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Barto Smith

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Barto

LET'S TAKE A RIDE AROUND THE WORLD (AND THE MIND) OF INTERNATIONAL CONCERT PIANIST **TZIMON BARTO**, KNOWN ALSO AS POET AND NOVELIST **BARTO SMITH**

PAST FSPA PRESIDENT AND FREQUENT *OF POETS & POETRY* CONTRIBUTING EDITOR **AL ROCHELEAU** WILL BE YOUR GUIDE.

Al: Let's examine this name known around the world in classical music, as well as the alternate "pen name" of the writer and poet, a name actually closer to the source, to a family well known in the hilly, mostly rural town limits of Eustis, Florida.

Barto: My original name was "Johnny Barto Smith, Jr." Because my dad went by "Johnny," I was always called "Barto" while growing up. (My dad owned a business in Eustis for decades, and my mother was either a town commissioner or the town mayor for some of that time.) My first name was changed legally after my teacher at Juilliard, Adele Marcus, had invented "Tzimon," remarking to me after she'd read the name on a poster, "Dear, I was only kidding." In any event, when you're looking for my CDs or to attend a concert, look for **Tzimon Barto**.

As for the writing, all my books have been published with what I feel is my REAL name: **Barto Smith**.

Al: Or here, just **Barto**. You've lead an eventful life for a country boy, and started early. Piano with your grandmother at five. Wrote an opera at nine? Lots to cover. Let's fast-forward you to your teen years.

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Rehearsal with the Israel Chamber Orchestra playing and conducting from the piano Mozart Concerto in D Minor, KV. 466, image published in Haaretz

Barto: In my mid-teens I was a Francophile. I learned French by taking private lessons, first, with the French-Canadian mother of the girl I lost my virginity to at thirteen on America's bicentennial, then with a married (unfortunately) beautiful Belgian countess, both of whom lived in Lake County.

I still remember myself during high-school football games, playing the marching-xylophone in the band with Dumas's novel, *La Dame aux Camélias*, tucked under my instrument's wooden keys. I slipped it out and read whenever the band wasn't playing, but the football team was. (Sports have always bored me.)

After two years, I could speak the language fluently. The Ultima Thule of France represented for me high culture, nonexistent in Eustis, Florida. Unlike European parents, who let their teenage children travel around Europe whenever a school vacation permits, my father would not hear of me leaving the country. My head so high in the clouds, I had actually convinced myself that, not only did I want to travel to France simply to speak the most beautiful language in the world with the natives, but even live there forever and attend the Conservatoire de Paris.

Al: Great set-up. Now tell us about running away to Paris with your girlfriend when you were seventeen, and how that turned out.

Barto: One Christmas my girlfriend gave me the gift of a French flag at a church party. Immediately upon unwrapping it, I burst into tears, at which all the adults at the party thought I should be committed.

Not long afterwards, I *told* my girlfriend that she and I were going to Paris. She didn't have a passport. No problem: she'd use my mother's (we had only to pencil in my mom's premature gray hair on the passport photo). I filched my dad's American Express card. And packed my suitcase chockful of nothing but French poetry and novels. I borrowed a car



from my dad's company, and my girlfriend and I drove to the airport. We booked a one-way flight: Orlando-Miami-London-Paris. I still remember, when our plane took off, I had what I imagined must be the sinking feeling that the amateur murderer has after his first time: *You can't undo it.*

Unfortunately, my girlfriend had made the mistake of informing a friend that we were running away to Paris. The friend didn't believe us – but reported everything to the parents when one of them called her late at night, wondering where the hell the children were. It was around this time that the two emigrants arrived in London, where a lovely fellow, Mr. Osborne, greeted us in the cheerfully stoic and ever impartial style of the perfect Brit: "Your parents are on the phone. And they are *nawt* heppy."

I spent the next fifteen minutes convincing Mr. Osborne of our ardent, sincere desire "just to see Paris – just one look – then return right away home."

Rooting for us, he spoke on the phone to my dad, "Oh, let the two kids see Paris for a day." At which Dad dropped the bomb: "His girlfriend's traveling on a false passport!" Now there was nothing more Mr. Osborne could do for us. He accompanied us to the next flight back to the States. Once at home, in order to pay my dad back for the excursion (thankfully, in economy class), I spent the next year playing organ at Harden's Funeral Home in Eustis, hidden behind tinted glass, right beside the head in the coffin and hundreds of what looked like flowers on Prozac – (to this day, I ask that presenters not give me any bouquets onstage after a performance). I also jobbed playing ragtime-piano at Mt. Dora's Pizza Roma.

There's a happy ending to all this: for my high-school graduation present, my paternal grandparents gave me and the same girlfriend a trip for the four of us to Paris. Less than a decade later, I moved there for good. And my first son was born in the American Hospital in the suburb Neuilly-sur-Seine. Aptly, in the City of Light, his name was *Ori*, Hebrew for *My Light*.

AI: You drive yourself to achieve big goals, unique goals, in and out of the arts. This was the case for you all the way back to your youth. Perhaps with this question and ones that follow, it's also time to reveal your *epiphany of numbers*, in a church, this time slightly back to age sixteen.

Barto: A few minutes before Evening Worship at Bay Street Baptist, I'm sitting alone in an empty pew close to the piano. The music director's taste hasn't gotten so bad as to have his reel-to-reel player leak Muzak into the church while worshippers enter, and so, except for some scattered chatter, it's quiet.

Barto's debut at the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds, Spoleto, Italy — Photography by Malcolm Crowthers

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Barto in his home in Eustis, Photography by Mark Andrew James Terry

In an instant I'm struck blind. Imagine looking at a black screen inside the cinema of your head after a power outage – that's what I see. But I'm not afraid. I experience a purely abstract theophany. I don't see or hear a thing: I *understand* a mandate. Only in hindsight can I say that the mandate is composed of three parts, because, during the episode, the three parts don't follow one another in making themselves understood. It's as if I'm hearing one major chord composed of three vowels; you don't hear the three vowels separately – ah, oh, oo – but as one tiered chord. The three notes of the soundless "chord" are as follows:

- 1) the number 777;
- 2) the directive to learn Biblical Hebrew so as to formulate from the *Breshith/Genesis* account of creation a numerical-linguistic equation that will result in the 777, then incorporate that equation into a still larger one encompassing the entire *Tanakh*, or *Old Testament*;
- (3) the commission to write a series of musical compositions based on the *Tanakh*, the parts making up the work expressed with values related to the fundamental 777.

My cabalistic stroke doesn't last longer than seconds because, when I come to (without dizziness or nausea; without anxiety), the worship service has yet to begin. So excited about my transcendent happening, so resolved to see it through, the next day I engage a local rabbi to teach me Hebrew. After a month has passed, though I have yet to discover the equation, I begin my poetic setting of the *Breshith* creation account and the well-known *Twenty-Third Psalm*.

It will take me until my 58th birthday to finally discover the gematria and numerology behind the 777, and even behind its extension, 70707. The musical composition was metamorphosed into a

literary one following the death of my second son, to be explained later.

Al: All right, but let's take a bit of a break. Which musical composers, the true poets of the art, affect you most?

Barto: Bach, Haydn, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Bruckner, and Charles Ives. Bach is without a doubt, for me, the greatest. You know the saying, "See Venice and die." I say, "Hear Bach and die." As for my choosing the repertoire I will perform, with few exceptions, the compositions that appeal the most to me and my style of playing are all about *bel canto*, or *beautiful singing*.

Al: Regarding your playing style, I have told you that your left hand seems almost *granitic* to me in its strength; it reminds me of Rachmaninoff's from his RCA recordings. This is especially true to me when you perform his *Third Concerto*. Meanwhile, the right hand, the sensitivity to small, subdivided dynamics and to tone colors, seems almost limitless, as in your Rameau and Bach. In terms of color, your mentor and later collaborator, the great pianist and conductor Christoph Eschenbach, drew favorable comparisons between you and Horowitz.



Barto: That was kind of Christoph. My style of playing is concerned with one thing times three: Phrasing. Phrasing. Phrasing. What is phrasing exactly? Take the song *Happy Birthday*. You don't sing each syllable with the same strength as the previous and the following syllable. You accentuate one more or less than another, increasing or decrease the volume as you do so, depending on your interpretative choice: that is, you *naturally* emphasize *birth* of *birthday* or *you* in the song's initial phrase above all other syllables. Many musicians and – it blows the mind – supposedly musical singers *unnaturally* emphasize and phrase nothing at all.

Now, I can understand that many pianists have difficulty making the glorified xylophone of the piano "sing" at all, much less, phrase, but singers?! A phrase can be of any length, but no matter how long or how short, the performer must delineate, then show that phrase's beginning, middle, and an end – (the infamous rule for the classic telling of a short story). Let's define *color* as *dynamic* (the loudness and softness assigned to one ore more notes). It's the artist's job – his *must* – that he colors a phrase with a range of dynamics that ultimately reveal a climax, and to such degree that the direction and point of the phrase will be perceptible to a plumber in the audience. Many performers fear they might overdo – exaggerate – phrasing. ALL PHRASING *SHOULD* BE "OVERDONE" - especially in a hall seating three thousand! More *IS* more, at least in music.

Al: Some critics have issues with the liberties you take, with those very same dynamics I mentioned, with your lingering tempos, etc. *Of course, some critics are also idiots*. In any event, how does all that affect you?

Barto: There are some lines by the Sufi mystic and poet, Rumi, which I believe say all there is to say on the subject:

(Continued on next page)

*Knowledge has two wings, opinion only one wing;
Opinion is weak and lopsided in its flight.
The bird having but one wing quickly drops down,
And again flies on two steps or more.
This bird of opinion goes on rising and falling
On one wing, in hope to reach his nest.
When he escapes from opinion and knowledge is seen,
This bird gains two wings and spreads both of them.
Afterwards he 'goes upright on a straight path,
Not groveling on his face or creeping.'
He flies up on two wings even as the angel Gabriel,
Free of opinion, of duplicity, and of vain talk.
Though the whole world say to him,
"Thou art firm in the road of God's faith,"
he is not made more ardent by their saying this,
Nor is his lofty soul inclined from its course.
And though all say to him, "Thou art in the wrong way,
Thou thinkest thyself a rock who art but a blade of grass."
He relapses not into opinion at their rebukes,
nor is he vexed at their malevolence.
Nay, even if sea and mountains should cry out,
Saying, "Thou are mated with error,"
he would not relapse one jot into vain imaginations,
Nor would he be grieved by the reproaches of his foes.*

Al: You are nothing if not provocative, in both performance and in your life. How about your interview for a German documentary, reciting Hebrew while seated in the median of Michigan Avenue in Chicago? Impromptu?

Barto: Absolutely. In the moment, it seemed so right to plop smack down in the middle of Michigan Avenue, and, eyes closed, burst into *Psalm 121*, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help . . ."

Al: Barto, how does your longtime adherence to weightlifting complement your playing, your general outlook?

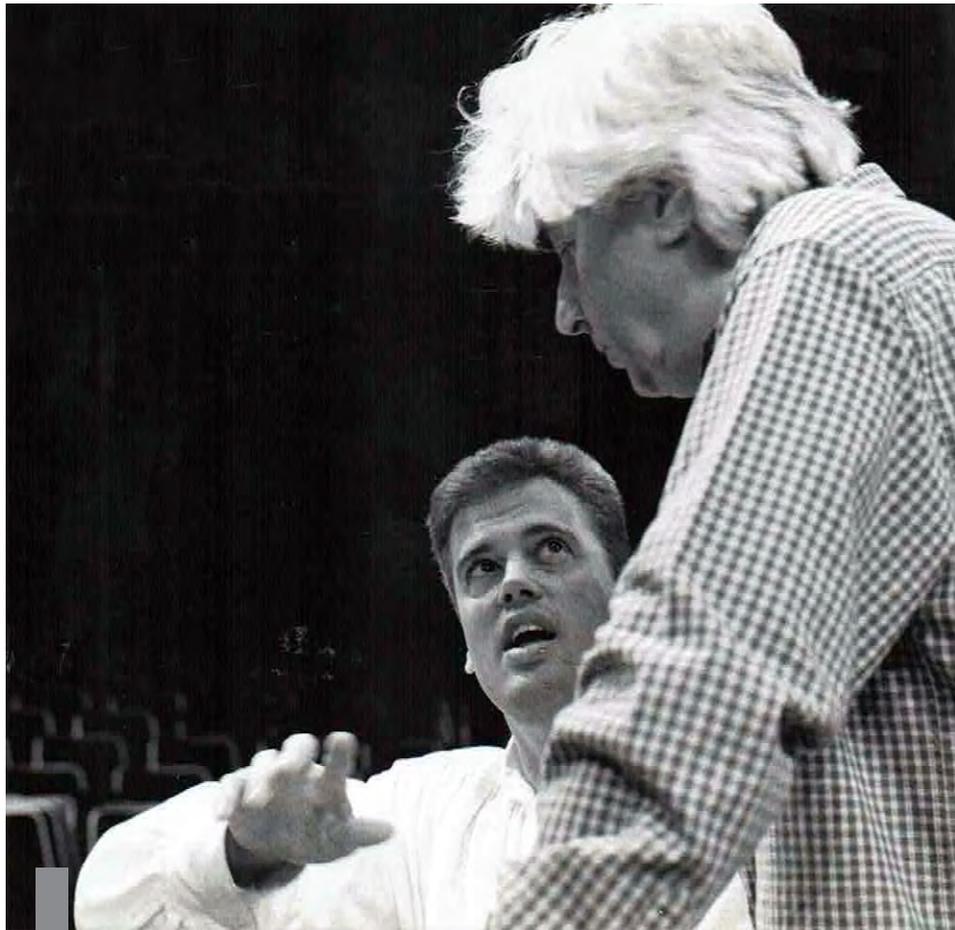
Barto: Weightlifting is simply another ideal for me: the ideal appearance I envision for my body. Together with a strict diet, it's the only thing I do consciously for my health. It's also the best weapon against the disadvantages of aging.

Al: What do you think are the prime parallels of thought and emotion between poetry and music? How does one art complement or overlay the other?

Barto: The music sounds prettier. The poetry thinks prettier. That said, while it might seem at first that poetry is the servant of music, in opera – (and I mean when opera is performed at the highest level, which is extremely rare) – word and note can become synonymous, at which point the emotional impact upon the listener is redoubled.

Imagine how perfectly integrated an art form like the *sung* poetry of Homer and the Greek tragedians was.

As for “emotion,” I think it is important to point out that the *realistic* emotions of our daily life are not those we experience when creating or performing either poetry or music: the professional artist and the true connoisseur experience *poetic* or *musical emotions* – those not tied to one specific event in one’s life, but to the common substance in many. These synthetic emotions – (*synthetic = to put together*) – cannot exist without one having first felt all possible realistic emotions to all possible degrees in life. But the synthetic emotions transcend the realistic ones – making these appear even vulgar; they never cause psychological or physical harm to one as realistic emotions can do, since they are never limited to, nor remind one of, a singular traumatic event.



Barto working with Russian Conductor Dmitri Kitayenko, in Germany, rehearsing Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto, Photographer unknown

When you feel elated by the last movement of the Haydn *Cello Concerto in C Major*, you do not feel the same elation as you did when you walked up the aisle after getting married to Mrs. Right; rather, your brain synthesizes *every* burst of happiness you felt in your life, and the Haydn last movement siphons just the amount of abstract elation that it calculated to inspire.

Al: As a craft, a thing of rational building, how is musical structure synonymous with poetic structure? Leonard Bernstein had his ideas as relayed in his *Norton Lectures*. What are *your* ideas?

Barto: A difficult question since *structure* can refer to many aspects of music and poetry. Regarding an overall synonymous structure: everything is art the moment you put a frame around it. That frame realizes the idea of *restriction*, which, as Jewish mystics believed, was the first step necessary for God’s creation, called *tzimtzum*. For me, the frame is what imposes structure on art’s every dimension. With painting, you can also have the “frame” without the wooden container: just by perceiving something and observing it for yourself and for its sake alone, the “frame” of your periphery and depth-perception has *re-created* the object, scene, or situation into a work of art.

As the structure of music and poetry is traditionally defined (sonata form; *ottava rima*), you could go shopping and maybe find some musical form that best harmonizes with a pantoum or villanelle. That sort of thing doesn’t interest me much, just as traditional forms interest me less than how they are altered. I suppose musical and poetic forms don’t interest me so much for their own sake, since it’s the easiest and most superficial aspect of either discipline to understand on paper. It is more elusive when one is listening, since the idea of structure implies something stagnant, and neither music nor poetry when played, spoken, or heard is stagnant.

As for musical structure being synonymous with poetic structure on a deeper, more intricate level, I can only tackle that one by referring to music theory, and not the vague term, *musical structure*, then scouting out similarities between that and linguistics.

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Barto with Ori, Photography by Malcolm Yawn

For example, Bernstein relates a note with a phoneme; a motive with a morpheme; a phrase with a word.

My analogies are more specific and depend on natural phenomena (light, the chemical elements, phyllotaxis, perihelion and aphelion of the planets, and DNA) in addition to music theory and linguistics.

I've been able to devise a system that incorporates the additive and subtractive mixtures of colored light-beams, the 12 English vowels, and the first 6 intervals of the musical overtone series (beginning with the interval of the fifth), in which the operations of all three match up; a system that unites the spectral emissions of almost all the naturally occurring chemical elements with the chromatic scale and a vocal spectrogram of English vowels and consonants; phyllotaxis with the musical overtone series and linguistic X-bar theory. All the above could also be applied to any of the world's languages. The question is how to use these analogies in a work of poetry.

For my purposes, as I'll describe later in this interview, the theories alone play the main role in the second part of my literary epic, *The Stelae*. But they could certainly be adopted in the creation of a musical and poetic work, for example, similar to the opus magnum that the composer Scriabin was beginning to map out, entitled *Mysterium*.

As for such structure that would simply marry the traditional forms of music with poetry or vice-versa, the musical piece is as synonymous with the poetry it sets as the composer and/or poet determines. In some large musical works, say, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, the poetry serves as a series of rooms in the larger musical building. In a smaller piece, like Duparc's *mélodie*, a setting of the Baudelaire poem, *L'Invitation au Voyage*, the music acts solely as an accompaniment to the poetry, and so, its structure is totally subservient to the poem's peculiar form.

Al: Before *The Stelae*, which we'll cover in detail and which will take us into your writings and poetry, let's take up one of your other, ongoing pursuits. What of the solo car expeditions across continents and around the world. What were the wildest exploits?

Barto: Oh, my God! Every two years, I outline, literally, physically, one continent in a car. I've circumscribed four out of six. Let me recount just a few highlights in as concise a way as I know how:

I. My first "brilliant" idea: I want to drive my Jag around the world. The idea is nixed by Fate already when, beginning of December, I arrive from Florida in Quebec, and, no snow tires (they weren't required until a week later), I spin out of control and crash at the bottom of a mountain. Car's totaled. I'll have to rent an SUV from here on out. In the Yukon, it's two in the morning, minus 48 degrees. Because gas stations are few and far between, I've amassed full canisters of the stuff, and triumphantly placed them in the back. On top of a mountain, I smile when I see the gas light illuminate. I let the SUV run out of gas. And I discover the gas canisters are child-proof, which means Barto-proof. There is no way I can open one. I try everything. Hopeless. I will freeze to death, and, no pen on me, I can't even write a note



Barto in Sandra Kleimeyer's kindergarten class, 1967

to let people know why I froze to death after running out of gas when half a dozen canisters filled with gas are in my car. After an hour, I see oncoming headlights. I'm going to live! The car stops. A man in the usual costume in these parts – astronaut suit – gets out, and, after but a few seconds opens my canister! I thank him and wave goodbye. I start to pour. Nothing comes out. I discover the damned *nozzle!* is child-proof. I'm screwed. I get back into the car. Put it in neutral and coast down the mountain. Guardian angels have parked several Mack trucks on a plateau to one side of the descent. I knock against the window of one. No answer. The second: "Go away! I'm asleep." The third trucker responds. A man descends and helps me. To my relief, he takes a good ten minutes to figure out how to "unstop" the nozzle.

II. For the African stretch of my trip, I have the most wonderful experience I've ever had with regard to life meeting death. I'm on the border between Mozambique and Tanzania, marked by the Ruvuma River. The river is so low that ferries can't convey cars from one side to the other. I'm told it will be weeks before the water level will rise. Many stranded tourists stand on the shore, joking, taking photos. I've got to end my trip around the entire continent in two weeks. I've already taken a month longer than expected. I see a bunch of drunken young natives. I tell them, "I'll give you three hundred dollars if you can get me and my car across the river." (300 is the equivalent of 3000 in these parts.) They answer, "Show us the money." I hand it over. They fetch a large rowboat, affix a motor to it from another boat, then pile up planks and branches over the seats. Just before I get into my car, a preacher from South Africa approaches me, "The Lord has told me to pray with you." He does so, then slips a rubber bracelet inscribed with a Bible verse around my wrist. I drive onto the rowboat, and am ferried across the river. While the tourists howl with laughter and snap one photo after another, I play Charpentier's *Te Deum* as loud as my CD player will go, and the five drunken kids on the improvised ferry dance for the first and only time to French Baroque music on the Ruvuma River, the sun setting, hippos doing their thing at a safe distance from us.

The next day, I'm driving up a hill in the left lane (as in the U.K., so in Tanzania) behind a truck, double line down the middle. On either side of the road is an abyss. The truck is too slow. A white car behind me pulls around me and starts to pass the truck. Oh, good, I'll just follow him. If something comes towards us, he'll be my shield! Of course, just then a bus appears, barreling straight for the white car. The latter swerves and lands perfectly in front of the truck, safe. There I am, like the bus, doing sixty. There's no way out. The two seconds that follow are in slow, slow motion: I imagine me and my car sinking into the front of the bus as if it were a big pillow. That's how I'm going to die. I inch as far as I can next to the truck in the lane beside me and laugh. I say out loud, "Here we go!" And that moment, more than anything I made out of Play-Doh, more than anything I've ever played or written, was the one accomplishment that I can honestly say I'm most proud of: I laughed before I knew I was going to die.

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There is a huge roar. All the windows break. The bus has taken off the entire right side of my SUV, yet I can still continue to drive, which I do – mainly because I’m so embarrassed at having almost caused the bus to crash. For the next days, I pick out glass from the hair on my head to the hair of my groin. Countless shards of laughing glass.

Al: You’ve been so many places, deep inside diverse countries. Tell a bit more about what you discovered of the people, the ones who will always be more important than the politics.

Barto: This will come as no surprise to Westerners who’ve roughed it in Siberia, the Mideast, or Africa: the poorer the people are, the more they help you, and want nothing from you in return. The greatest people I have ever met are the Muslims of West Africa. Can you imagine knocking on a door in America and asking if you could spend the night? You’d do it in jail. In Guinea, the Muslims fed and housed me. There are no tow trucks in Africa.

Once I broke an axle. By word of mouth, a repairman arrived – with a generator! – and, *in situ*, welded the axle back onto my car. For me, the Muslims in Africa are more “Christian” than many I’ve known in the West.



Barto with the widow of Arthur Rubenstein, Nella, at his London debut



Barto with personal champion Czech conductor Zdenek Macal, Cologne, Germany

Al: Okay, on to the *Stelae Project*. While you could write a book just on the planning of this stupendous effort, hand me the basic plan, its rationale, its targets.

Barto: The basic plan? *The Stelae* is a *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹. It began as a musical composition based on the Hebrew Bible. Its genesis is interesting: My second son died at nine months. I was looking out the window onto his grave beneath a wild cherry tree. I wondered what epitaph should be engraved on his tombstone, and thought to myself: *Here lies . . .* But then wondered out loud – “What is there to life actually other than space . . . and skull?” My memory, associating the juxtaposition of those two all-encompassing nouns, answered with,

*To make a prairie, it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do
If bees are few.*

¹ The German term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, roughly translates as a “total work of art” and describes an artwork, design, or creative process where different art forms are combined to create a single cohesive whole.

So it was, the first poem I wrote for *The Stelae*, literally with Miss Dickinson's help, became:

*Here Space
Skull
Space and
Skull
frozen by
Bullets of Light
Skull
Space
And all
Color in a
Cradle
where
tucked away of
Eyes
our allied
Blindness delectable
picked upon Lutes turned to Petals for
Ever
shall be replayed*



Barto with mentor Christoph Eschenbach with the Australian Youth Orchestra, European Tour, 1988

It was then that the original concept of a musical composition turned into a literary epic.

Part I of *The Stelae*, then, is (1) a radically personalized translation of the Hebrew Bible; (2) a letter from a father to his son; (3) nine novels, poetry, and an autobiography.

Part II is composed of a journal kept by a terminally ill son from the age of 11 to his death at 17 as he travels around the world in a car with his father. This runs parallel to a series of analogies that bind music theory and linguistics with the natural phenomena as created on Days 1 through 6 in the creation story of *Breshith/Genesis*, and reaches its climax when all three elements of music, language, and science are depicted as gems stopping the holes of a music-box disk. When the disk is played, the words that have been found in the inclusions of the gems and the arrangement of tones on the disks, prove to be charged with such universal power that they can bring their representations into actual existence; everything from the additive and subtractive colors resultant of mixing beams of light to the DNA patterns of man.

The structure of both parts of *The Stelae* comes from the first verse of the Hebrew Bible, over which one can superimpose the six days of creation. These days, in turn, can be said to symbolize the covenants of the Bible – the light of Day 1= the rainbow covenant with Noah; the firmament of Day 2, *separating* the waters above from the waters below =the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision, establishing the *separation* of the Hebrew from all other peoples; the earth of Day 3 = the Mosaic covenant and the chosen people entering the promised land; the sun and moon of Day 4= covenants with Kings David and Solomon; the fish and fowl of Day 5= the New Covenant made with the prophet Jeremiah; finally man of Day 6 = the Messianic covenants, for example, in Micah and Isaiah, pertaining to the Son of Man, or the Messiah.

These six stretches of scripture from *Breshith/Genesis* to Nehemiah, as demarcated by six covenants, form the six divisions of *The Stelae's* larger two parts.

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Al: Tell a bit about the amazing, objective creation of *The Stelae*. Also, the non-profit organization you have devised and about the use of the Barto estate in Eustis, Florida for the achievement of this massive project.

Barto: The text of *The Stelae* is to be inscribed on 3367 granite slabs, and, six-seven years from now, erected like dominoes in the shape of a logarithmic spiral on 39 acres outside of Eustis in the Wekiva Springs Basin. The area will be designated as a cultural park, the land having been recently re-zoned for the purpose of my foundation, also called *The Stelae*. In sixteen of the granite slabs, brass coiling will be installed so that when wind passes over the tops – (like blowing over the lip of a bottle) – the sixteen overtones of the natural harmonic series will sound.

Al: You have worked extensively in many aspects of literature: poetry, stories, novels, journals, all part of the greater *Stelae Project*? Where do you draw the lines of intent, form, genre, in these efforts?

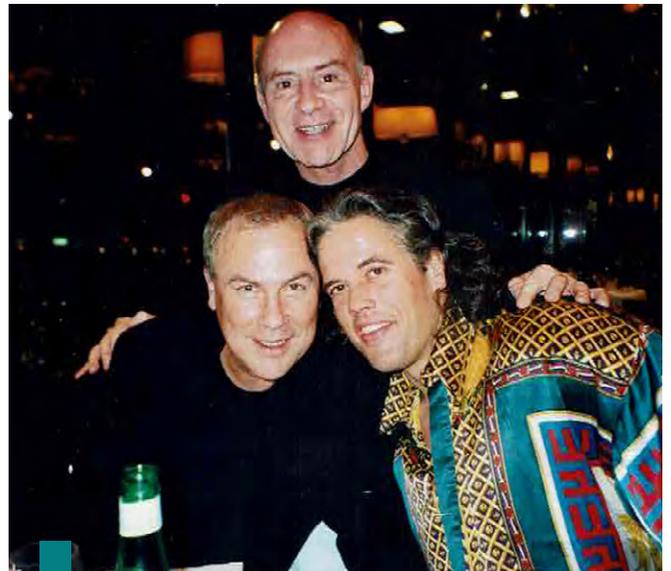
Barto: In choosing subject matter and forms, I don't draw a line. One stele could even be classified as a sculpture *à la Duchamp*: a sink is attached to, protruding from, a granite slab. This, as if to say that *The Stelae* includes everything, including the kitchen sink.

Al: Back to the poetry. Let's explore your poetic method, the use of rhythm, and your pioneering marks of inflection. Is this a fallback of sorts to early English poetry, with its formulae that included regimentation of beats? Have you brought the process back only to completely free it up?

Barto: It has been one of the greatest pleasures of my life to be able to read *Psalms* and the prophetic books in Hebrew, Homer in Greek, Ovid in Latin, in addition to speaking four languages other than my mother tongue. I have always liked the idea of importing foreign prosodies into English. The best way I thought one could realize their meters into accentual English was by underlines – identifying where each foot begins (see poems on pages 20 and 22 which reveal the Sapphics, sometimes with an added Adonic line, sometimes without). The Prosody in essence is extremely simple: as in music, there exist only variations of 2s and 3s. Just by the curious reader accentuating – be it ever so slightly – the first syllable or word under which each new underline *begins*, he can determine whether he's reading a Welsh *awdlgywydd* or Greek choriambics. The imposition of new poetic forms onto one's work automatically compels the writer to become more imaginative with language than without them – said by Jorge Borges. And indeed, transferring a complicated Irish form onto an idea to be expressed in English can lead to refreshing variations of syntax.

Al: You and I have discussed in the past the pioneering work of Sidney Lanier, a grandmaster poet and also in his time one of the best classical flutists in the world, uniting poetic and musical rhythms in his own, universal kind of notation. How does your own work in the same vein, as seen in your scansion notations of the poems in *a lady of Greek origin*, parallel, depart from, or advance that work?

Barto: The thing to appreciate most about the *Science of English Verse* by Lanier is its reconciliation with poetry and musical notation. As Pound wrote, and I paraphrase, *The moment poetry strays from music, it atrophies*.



Barto with Eschenbach and Director Wilson with whom he collaborated on a one-man show, *Hot Water*, which featured Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*

I have a gripe, however, with Lanier, who recognizes the iambus, and with the entire tradition of scansion. It is utterly cockeyed to count poetic feet beginning with an upbeat. In essence, there are only trochees (Xx) and dactyls (Xxx), 2s and 3s respectively – not only in English prosody, but in any prosody – in any *language* – period. The idea of beginning to count a beat with an iamb (as in “iambic pentameter”), and *then* the downbeat is foreign to anyone with musical training. Add to that the so-called pyrrhus, anapest, bacchius, cretic, spondee, etc., you have the perverse concoctions of academics who’ve been left to play without adult supervision.

Al: You read and study constantly; what are some of the diverse subjects you have sought to master, at least to your own purposes and satisfaction?

Barto: Philosophy and Chinese. The last is the most difficult subject – period – I could have imagined. Yes, it’s easier to draft for yourself a tolerably convincing “meaning of life” than to master Chinese. I have studied it for many years and I am still not fluent. After learning two-three thousand characters, however, and still feeling incompetent, you have to repeat to yourself as I do:



Acclaimed pianist and friend of Bela Bartok, Juilliard professor György Sándor congratulating Barto following a recital

“不要現在放棄!” / “Don’t give up now!”

Al: Your work in elementary education was pioneering, combining visual art, poetry, and Homeric Greek. Can you sum up your project with Lake County Schools? How did that come together?

Barto: What a joy to bring to a Lake County School the very subject matter I would have loved to have been able to study from Grades 1-4. My experimental course was called *30-20-10*. First graders arrived at 7 a.m., ready to study 30 minutes of music, 20 minutes of Ancient Greek, and 10 minutes of fine art. Of course, the teachers played around with the temporal proportions, as they should. I devised the syllabus and coached the two expert teachers – Betty Chernault and my ex-wife, Gesa Barto. The very premise of

the class was to show that, after four years, the same 24 students would score higher in statewide compulsory-testing (at the time, this was the infamous FCAT), as well as in other, comparatively disparate academic subjects, as opposed to those in the same school who did not participate in the course. At the end of four years, “my” students scored 15 percent higher on the compulsory test than the rest of the student body.

Al: There is a side to the art-as-commerce of classical music most don’t see and might not believe. While much is made in another quarter of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” we both know the classical field is actually no different. Is there a tell-all in your future, since you know “where the bodies are buried,” and as I see you are hiding a shovel?

Barto: Of course. As mentioned before, there is an autobiography in *The Stelae – Autobiography of a High-Wire Narcissist*, where I take myself to task and/or hopefully perform such a fascinating song-&-dance as to justify my existence.

Al: Your home library is enormous; especially conspicuous are thick and well-filed categories, with tomes of philosophy, the sciences, music scores, visual art renderings, and classic literature in numerous languages. How long have you been collecting?

(Continued on next page)

Barto: Really, I don't collect. I simply put what I've read into such sensible sequence that accommodates my obsessive-compulsive "order" (disorders are for blamers). No book is shelved until after it's been read. Ha: Many years ago, I had some friends over, who filled my house with clouds of marijuana (I never liked hashish; having preferred the harder "candy"). One of the potheads seated at the dining-room table turned around and his unsteady gaze settled on the books looming over him . . . Schiller, Singer, Smollett, Stendhal . . . He said, "Hey, dude, y'only got good books in here!" I wanted to tell him that porn is much better online than in a magazine. When it comes to my library, just as I really don't like pop music – I don't like literature expressly written for a buck. I think of my library like the ideal hometown, made up only of best friends.

Al: Who are your literary influences? Certainly there is affinity for Joyce and Pound, when examining your 500-page, annotated novel *Harold Flanders*, with its use of historical asides, non-sequitur, inside jokes, puns, pictograms, etc. What of those and other influences, too?

Barto: Most authors in that "hometown" I just mentioned have had an influence on me, just as most composers influenced my musicianship. In the second part of *The Stelae*, one half of its gestalts is composed of a dialogue between a young man and an Old Deaf One (he reads lips very well), the latter of whom represents the Judeo-Christian God; in *The Stelae's* first part, the same God's doppelgänger is an Old Blind One – (who wouldn't love a handicapped God?!).

The style of this conversation between the Old Deaf One and the young man insists that a word or clause, thought or spoken by the two, be echoed on the facing page from an equivalent representation in world literature – ordered chronologically from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* right up to Olga Tukarczuk of the present.

Al: The future for you? Concertizing, research, writing and implementing of colossal dreams. How about a current agenda, a future timeline, assessment of obstacles, and how you may negotiate them?

Barto: Other than wanting to make some more CDs, I would like to conduct opera again, though only with young singers, and with at least a good month of rehearsal coaching them. OK; I also want to have twelve children before I get too old! I'll start them out on Chinese before they can walk; that way it will be a cinch for them. They'll be fluent by seven and make fun of their dad's lousy pronunciation.



*Barto at 17 with Conductor Leonard Bernstein
at Serenak, Tanglewood Institute, 1980*



BARTO SMITH (TZIMON BARTO)

Photography by Mario Testino

“The finest virtuoso I’ve ever heard.”

— Christoph Eschenbach,
*himself No. 24, Philips Records’
Great Pianists of the 20th Century*

*The connection between poetry and music is for **Tzimon Barto** of utmost importance and meaning, both as a pianist and in his writings. This is also apparent in his musical interpretations: he takes an exceedingly personal and unconventional approach, captivating audiences with his zeal, exquisite sense of tonal color, subtle nuances and a superb technique. A colorful, surpassingly varied range of expressive elements from feather-light melodic lines to expressive chord series characterize his performance. As one of the foremost American pianists, Tzimon Barto celebrated his international breakthrough in the mid-1980s when he performed at the Wiener Musikverein and the Salzburger Festspiele at the invitation of Herbert von Karajan.*

Barto has performed with every major international orchestra and is a regular guest at the most renowned festivals. In 2014 Barto premiered Rihm’s Second Piano Concerto, a work dedicated to him, at the Salzburg Festival together with the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra under the baton of Christoph Eschenbach.

Tzimon Barto’s extensive discography includes albums featuring works by Haydn, Rameau, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Schumann and Brahms. Recent releases have been dedicated to the Ives “Concord” Sonata, the Busoni version of Bach’s Goldberg Variations, as well as the Paganini Variations of Liszt, Brahms, Lutoslawski and Rachmaninov.

Born and raised in Florida, Barto received his first piano lessons from his grandmother at the age of five. He studied under the famous music-pedagogue and pianist Adele Marcus at the Juilliard School of Music in New York, where he won the Gina Bachauer Competition in two consecutive years.

*In 2006 he initiated The Barto Prize, promoting contemporary piano compositions in an international competition, and integrated the winning compositions in his recital programs. Tzimon Barto speaks five languages fluently, reads ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew and is learning Mandarin. Under the name **Barto Smith**, his book of poetry, **a lady of Greek origin** was published in 2001 and again in 2008 in a revised version, and a stage version was performed in Frankfurt and Vienna. In 2010, his expansive novel **Harold Flanders** was published.*



[Link to book](#)

BARTO SMITH

POEMS BY

Two poems from *a lady of Greek origin*

3:00 p.m.

Clingman's Dome, re member? I vowed to you while
clouds be neath us veiled the view, vowed to you, E-
gyptian vulture, to jump, then to crack on rocks be low. oh, just think! why,

you could eat – hell – share all the mussel's luteous
meat. how you gasped when I jumped, re member?
only you had read the sign: Warning. Here No Gravity. DANGER!

since then I've done past a-said rock and hard place
Perimell knew, like strings of gut waft Ec batan,
dropping, gracefully never to grieve with in glossed
confines of postcards.

still, the stars with hold me your diadem; lustre
I'd have crowned you with to re vive an antique
world. keep their stairs for the next one's es say.

this fall's all mine a-

lone

Clingman's Dome: mountain (6642 ft.) and tower on the North Carolina-Tennessee border; highest in the Great Smoky Mountains / **Egyptian vulture:** a small Old World vulture known to ascend hundreds of feet in the air with a captured mollusk, then, releasing it from its talons to fall and "crack on rocks below," descends and eats the exposed meat. / **Perimell:** a nymph, victim of forbidden love, hurled from a cliff ("a-said rock . . .") by her father onto the island named for her (" . . . and a hard place") (see Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Bk. VIII, 757) / **Ecbatan:** splendid ancient city once said to be surrounded by seven concentric walls (Herodotus), on the site of which stands the modern city of Hamadan, Iran

7:00 p.m.

no, I can't can you? Can you remember the most pulchritudinous sky you ever touched?
I mean, remembering so hairs on your skin remember; stand as they stood then to brush the sky?
I've felt how-many-years of skies, always blue or gray or black; always black or gray or blue . . .
just too much the same, too glabrous that I'd consort them with such hair-raising memory.

can you remember
straight-off most resplendent-lit sunrise / sunset
you ever heard?
I mean, remember which birds were strung to which chords the light poured?
"how many years" . . .
I've heard "how many years" of sunset / sunrise
plying same plexus,
monotone with the same note in the conch, held to a serrate ear.
shell and ear part then. Could it be sound leaves, since sound prefers sea, that
mightier with overtones, drowns shell's sound to some "rather-a-
way's"?

oh, but ask me when I walked beside one I loved much more than my self.
would that once-a-man could feel nineteen clouds ride sixty de grees;
would that twice-a-man could hear twenty swallows splash 'cross suns's cymbal . . .

memo rized (:_____ an oak that's so naked now with out your back.
you said, ". . . well then, the tree can just keep my shadow here as a ransom."
. . .) Empyre an was never more memora ble, had I not seen it

lied in your
eyes –

BARTO SMITH

POEMS BY

bright *Avesta*
east of the Amazon asterisk re-
ferring to
heads west ma-
rooned isles a-boil in the
Sea Vourukasha
overflowing from
Tishtrya's star
circles be-
neath the wet querns grinding out
rain – the rippling
flanks of waves so that
Sirius
go as a stallion to
mares mares the waves of the
ocean –
thrown-on His lab-coat lighthouse of white granite
never shaving
ever beardless
never sleeping
ever dreaming
a thousand
ear-eye of
moonsun He
gleams through the night surf
tossing uproarious foam over His
head His
tousle the
hardest of stones this scientist of sky
Ahura Mazda
You smite bones from
shells You pound pearls into
marrow You
laugh dead men to stand up

the cynic smiles:
“Laugh dead men to stand up?”

Ahura Mazda:
“If I have made that which was not,
why cannot I make again that which was?”

BARTO SMITH

POEMS BY

free
me
from
freedom –
rather bound
bow
to send homely an
arrowhead
jailed in
flight –
at least one syllable be-
fore gravity's
gibbet –
that splits
a space
only because
I had been
bound

Just like today, so it was then,
leaves were green, and heavens, blue.
This, all because young fools in love splattered air
with sighs and songs, things they'd recall having seen . . .
only because leaves were blue, heavens green.

X

Wandering, the sun for an eye-patch,
bumps from his ex an amnesic kiss
(forgot to forget that was now)
motionless: the moving crates.

Left stroke of X: jailed in the cell the same size as the 332 square miles that insist New York City.
Right stroke of X: jailed in the cell the same size as the 332 square miles that resist New York City.
Time's Square signs blink end-sums of each coital act
smeared to tonight and tomorrow in ephemeral neon:
erasures of pink rubber moons.

Sanctus: first moment I knew My second thought.

In lukanga, water jugs pull Women's Heads to the heavens;
 camp at krasnoe: Soldiers' cellophane Faces –
 membranes atop stars' translations of days . . .

. . . or were They the Faces of Children in front of *Lagers*,
 outlined in constellations' invisible lines,
 who don't care Their art's painted with diesel and fire.

Inside, on west forty-third times-square pavement – breathes rain into steam:
 He stands there; opens His raincoat; flashes a Milliner's shop;
 sewn in His lining – byzantine mosaic – ten-duotrigintillion silver-gold mirrors . . .

Taken, every Thought that makes Them,
 every Make that feels Thee,
 and shot the big bang into Mine

Eye,

buckshot, sawdust drawing Me out, till I hold all the drawn that drew past now:

Her with Mine Own Ear You speak
 Him with Your Heart to marry Us.

Remember Your try at persuading Me: a Mother gave rise to You dropped from Her Thighs?
 Remember spanking Me unto Thy laws?
 Feeding Me sweets in the cells We called "temples"?
 Desperately later We dreamt up equations to fill in the blanks:
 Sita's stubbed Toe in calcutta at 7 would balance out Bob's find of a dime in rhode island at noon?

(Continued on next page)

Sanctus: christmas strands of Eye Sockets,
plugged in Our Sternums whence Each of Us hang
(in fact, all pronouns were “You” alone.

Don’t ask the explain;
all unknown’s still less known the instant You know it –
suffice to say, “It” was made of one Heartbeat.)

And had all been different if known it *was* You,
murdering, each friday, Yourself in the
endless rebirth of a cross-scribbling Child?

– (Mosquitoes escape from the Bug-Man-truck’s cloud) –

I tell You, it had made the difference: the short scream –
Her last cardiogram writ up
to write down
eternal acoustics’ sun-dotted notation,
as pretty, as dire, as the dance round black holes
set down as partita by Bach for His dead Wife; dead, that is, to inept time
dreamt by timelessness.

Joy, Our names of things always shall sing those things back,

soft as a Virgin-Maid bed sheet floats down to its mattress,
loud as next Butterfly’s crash in a vacant garage’s free-for-all web.

Me

I have no name

I do not hate You

I do not love You

and I must never let Us die –

BARTO SMITH

POEMS BY

Venus is born in Iowa!
Ride on the Foam of White Farms!
Kids loosed from Arion's Cinema Max,
seen from above: Diamond Dots set in Gold Ears of Corn!
Maze amazed at its Chassid Sex Dance!
Sawed: Plywood Pagans at the Lumberyard Strip Club!

Venus is Born in Iowa!
Rake Sand beside Zen-Smiling Monks!
Lift Hutches' Latches! Loose Hillions of Hares!
Here in Paphos Iowa
the Sheep do not, cannot count Sleep!
What with Cargoes of Chartres arriving each day!
The Bad Boys lifting, sweating Safaris!
The Good Girls sucking on Sapphire Cigarettes!

Sow the corn! Don't reap ever!
Sprinkle Jerusalem with Infinity Foil Glitter!
Sear Paths paving Way for Ahriman's
Shot! Seize the Flame! Light the Torch!
Bad Boys lifting, sweating Safaris!
Good Girls sucking on Sapphire Cigarettes!

(Continued on next page)

BARTO SMITH

POEMS BY

Greatest of Humans' Goddesses Humane

Te laudant the Bad Boys! *Te*

laudant the Good Girls! *Te laud-*

ant Men Women Crow Trout Pig!

Melted to Nothing but Every Thing!

The Bad Boys lifting, sweating Safaris!

The Good Girls sucking on Sapphire Cigarettes!

Melted to All except Dreaming – You shall have Them Sweet Goddess!

Make Round Dance with Your Shadow –

Without! – Dance Your Shadow! – Dance beyond vacuous Sea's Seigneuries!

Husk Hearts! Hurl Cobs at the Moon!

Sound Tonight's Groans into Bone-Tones Void the Loan!

Even not loving They love You O Venus!

Even hating They love You O Venus!

You Who Adorn All The Elements are She Who Made Them In Her – Our – Image!

Ride on the Foam of White Farms!

Bad Boys lifting, sweating Safaris!

Good Girls smoking Sapphire Cigarettes!

This Night, O Venus, Thou art born in Iowa!

Pugh's Dry Cleaners

Around & around & around & around:
plastic-sloughed skins swing from sweat-shop hooks. Ask them,
“Who? What? Where? How? When?” – ask “Why?” – they will answer:
STOP! GO! GO . . . STOP! GO! GO . . . GO! STOP . . . GO . . . GO!
Predicates, finally, of subjects made sense
and that, without one head, one finger, one toe.

Found Poem on the Golden Gate Bridge

Survival of the fittest. Adios. Unfit.

I thought I was my shadow, that's what I thought.

That I and my shadow held fast to the sun,
one sun leasing shadows to world's seven billion others.

I thought I pulled my shadow's plug each night, that's what I thought.

Free! my eyes could blink clouds from could's,
float faraways whereto, wherein, whenever faraways liked, of what faraways wished,
and stay just as long as faraways would have it.

I thought – that's what I thought – my shadow hung from the motile tree of me, spangled with Xmas,

dispelling the rumor of humdrum shadow;

that I was indeed I, translating frequencies to touch, touch to integument;

that I surveyed my I's mirror to navigate better this shadow-ship built by myself,
and which was – (that is, which should have been) – a greater *moi, moi vraiseemblable*.

That's what I thought.

But then, came a time I sensed nothing had gone and turned into something.

I turned around.

Turned back again, gasped,

“My shadow!”

It spoke: “I thought you were my shadow.”

To have seen the oak bind earth and heaven with ten-thousand fingers,
tying the two into one knot of tree.
This, worth the wait of an entire lifetime,
This, worth the death, disentangling us three.

Poets are soft-bodied beetles that range from 1.5 to 2 meters (up to seven feet) in length, and have special light organs on the underside of the abdomen. The flattened, dark brown or black body is often marked with orange or yellow.

Some adult poets do not eat; others feed on pollen or nectar. Both sexes usually are winged and luminous. Females lacking wings and resembling the long, flat larvae are commonly referred to as poets, too. The larvae, sometimes luminescent before they hatch, live on the ground and feed on snails and slugs. They inject a fluid into their prey and then withdraw the partly digested matter through hollow mouthparts.

Most poets produce short, rhythmic flashes in a pattern characteristic of the species; the rhythmic flash is part of a signal system that brings the sexes together. Both the rate of flashing and the amount of time before the female's response to the male are important. Some authorities feel that the flashing is also a protective mechanism, reminding predators of the poet's bitter taste. Some frogs, however, eat such large numbers of poets that they themselves glow.

– *Encyclopedia Britannica*

Sleep all things of beauty
No man will disturb you
No man can disturb you
Let through you are all that there was,
are all that there is
And few as the sun moon and stars knew it
Who had you asked if not them?
Sleep all things of beauty
No man can disturb you
No man will disturb you
You let them be as is beauty's way
and keepsake the what they remember you by
And that is enough,
yes, that is enough
The sun, moon and stars knew it
Who had you asked if not them?
Beauty is memory and memory must sleep
So sleep all things of beauty
No man will disturb you
No man can disturb you
Awake, he is only a day,
dreaming the night,
passed through your sieve
like seeing from sight

on my 60th birthday, Jan. 2, 2023

the one billion
 nine hundred seventeen million
 one hundred and twenty-nine thousand
 six hundred seconds
 I lived floated

 down

 each one clinging to a raft of snow



About the Contributing Editor of this article

Al Rocheleau Al Rocheleau is the author of *On Writing Poetry, 2010* (in bookauthority.org's list of "the top 75 poetry writing books of all time"); *Falling River: Collected Poems, 1976-2016*; over 200 poems and translations published in more than a hundred journals in six countries. He is also founder and director, Twelve Chairs Advanced Poetry Course (180 Hours) and the Twelve Chairs Short Course, both accredited by the Florida State Poets Association; lecturer, University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, Emerson College, University of Florida, Oak Hammock Institute for Learning in Retirement, Florida State Poets Association, and Florida Writers Association; recipient, Thomas Burnett Swann Award, 2004; nominee, Forward Poetry Prize, U.K., 2018; participant in joint music-and-poetry compositions and public performances with Florida composers Keith Lay (2014), Benoit Glazer (2018), and Stan Cording (2021); immediate past president, Florida State Poets Association.

Tzimon BARTO

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Chopin: Preludes & Nocturnes — [Link](#)

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A Basket of Wild Strawberries — [Link](#)

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RAVEL, M.: GASPARD DE LA NUIT / MIROIRS / JEUX D'EAU — [Link](#)

Capriccio recordings

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TZIMON BARTO: THE SCHUBERT ALBUM — [Link](#)

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Mozart

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnlqUWRbD0>

Richard Strauss

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSTS11qqLMc>

Interview with composer, Lera Auerbach

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpJ4oefeJmk>