

A CONVERSATION WITH HARRISON GRADWELL SLATER: A NOVEL WITH A SOUNDTRACK

Q. What was your inspiration to write a novel based on Chopin and to include a piano CD of his music?

A. The music of Chopin captured my interest at a very early point in my training as a pianist. When I decided to write *Nocturne*, a novel about rediscovered diaries related to Chopin, the piano music played a role from the very beginning in the research and writing. In a *Boston Globe* review of my first novel, *Night Music*, Richard Dyer wrote something like, “Slater gets as close as anyone can to reproducing in prose the sound and effect of Mozart’s music, which provides a soundtrack to the action.” The “soundtrack” concept had been important to my descriptions of Mozart’s music for *Night Music* (which was optioned for a film) but the CD that I recorded of Mozart’s music was not actually tied in with the narrative. For *Nocturne*, I decided to integrate the music into the text—to make it an indispensable part of the novel.

Q. How were you able to incorporate Chopin’s music into a contemporary novel?

A. Initially, the use of music in *Nocturne* was to help the reader.

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Whenever a piano work by Chopin was mentioned in the diaries or in the contemporary narrative, I added a CD TRACK marker so that the reader could hear the work immediately without having to look up recordings and order many different CDs.

Q. The concept changed?

A. Yes, you could say that it evolved in a very short time. When I started book readings for *Nocturne*, I played CD tracks (not specifically tied in with the text) that evoked the character of the narrative. Certain works of Chopin enhanced the moods and textures dramatically, and I realized that Chopin's music could provide a virtual soundtrack for the novel. The audience reaction was overwhelming.

Q. Did you edit Nocturne to accommodate the changes in the concept?

A. No, the way the novel was written was already fairly radical and I didn't want to confuse the reader, who is dealing with a new approach to reading novels: A novel with a soundtrack, performed by the author. *Nocturne* works well with the present CD TRACK markers, and the reader has the option of listening to the entire CD while reading or playing it only when the particular piano work is mentioned. Or not listening to it at all while reading. After testing it out for several years, I was reassured that, even without an explanation, readers found it easy to use.

Q. How are you going to take Nocturne to the level of a novel with a virtual soundtrack?

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A. Before the final printing, there was the possibility of adding a CD TRACK marker at each point in the novel best suited for a soundtrack. For example, the entire last scene in the novel (Chapter Forty-Two) calls for CD TRACK 22 from the beginning, even before the piano work is mentioned in the text.

Q. You decided not to change where the music enters?

A. I chose to keep the music closely tied in with where each particular work of Chopin is introduced in the text, in sequence. However, with Books on Tape, or Audio Books, the novel will be read aloud with the music fading in and out whenever it is best suited for effect, literally like a soundtrack for a film.

Q. Where else in Nocturne could the reader play the piano CD as a virtual soundtrack?

A. The moments that call out most for a soundtrack are, for example, the last scene in Chapter Six, with Clifton looking out over Montmartre, which is slowly being enveloped by dark storm clouds. Chopin's Prelude in E Flat Minor (CD TRACK 20) conveys Clifton's disturbed state of mind and the direction the narrative is taking. It also provides a leitmotif for his character.

Q. A leitmotif?

A. For example, the Nocturne in D Flat Major (CD TRACK 1) provides a leitmotif—a theme representing a character, situation or idea—for Artemisia and of Matthew's vision of

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her. It should accompany her entrance in Chapter Five and her appearances throughout *Nocturne*.

Q. Other places where the reader could play the CD as a soundtrack?

A. For the opening of the novel, the Nocturne in C Sharp Minor (CD TRACK 2) should be played immediately. It represents the main theme of the novel, and the love story between Matthew and Artemisia. Later, the love scene between Matthew and Artemisia in Chapter Twenty-Two that forms the arch of the novel is intimately tied in with the Nocturne in E Minor (CD TRACK 15) with its undercurrent of foreboding. This nocturne can be played from the beginning of the chapter. And the preludes of Chopin on the CD, with their wild and dramatic changes of mood, can be used freely throughout the reading of *Nocturne*. For example in the last scene in Chapter Two: The F Sharp Minor Prelude (CD TRACK 19) is perfectly suited for Clifton's explosions of rage.

Q. How do you see the future of novels with a soundtrack?

A. It's an idea whose time has come, particularly in this age of multimedia, interactive media and new forms of communication. *Nocturne* is at the cusp of a new era of experimental trends in the publishing industry, all of which will make reading a more interesting and varied experience for everyone.

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