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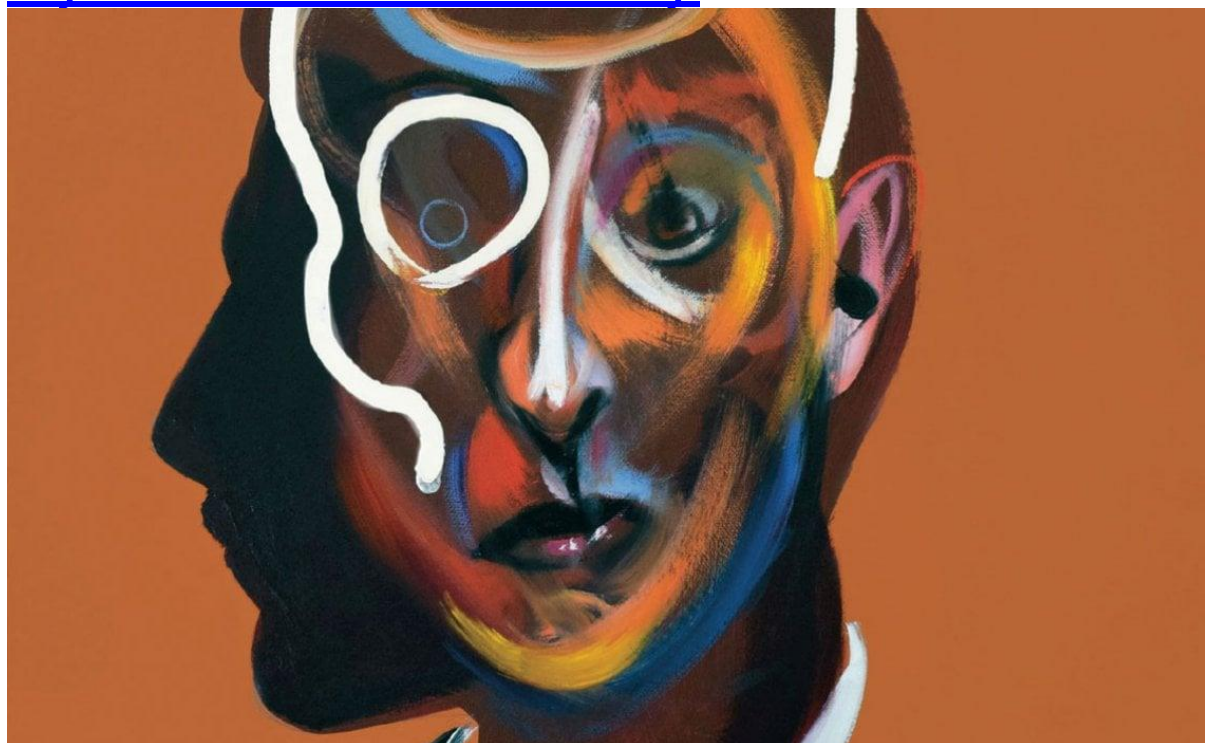
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Ghost notes:
Simon Tedeschi's 'Fugitive'

[By Anna Goldsworthy](#)



A virtuoso memoir of music and trauma, and his experiences as a child prodigy, from the acclaimed Australian pianist

In his new book, *Fugitive*, the Australian pianist Simon Tedeschi describes the many faces of the child prodigy:

To his public, the child prodigy is a robot or a God.

To his rivals, he is a false prophet.

To his rivals' teachers and parents, he is a demon.

To his society, he is a symbol.

But to himself, he is simply a ghost.

A declaration of interest here: I met Tedeschi at the tail end of his prodigy years, when we competed against each other in the national keyboard finals of the ABC Young Performers Awards. I was about 20; he was a young teenager, clad in a bow tie and possibly even braces, pale and intent and yet somehow *spry*. I can't remember if I viewed him as a false prophet, but I'm sure I viewed him with suspicion. (I cannot speak for my parents and teacher.) After our performances, we lined up on stage to await the results. *Was humiliating*, my teacher said afterward, *you looked like queen in kindergarten*. We were all beaten by the youngest finalist: the astonishing 12-year-old David Tong, playing Liszt. Some years later Tedeschi won the competition, by which time I had retired from such humiliations, as a queen or a green-eyed monster. David Tong gave up the piano to become a rough-terrain pilot in Papua New Guinea, where he died in a plane crash in 2017.

I have not met Tedeschi since, but when the world is working properly, we orbit the same pianos. I feel I know him as a spectral presence: on the radio playing Gershwin, or in the fingering of a score lent to me by a shared collaborator, or as the next visitor to Coffs Harbour after I have vacated the piano stool.

And, indeed, ghosts are one of Tedeschi's themes in *Fugitive*, a book whose genre is difficult to describe – memoir? meditations? prose-poetry? music? – but whose achievement is clear. Any book worth reading contains its own music, but few books so closely approach its condition, to paraphrase essayist and critic Walter Pater. “For while in all [non-musical] art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form,” Pater explains, “it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it.” Tedeschi achieves this synthesis not by appropriating the grand structures of fugue or sonata form but

by modelling the book on Sergei Prokofiev's suite of piano miniatures from 1915 to 1917, *Mimolyotnosti*, commonly known in French translation as *Visions fugitives*, though Tedeschi proposes an English alternative, *Ephemerality*. One of the challenges of writing (I note in front of this particular keyboard) is that of unspooling your thoughts in a continuous thread, when rogue thoughts often tend sideways, or exist in simultaneity, or contain hyperlinks and digressions. A piece of piano music, despite its linear nature, operates on many planes: not just those of text and subtext but also those of melody (horizontal) and harmony (vertical), along with texture and rhythm and timbre and tessitura. "Phrases have their own topography," Tedeschi notes, "they move forward with the line but also remain wedded to the ground with each change of harmony, and this is where the battle lies, why each piece of music grapples with its own destructive potential, why beauty is never what it appears to be."

In his memoir, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev*, Sergei Prokofiev enunciates the four "basic lines" of his work: the classical, the modern, the motoric and the lyrical. He grudgingly admits the existence of the "grotesque" as a fifth line, though he prefers the designation *scherzando*, or playful. *Fugitive* operates with a similar range of register, deftly moving from memoir to musicology or theology, to love letter to Tedeschi's wife. Its recurrent images and ideas – beating hearts, borders, silences, ghosts – form a mash-up that looks a little like Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*. But although Tedeschi, like Lockwood, is "very online", he is less interested in evoking the online world than the atmosphere of the *Visions fugitives*. As with most miniatures, a good part of their business is that which remains unsaid, and so, in a Pateresque convergence of matter and form, silence is not only one of Tedeschi's themes but his *modus operandi*. Many

of his silences are those of music: the “ghost notes” of jazz, which sound as “a stream of in-betweens”; “the weave of [the] silences” of an enraptured audience; or the “no music” that Mozart allegedly claimed lay at the heart of his creation. But there is another, larger, silence at the heart of this book, which Tedeschi refers to as *That Which Happened*, after the poet Paul Celan, who believed that language after the Holocaust “had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech”. Tedeschi’s Polish maternal grandparents were also Holocaust survivors who migrated to Sydney’s eastern suburbs, where “most of the survivors in the community didn’t speak to each other – some things can never be said, much less repeated”. His paternal grandfather, meanwhile, fled Mussolini’s Italy for Australia, where “at the border, no one believed there was such thing as an Italian Jew”. These grandparents are fleeting presences in the book – *visions fugitives* – but they are key to its meaning. “Nanna did make a joke, just one time,” Tedeschi recalls. “My sister, then a baby, dropped a bunch of dolls on the floor. Nanna walked in and simply said – *Auschwitz*. Everyone cried.” When his grandmother dies, Tedeschi is prompted to touch her dead body, in violation of Jewish law: “I wanted, I think, to subject her to some kind of indignity. I also wanted to test God.” She lives on as a smell in the walls of her apartment, “all spit and spite”, and as perhaps Tedeschi’s most important ghost.

Such preoccupations – emigrants, memory, trauma, time – recall the works of W.G. Sebald, as does the book’s layout, in which the prose is studded with the occasional black-and-white photograph. Any book with “fugitive” in its title inevitably summons the ghost of Proust too, though Tedeschi invokes the musical concept of *rubato*, or “robbed time”,

rather than lost time, noting that “what you take away from the bar has to be given back, but in real life time is something that is taken away from us”. Unlike Sebald’s exhaustive annotations of the material world, or Proust’s painstaking excavations of cognition, Tedeschi’s digressions are as “fleeting or fleeing or flitting” as the *Visions fugitives*: works that demand “an ability to go deep but wrench yourself out before it’s too late. An appetite for abandonment.”

Occasionally, Tedeschi fixates on an object:

I’ve vowed not to tell you about the ring. The emerald ring chosen by my paternal grandfather as a baby when he picked it up and put in his mouth, like Moses with the lump of burning coal ... brought from Torino by my paternal great-grandmother, a tiny woman with hangdog eyes. Given to my mother by my father. Green and gleaming. Sold after the divorce for a pittance. Depending on where I walked in the room, it seemed to beat like an open heart.

This ring, with its multiple traumas, is in many ways emblematic of the book’s process. It winks at us, but we do not linger upon it. Tedeschi is not in the business of spelling things out; the parental divorce is not mentioned elsewhere. Instead, it is up to the reader to detect the harmonies. A clear resonance emerges between the ghosts of Tedeschi’s grandparents and the ghost of the child prodigy. Inherited griefs are also heavy, and Tedeschi’s evocations of his former self are moving: “younger, smaller, weighed down by a kit bag of griefs, old enough to know, when threatened, how to flash colours as madly as a chameleon”.

Some years before his own untimely death, the brilliant Australian pianist – and former wunderkind – Geoffrey Tozer

described the phenomenon of the child prodigy as a “hideous creation of adults”. He explained to Andrew Ford on ABC radio’s *The Music Show* that “it’s like being an old man with no future. [The pianist Artur] Schnabel used to describe a child prodigy: there goes somebody with his future behind him.” From early childhood, Tedeschi understood his role. “In a little kitchen,” he recalls, “I was forced to talk to adults who saw me as a kind of mascot.” How does the prodigy survive his childhood? In his memoir, *Unfinished Journey*, violinist Yehudi Menuhin describes the painstaking process of bringing unconscious processes into the conscious realm: an artistic adolescence as awkward and painful as physical adolescence, and more often fatal. One of the exhilarations of *Fugitive* is the triumph it represents, as Tedeschi emerges from his hothouse not just as a pianist of note, but as a writer of distinction.

There are perhaps vestiges of the child prodigy in the book’s self-absorption. Growing up in the public eye (albeit a niche one), Tedeschi has become used to himself as an object of fascination, and spends a good deal of time contemplating his own body, which is also the subject of striking portraits by his artist wife, Loribelle Spirovski. We begin intimately, within his head, with a clicking temporomandibular joint for which he is treated with Botox (illustrated with a photograph of his jaw). Over the following pages, we are treated to a neurotic’s catalogue of ailments, as Tedeschi wipes his bottom too hard; flosses until he bleeds; is scared of the dark; has weak legs from sitting too long at the instrument; pisses “twenty or more times before I play and about eight times before I sleep”. And yet any solipsism is redeemed by the humility that inflects almost every line, particularly when he writes about music. It is the necessary humility of the interpretative artist, forever “assailed by something bigger and better than you”. What is

the work of a classical musician other than a deep, embodied reading of a text? Tedeschi quotes Merleau-Ponty: “The body is our general medium for having a world.” But it is also true that the body is our general medium for playing the piano, with its peculiar marriage of the corporeal and the transcendent. Tedeschi captures the experience of this with a poet’s precision: “I’ve touched infinity. Not a large number or a small one, but an interstitial one. I feel it every time I catch a soprano’s downbeat, as intricate as the hooking of a tiny necklace.” *Ah that*, I thought gratefully, as I did when he evoked the surreal habitat of the performing musician – those halls full of strangers with whom one seeks to enact an intimacy. Or indeed the immense energy required for playing softly: “The risk is monumental ... the thought is made impulse. The candle of sound is fixed in the air.”

Classical music has its own relationship to time: it is at once moored in history and is a (fugitive) experience of the moment. Somehow, in this profound and fleet-footed book, Tedeschi finds an expression of this. I read it with the wonder and surprise I feel when listening to a musician at the top of their game. There are moments of overreach, but, as with any virtuoso performance, these are the cost of risk. It is a joy to hear a mind engage so unashamedly with deep culture and with inner life, un beholden to the increasingly totalitarian demands of what can and cannot be a subject for literature. In *Fugitive*, Tedeschi has created something singular and startling, as ephemeral and as resonant as music.

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