

PICASSO'S MUSIC

By Philippe-Joseph Salazar



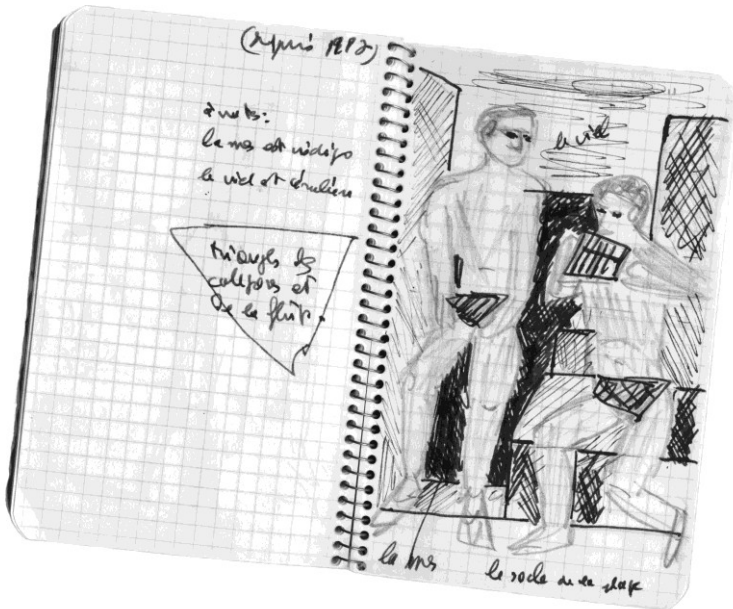
T*his one-minute story is dedicated to Stuart Saunders's love for painting. I hope he will forgive me for trusting words more than pictures. It is also an indirect and tardy response to the gift Edmund White made me of his *Écorché vif* (original, Skinned Alive), on a bright winter day of 1997, not far from the Picasso Museum in Paris.*

“At a recent exhibition held at Palazzo Grassi, in Venice, one could appreciate, in a less crowded setting than in its original home, Musée Picasso in Paris Marais district, Picasso's *Panpipes Player* (1923). The painting is well known, it is fridge magnet stuff, but let me indulge you with a presentation, and there is no need for you to look at the slide, unless you want it for your fridge, just listen”, said the lecturer.

“Two young men, naked but for a loin cloth, one standing on the left, the other sitting on the right. They are the characters in the composition. The standing figure holds himself in counterpoise, his right leg thrown forward. He watches the other young man play the pipes. The second figure's legs are placed at an angle, in the customary attitude of music players who balance themselves and their instrument by folding a leg under their chair and placing a foot forward. In this instance, the piper is sitting on a rectangular parallelepiped washed in greyish umbra with another cube of the same colouring behind it. The young men are framed by two pale yellow ochre rectangles, two walls one assumes, the top of which slopes away toward the imaginary middle of a blue rectangle, the sky, itself set above the darker blue of the sea. The sea forms a square framed by the walls. In the foreground a slab of the same sandy hue as the wall is in alignment with the base of the parallelepiped seat and shows the neat line of what must be a step down towards the Mediterranean. There are seven horizontal planes.

The painter's Greek geometry is unnervingly exact. For instance, the length of the parallelepiped is half the width of the canvas. The far away end of the walls equals this width. The line of horizon, that is the

side of the square sea, is equal to the parallelepiped base plus the slight gap left by the painter on its right, as the seat is placed off centre. In addition, because the player's feet are set within this line, the piper is inscribed in a rectangle of perfect proportions with a base two-thirds of its height. The standing figure is inscribed in an elongated rectangle the base of which is two-fifth of its height and itself equal to the width of the canvas, allowances having been made for brush strokes and outlines that are not as precise gestures in the modern idiom as they were in classical art.



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In short, this is a deceiving painting. The idea we get of its subject is not what we see. Hence, the necessity to use our inner gaze, and to... switch off the projector! Thank you, Paul, you can now sit down. Words suffice. Images are palliatives.

Listen all. At first glance the painter has given us his treatment of a typical Greek theme, which has a long history in his practice, down to the palette itself – blue of the two light elements, yellow and brown of the earthy element, reddish pink of the human flesh. The white of the

woven loincloths is a reminder perhaps of the dark reeds of the pipes, of the wild vegetal reign, now processed and domesticated. Nonetheless, this subject matter is of the sort you could expect to encounter around 1925 when there was a quirky Mediterranean Neo-Classical revival among Cubists, Surrealists, and even Dadaists. Think of Jean Cocteau's drawings, or for that matter Picasso's drawings on the piper's theme. Think of the rediscovery of arch-classical Poussin at the same time. Think simply of Matisse.

However, as we all know, Picasso was keener on painting women, his mistresses, than men, unless they were surrogates of himself, with bullish genitalia re-enacting the legend of the Bull who seduced Pasiphae, and begat the Minotaur.

Men in his paintings or drawings are few in numbers and sexually puerile. As you are aware, his son and grandson had awful, emasculated lives at his mercy. Why has he chosen this subject matter? The Panpipes may be the key. Let me hasten to dispel any suggestion that the reeds are phallic symbols and so on. This has no meaning at all in this case, as nothing else in the composition points in that direction. The two young men are perfectly poised. Phallus, or lack of it is not their business.

At the centre of the canvas are the reed pipes. The painting is silent, as it should, *muta eloquentia*, but the player blows softly into the reeds, so music there must be. The painting makes music. However, you will only hear the melody of the reeds if you open our eyes deeper into the idea, if you allow me this turn of phrase. Remember that the words, and concepts, of 'idea' and 'vision' come from the same Indo-European root — in fact our own 'idea' is a noun formed on the verb '*videre*', in Latin 'to see'. An idea is an inner vision. This is why the visual arts are palliatives.

Let us open our eyes into the music of the pipes. Are they pipes, those tied up reeds? The exact name for the Panpipes is the syrinx. Pan played music on a syrinx because a nymph called Syrinx preferred death to rape by the hoof-footed creature. As he gave her chase on the banks of a river in Arcadia, she implored the gods, and one river-god

who was her father came to her succour. Pan, reaching for her hair, caught an armful of freshly sprouted reeds and Syrinx's pliant body escaped him. Yet, while mourning the loss of his object of desire, and to ensure some sort of triumph by Eros over Nature, and by passion over piety he cut the reeds and invented a musical instrument of a sound as soft and as plaintive as the sound of winds blowing through reeds at sunset. He had to be satisfied with the sound of his own lament, or perhaps hers, played upon seven unequal reeds.

Don't you hear it, don't you see it? The canvas is a stave, extended to seven lines, orchestrated by the rhythmical division of the canvas into seven horizontal planes. The painting begins to sing. Do you hear the melody of the reeds?

Consider now that a Greek pipe is not a modern flute, that our two young men, player and listener, two shepherds perhaps from a modern Arcadia, now making music by the sea in Provence as they would have by the banks of that fatal river, had a different ear for music than we do.

Poussin, the sublime Neo-Classical painter whose revival was so crucial to the works of Cézanne and Matisse and Picasso and Braque, had a conceit of painting just as mental as Cubism's designs. In a letter to one of his patrons, Poussin wrote on how the Greeks made music. He is a painter who, instead of explaining to his patron why and how he paints canvases considered at the time odd and possibly a bad investment, 'Pagan' even, expatiates on music.

Poussin describes how Ancient Greek music had five modes to which were affixed specific passions and attached specific instruments apt to arouse these very moods. The syrinx, in this instance, plays in hypolydian, a mode 'which contains in itself a certain suavity and sweetness that fills listeners with joy'. Let me correct myself. Poussin wrote 'viewers' not 'listeners', for he is writing about modes or moods of painting, adapting to his silent art the modes and means music harnesses to mould moods in our hearts.

Our two young men are making suave and sweet music. In fact, the

mood procured by the mode is as much that of the listener on the left as it is ours. A simple equation, again numbers at play, makes us listeners and viewers. Yet, suavity and sweetness do not imply sentimentality, which belongs to the ionic mode. This distinction is subtle but makes it all the more important for us to tune in more finely to the music of the canvas.

The hypolydian music is that of joy. Now, to understand 'joy', I have to turn to Poussin's contemporary Descartes whose philosophy, by the way, underwent a similar revival in the 1920s: 'Joy consists in the agreeable emotion the soul experiences in conceiving the enjoyment of goodness'. The 'passion of joy', says Descartes, is not in possessing something we conceive as good for us, but in the emotion the thought of such possessing brings us. It is therefore a 'fundamental passion'.

Shall I take stock? Eunice, if you are not interested you can leave... Thank you. I can see that your attention is flagging. Let me recap.

Pan did not ravish Syrinx. Syrinx becomes a syrinx. The syrinx plays in hypolydian. The hypolydian expresses joy. Joy is not about possession but the thought of it, like Pan's sublimating Syrinx's rape in music. Of the rape, Pan will never possess anything else but the thought of the joy it would have procured him.

As for the young men in the painting, there is a telling sign of their joy, in the colouring of their skin. In a painting, like in any true design, nothing is placed at random. The young men's bodies are flushed with blood, certainly not on account of some sun-tanning session on the Côte d'Azur but because, Descartes again: 'Joy renders Colour Vivider & Vermillion, for it opens the sluices of the Heart, makes Blood hasten its Course through the Veins; and, increasing in Warmth & Subtlety, Blood swells moderately the Face; which gives Joyfuls a Smiling & Gay Countenance'.

The two young men in the painting are representations of the effect of joy. They are shepherds of Arcadia, the joyful land, where the syrinx echoes to the strains of hypolydian melody.

In the Greek idea of a well-tended land, and this idea runs right down to actual agrarian reforms in 18th century Physiocratic economy and the rise of what we now call management, such humanly tended land, conducive to the joy of being social, is cultivated in hypolydian. People enjoy making goods that satisfy their needs if not their desires, they enjoy each other's intercourse, they produce enough to consume and reach happiness. They are not *rentiers* who live off safe rentals or capitalists engaged in risk taking. They have no desire to possess more than is necessary to live well, without the encumbrance of heritage or year on year profits.

One problem remains; where are we, you and I, in this painting? What is our joy? What goodness are we supposed to enjoy, and not possess? Are we merely duplicates of the two young men in joy, the player joyful from listening to his own suavity and his companion to the music?

There is an answer, and the canvas provides it. The visual logic of the painting places us on the same plane as the two men: the foreground is level with our own ground. The two young men are only one step away from us. We stand together at the edge of a utopian space, Arcadia.

You see, if I were a cultural historian and willing to explain this tension in happiness, I'd hang my hat on the Roaring Twenties, on economic growth, indeed on the optimism and consumerism and the 'we danced all night' approach epitomised by Miss Barbara Cartland in her autobiography bearing this very title — all that set against the first signs of the approaching Great Depression. No, I will not, I am not writing for *The Economist*. The art of the painter suffices.

The true question therefore is: Which rape are we denied, so that the reeds, the Panpipes, the melody and happiness are possible? What is the nature of this cruel exchange? Suavity is not a given, it is the result of a dolorous swap. Syrinx has exchanged her body, her hopes, her mind, and her freedom against not being violated. She is the forced instrument of suavity and joy and sweetness, of Arcadia, of the perfect state of human and social happiness, because she has called onto being sacrificed. Rape has been denied. Pan is a passionate flautist because he was a dispassionate f***. Pardon me. Alliterations are my foible. Can

you hear the music clearer now? What violent desire and what chaste integrity have been denied so that peace can prevail in Arcadia?

Can you see, now, that the seven-reeded flute is not Pan's only instrument? Pan is also credited for being the first military strategist. Having devised the art of dividing an army on the battlefield into two wings – in imitation of the two horns he wore on his head –, he also invented propaganda to spread fear among the enemy army. Long before loud-speakers were used in the Korean War to sow disinformation, Pan used echoes in Arcadian valleys to multiply the shouts of his battalions, to make one man sound like ten, and to cause what was called 'panic attacks' among his enemies.

Pan has therefore two instruments at his disposal. The pipes, which tell of peace acquired at the expense of a victim, and the illusion of sound, which helps bring about peace through strategies of cleverness and deceit. It is no surprise then that the seven-reeded flute is considered in Ancient Greek musical theory as cosmic harmony itself, or the music of the seven planets. You play the flute, you play the universe and since *kosmos* means order and beauty, you play order and peace. But again, at whose expense?

The painting sings louder now, does it not? It sings to us of violent self-renunciation and painful growth. Do you understand now why the sitter is a youth and the figure standing a young man?

The other, inner music of the painting is that of a transition between the ages of life. The player is the past of the *contraposto* character; he is at rest in the path of life while the listener is poised to walk on. The youth has his back against the two sturdy blocks of stone, steps that will have to be mounted. The young man has his feet next to the step that leads to the open shore he is returning from and toward which he is leading, at the sound of his pipes, the younger man: he charms him to an *Embarquement pour Cythère* — you do remember my lecture on Watteau, I hope — to the indomitable sailing of life, *l'âge d'homme* as Michel Leiris puts it.

Let me bring together the facets of the idea I have tried to make you

envision: to grow is to wage war over oneself and to renounce what we are and what we possess — freedom and virginity, integrity, like Syrinx — and to accede to joy — being the idea of what we think is good, even though we have to relinquish our previous shapes. However, this growth occurs under urgency, in a violent gesture of refusal, when those who are supposed to protect us, like Pan who guards the valleys of Arcadia, are the real aggressors.

When we are faced with that awful reality, life turns on its hinge. Nothing will ever be the same, and Arcadia is tainted forever. A new landscape is opening up, onto a sea, with steps down towards an unseen shore, uncharted voyages and charted ones that turn into errands. This is what the painting you have in front of you is telling us, in the crying of Syrinx that cannot pass for the sweet melody of a syrinx. This is the most violent of paintings, it skins us alive. Don't be fooled, though. This is Joy itself".

The lecturer took out a pack of fridge magnets, left it next to the lectern, walked out, *écorché vif*.



PHILIPPE-JOSEPH SALAZAR was educated at Lycée Louis-le-Grand (Paris). A past Fellow of École normale supérieure where he was tutored by Louis Althusser he studied philosophy under Emmanuel Levinas and semiology with Roland Barthes. An opera critic and author of a libretto, Icare (Paris, 1981), he is a political chronicler for French intellectual magazine Les Influences. A sometime director in Rhetoric and Democracy at Collège international de philosophie in Paris, Jacques Derrida's foundation, and a former Dean of Arts at the University of Cape Town (South Africa), he is presently a Distinguished Professor of Rhetoric and Humane Letters at the same institution. Laureate in 2008 of the Harry Oppenheimer Fellowship in recognition of his pioneering work in Rhetoric.

