DANIEL FELSENFELD

Rebel Music

Daniel Felsenfeld writes for the Opinionator, which provides “exclusive online commentary” from the New York Times, and which originally published this piece in March 2010. He also maintains a blog titled Daniel Felsenfeld News. As a composer, he has written in many different genres: orchestral music, opera, chamber music, solo music for piano and violin, and vocal music. He is author and coauthor of several books on music, including Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber: Their Lives and Their Music (2005), and a series of listening guides that accompany CDs. Felsenfeld teaches music at City College of New York. In this essay, he explores his journey of becoming literate in classical music.

Music may be the universal language, but those of us who spend our lives with it are expected to know it in depth, from early on. Many composers, whether traditional or experimental, have been steeped in Western classical music from the cradle. That was not the case with me.

My primal time was the middle of the ’80s in Orange County, Calif. I was 17 years old. The O.C. was billed as the ideal suburban community, but when you’re raised in a palm-tree lined Shangri-La as I was, it is hard to grasp what’s missing without that crucial glimpse beyond. Now I realize: even though we had enough water to keep the manicured lawns just so, I was experiencing a personal drought, an arid lack of culture of all kinds, especially music.

I was by no means un musical, though any talent I have remains a mystery, coming as I do from perhaps the least musical of families (who would be the first to admit this). To her credit, my mother signed me up for the de rigueur piano lessons. Each week I dazzled poor Ms. Shizimizu with either an astonishing performance of a Mozart sonata or a heretofore unseen level of ill-preparedness. I slogged my way through Chopin Preludes, culminating my high school piano study with a middling performance of Beethoven’s “Pathétique” sonata. Probably not unlike most kids’ first encounter with formal music study: uninspiring.

Eventually I quit lessons, but had developed chops enough to work in both piano bars (an underground piano man, traveling with my own sniffer) and community theater orchestra pits. The music was dull, or at least had a dulling effect on me — it didn’t sparkle, or ask questions. I took a lot of gigs, but at 17 I was already pretty detached. I was attracted to music for some reason I lacked vocabulary to explain, and neither Oklahoma! nor Annie offered answers.

That might have been it — working my way through junior college playing in pits or at Nordstrom’s, settling into some career or other — a piano studio, weddings, writing songs for mild amusement. Thankfully, it was not.

Some afternoons I would go to my friend Mike’s house at the end of my cul-de-sac to listen to tapes of bands a lot of my friends were listening to: General Public, Howard Jones, the Thompson Twins (or David Bowie, Bauhaus and The Clash in our edgier moments). One day, bored with the music, Mike flipped his double-decked cassette case over to reveal rows of hidden tapes in a concealed compartment.

"Want to hear something really wild?" he said.

"But of course."

At 17, rebellion was of course a staple in my life. The smartest kids I knew took the route of dollying themselves up in anti-establishment finery — goth, punk, straight edge — forming bands, going to clubs in Los Angeles, spouting manifestos. I had auditioned this mode, joining a band (whose name escapes me) and, in one of my great (mercifully underphotographed) late high school moments, taking a long, throbbing solo at a school assembly on one of those bygone over-the-shoulder keyboards.

It seems implausible now, but the “something really wild” Mike held was not goth, metal, or punk. It was a neatly hand-labeled tape of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. He put it on, and I listened. I think it was the first time I actually heard music for the first time.

Was this the same Beethoven to whose sonata I had done such violence? It unrolled from the small speakers, this big, gorgeous, unruly beast of a thing, contemporary, horrifying, a juggernaut that moved from the dark to unbearable brightness, soaring and spitting, malingering and dancing wildly, the Most Beautiful Thing I Ever Heard. This “symphony"
by this Beethoven had a drug-like effect on me. At my insistence we listened again. And again. I wished it would just keep going.

Mike, who was just a kid in the neighborhood with odd—evolved? sophisticated?—taste, had dozens more tapes: Brahms, Mozart, Bach, Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius, Rachmaninoff, Strauss. I may have known that this kind of music was called classical, but I certainly did not understand that it was considered "great" or that it was revered as the foundation of musical culture in the West. I just loved it more than anything I'd heard before, and I must have sensed it was also miles away from Orange County, exactly as far as my adolescent self longed to be. I dubbed Mike's tapes, and listened to them in secret. Driving to school with Beethoven blaring, I'd switch to KROQ as I entered the parking lot, swerving into my spot believing I'd put one over on people again.

My passion for this "other" kind of music felt like the height of rebellion: I was the lone Bolshevik in my army. I loved this new (to me) music, but loved my abstract role in it even more. Rebels sought to break the mold, to do something that was exclusively "theirs," to be weird by way of self-expression. And since I was the only one I knew listening to symphonies and concerti, operas and string quartets, I felt I was the weirdest of them all; it served my adolescent need to be misunderstood. And so I decided, with little prior experience or interest, to become a composer.

Little did I know, right?

All too soon, I came to understand what hard work this was. I studied scores, read biographies, got a serious piano teacher and logged hours a day practicing, traded up Mike's cassettes for the then novelty compact discs, and boarded the spaceship bound for planet New York once or twice (always returning, at least then, to warmer climes). After signing up for theory classes at Fullerton Junior College, I met my first living composers: Brent Pierce taught me counterpoint and harmony (one summer I wrote a daily fugue), and Lloyd Rodgers was my private teacher (who encouraged me to copy out the entire "Well-Tempered Clavier" by hand). In the meantime, I heard my first examples of what is called "New Music," that is, classical music written more recently than the 19th century.

Of course, some of my illusions vanished so soon as I realized there were composers I could actually meet. I was no longer a rebellion of one, but this halcyon innocence was traded for the ability to interact with artists who were always taking on the obscene challenge of creating music that was totally new, completely theirs.

Now I live far from the O.C., in New York, having long ago colonized this distant planet and gone native, an active member of a community I once admired from what seemed an impossible distance. And while there are moments I lament not having been raised in a musical family, or my late and clumsy start, I also strive to make my less-than-ideal origins an asset. I've learned I do my best work when I remove myself and try to return to that Age of Wonder when I first heard the gorgeous dissonances of pieces like Samuel Barber's "Hermit Songs or Prayers of Kierkegaard, Elliott Carter's Second String Quartet, Michael Nyman's The Kiss, George Crumb's Black Angels, Arnold Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire, Benjamin Britten's Turn of the Screw, John Corigliano's First Symphony, and Stephen Sondheim's Sweeney Todd, and took them to be the same dissonances, not contrasting sides of a sometimes-contentious or politicized art world. When I am composing, I try to return to that time and place of inexperience when I was knocked sideways by dangerous sounds. Why else write? Why else listen?

Engaging with the Text

1. What is the SIGNIFICANCE of Daniel Felsenfeld's literacy narrative? Where in the essay does the author make the significance clear?

2. What STANCE does Felsenfeld assume toward his stated topic of "rebel music?" Where does this stance become clear in the essay? By the end of the essay, what are we meant to understand about why he uses the phrase "rebel music?"
3. This essay details some of Felsenfeld's journey to becoming literate in music so that he could become a composer. How is music literacy similar to literacy in the sense of reading and writing? What does the latter prepare you to do in the world?

4. If you were asked to choose or design a visual to accompany this essay, what would it show or look like? What point(s) about the essay would you want the visual to highlight?

5. For Writing. As this essay shows, there are many literacies people develop in life: math literacy, music literacy, art literacy, body building literacy, limiting literacy, and so on. In addition to the ability to read and write essays, what other literacies have you developed? Write a narrative about one of those literacies, including specific details about how you developed it.

TANYA MARIA BARRIENTOS

Se Habla Español

Tanya Maria Barrientos is manager of internal communications for the University of Pennsylvania and a former columnist and feature writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer. The following essay appeared in Latina, a bilingual magazine published by and for Latinas. It was adapted from an essay of the same title that was published in Border-Line Personalities: A New Generation of Latinas Dish on Sex, Sass, and Cultural Shifting (2004). In this piece, Barrientos recounts her struggles as a Latina who is not fluent in Spanish. She takes her title from a phrase often seen in store windows, announcing that "Spanish is spoken" there.

The man on the other end of the phone line is telling me the classes I've called about are first-rate: native speakers in charge, no more than six students per group. I tell him that will be fine and yes, I've studied a bit of Spanish in the past. He asks for my name and I supply it, rolling the double "r" in "Barrientos" like a pro. That's when I hear the silent snick, the momentary hesitation I've come to expect at this part of the exchange. Should I go into it again? Should I explain, the way I have to half a dozen others, that I am Guatemalan by birth but pura gringa by circumstance?

This will be the sixth time I've signed up to learn the language my parents speak to each other. It will be the sixth time I've bought workbooks and notebooks and textbooks listing 501 conjugated verbs in alphabetical order, in hopes that the subjunctive tense will finally take root in my mind. In class I will sit across a table from the "native speaker," who will wonder what to make of me. "Look," I'll want to say (but never do), "Forget the dark skin. Ignore the obsidian eyes. Pretend I'm a pink-cheeked, blue-eyed blonde whose name tag says 'Shannon.'" Because that is what a person who doesn't innately know the difference between corré, corra, and corri is supposed to look like, isn't it?

I came to the United States in 1963 at age 3 with my family and immediately stopped speaking Spanish. College-educated and seamlessly
Writing a Literacy Narrative

Narratives are stories, and we read and tell them for many different purposes. Parents read their children bedtime stories as an evening ritual. Preachers base their Sunday sermons on Bible stories to teach lessons about moral behavior. Grandparents tell how things used to be (sometimes the same stories year after year). Schoolchildren tell teachers that their dog ate their homework. College applicants write about significant moments in their lives. Writing students are often called upon to compose literacy narratives to explore their experiences with reading and writing. This chapter provides detailed guidelines for writing a literacy narrative. We'll begin with four good examples, the first annotated to point out the key features found in most literacy narratives.

**EMILY VALLOWE**

**Write or Wrong Identity**

Emily Vallouw wrote this literacy narrative for a writing class at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia. In it, she explores her lifelong identity as a writer — and her doubts about that identity.

I'm sitting in the woods with a bunch of Catholic people I just met yesterday. Suddenly, they ask me to name one of the talents God has given me. I panic for a split second and then breathe an internal sigh of relief. I tell them I'm a writer. As the group leaders move on to question someone else, I sit trying to mentally catch my breath. It will take a moment before the terror leaves my forearms, chest, and stomach,
but I tell myself that I have nothing to fear. I am a writer. Yes, I must definitely am a writer. Now breathe, I tell myself ... and suppress that horrifying suspicion that you are actually not a writer at all.

The retreat that prepared me for my eighth-grade confirmation was not the first time I found myself pulling out the old “I’m a writer” card and wondering whether I was worthy enough to carry this sacred card in the wallet of my identity. Such things happen to people with identity crises.

In kindergarten I wrote about thirty books. They were each about five pages long, with one sentence and a picture on each page. They were held together with three staples on the left side or top and had construction paper covers with the book’s title and the phrase “By Emily Vallowe” written out in neat kindergarten-teacher handwriting. My mom still has all of these books in a box at the bottom of her closet.

One day at the very end of the school year, my kindergarten teacher took me to meet my future first-grade teacher, Mrs. Meadows. I got to make a special trip to meet her because I had been absent on the day the rest of the kindergarteners had gone to meet their future teachers. Mrs. Meadows’s classroom was big and blue and different from the kindergarten class, complete with bigger, different kids (I think Mrs. Meadows had been teaching third or fourth graders that year, so her students were much older than I was). During this visit, Mrs. Meadows showed me a special writing desk, complete with a small, old-fashioned desk lamp (with a lamp shade and everything). I’m not sure if I understood why she was showing me this writing area. She may have said that she’d heard good things about me.

This handful of images is all I can remember about the most significant event in my writing life. I’m not sure why I connect the memory of my kindergarten books with the image of me sitting in Mrs. Meadows’s old classroom (for by the time I had her she was in a room on the opposite side of the school). I guess I don’t even know exactly when this major event happened. Was it kindergarten? First grade? Somewhere in between? All I know is that some event occurred in early elementary school that made me want to be a writer. I don’t even clearly remember what this event was, but it is something that has actively affected me for the fourteen years since then.

I have wanted to be a writer my entire life — or at least that’s what I tell people. Looking back, I don’t know if I ever wanted to be a writer. The idea might never have even occurred to me. Yet somehow I was marked as a writer. My teachers must have seen something in my writing that impressed them and clued me in on it. Teachers like to recognize kids for their strengths, and at the age of five, I probably started to notice that different kids were good at different things: Bobby was good at t-ball; Sally was good at drawing; Jenny could run really fast. I was probably starting to panic at the thought that I might not be good at anything — and then a teacher came along and told me I was good at writing. Someone gave me a compliment, and I ran with it. I declared myself to be a writer and have clung to this writer identity ever since.

There are certain drawbacks to clinging to an unchanging identity since the age of five. Constant panic is one of these drawbacks. It is a strange feeling to grow up defining yourself as something when you don’t know if that something is actually true. By the time I got to middle school, I could no longer remember having become a writer; I had just always been one — and had been one without any proof that I deserved to be called one. By the age of ten, I was facing a seasoned writer’s terror of “am I any good?” and this terror has followed me throughout my entire life since then. Every writing assignment I ever had was a test — a test to see if I was a real writer, to prove myself to teachers, to classmates, to myself. I approached every writing assignment thinking, “I am supposed to be good at this,” not “I am going to try to make this good,” and such an attitude is not a healthy way to approach anything.

It doesn’t help that, if I am a writer, I am a very slow one. I can’t sit down and instantly write something beautiful like some people I know can. I have been fortunate to go to school with some very smart classmates, some of whom can whip out a great piece of writing in minutes. I still find these people threatening. If they are faster than I am, does that make them better writers than I am? I thought I was supposed to be “the writer.”

My obsession with being “the” writer stems from my understanding of what it means to be “the” anything. My childhood was marked by a belief in many abstract absolutes that I am only now allowing to crumble. I was born in Chicago (and was thus the fourth...
generation of my family to live there), but I grew up in northern Virginia. I came to look down on my Virginia surroundings because I had been taught to view Chicago as this great Merica — the world's most amazing city to which I must someday return, and to which all other places on earth pale in comparison. Throughout my childhood, I gathered that Chicago is a real city in which average people live and which has an economy historically based in shipping and manufacturing. Washington, D.C., on the other hand, where my dad works, has a population that includes a bizarre mix of impoverished people and the most influential leaders and diplomat in the world — and so manufactures nothing but political power. People in Chicago know how to deal with snow; Virginians panic at the possibility of snow. Chicago rests on soil that is so fertile it's black; Virginia does not even have soil — it has reddish clay suitable for growing nothing except tobacco. Even Chicago's tap water tastes amazing; D.C.'s tap water is poisoned with lead. I grew up thinking that every aspect of Chicago was perfect — so perfect that Chicago became glorious to the point of abstraction. No other city could compare, and after a while I forgot why no other city could compare.

I just knew that Chicago was “the” city... and that if “the” city existed, there must also be an abstract “the” everything.

I grew up with this and many other abstract ideals that I would defend against my friends' attacks... until I learned that they were just abstractions — and so was I. My writing (identity) was just another ideal, an abstraction that I clung to without any basis in fact. I used to use writing as an easy way to define myself on those over-simplistic surveys teachers always asked us to fill out in elementary and middle school — the surveys that assumed that someone could know all about me simply by finding out my favorite color, my favorite TV show, or my hobbies. I used to casually throw out the “I'm a writer” card just to get these silly surveys over with. "I'm a writer!" was just an easy answer to the complicated question, "Who are you?" I always thought the surveys avoided asking this question, but maybe I was the one avoiding it. For years, I had been defining myself as "the writer" without really pondering what this writer identity meant. Is a writer simply someone who writes all the time? Well, I often went through long stretches in which I did not write anything, so this definition did not seem to suit me. Is a writer someone who is good at writing? Well, I've already mentioned that I've been having "am I any good?" thoughts since elementary school, so this definition didn't seem to fit me, either. I was identifying myself as "the writer" as an abstraction, without any just cause to do so.

The funny thing is that I recognized my writing identity as an abstract ideal before I recognized any of the other ideals I was clinging to, but that didn't make the situation any better. It is one thing to learn that dead people have been voting in Chicago elections for decades, and so perhaps Chicago isn't the perfect city, but what happens when the absolute ideal is you? More important, what would happen if this absolute were to crumble? It was terrifying to think that I might discover that I was not a writer because to be not a writer was to suddenly be nothing. If a writer was the only thing that I had ever been, what would happen if writing was a lie? I would vanish. Looking back, the logical part of my brain tells me that, if I am not a writer, I am still plenty of other things: I am a Catholic; I am a Vallowe; people tell me that I have other good qualities. But when facing these horrifying spells of writer's doubt, my brain doesn't see these other things. I am driven only by the fear of nothingness and the thought that I have to be a writer because I'm not good at anything else.

Am I really not good at anything else? I used to blame this entire writer's complex on whoever it was that told me I was a writer. If that person hadn't channeled this burdensome identity into me, I might never have expected great literary things from myself, and life would have been easier. I had these thoughts until one day in high school. I mentioned something to my mom about the fact that I'd been writing since I was five years old. My mom corrected me by saying that I'd been writing since I was three years old. At the age of three I couldn't even physically form letters, but apparently I would dictate stories to my mom on a regular basis. My mom explained to me how I would run to her and say, "Mommy, Mommy, write my story for me!"

This new information was both comforting and unsettling. On one hand, it was a great relief to know that I had been a writer all along — that I would have been a writer even if no one had told me that I was one. On the other hand, the knowledge that I had been a writer all along drove me into an entirely new realm of panic. I've been a writer my entire life?
"I've been a writer since I was three? Three? Three years old: How is that even possible? I didn't know it was possible to be anything at age three, let alone the thing that might define me for my entire life. I have been taught that each person has a vocation — a calling that he or she must use to spread God's love to others. Yet I've also assumed that one must go on some sort of journey to figure out what this vocation is. If I found my vocation at the age of three, have I skipped this journey? And if I've skipped the journey, does that mean that the vocation isn't real? Or am I just really lucky for having found my vocation so early? Was I really born a writer? Was I born to do one thing and will I do that one thing for my entire life? Can anything be that consistent? That simple? And if I am living out some divine vocation, is that any comfort at all? If I am channeling some divine being in my writing, and everything I write comes from some outside source, where does that leave me? Am I nothing even if I am a writer?"

This questioning has not led me to any comforting conclusions. I still wonder if my writer identity has been thrust upon me, and what it means to have someone else determine who I am. If I am a writer, then I am someone who passionately seeks originality — someone who gets pleasure from inventing entire fictional worlds. Yet if someone — either a teacher or a divine being — is channeling an identity into me, then I am no more original than the characters that I create in my fiction. If my identity is not original, then this identity is not real, and if I am not real... I can't even finish this sentence. I don't know if I really wrote thirty books in kindergarten. It might have been twenty — or fifteen — or ten — or five. I might have made up that part about the special writing desk in Mrs. Meadow's old classroom. I don't know if God predestined me to write masterpieces or if a teacher just casually mentioned that I wrote well and I completely overreacted to the compliment. Questioning my identity as "the writer" has led me to new levels of fear and uncertainty, but this questioning is not going to stop. Even if one day it withered and gray, with a Nobel Prize for Literature proudly displayed on my desk as I try to crank out one last novel at the age of ninety-two, my thoughts will probably drift back to Mrs. Meadow and those books I wrote in kindergarten. In my old age, I still might not understand my writer identity, but maybe by that point, I will have written a novel about a character with an identity crisis — and maybe the character will have come through all right.

In this literacy narrative, Vallsou reflects on the origins of her identity as a writer: her early teachers, her parents, God, herself. The significance of her story lies in her inability to settle on any one of these possibilities.

MARJORIE AGOSÍN
Always Living in Spanish: Recovering the Familiar, through Language

Marjorie Agosín, a Spanish professor at Wellesley College, wrote this literacy narrative for Poets & Writers magazine in 1999. Originally written in Spanish, it tells of Agosín's Chilean childhood and her continuing connection to the Spanish language.

In the evenings in the northern hemisphere, I repeat the ancient ritual that I observed as a child in the southern hemisphere: going out while the night is still warm and trying to recognize the stars as it begins to grow dark silently, in the sky of my country, Chile, that long and wide stretch of land that the poets blessed and dictators abused, I could easily name the stars: the three Marias, the Southern Cross, and the three Lilies, names of beloved and courageous women.

But here in the United States, where I have lived since I was a young girl, the solitude of exile makes me feel that so little is mine, that not even the sky has the same constellations, the trees and the fauna the same names or sounds, or the rubbish the same smell. How does one recover the familiar? How does one name the unfamiliar? How can one be another or live in a foreign language? These are the dilemmas of one who writes in Spanish and lives in translation.

Since my earliest childhood in Chile I lived with the tempos and the melodies of a multiplicity of tongues: German, Yiddish, Russian, Turkish, and many Latin songs. Because everyone was from somewhere