Breathing Memory: The Harpsichord and the Accordion

Until I was 19 and studying continuo at the University of Michigan, I had never improvised, in fact I had never played anything by ear. My father, who was the quiet overlord of my training as a young musician, was an ardent folky and a composer. In most available waking hours, when he wasn't working at the library, or out taking photographs, he was up in his attic study listening to what his inventive ear was saying and writing it down. So, there was a precedent for creative and intuitive music-making in my life, but I somehow ended up more of an auditor than a partaker. At the University of Michigan, I started to learn keyboard harmony, patterns started to fall under my fingers, and in my first continuo class, I tapped into the sounds inside my own mind and found they wanted to push their way out. Not very gracefully, and certainly saddled with some cliché and uniformity, but they were the first children of my invention, and I loved them.

I felt, however, that I was surrounded by musicians who, all their lives, had been soaking up, and then spewing out, music that didn't start on the page but rather in their ears. There's no making up for the absence of by-ear experience as a child. I see what 12 years of improvising, composing, transcribing, and otherwise playing what is heard rather than what is *seen* has done for our 15-year-old son Ezra – he's possessed of a natural fluency that I will never know. There's no border crossing guard standing between what he hears and what he plays, either with harmony or melody, not to mention, oh my God, rhythm. In college, whenever I thought I was really starting to flow, to be able replicate what I was hearing, I'd come up against my severe limitations, sometimes in a public and humbling way. Continuo on the harpsichord was the avenue through which I found both the safety and the structure for developing my ear and improvisational abilities.

Upon finishing my undergraduate degree, I moved to Boston with a rather unsettled plan to study, as a special student, at New England Conservatory. From the first day in the thick of the Early Music Department, I knew I was going to reap some very good friendships but not much enlightenment. I thought I could fill in

the educational holes, and satiate my hunger for creative and by-ear music making, by taking a course on improvising at the organ with Bill Porter, but quickly realized I was being thoroughly distracted by a much more potent force at NEC – Third Stream Studies. This 'department' (really more of a movement unto itself) was founded by Gunther Schuller and Ran Blake to develop composer/performer/improvisers with unique voices, using materials from a broad range of musical styles, mostly learned by ear. My dear friend and recorder-player partner Cléa Galhano had already started to invest herself in this process by the time I enrolled in Ran's class during my second term at NEC. It was mind-bending, and back-breaking – the hardest work I had ever done as a musician, madly listening to innumerable taped examples that we had to be prepared to first sing in their entirety, then play and improvise upon. Needless to say, I was being drawn away from the Early Music Department and from the harpsichord, at least as my vehicle for further essential music training. My ears, my voice, and my grappling fingers on whatever keyboard was available became the more important tools.

One of the Third Stream instructors was Hankus Netsky, the founder of the Klezmer Conservatory Band. Through a number of entangled circumstances, all of which had in common my growing desire to connect more fully with the music of my Judaism, I had become familiar with the group and had started to hear Yiddish tunes floating through my head throughout the day. The original accordionist for the KCB was Alan Bern, who was a luminous specter during my time at NEC, not really there anymore, but still being heard in the distance. The accordion sound that *was* always right there, almost too present, was coming from a Spanish guy named Maurizio who seemed to always be swarthily situated on the steps with his shiny black accordion, his fingers driven wildly across the keys by tangos and Latin jazz – he was the embodiment of a certain element among the dyed-in-the-wool Third Stream students, bringing their deep experience, and technical mastery, of a single musical tradition to this program to have their artistry imploded and to have their ears opened wide.

That summer, I had been given a scholarship to go abroad to first attend a Baroque Performance Institute in Trondheim, Norway, and then to take harpsichord lessons in Amsterdam with Gustav Leonhardt. In anticipation of these studies, I tried to pull myself together, return to my pre-Third Stream focus, but I kept allowing things to get in the way. Sometime in the intervening weeks between the end of

Spring term at NEC and my departure for Europe, my friend Megan gave me an old accordion that had been living in her attic. It was dried out and leaky, but it had a rich ancient sound. What I discovered immediately was that, despite the physical effort and the difficulty of coordination, the breath of the accordion was deeply satisfying to me. It was, in fact, the opposite of the harpsichord on several fronts, and I spent many hours when I should have been preparing harpsichord repertoire instead just sitting with the accordion, picking out tunes, finding the chords, sustaining and swelling, swelling and fading.

The story of my trip to Norway and Amsterdam is one that's good for parties, it's so filled with mishaps and odd directions. My son loves for me to tell the story, but how much does it really support what I'm trying to say about the harpsichord and the accordion? Well, it depends I suppose on what I'm really trying to say – is it a parable, a metaphorical juxtaposition of two instruments and their disparate traditions to bring home the deeper internal division I had just started to recognize? Or am I actually going to end a more laser-like account with something useful and instructive, a learner's guide to bridging the divide and finding the utility in the two instruments happily co-existing in the life of a professional keyboardist? I would reckon it's more the former. So, here's the story:

I flew to Paris to spend a few days with a friend there. The first sign that I was approaching my adventure as a *claveciniste* with some ambivalence was on a day trip to a splendid late 17th-century chateau in Sault. I was keenly aware that my first contact ever with such a site of *ancien regime* culture should have filled me to the brim – after all, what was the aim of this pursuit as a harpsichordist if not to be transported, through sound and gesture, to such a time and place? Instead, I was left empty and aimless. This was before I had learned to trick myself (with profound and life-changing results, I should say) into personal connection with Baroque history by imagining the women musicians milling about exactly this sort of context. So, there I was, on the train back to Paris, battling a sense of displacement, and all the more disturbed because I wasn't in the least surprised. This scene of French aristocracy was not the painting I longed to place myself within, seated at the keyboard in a tight satin bodice, a little dog at my feet, gazing off into the distance while a man with a lute leaned lasciviously over me. At least, not right now. But here I was, with 6 weeks stretching before me of nothing but reconstruction, restoration, of that 17th-century sound world, those graces, that *mouvement* being my supposed holy grail.

When it was time to travel by train to Norway for the Baroque Institute, I bought a ticket for the night train in order to avoid having to spend a night in Hamburg. Upon schlepping to Gare du Nord, though, I found that the train was completely full and all the corridors were overrun with drunken Swedes making their way back to their dry homeland after a lusty holiday. I didn't have any idea how I would manage to travel that night under those conditions, so I got off the train and went back, weeping, to my friend's apartment to await the early morning train. Knowing that I would now need to find a place to stay for the layover in Hamburg, I called a number of the cheap hotels listed in my guide book, but everything was full. The last call I made from that list left me with the number for yet another hotel, which I called and was able to reserve a room. When I arrived in Hamburg (I now can't imagine how I did all this – my German was almost non-existent, and I had significantly overpacked so I was literally dragging my bags along the streets), I made my way to the address I *thought* I was staying at, but a woman with severe burn scars on her face answered the door and told me that the building was down the block, and she called a midget assistant to take me to it. The room I was to stay in was on the third floor and when the door was opened, two things took me entirely off guard. One was that there was a large sink smack in the center of the room. The other was that there was a chilly breeze from the open window, but when I went to close it I found that there was no window, in fact there was no window frame, there was just a rectangular hole in the bricks. The assistant said 'Ist gut?' and I shook my head, picked up my bags that felt like barbells, and headed back down the stairs to the outside. It was close to 11:00 p.m., I couldn't very well wander the streets looking for a room, so I had no choice but to go back to the train station, where I set myself up on the floor leaning against a wall, and waited for the next north-bound train to come. When it did arrive early in the morning, it was the same overflowing night train from Paris, 24 hours later but no less the transport for inebriated Scandinavian vacationers.

One other unfortunate episode lay between Hamburg and my arrival at Trondheim – neither the harpsichord or the accordion played a part in it, but it seems, like other episodes involving Norwegian Air Force planes and fjords and blisters and Red Light Districts and children's bicycles that will be touched upon down the road, to be some sort of connecting tissue in the somewhat surreal sensibility that settled upon this whole European trek. I guess what I'm saying is that these events were the bizarre and meaningful byproducts of, even intrusions upon, what looks on my resumé like a run-of-the-mill educational foray. And I've come to believe that I was made susceptible to their impact because of the distancing ambivalence I

had brought with me, an ambivalence toward my stated goals that was born out of the grueling tapes of the Third Stream and the dusty bellows of an accordion.

So, this little episode has to do with the European practice of putting trains onto boats to get them across water rather than having them go across bridges. After Hamburg, I stopped for an afternoon in Copenhagen to wait for yet another connecting train. While there, I met a very friendly Danish family who boarded the same train as myself but went to a different car because I had an Interrail pass that limited where I could sit. I settled in for a bit but then went in search of my new friends in another car further up, leaving my bags where they were so that I'd remember where I was sitting originally. While I was talking and eating with this family, the train stopped for a bit and an announcement was made, which the woman said meant that they were putting the train onto a barge to take across the channel to Helsingborg at the base of Sweden. I was fascinated, I watched out the window as they maneuvered it, and felt us float away. I said "Wouldn't it be funny if they hadn't put all the cars onto the train and the car with my bags in it had been left on the Danish shore?" and it seemed, like in a cartoon, to register as a reality with all of us simultaneously. I bolted through the cars, reaching the window at the end of the train and looking with despair at the last three cars left behind at the dock. I was panicked and miserable, but the train attendant said happily "Oh, you'll just jump off the train when we arrive at the shore and take the next boat back across, run in and get your bags, then take the next boat back and we'll probably still be here." I didn't like the sound of 'probably' but he was being so cheerful and matter-of-fact, as though this had happened many times, I decided to give it a try. What ensued is the closest I've ever been to being part of a chase scene, except with very slow moving vehicles. I was able to float back across on an empty barge, retrieve my bags, jump back on another barge as it was leaving the dock and arrive back at my train seconds before it departed. As I was looking out the window when we were pulling away, I thought about what it would have been like to either lose my bags, with my music and clothes and travel material, or to spend the night somewhere near the dock at Helsingbord as I waited for another train heading to Trondheim the next morning. Perhaps it was the fatigue, or the eerie disenchantment that had settled upon me since the trip to Sault, but neither possibility seemed all that bad.

My arrival in Trondheim perhaps marked the peak of a sort of dissonance between where I was and what I was there for – I had never been that close to the Arctic Circle, had never taken in that type of lush, glacially folded landscape, and

certainly had never experienced Scandinavian culture to that degree. It was all new and intoxicating, and I could hardly believe that my days there, for two weeks, would be largely occupied by sitting inside rather sterile institutional buildings mulling over upper note trills and other minutiae. The peculiar splendor of my surroundings fed a lurking disengagement with what was, and now remains, a heartfelt passion for the details of the 17th century musical aesthetic. Add to that my encounter, on the first day there, with Hardanger fiddle players, and my detachment was complete – the far-reaching improvisatory spirit was too powerful for me to wholeheartedly attend to the intricate task at hand. I know this isn't a unique story; in fact it's a pretty hackneyed one in the universal narrative of the classically-trained musician's identity crisis. But my imagination can still viscerally evoke the small clouds hanging over steep green slopes and the driving open intervals of the fiddle music – my disjuncture was no mere abstraction.

In the course of my first week in Trondheim, I kept slipping out at various opportunities, wandering around, breathing in the cool air. Shortly after my arrival, I met two young men, former bunkmates in the military, who represented the extremes of ethnicity and character that make up Norwegian culture. Thorstein was a ruddy, blonde, friendly native of Oslo – the kind of considerate person who didn't like to have his headlights on while driving through streets at night because they might wake children. Ari was from the far north, likely of Lappish descent – he had the blackest, thickest hair, translucently pale skin, and dark, dark eyes. He was always heaving discontented sighs and had not a single kind thing to say about Norway. I saw them each day of that week, while I was dipping in and out of master classes, coaching sessions, and performance practice lectures. At the week's end, I received word of a family crisis that made it necessary for me to consider flying home. Looking back, I now can see that I used this to seize the opportunity to excuse myself from the second week of the institute – I didn't know that I was going to leave Norway, in fact I was pretty sure I wasn't, but I knew I needed to leave what had started to feel like captivity. I packed up my things and went into town, ostensibly to catch a bus or a train back to Oslo, but ended up meeting up with Thorstein and Ari and staying at their apartment. Ari's father was in the Norwegian Air Force and, it being pre-high-security days, he and his friends could board any military plane going anywhere. The day after leaving the institute, I was crouched on the floor of a small, hollow plane heading to Tromso, Ari's home town, at the 69th parallel. It was early July, the sun never completely went away, and I was just a traveler for a little while, following impulses, playing by ear.

I was well aware of the fact that there were more serious harpsichord demands coming up in 12 days when I got situated in Amsterdam, but I decided to exploit my remaining week of wandering in Norway. I found my way to a youth hostel in Voss where I met a group of Australian hitchhikers – people with 'real' careers back home who had saved up to take a year off to backpack around Europe. I was struck by the freedom they were endowed with – here were lawyers, bankers, doctors who both felt at liberty to take a year away from their jobs and didn't feel that those jobs defined who they were when they were talking about themselves with others. There was something to be extracted that was useful to me as an ambitious American, although difficult to translate into perfect relevance for the musical profession. I did know, for certain, that there was, if anything, only an uneasy freedom for me in this brief spontaneous hiatus from my drive toward being a particular type of concert artist; it didn't feel endorsed by my training and origins – instead it felt like a threatening detour, stewing in uncertainty, infected by alien sounds and the swell of bellows.

I took a full day hike from Voss down one of the fjords and found that the pretty little clouds hanging low over the green pathways actually produced rain, rain that soaked into my pro-Ked hightops and socks within the first 30 minutes so that for the remaining 7.5 hours of walking, my feet had wadded up wetness being pressed against them by even wetter canvas. By the time we returned to the hostel, my feet had bleeding blisters, and my only other shoes were a pair of clogs that made me feel like the little mermaid when she was briefly granted legs but at the cost of each step being as painful as knives cutting into her. There were no places in Voss to buy another pair of shoes, and I wouldn't have been able to walk to such a place anyway, so my only choice was to hobble to the train the next day to get transported to my next stop, the coastal city of Bergen, where I was sure to find bearable shoes within limping distance. The hostel there was up a huge hill overlooking the city, so before beginning what promised to be a very slow and uncomfortable schlep there, I went to a shoe store and bought some little boots of the softest leather. Even with those, my two days in Bergen were severely restricted – I was able to venture down to the harbor one morning to partake of freshly caught and steamed shrimp with a small loaf of crusty bread, but by the second morning it was clear that all I was good for was boarding the train again and sitting still for the long trip to Amsterdam.

All of this sudden inactivity, and the accompanying sadness, put me into a contemplative, alright, *ruminative*, state, so the train trip away from the fjords, the fiddles, the eternal light was spent deep in thought about where I was going and

what I would do. I was returning to the proscribed realm of my work as a harpsichordist, but I had truly been somewhere else for the bulk of my time in Norway. It took 16 hours, overnight, to get to Amsterdam, a place I had never been, and I made my way, with my broken walk, to an apartment that had been left for me by Fred Jacobs, a lutenist friend of a friend. This apartment was in the Red Light District which, in 1986, was less of an artisan and touristic hot spot as it is now, still seedy and dangerous. The flat was on the fourth floor, with the shower and phone kept by the apartment below. I slept a long while, through the day, and resurfaced in the evening to find that exiting that building at that time made me subject to many a solicitation. I scurried around to find some snacks at a corner market and quickly retreated, so the remaining evening's activity consisted of sitting in the apartment, making arrangements to practice at the Klinkhammer harpsichord shop the next day, mapping out how to get to Leonhardt's house on Herengracht the day after that, and pouring over the Amsterdam business phone book for musical instrument shops to see if the words 'akkordeon' or 'trekharmonika' popped out from the incomprehensible Dutch advertisements. I had decided how I would spend my spare time, between practice sessions at Klinkhammer's and lessons on Herengracht. Now I just needed to find the right machinery.

I was to spend a month in Amsterdam, with twice weekly lessons with Leonhardt. On the first day out, after spending a couple of nervous hours at Klinkhammer's, I made my way toward a neighborhood I knew had an instrument shop. I spent the rest of the afternoon trying out assorted accordions, ones that were two large, or too out of tune, or too leaky, or too expensive. I left that shop without a purchase, bought a falafel, and went back into hiding in the Red Light flat. That night was the only time during my entire stay that I took a shower – the negotiations with my disapproving downstairs neighbors (Fred had failed to inform them that I'd be staying there) were too tense, and they sat at a table immediately adjacent to the shower while I was in it. If I opened the door of the stall and stepped out, I would be right next to them, dripping, wrapped in a towel. The next morning, I set out for Herengracht – my feet were feeling better, the sun was making the canals golden, and my spirits were high as Leonhardt opened the door wearing a double-breasted suit. He escorted me to one of the many rooms in which I would ultimately have lessons (my next one would be in the kitchen) and, after a brief exchange of niceties about the people we knew in common, we worked for 90 minutes on a Louis Couperin unmeasured prelude. I felt a little unleashed by this excursion with him into semi-improvisation, exhilarated but then a little sad

because I knew we couldn't work forever on pieces that had no specified rhythm. Exactness of notation would enter the picture by the next time I saw him, and then where would I be? We scheduled our next meeting, he walked me to the door – perhaps I've invented the memory that he bowed as we said goodbye, that really would be too much.

Outside, I began to wander, not noticing my steps for the first time since the fjord hike. I didn't know where I was going, and I ended up very far away from where I was staying, in an area I still couldn't find for you on a map, despite the fact that I've been back to Amsterdam a few times since then. The reason I've tried to find it is that, after two hours of wandering, I stopped to look across the canal at a café that I thought would work well for a rest. While I was gazing, I noticed a dreadful smell wafting up from my feet and realized I had stepped in dog shit, a liability I had been careful to avoid until I started feeling a little happy and wanted to look up rather than always at the sidewalk. (I should mention that they've really addressed that problem in Amsterdam since the mid-80s, so now you can look up most of the time without great risk). Anyhow, the excrement surrounded the seam of one of my very soft leather boots. I took out a bottle of water and some napkins I happened to have, and leaned against a post to get to work. When I was satisfied I had removed the offending substance, I looked up for a trashcan and there, in a shop window, was a small red accordion. I stared at it for a little bit and then almost walked into the shop holding the dog-shit covered napkins, but I caught myself and threw them out quickly before marching in with great purpose, unconcerned about what smell I might be bringing in with me. The store was filled with instruments, old and new, and was run by one of the rare Netherlanders who don't speak a word of English, so I pointed to the red accordion in the window. The old man crawled over a double bass and some cases to retrieve it, then looked around for a place for me to sit, eventually just giving me his stool behind the counter. He placed the object in my arms like a newborn baby and adjusted the straps to fit comfortably around my shoulders. It was a Weltmeister (which would turn out, ironically, to be the preferred accordion of the Nazis when they played polkas and lŠndlers for one another), it was my size, it was brand new, and it had a sound like a bow being drawn across strings from another galaxy.

This shiny acquisition was my companion during my weeks in Amsterdam. I continued, however, to go to Klinkhammer's to practice Louis Couperin and Frescobaldi, I continued to show up at Leonhardt's doorstep and to witness his sequence of suits and the harpsichords strewn about the mansion. I grew

increasingly unclean because of the shower situation, so my primary shopping excursions were focused on purchasing a variety of scarves to cover my greasy hair. I managed to take a few trips away, the longest being two nights in Brugge for a part of the Early Music Festival (with the added benefit of a useable shower in the youth hostel there). While there, I went to rent a bike to ride around the surrounding area, but they only had children's bikes left. So, I spent a day touring the outskirts on a little blue bike like Curious George, my knees hitting my elbows as I pedaled madly along the canals. I took in the rows and rows of miniature gardening plots that served as getaways for town dwellers, weathered and settled-looking couples resting under porticos outside their toy-like houses. But all the while, I was thinking about the accordion sitting alone in Fred Jacob's apartment, waiting for me. More than anything, I wanted to continue working on the tunes I had started teaching myself, to keep training my left hand fingers to feel their way around the buttons for the bass notes and chords, to develop that ineffable sense of timing where the air of a bellows in-push got used up at exactly the end of a phrase – the sound evaporating before changing directions, a new breath taken. The songs were pulsing through my mind -- Yingele Nit Veyn, Dos Freylekhe Schnayderl, Oy Avram, Reb Dovidl, Ma Tovu, Firn di Mekhutonim, Bitola – and they were starting to sing out through this red contraption. I was driving the people downstairs crazy.

I can't recall how I got the accordion home – I may have put lots of padding inside the case and checked it as luggage, or perhaps I took it as a carry-on, lugging it through three transitions to connecting flights. I do remember that, upon my return to Boston, the first thing I did was get a ride with my parents up to the little house they had just bought way up the coast in Maine. During my week there, I sat in the living room, overlooking the Machias Bay, and played my accordion for hours on end. I had no harpsichord music to practice, no lessons I had to get to, and nobody below me stopping up their ears. This was a new sort of freedom, captured in swells and pushes.

In the course of the remaining summer weeks, I sought out Alan Bern, the accordionist who haunted me, and in late August I began lessons with him. He was teaching Noam Chomsky's wife as well, and I would sometimes talk with her when we crossed paths at the little studio where Alan taught – she was fulfilling a life-long dream, now that her kids were out of the house, but she was having a lot of trouble finding chords. Alan had a cache of exercises for this challenge, and the intensity of my practice reminded me very much of the effort I put into those first

keyboard harmony and continuo classes at Michigan. To this day, I can execute the jumping-around patterns on bass-note buttons to play scales down, although the scales up are still hard for me. Oddly, despite my seeming obsession with accordion practice, and my decision to not enroll in any more early music classes or lessons at NEC, there was something that had inadvertently come alive in my harpsichord playing. Somewhere in the non-committal fog of my European wanderings, most likely during my one week in Trondheim, I had heard a lively performance of CPE Bach's A minor Wÿrttemburg Sonata, and it had captured my imagination. I was entranced by its 32nd-note swirls and scoops, its surprising harmonic twists, its abrupt suspension of motion, and the subtle sadness that permeated its entire substance. I had found similar inspiration in Frescobaldi's *Cento Partite Sopra Passacaglia*, a long tangle of a piece built over more than 100 repetitions of the lamenting descending minor tetrachord. These two pieces kept me returning to the well daily and I found a sultry pleasure in my harpsichord practice, removed, really for the first time, from anybody else's expectations of what I needed to be working on, and how I needed to be doing so. There was more in common between what swept me up in plaintive Yiddish songs and what kept me so fervently working at these rather monumental works of 17th and 18th-century eccentricity.

Sometime in mid-fall, I scheduled a single lesson with my on-and-off harpsichord teacher, John Gibbons. I had been a frustration to him the whole previous year because I was rabidly individualistic, so really not very responsive to his specific musical and technical teachings, although I greatly enjoyed some of the more conceptual and cerebral elements of our work together. I had pissed him off before leaving for Europe after a recital by one of his students – not so much because I had said to him "Isn't it time for you to teach your students a little bit about articulation?", but because I overheard him saying to that same student the next day "Isn't it time for you to learn a little bit about articulation?" and called him on it (in a self-congratulatory manner that I've labored to cleanse myself of over the decades). So, I didn't have high expectations for a positive response to my newly unfettered playing at the coming lesson, but was still shocked when the only thing he had to say was that it reflected a type of intellectual laziness that he didn't want to have much to do with. I packed up and walked out (well, I said some non-repeatables too), so I believe those were the last words he spoke to me until, 5 years later, he was a judge at the Jurow competition and he shook my hand after I had received second prize and told me "Second place is the proud kingdom of those who bring too much personality to the music for all the judges to be able to

agree." Where he stood among those judges was another question, but he was right – I went on to take two more second prizes in other competitions.

In the fall of 1987, I started to address some sources of tension that resulted in pinched nerves in my shoulders. A massage-therapist friend observed my practicing at the harpsichord and remarked about a variety of posture issues, but most importantly noticed that I tended to hold my breath while playing. Even when I did breath, it seemed to be in gulps and gasps. I began to pay attention to this but simultaneously noticed that it wasn't an issue when I played the accordion – simply put, when the instrument breathed, I breathed with it. Yes, I loved the sustain and swell of the sound, and the music I played on that instrument had a deep, almost primal, resonance, but the most profound effect of playing the accordion had to do with the ease of breathing. It slowly took in air, and slowly released it – the technique of this needed to be practiced so as to be timed well with musical phrasing and shape, and certain arm muscles had to be strengthened, but there was no mystery to it. If I obeyed the orders of my own semi-voluntary reflex, the bellows would move accordingly. As in our own varied relationship to the air around us, sometimes there were gasps, rapid intakes, abrupt stops, and even the special effect of a type of stuttering expulsion to create a peculiar tremolo (much like the 'trillo' or 'battuto' in early 17th-century vocal practice), but the basic ease remained.

How can I begin to elaborate upon the meaning of breath, in music, in communication, in life? It is not only everywhere, it is often the most crucial element at work in each everywhere. As I sit writing this, I am distracted by my lungs' refusal to be completely filled. I work at inhaling deeply, I willfully and angrily wish the constriction away while knowing that the only remedy is the expansive, even breaths of meditation. It is what I remember to reach for, often a little late, when the fear of a performance seems to be getting the better of me. It was my last, and most peaceful, resort for communion with my mother while she lay laboring for her final breaths, the even swell in and out of fullness being the only gift I could bring. It is the emblem of all that has freed me from myself crowding in on myself, from disorientation in my surroundings, from the distress of having taken the wrong direction, and the fear that I'll never find my way back to what feels right, to where the air is unpolluted. There are, indeed, many forms of pollution, some we create all by ourselves.

Breathing means rescue, survival. We learn to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on a dummy in middle school, giving the air in our own lungs to a

hypothetical other so that they can survive, even *re*vive. We can't imagine ever needing such urgent action to be taken on our own behalf. And yet the accordion has rescued me in such a way on more occasions than I can remember. It has reminded me to inhale, exhale, and to sing while doing so. The most striking account of this is upon our move to a small town in Iowa, which I've written about extensively in other quarters. Out of my new location's diminutive size, its isolation, its narrow ethnic demographic, and the absence of professional activity for me, I had imagined myself into a state of suffocation. In my early months living there, I was allowing myself to strangle on what felt like a deficit of air available for the likes of me. I had started to play duo harpsichord repertoire with a fellow early keyboardist who had also just moved there, but the bulk of our time together was spent in conversation about what wasn't there for us, how we feared disappearing, and how we felt watched by the eyes of a small community that notices every new arrival. I learned that musicians could play for weekly gatherings at the food co-op, so I decided to take my accordion out - it had been fairly neglected over several years of finishing degrees, moving about, pursuing notoriety, launching our teaching careers. I sat in the corner of the café, playing as though I was alone, listening to the bold sweet sounds carried across the bellows' wind. I revisited melodies I had packed away – they were still there, but needed to be shaken out, the dust blown off of them. My body opened and closed with their contours, my lungs filled and emptied with the pushes and pulls. I was brought into a simple, satiated present, I was being resuscitated, and the air around me seemed ample, even rich.

While my five years in Iowa turned out to be my most active and driven period of work in the realm of historical performance, my accordion kept coming out of its case, bringing me home, reeling me in, warming me up, calming me down. Enterprises evolved in our little corner of the frozen tundra that kept me playing. First there was the formation of a makeshift Yiddish music group called NorskiKlezmorski, which took off to the point of playing live on several public radio stations in the region and traveling to play at a number of summer festivals. Then a dueling accordion collaboration (to mirror the Dueling Harpsichords) grew out of the Balkan zeal of an extraordinary woman who had demanded lessons from me and then quickly learned to play circles around me. Both of these ensembles would have existed in the shadows and margins of a larger city's live music culture, but in Decorah, they drew lots of attention and I found myself more often in front of Northern Iowa audiences strapped into an accordion than seated at a harpsichord. This split in my performing identity went

hand in hand with other divisions experienced in that time: my life as a 'professional' only existed away from there while this 'avocational' pursuit was the domain of my home base; my travels away to maintain said professional activity were pressurized, frantic, and often fraught with hazardous conditions and loneliness, while my time at home was exotically quiet and sweetly routine in the way that only rural life can be; my work in the baroque realm was urged ahead by the outward facing quest for new manners of constructing old courtly compositions while my forays through Jewish and Eastern Euorpean folk musics were the stuff of inward seeking, to describe my neglected roots, to find a warm and easy center that only these haunting melodies, energized by the ins and outs of bellows, could bring me. And two years into our time in Iowa, a new disparity was born of our child who chose the accordion to be what he danced to, what he reached up to touch while I played, what he would sing along with, while conditions chose it as the instrument by which he and I could be together, in the same room, in the same state, the harpsichord pulling me away on a regular basis, keeping us apart. When I had added another instrument to my collection, a lady's accordion from the 1930s, with sparkly gold flecks imbedded on its thin keys, he would call out which one he wanted me to play – "Mama, play the gold, Mama, play the red!" Like the Flemish and Italian harpsichords that sat nestled in my studio, there were two accordions to choose from, providing a wider diversity of ineffable contributors to a swelling sweetness in my life, a nostalgia for a world I had never actually occupied.

There's an irony to how rarely the accordion came out of its case between 2000 and 2010. These were ten years when I had returned to being surrounded by Jews and thriving Jewish culture, first in Cleveland Heights and then in Newton, Massachusetts. They were also ten years during which I was consumed by a whirlwind of work as a harpsichordist, fortepianist, and general historical performance maven – working on my doctorate, directing a baroque orchestra, touring as a soloist and ensemble member, teaching at the conservatory in Cincinnati. My primary avenue for playing the accordion was found as music director at a Unitarian church in Needham, Massachusetts. It's often said that most Unitarians are disenfranchised Jews, and if they're not, they want to be. I had stored in the back of my mind what a friend from college had said about his work as the music director at the UU church in Ann Arbor – "they'll let me do ANYTHING!" In this case, he was referring to the fact that his prelude that Sunday had consisted of dropping 200 ping pong balls on the strings of the piano, but I made use of it for slightly less edgy purposes – I was going to play the accordion regularly in church. And I did, sometimes joining with a mandolin-

playing parishioner, or the folk group, or a variety of singers. I even created an arrangement of Palestrina's 'Sicut Cervus' with accordion accompaniment. And my friends who attended the church, with whom we would often take small camping and hosteling trips around New England, would always ask that I bring the accordion so that we'd have it to accompany our singing, piercing the quiet of the woods and firepit. But otherwise, the instrument lay low, at rest in its box under the harpsichord.

During our first year in Newton, I was working to recover from overuse injuries to my hand and arm, slowly reconstructing my technique at the harpsichord, and engaged in a more universal examination of my way of holding myself, of conceiving of myself, at that instrument. I was trying to bring a different type of health and ease to my playing, to find pleasure and freedom in performing, to throw off some oppressive physical and psychological baggage that had accumulated. I was aiming to give a series of recitals that brought me into this new place with the harpsichord, and my composer husband had the idea of writing me a piece in which I played both accordion and harpsichord. He wanted it to be almost a theater piece, to depict the obvious divide I had always experienced between the one and the other, and to perhaps bring about some union. It was meant to be a little humorous, but also therapeutic. In 'Breathing Memory,' John recorded and electronically processed accordion sounds so that they were primal surges intruding upon my earnest efforts to play CPE Bach's Folia on the harpsichord. I was drawn off by the sounds and brought to the accordion, where, like a chimp investigating an unfamiliar toy, I explored the long, gentle shapes created by bellows slowly pumping in and out, eventually also creating more violent bursts and clusters. I'm brought back to the harpsichord, where I play a stream of expansive arpeggiated cluster chords, breathing, swelling with their motion. The piece ends with a doleful Russian tune played on the accordion, and accompanied by the recorded sounds fading off into the distance. The piece explores memory on many levels – the most basic memory, or recollection, of the body's breath, the more complex memory of an identity buried, and the healing memory of the musician's singularity, regardless of what vehicle is being used for performance.

That same Russian lament built itself into deeper emotional memory in June of 2010. Through a fundraising auction at the church, I had ended up committed to playing background music on accordion at an afternoon cocktail party in Needham. The house I was heading to was very close to the hospice I had been visiting where my oldest friend, Persephone, lay dying. She had lived for many years in Russia,

involving herself in a number of ways in the nation's process of being ushered out of the soviet era. After I had been playing background music, largely ignored, in the corner of the party host's patio, I decided to stop in to see Persephone and, on a whim, decided to bring the accordion in with me. She was only half-conscious but was able to respond enthusiastically when I asked if I could play for her. First a Macedonian tune, then a Jewish ritual wedding march, and, finally, the Russian song. Its title translates as 'Please don't leave me.' When I finished, I saw that she had drifted back into sleep, so I packed up quietly, kissed Persephone on her stubbly head, said goodbye to her mother Liz, and snuck out. I had played that tune only two hours earlier for a mass of chatty, inattentive socialites and I was mindful of the difference between that use and the use it had just been put toward. She died the next day and I played the song again at her memorial.

Thinking back, I'm struck by the fact that I hadn't considered playing the accordion at my mother's memorial service only 6 months earlier. Here was a marker of the deepest, most wrenching sorrow I had experienced, ensconced in Jewish observances – sitting my own quiet Shiva, recitation of Kaddish, chanting of El Male Rachamim – but there was no question that the music I needed to play for that occasion was to come from the harpsichord. The andante from the E minor violin sonata by Bach and Purcell's 'An Evening Hymn' were my choices, and it was with those ground basses that I found my greatest comfort, and felt my deepest connection to my mother's memory. Yes, she was the keeper, the transmitter, of a Judaic longing that had brought me to the accordion, but more profoundly, she was the provider of a type of freedom and imagination that had brought me to harpsichord long before that. At the end of the service, we all sang Cole Porter's 'Don't Fence Me In', her theme song, and I can be certain that, despite the tangle of constriction that had grown up around my life with the harpsichord, she had always seen it as an open gateway, my path to musical liberty, to be made into whatever I wished. The easy gratification of playing Purcell and Bach at her memorial on the Italian harpsichord she had purchased for me, the rightness of brass strings plucked and reverberating on the walls of the Wesleyan University chapel, told me that such openness as she had imagined still remained with me.

Something happened in the months after my mother's death, and it all seemed accidental. 18 years earlier, immediately after I finished my masters degree and got married, we moved to Pittsburgh in order for me to be the harpsichordist for a new early music ensemble that would ultimately become Chatham Baroque, still very much alive and kicking. One of the founders was a wonderful recorder player

named Jeff Stock. Around the time that I moved away to Nashville two years later, he started moving toward a higher level of Jewish observance, leading ultimately to becoming a cantor, one who sounded strikingly like the old wax recordings of my grandfather Morris. And while Jeff was becoming a cantor, he was also gradually partnering with another cantor, Hollis, who became his wife. They moved to Boston when she landed a position at Temple Shir Tikva in Wayland, Massachusetts. None of this would really matter except that Jeff called upon me one fall to play for some of the High Holy Day services at the weird synagogue he was serving and that got me on his list of keyboardists available for such purposes. God knows I didn't want to be on that list – I had had my fill of playing wretched Anglican-like Shabbat music behind a screen at decaying 1960s temples in Flint and Detroit – but I loved Jeff, knew we'd have some fun, and I wanted to help him out. At the time, the music and ritual had very little resonance with me. Several years later, however, when I received a call from Hollis asking if I'd be available to play for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur that fall, it all felt a bit different. We met up to try each other out and there was immediately a sense of having stepped into a whole new zone in relation to Jewish liturgy, one where fervor and musical enterprise were barely separable. My desire to participate was strong, for my own soul's sake and for the vapors of my mother's wistfulness, and the music Hollis worked with was of an entirely different order in its creativity and integrity. She wanted me to commit also to playing regular Saturday morning services, which I resisted for fear of feeling enslaved, but I eventually relented because I had a sense that there really couldn't be much drudgery when working with someone like her, and being driven by such deep internal urges. What sealed the deal, though, was when I happened to mention that I played the accordion and she jumped, almost shouting that she and the rabbi had wanted to start a Shabbat klezmer band. I told her about Ezra's clarinet prowess, and the seed for our band was planted. We started it the following fall, playing once a month, gradually gearing up to cover most of the Friday night service music plus a few of our own raucous numbers. Working with saxophone, fiddle, trombone, bass, flute, and mandolin, Ezra and I threw ourselves into a shared leadership, and found ourselves simultaneously thrown into learning Hebrew, pondering Torah, considering Bar Mitzvah. The High Holy Days earlier that year were perhaps my entree into the heavier stirrings within me, wanting connection to my mother's memory and the complex rewards of T'shuvah, but the band (eventually called Shir Chutzpa) was our joint entree into a type of joyous, unfettered exploration of this part of who we were.

There are points when things that have seemed essentially different show themselves to be actually cut from the same cloth. I have arrived at those points of clarity as they pertain to some of the larger of life's forces - love, loss, longing, prayer. My love for my child rises out of the same pool as my mother's love for me, Liz's for Persephone; we draw from the same reservoir of pain when the object of your love slips out of reach, whether it is one's mother who stops breathing, one's daughter who says goodbye and turns onto her side for the last time, one's child who no longer wishes for his hand to be held; the yearning that takes root upon the approach of Rosh Hashana is no different from the studied quest for Nirvana or the noisy steps toward Resurrection; stillness of the mind, quieted breath, openness, are what we all are seeking when we ask for, and sometimes manage to sit in, peace. I now find that I live a life as a musician where the harpsichord and accordion not only peacefully coexist, they substantially overlap in the roll they play in my life. Pluck and swell remain seemingly at odds, yet I move into each with a fullness of bodily release and a richness of breath. I approach the playing of each instrument with the same complex of anxiety about adequacy of execution and a jonesing for the freedom and flexibility they bring me. I believe that anything can happen on either, and I try, sometimes successfully, to be entirely myself with each, following my curiosity, my sense of play, and my need to burrow into sound and gesture. An unmeasured prelude by Louis Couperin will never be just like a doina, but both are rhapsodic vehicles for freely traversing a landscape of harmonic surprises; a gavotte will always distinguish itself from a bulgar but both are brought to life by imitating the ecstatic jumps and landings of the dancer; Froberger's plainte from the melancholy of his time in London may require more slavish attention to notational detail than a sad Russian melody quickly scribbled onto the bottom of a piece of manuscript paper, but each is the sonic embodiment of another person's sorrow. And when I am playing either instrument with others, I am seeking the same camaraderie, connection, and interplay – with both, I can find myself laughing at unexpected turns of events, looking at my partner with terror at their fast tempo, thrashing about as we escalate toward a barely contained ending. Most importantly, I am seeking collaboration in singing of songs, dancing of dances, lingering on colors that bring about a shared delight.

Shleimut – wholeness – all this, for bringing together the scattered particles of a life lived.