

Words and Music

By Karen Finnigan

I want to document something that happened to me last winter, one bitter cold morning in January. I was at my computer, willing but uninspired, not sure I could get any words to flow. I had a rough idea of what happened next, but didn't think I had the energy to dig down and find my characters that day. They were in Norway, but wouldn't talk to me. I should add I like to work to music, but wasn't sure if I had the music that would inspire this scene.

The doorbell rang at 11 in the morning.

With dogs barking around my heels I opened the door a crack. A young man stood on my doorstep. A stranger with merchandise in his hands.

Laundry soap? Insurance? He had 10 seconds, tops, before I shut the door, or a dog got him.

Besides, it was bitter cold. I don't know why he chose my house or street on a morning like this. It was so white and cloudy, he could have walked out of the mists for all I knew.

He held up a CD.

What kind of music? I asked to be polite. Skeptical, I was ready to shut the door.

Classical piano, he said.

I gave him 30 seconds more. Whose?

Mine, he said.

Really? He had my attention. I shoved the dogs back and went out to the porch, reached for a CD. What songs did you record?

Most were pieces I didn't know or write to, until he mentioned the last ones.

Beethoven.

I'd already given Beethoven to one of my characters, but didn't have a good CD of it.

Sale.

But before I finalized the deal, I had a question on another level. What are you dreaming of doing? I asked him. Concert stage maybe?

No, he was just trying to make a living, he told me. A photo of his wife and children beamed back from the CD cover.

As a struggling writer, no one on the block understood that better than me.

I wrote him a check with my red pen, brought in my new CD and slipped it into the player.

Lyrical piano music spilled out in 4:4 time. I skipped to the final pieces, the Beethoven, the sonata called "Cantabile." A familiar, much loved piece, it was exactly what I wanted to hear.

I should add I just happened to be writing the scene in my novel where Kristine hears this music being played in Rolf's apartment. Meant to be? I don't know, but it was exactly, precisely the music I needed at that moment in the scene I was trying to create.

When I sat back at my computer, I wrote a word, then another, and a whole

sentence. Suddenly the characters were talking, telling me what they wanted to say. The CD ended, and I hit replay. My characters were talking in 4:4 time, and I was typing, capturing their words. At some point the music ended again, but by then I didn't even realize it. It had done its job to open up the creative channels in me, and I kept on writing.

I've spoken to many writers who say they work to music, that it inspires creativity. In my earlier writing career, I wore out my favorite CDs and tapes getting the right music to turn on the creative juices. Then and now, not just any music works. Not the heavy beats of the radio Top 40. No, for me it takes a certain tempo and sound to open the door to where words will flow like magic. Classical or stage tunes, usually to 4:4 time work. About the tempo of "Music of the Night," on a *Phantom of the Opera* tape I wore out long ago.

If I ever tried to explain this to noncreative friends, they look at me like I've lost it. But writing friends all seem to understand and share a belief in the power to music in the creative process. They're the ones who nod. *Yeah, music. Works for me too.*

I should add that while the auditory stimulation of music works for writing, at the same time I want no visual stimulation at all. I create in front of a blank wall. A wall as white and plain as the blank screen. Though when it comes time to edit or critique, I do an aboutface. I'm sure you've heard me complain how I find it too hard to listen when you want me to critique a reading. Then, I *do* want the visual, hard copy page. Go figure. Visual helps me be analytical, helps the reasoning side of my brain stay focused. Auditory sensations, though, move me to the other creative side. Sound provides the magic wand to open my imagination. And pulls the research stored in my right brain over there too.

Only of course it's not magic at all. The science behind music and creativity is documented. Something about music greasing the skids on neurological receptors that connect the left and the right sides of the brain. The Mozart Effect, you may have heard it called. But the effect isn't limited to the music of Mozart. His was the music was used in the study on the effects of music on the brain, that's all. Other composers can have the same effect. I'm not here to explain that part of it. You can pull it up on GOOGLE to read about the science of music and the brain. Many writers intuitively know. They swear by the power of music to unleash creativity. Like me, they also know precisely what kind of music each needs to tap into their creative place. Country/western music? Rap? Won't work for me. But a Grieg symphony? Yes.

But while there's a scientific explanation behind how music connects the right and left sides of brain, another thing should be pointed out: There's still a lot of mystery in creativity, in what it takes to inspire. A mystery in what makes someone keep writing or not. A mystery to how or why a simple knock at the door can open the door to words.

So in the end this is more about serendipity than science. There might have been a CD in my house that morning that would have inspired me if I'd dug hard enough. But there was a surreal quality to the exchange that morning--a stranger at my door, frigid white mists behind him, out of which he came and into which he vanished just as quickly, handing me the very music I needed to write--as if , here, try this. Keep going, you can do it.

I did keep going. Recently, I completed my first draft of *Return to Cloudberry*. If my novel could have a soundtrack, Joel Palmer's CD would be on it.

