

The Seventh Dragon

The Riddle of Equal Temperament

Second Edition

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Acknowledgments

for the First and Second Editions

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The Seventh Dragon

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Dramatis Personae

The Seventh Dragon	referred to as “he.”
The Tuner	referred to as “she.”
The Piano	referred to as “it.”

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First Interval

*In many a forest falls a tree
That no one hears.
Not for lack of sound,
But ears.
(Anonymous)*

THE SEVENTH DRAGON in Japanese folklore is the only one of nine who is never seen. All eight brothers and sisters, even his mother, are depicted in art carrying on their individual special tasks. They grimace from beneath tables, look down from the fronts of buildings, decorate the pages of books, ornate and terrible. Why is the Seventh always absent? Because he is invisible. Yet he too has a special task, which is listening. Perhaps he never shows up because his visible self is constantly consumed in the act of hearing.

Like the Seventh Dragon, a piano tuner is a Listener. Although she does not disappear each time she leans over a piano, and become invisible to the other people in the house, her task involves the imbibing of musical sound.

But what is there about listening that can render a dragon invisible? (I am assuming he is invisible *because*

rain upon us all our lives, but our ears are responsible for translating only a tiny portion of them.

If you watch cellist Mstislav Rostropovitch and can take your eyes from his face long enough to see his fingers move, you might just wonder what kind of sound would come from the left hand, the one that trembles in vibrato over the strings. We do not hear that hand, though it moves constantly throughout the composition. The air around the cello has another priority – it dances to the back-and-forth of the strings, which are caught and released by the bow many hundreds of times a second. One human hand, however, even when it is moving as rapidly as it can, does not speak the air's language.

Since there are sonic vibrations that we cannot (or at least, do not) hear, is there something in the nature of these unhearable sounds that nonetheless might be rendering our Listening Dragon invisible?

Invisibility might indicate that our dragon resonates to an ultrasonic frequency, and that normal sound destroys him – like the shattering of glass. Or, alternately, if we think of our dragon as being composed of regular (sinusoidal) wave patterns, then his invisibility might be simply a kind of silence on his part. When the nodes of musically-generated sound waves intersect, silence is the positive, if temporary, result. Perhaps our invisible listening dragon is really an anti-dragon, particularly sensitive to musical wave patterns, and thus he appears only during those moments of silence that occur in music so rarely and so briefly they are virtually non-existent, and when there is no music playing, those moments do not occur at all. That may be why the piano tuner, who is deliberately playing with sinusoidal curves, and is tuning an instrument that now and then produces something close to a set of pure overtones, might, if she

is fortunate, catch a glimpse of that grand old creature of silence, complete with wings and tail.

However, it is more likely that the dragon is invisible because he is a Listener. This has to do not with sound but with ears.

Could it be that we receive some of the unheard sounds, the acoustical vibrations that are too high or too low for our ears – could it be we receive them in ways other than by hearing? Hearing, after all, is a specialized form of the sense of touch. Must the idea of sound begin and end with whatever stirs our eardrums into action?*

Listening is a capacity we hardly know we possess. It is possible to make of the body a sun, which draws sound up like water from a rain puddle. The ears only tell us what we have done, afterward: but during the listening every cell will incline in that direction, and the entire world will rise into us like glorious, palpable mist.

A piano tuner is a Listener, not just one who hears. Her listening is not something she does, suddenly, each

**sotto voce: It is undoubtedly true that a blind piano tuner has the advantage of all blind people who of necessity have compensated for the loss of one sense by the enlargement of the capacity of the others. Nevertheless, it is my belief, based on nothing but intuition, that a sighted piano tuner uses her EYES as well as all her other senses, to enhance listening – not to distract from it (although that is definitely possible too, if someone has an interesting picture hanging above the piano!). When I tune, I find myself staring fixedly at the tuning pins and the strings, almost as though I were “seeing my way into” what the strings are doing. I suspect that somewhere in the complex circuitry of receiving areas in the brain, there is a redundancy at work, which means the “seeing” section and the “hearing” section are not rigidly cordoned off from one another, but actually use some of the same “wires.” Sometimes when I am tuning, I confess, I can scarcely tell the difference between the sounds I hear and the thick ambience of color and transparent air that swirls around my head.*