ultimate belief that music is a way to escape death. He appears to fear living without meaning, and dying without being remembered, but this fear is ultimately assuaged by the existence of music, that undying testament to the human experience.

Ross reveals in his interpretations of music a fixation on melancholy, even in the works of Johannes Brahms, where it is subtle. He describes one symphony as “whirl[ing] away in a fast diminuendo, like a group of revelers vanishing down an empty street” (“Blessed” 295). That the music evokes in him images of emptiness and the passing of time suggests his preoccupation with the transience of life and the imminence of death. Ross suggests that a note in one of the composer’s Intermezzos represents a “bell tolling from whatever unknown church Brahms chose for his doubting faith,” and adds that this is “the music that you will hear when you die” (307, 308). His interpretation of such music exposes more about himself than about the composer: his dread of death, and perhaps his own agnosticism. And in his characterization of Brahms’s music as “one troubled mind commiserating with another,” Ross reveals himself to be, at least in that moment, full of grief (296). But why such sadness? Perhaps it stems from a “primal fear of being weighed in the balance and found wanting”—the subconscious anxiety that, when all is said and done, his life will have amounted to nothing (73). He dreads such senselessness, dreads dying without meaning.

Yet as much as music fills him with melancholy, as much as it reminds him of his mortality, it also gives him intense joy. Ross says of one Brahmsian
movement, “What does the movement evoke, if not the triumph of darkness?” and describes another piece as “unadulterated C-major joy” (311, 301). When Ross listens to music, the distinction between emotions is blurred. Hope and misery intermingle to reflect the reality that lies between; what he experiences cannot be neatly separated and classified. Yes, Ross asserts, music can make him melancholy for no discernible reason, but it is “a pleasing melancholy” (“Walking Blues” 32). Such conflicts of emotion transport him from the “hurly-burly” of everyday life into a “twilight realm where time stops for a while”—a place where he can immerse himself in emotion, experience it more richly and acutely (32). To be able to feel anything with such intensity is a luxury to Ross, not a burden. His complex, shifting reactions to the music parallel his attitude towards life as a whole: that it is not only full of loneliness and sorrow, but also joy and love. The full spectrum of the human condition, the “entire gamut of emotion,” lies waiting to be experienced in chords and symphonies (“Great Soul” 126). One need only listen. For Ross, there may be nothing more than this in life, but he wants nothing more.

It might seem overly romantic, however, to view music as anything other than a hobby or a plaything for the privileged. After all, Ross asks, “Isn’t it simply a self-indulgent fantasy to think that German chamber music could change the world of a girl whose mother is living on food stamps?” (“Learning” 237). Yet Ross contends that there is more substance to music than one might think. He would agree with the Pythagorean Greeks who spoke of a duality between astronomy and music: while astronomy concerned itself with the relationship between tangible, external objects, music studied the invisible and the internal. Ross wants us to realize that music is not simply a pastime but an inextricable part of our being, a science of human nature. He asserts that music has the ability to “have it all, uniting Romanticism and Enlightenment, civilization and revolution, brain and body, order and chaos”—a reflection, an embodiment, of life itself (“Listen” 7). Perhaps we have music because it allows us to make sense of our lives, to express ourselves when science and language fall short. Could it be, then, that music is somehow necessary to understanding ourselves?

Ross asserts that music is indeed an essential facet of our nature, precisely because it affects what we cannot put a finger on. He writes, “It has long been understood that music has the ability to stir feelings for which we do not have a name” (“Walking Blues” 32). Where do these emotions come from? What significance do they hold in our lives, if any? These are questions that John Berger addresses in his essay “The White Bird.” He writes that we are born
into a world that “lends itself to as much evil as good,” whose “energy is fear-
somely indifferent” (7). In other words, the universe is a blank, impartial
force; it does not lean in our favor or promise us happiness. Therefore, we
react to art so strongly because it seems to exist “always [as] an exception,
always in despite of” our condition, a condition that is very often ugly and
unsympathetic (7). We find art beautiful because it is a symbol of defiance; it
reminds us that if foulness can exist in this world, so too can beauty.

Perhaps these seemingly polar opposites are interwoven. Perhaps that is
how art makes life bearable, by giving sound or shape to inner chaos and
thereby “tam[ing] the edges of emotion” (“Walking Blues” 26). One is
reminded of the emotional dance that Ross experiences when listening to
music: “Sobs and kisses, pleasure and anguish, coincide” (35). Berger gives us
this premise: we are organisms living in a non-sentient universe, one that has
the potential for both great beauty and great ugliness, and Ross believes that
music makes our tension-filled lives bearable.

But art still does not explain the problem of death. How does one escape
the fate that Ross regards with such fear and sadness? The seemingly cruel
coexistence of the brevity of human life and the inevitability of death is someth-
ing that we have grappled with since biblical times, and Ross echoes Job’s
sentiments: “Why go on? What do we have that is better than death?”
(“Blessed” 311). In the end, Job had God, but the agnostic composer Brahms
had music. His compositions reflect both pain and joy, and they serve as a
kind of storyline of his experiences. Strip away this music, Ross asserts, and
you will find nothing but a “gray void” in its wake (311).

Perhaps, then, Ross sees music as an attempt to preserve one’s voice, to
keep one’s story alive. Indeed, he confesses that when he listens to music, he
“map[s] out a little more of the imaginary world . . . invent[s] stories for each
thing as it happens” (“Listen” 20). This need to tell stories stems from Ross’s
desire to preserve life. To tell a story is to remember; to remember is to bring
what was lost into the present. Berger writes that “[all] the languages of art
have been developed as an attempt to transform the instantaneous into the
permanent,” and that “the transcendental face of art is always a form of
prayer” (9). The prayer is for salvation from oblivion, for the preservation of
what hope and beauty exists in a world where suffering is rampant. This
prayer is passed down for as long as people are willing to hear it. As Ross says
of one of Beethoven’s works, “The symphony becomes a fragmentary, unfin-
ished thing. . . . It becomes whole again only in the mind and soul of someone
listening for the first time, and listening again. The hero is you” (“Listen” 21).
The composer, the player, and the listener reciprocate and engage in
conversation. The story goes on; there is no end. After all, as Ross writes, “Since the oldest art forms, such as music, have transcended time, they can become part of any time” (“Learning” 237). And thus, whatever Brahms or any ordinary listener endeavored to express can be heard and understood even centuries after they have died. We are immortalized by the stories we write and play and hear in music.

Of course, our physical deaths are inevitable. Even then, however, Ross believes that we use music as a way to assert our existence and cope with mortality. Like the sonata Brahms composed after his friend’s suicide, we are “broken but still colossal” in the face of death (“Blessed” 299). To be alive at all is miraculous, but to create art even despite our circumstances is even more miraculous. In his final years, the composer Schubert wrote an Adagio that to Ross reflects “an awareness, a defiance, and then an acceptance of death” (“Great Soul” 136). Again, there is the fixation on death and mortality, but it seems now that Ross is not preoccupied with the sadness of dying. Rather, he is fascinated by the beauty with which humans contend with death, the art we create in response to it. One is reminded of the wooden birds Berger speaks of: simple yet profound symbols of the human desire to replicate and thus preserve beauty, even after its source—the actual bird—has long gone. By the same token, we play and listen to music without realizing that we are carving wooden birds ourselves. A composer like Brahms cannot die because every time someone listens to a symphony of his, the essence of his being is brought back to life. The death of his body is rendered irrelevant when everything else—those elements that made him human, like joy, melancholy, love, and loss—remains so fully expressed in his music.

The apparent transience and insignificance of life answers to music, which continues to exist even after the passing of its makers. Music, in itself, is rooted in a language of cycles and repetition. It displays a reluctance, a desire to draw things out: the first movement of a symphony ends, but then there is the second, and the third, and the fourth. The vibrato of a violin lengthens and varies the sound of a string; the pedal on a piano sustains what would otherwise be a short and choppy note. And there is the often-used *da capo al fine*, an Italian musical term that means “from the beginning to the end.” The notes end, but the performer is expected to play on, repeating the piece from the very beginning. When the music is over, we are transported back to the dauntingly apathetic world Berger speaks of. Here we are given the choice of what to do in such a situation, and Ross chooses music, every single time. He may not be able to escape physical death, but he can outlive himself so long as he engages in the call and response, the remembrance that
music embodies. He ultimately seems to agree with Berger, that our search for beauty in the world means “that we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe” (8-9).

WORKS CITED

   “Blessed are the Sad.” 293-311.
   “Chacona, Lamento, Walking Blues.” 22-54.
   “Great Soul.” 124-37.
   “Learning the Score.” 226-38.
   “Listen to This.” 3-21.