

## Of Sound and Silence

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**E**ntitled “The Mood that Passes Through You,” the melody is simple yet haunting. Composed of single notes, and supported by flowing runs of the same four notes over and over in the bass hand, the lonely sound is sometimes enthralling, sometimes unpleasant. As it weaves its way up and down the piano, climbing the black keys and embracing the unnerving, contemplative atmosphere they create by slightly lowering or raising the pitch, it is hard to say whether the piece is one we’d call beautiful. Nevertheless, it is intoxicating, both thrilling and frightening in its power. During the film, one of the characters describes the music as strange, remarking with a shudder that “to have a sound creep inside you is not at all pleasant.” But what is also unpleasant is the silence created after the sound ends. The intensity remains, begotten by the music but losing none of its power as the last notes trail off. Instead, it increases. The emotional tension builds as we squirm in our seats and long for the next sound, any distraction to relieve us, just as we longed for the piano melody to resolve itself and turn into something more pleasant and less disturbing—something less capable of creeping inside and grabbing our heart.

*The Piano* is unique in the way that it communicates with us. The film’s power lies in its strange and subtle ability to inhabit us, until our emotions are no longer under our own control but instead ride the turbulent ebb and flow of the movie. Music plays an important role in this inhabitation. It is through her piano music that Ada, the heroine of the film, tells her story, as she has not spoken since the age of six. Ada herself makes it clear in the beginning through a voiceover that the voice we hear occasionally is not her speaking voice, but her mind’s voice. The musical language of the film, therefore, becomes absolutely crucial. The piano music no longer has its usual role as background accompaniment; instead, it becomes an expressive substitute for her voice. Michael Nyman’s stunning score, rich with passion, creates a rapturous narration for the captivating images produced by director Jane Campion.

However, in a film seemingly dominated by sound, there is another force at work. Ada's muteness, the stark dress of the characters, the grey and blue tones of the landscape—all contribute to the power. And silence. But silence is not there to act simply as a counter balance to the sound of her music. It goes to the opposite end of the spectrum, possessing as much intensity as the music and a wholly different, but no less effective, means of communication. In our culture, silence is something we don't like to deal with; we'd much rather fill up our lives with sound and distraction. Silence is pure and raw and charged with emotion. It leaves us stripped, unable to cover ourselves—we are our naked, true selves, and that realization can be frightening. *The Piano* has no comfortable middle ground to distract us. It is a movie of extremes. Just as it begins with beautifully haunting music, it ends with intense bewildering silence. Its story is one of frightening passion without any regard for limits, communicating with two extremely powerful and different forms of emotion. It grabs us. Our minds are confused, enthralled, and confounded by a passionate masterpiece that defies immediate understanding, and our hearts are haunted with the echoes of its extraordinary symphony of sound and silence.

Set in the wild bush of mid nineteenth-century New Zealand, *The Piano* tells the story of Ada (Holly Hunter) and her illegitimate nine-year old daughter, Flora (Ana Paquin), as they leave their life in Scotland to live in a rough colonial settlement with Stewart (Sam Neil), Ada's new husband by an arranged marriage. They have never met. When Ada and Flora are carried through the pounding surf and reach the coast, there is no one there to meet them. They spend their first night in this strange new land alone, camped out under Ada's hoop skirt. Remarkably, they are not afraid; they have each other and Ada has her piano, which also made the perilous journey from Scotland.

From the first seconds of the opening credits the music is ever-present, creating a dreamlike quality with its foreboding, yet beautiful sound. Low, nudging cello supports the high wailing strings and song of the viola. And of course there is the voice of the piano, setting the moods of the music. There are traces of old Scottish folk and dance songs mixed in with the music's classical foundation. Ada's piano music has a sense of modesty, as she is not a trained composer, but it also has deep, intense passion. Ada is able to aurally communicate through her piano and through sign language with her daughter, and they are the two most precious "things" in her life.

Stewart does eventually arrive, a rag-tag entourage in tow, to meet his new wife and child and bring them back to his settlement. Clothed in a dirty top hat, vest, and jacket, Stewart's grimy, impractical European clothes accen-

tuate his obvious separation from the other inhabitants of the land, most of them native Maori Indians. Stewart seems more concerned with Ada's appearance than the fact he was late in meeting her. Ada has an intensity all of her own, separate from her music, and from the beginning Stewart seems frightened of it. Having a wife that could not speak was never an issue for him; as the movie progresses we get hints of the idea that he fancied possessing a "dumb creature" as a wife, someone who would depend on and adore him. Ada is the antithesis of his Victorian expectations. Her silence is about much more than just not speaking. She is a strong, fiercely proud woman who possesses an indomitable will and a stubborn mind of her own. Like her music, she has a mysterious beauty and an intensity that both enthrall and frighten.

Of all her belongings, Stewart refuses to transport Ada's piano. He does not understand Ada's need for it, viewing the piano as a worthless, cumbersome burden. One of the most haunting images of the film is that of the piano left on the beach, its ornately carved legs buried in the wet, dark sand that seems to stretch on and on as the camera pans out. A dark speck on the beach, the piano is alone, save for the crashing waves, whose foam advances closer and closer as the tide comes in. Unforgettable, the lonely picture of the abandoned piano on the desolate beach creeps inside us. In the background, piano music—Ada's cry of pain and goodbye—is playing. The simple patterns and repeated notes change slowly as the camera moves, shifting from a sad song of good-bye to a pounding rush of dazzling sound. Ada's face, as she looks back at the piece of herself left on the beach, encompasses the music's sadness, desperation, and fear. Without changing expression or blinking, her face registers the range of emotions she is feeling and expressing through her mind's song. The juxtaposition of the silent, empty piano and Ada's silent, seemingly empty face, with the rushing piano music in the background gives the scene an intense poignancy that resonates long in our minds and our hearts.

Ada is willing to do anything to save her piano from its certain destruction, and so she goes to her neighbor, Baines (Harvey Keitel), for help. He is a rough, illiterate Englishman who has become such a part of the native Maori culture of New Zealand that tattoos cover his face. He takes Ada and Flora back to the beach. Ada's joy in being reunited with her piano pours out from her in intense, rapid, ebullient playing. She is oblivious to everything except her piano, but Baines has taken notice of her; he is enthralled. Having "gone native," Baines is more in tune with the secret and unspoken things of the world; he is able not only to communicate with the Maori Indians but also with Ada. Unlike Ada's husband, Baines is not intimidated by Ada's intensity. He is unafraid to listen to her strange music, and it mesmerizes him. Ada

touches the piano with the delicacy of a lover and that passion resounds in her music. Baines hears this. He realizes that she is tied to the piano and cunningly makes a deal with Stewart. For a few tracts of Baines' land, Stewart gives him Ada's piano and the promise that she will give him lessons.

During their lessons, Baines quickly makes his true intentions towards Ada clear. "Do you know how to bargain?" he asks her. She may earn her piano back if she allows him to fulfill certain sexual desires while she plays. She may earn back one black key for every visit. The repulsion Ada feels towards him is very great. But then Baines begins to change as Ada captures his heart, through her music and also through their intimate exchanges. She begins to haunt his mind; he longs for her spirit and heart, not only her body. He gives Ada her piano back long before she has earned all of the keys, because though he madly loves her, he wants her to care for him of her own free will.

Stewart, however, would much rather Ada have no will. He cannot understand her, and as he makes no concessions in an attempt to, neither does she yield to him. Only silence comes from her, and it scares him. When Baines gives Ada her piano back, she does not play it for Stewart. Whenever he does hear her music, he is perplexed and disconcerted because it is not simple, pleasurable listening. Stewart cannot take Ada's intensity—neither her music nor her silence. He seems a man uncomfortable and unsure of who he is, and he is quite frightened by this woman who possesses the power to pass inside him and perhaps see his true self through her silent, penetrating presence or her passionately complex music.

What is astonishing is that the music, like Ada herself, draws its intensity through its relationship of silence and sound. Confucius once wrote that music is emotion without bounds. *The Piano's* music overflows with emotion; it is Ada's outlet, and her passion is what gives it the power to play upon our heartstrings. However, Mozart believed that the most powerful part of music is its rests, its breaks of silence. Emotion is not communicated only through sound. The film's composer, Michael Nyman, pays delicate attention to the silence as well. His music takes on a living quality, slowing down and speeding up as if breathing, building up and then dropping down like a whisper. The range is characteristic of Michael Nyman and his minimalist style. Minimalism, part of the experimental music movement during the Modern period, focused on the interplay between sound and silence to move, disturb, and enthrall the listener. For its basis, the music had simple patterns and repeated elements. These slowly and subtly change with time, shifting in and out of phase, creating a hypnotic tapestry of sound ([www.msfiles.co.uk](http://www.msfiles.co.uk)). This

is precisely what Michael Nyman does, giving the music the freedom to encompass a wide contrast of moods. Ada's music has those moments of silence, the rests that build tension between the building, changing, notes, and it also has the rapturous moments of joyful sound, making it extremely powerful.

Power cannot exist without producing an effect on those in contact with it. For Ada, the men in her life finally react with an intensity of their own as the sound and silence trigger an eruption of emotions. Baines is possessed by Ada and her music, and his love for her becomes so great that he no longer wants only part of her. When Ada realizes she no longer has any reason to see Baines, she discovers how much he has come to possess her as well. His love and sacrifice touches her, and she chooses to go back to him. During her intimate time with him, her music pours forth in cascading sound. But the emotional tension has been growing between her and Stewart, and he follows her to Baines' home, where he witnesses her infidelity and the affection she lavishes on Baines but has never shown to him. The secret goes on, until finally Stewart's suppressed emotions erupt in a jealous rage when he finds Ada has taken out a key of her piano and inscribed it with a declaration of love to give to Baines. The explosive confrontation between Stewart and Ada finally brings together the silence and Ada's "voice" within their home. As Stewart storms into the house, wielding his axe, the piano music in the background is building in a passionate climax, playing furiously one of the familiar themes while Stewart roars, "Do you love him?!" before chopping off Ada's finger in a horrifying and heart-wrenching moment. The music stops briefly, then creeps in high and soft with a chilling, dying version of the same song.

It is only after this terrible act that Stewart finally feels Ada speak to him. As she lies in the bed, feverish and wounded, she opens her eyes and looks into him as he stares at her. She breaks the silence between them, not through her piano, as she did with Baines, but as a voice inside Stewart's head, which he hears as clearly as if she had spoken.

From this dramatic moment, a new chapter of Ada's life begins. Stewart lets her go, and she leaves the settlement to live a new life with Flora and Baines. But now that she has "spoken," it seems that there is no longer any music. Nor is there intensity; Ada is much diminished. She leaves clutching her wounded hand, staring out with bleak eyes that once burned with such fire. But her story seems to be ending happily; she shares a deep with love with Baines, and they are going to be able to be together. She also has her piano, secured fast with them in the boat that is taking them to their new life. But suddenly she demands that it be thrown overboard. It's "spoiled," she

signs; but Ada is intimately connected to her piano, and to throw it into the sea, to let it die, is like the death of Ada herself. She also feels that she is spoiled; her wings are clipped, and as the piano plummets to the bottom of the ocean, Ada slips her foot into a loop of the rope connected to it, and quickly is pulled out of the boat and down under with it. This is a dramatic and tragic ending, but one that seems at the same time oddly appropriate; for a life filled with such extreme passion and music, to end attached to her piano at the bottom of sea where there is nothing but silence, is a dramatic death fitting for Ada's intense life. But strangely, remarkably, it is not the end. After looking around underwater, Ada suddenly kicks off her boot. She chooses life and swims back up to the surface! "What a death—what a chance—what a surprise!" she says, her mind's voice speaking to us again for the first time since the beginning. And from here it does not stop, telling us about her new life, her new job teaching piano with a metal finger, and her attempts to learn how to speak again. This new, normal life is a happy one, but we cannot help feeling dissatisfied. The intense, powerful emotion, the sound and the silence, are gone; it is almost anticlimactic that after being filled with so much passion the film would end with Ada's acclimation into the real world.

Why did she make this choice? Perhaps she tired of silence, of living with such an intensity that she was able to communicate in powerful ways, but always to be cut off from those she loved. "Silence affects everyone in the end," Ada says in the beginning. It is fearfully isolating. It is interesting that when Ada stopped speaking she started playing the piano. Now, as her piano lies in its ocean grave, she begins to speak again. Her new life comes at the sacrifice and demolition of her piano and spirit; in a way, she did kill herself, leaving her sound and silence behind and rising up as a shell of her former self. But we come to find that her spirit has not died; it has just stayed with the piano under the ocean, and at night in her dreams they are reunited. Finally she can be in both worlds—that of her spirit, with its beautiful, disturbing power, and that of her new life, with a regular voice, husband, and child.

*The Piano* ends with this haunting image of Ada floating underwater, anchored by the rope to her piano and Ada's quotation of a sonnet by Thomas Hood entitled *Silence*. "There is a silence where hath been no sound, there is a silence where no sound may be ..." In this way *The Piano* leaves us; having opened with sound, it ends with silence. The image of the silent piano on the ocean floor is as haunting as the piano abandoned on the beach with the passionate music playing in the background. Both are beautiful in their ability to disturb us, lingering in our minds long after the sound, and the silence, fade.

## WORKS CITED

*The Piano*. Dir. Jane Campion. Perf. Holly Hunter, Harvey Keitel, Anna Paquin, Sam Neil. Live Home Video, 1994.

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