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During the English Renaissance, stories from the ancient world inspired many educated people. In the 1570s, five wall hangings of noblewomen, featuring five ladies and their allegorical virtues, were made at Chatsworth House, in England. Here is a detail of Penelope.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Remarkable English Renaissance Wall Hangings

‘The Noble Women’

LORRAINE FERRIER

On the top floor of Hardwick Hall, five wall hangings of noblewomen—Zenobia, Lucretia, Cleopatra, Penelope, and Artemisia—once adorned the high walls of Bess of Hardwick’s small private chamber. These women were not only of noble birth but also of noble character, bringing to mind all 16th-century womanly virtues.

Continued on Page 4





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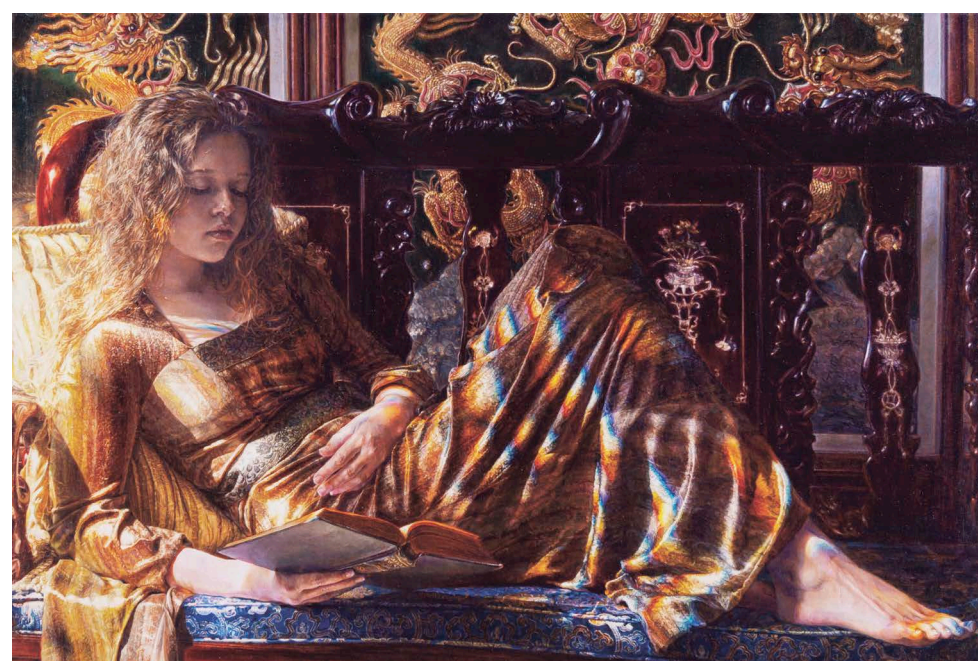
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## TRADITIONAL CULTURE

# A Must-Read for Patriots: 'The 1776 Report'

JEFF MINICK

This past fall, President Donald Trump founded the 1776 Commission, charging its members with the task of “cultivating a better education among Americans in the principles and history of our nation.” On Monday, Jan. 18, the commission released its “1776 Report.”

On Wednesday, Jan. 20, on his first day in office, newly elected president Joe Biden signed an executive order disbanding the commission and withdrawing the report, which had already drawn the wrath of certain progressives. Here from the Chicago Tribune is just one example of these attacks:

“In its report, which Trump hoped would be used in classrooms across the nation, the commission glorifies the country’s founders, plays down America’s role in slavery, condemns the rise of progressive politics and argues that the civil rights movement ran afoul of the ‘lofty ideals’ espoused by the Founding Fathers.

“The panel, which included no professional historians of the United States, complained of ‘false and fashionable ideologies’ that depict the country’s story as one of ‘oppression and victimhood.’ Instead, it called for renewed efforts to foster ‘a brave and honest love for our country.’”

The newspaper cites the objections of several university historians, with one of them describing the report as “a sixth or seventh grade kind of approach to history—to make the children feel good.”

So I decided to read “The 1776 Report,” which you can find on the Hillsdale College website, and see what I might find.

### A Vision of Past and Present

The report begins by noting that the purpose of the commission is to “enable a rising generation to understand the history and principles of the founding of the United States and to strive to form a more perfect Union.” The commission then adds, “This requires a restoration of American education,” and “a rediscovery of our shared identity rooted in our founding principles...”

In the remaining paragraphs of this Introduction, the authors address the present divisions in our country, admit that America has not always lived up to its ideals, and stress the importance of studying the documents and history behind the founding of our nation. By doing so, they contend, a student who is grounded in these concepts will “become a better person, a better citizen, and a better partner in the American experiment of self-government.”

If we read this Introduction, we find that the authors are interested in imparting knowledge of American history to students and the rest of us while at the same time reviving a love for the American Dream of liberty and justice.

### Founding Principles and Laws

In the next two sections of its report, the commission analyzes the creation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In these pages, the members of the commission give us a succinct and clear account of the history behind these documents, citing Americans from the Founding Fathers to Martin Luther King Jr.

I’ve read a good amount of history throughout my life—I majored in history in college and afterward completed two years of graduate studies—and I am confused by the critics who attack “The 1776 Report” as sophomoric. The commission presents a history of both the Declaration and the Constitution remarkable for its detail, its grasp of the difficulties faced by the Founders, and its brevity.

Here I can only conclude that these assailants were angered by the commission’s stouthearted defense of these cornerstones of our liberty, including the explanations regarding our First and Second Amendments, and for the use of the word “patriots.”

### Group ‘Rights’

The first pages of next section, “Challenges to America’s Principles,” deals with slavery.



Portrait of John Adams by Gilbert Stuart, 1810-1815.

In regard to slavery, “The 1776 Report” includes condemnations of slavery by men like John Adams—“a foul contagion in the human character”—and even by the slaveholding Thomas Jefferson, who as the commission notes, said of slavery: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever.”

The report also states: “The foundation of our Republic planted the seeds of the death of slavery in America. The Declaration’s unqualified proclamation of human equality flatly contradicted the existence of human bondage and, along with the Constitution’s compromises understood in light of that proposition, set the stage for abolition.”

America ended slavery through a bloody civil war, finally kicked the bigotry of Jim Crow to the curb, and now is home to people from countries around the world. We can never live in a perfect world, but we can rightfully take pride in our long march away from racism and prejudice.

But as the report states: “Yet the damage done by the denial of core American principles and by the attempted substitution of group rights in their place proved widespread and long-lasting. These, indeed, are the direct ancestors of some of the destructive theories that today divide our people and tear at the fabric of our country.”

**The authors of ‘The 1776 Report’ are interested in imparting knowledge of American history to students and the rest of us while at the same time reviving a love for the American Dream of liberty and justice.**

### Liberty Besieged

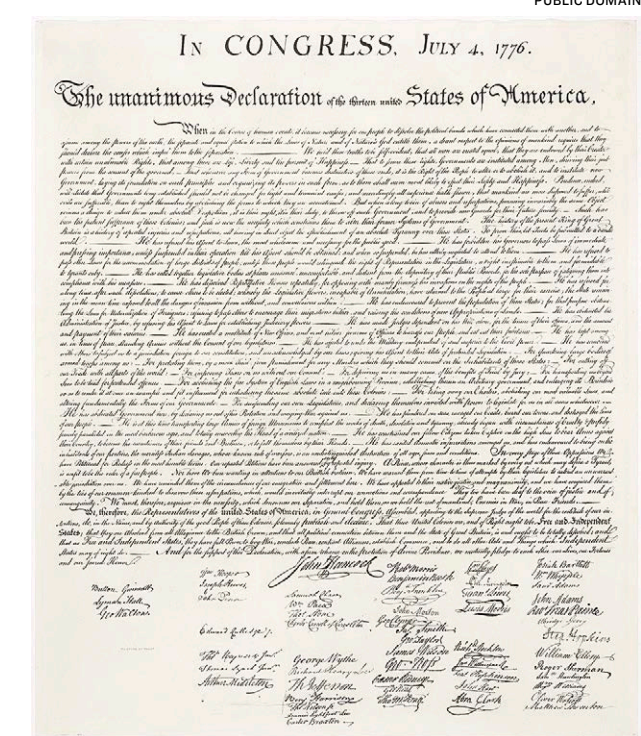
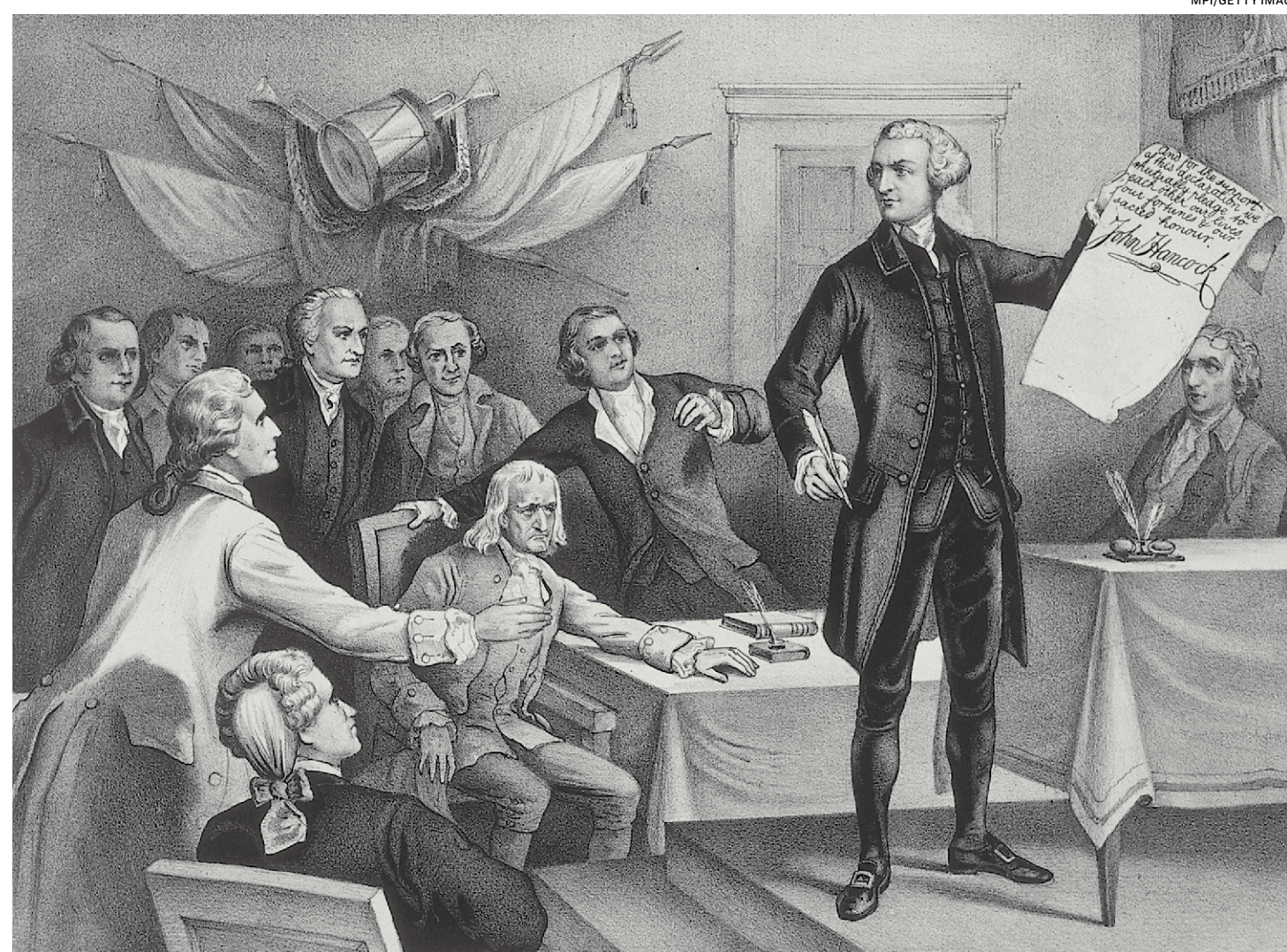
In the rest of “Challenges to American Principles,” the writers look at progressivism, identity politics, fascism, and communism. They offer an excellent synopsis of those last two ideologies, which so many Americans died fighting in various wars. They point out that our American principles stand in stark contrast not only to those failed totalitarian systems, but also to today’s ideas of progressivism and “protected classes” based on race and other demographic categories.” The authors contend that the intrusion of identity politics into our government and our public forum diminishes our individual liberties and increases the bitter divisions we see today among our people.

They also note the development of a vast American federal bureaucracy over the past century, of which they write: “This shadow government never faces elections and today operates largely without checks and balances. The founders always opposed government unaccountable to the people and without constitutional restraint, yet it continues to grow around us.”

Given this assault on what some call the Deep State, it is little wonder that “The 1776 Report” suffered such a bombardment of criticism.

### Wisdom Shunned

Yet it is the final section, “The Task of National Renewal,” that surely brought the blowback and quick cancellation of



(Above) “The Declaration of Independence,” July 4, 1776, a copy of the 1823 William Stone facsimile.

(Left) On July 4, 1776, John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, after putting his signature on the Declaration of Independence, watched by fellow patriots. Printed by Currier & Ives.

“The 1776 Report.” Here, for example, the writers take to task our universities for being “hotbeds of anti-Americanism, libel, and censorship that combine to generate in students and the broader culture at the very least disdain and at worst outright hatred for this country.”

Here, too, and this astonished me, the commission emphasizes the role of the family as “the first educators,” recommends dinnertime discussions of liberty, and states that “when families pray together, they acknowledge together the providence of the Almighty God who gave them their sacred liberty.” When have we last heard such sentiments expressed by any government body?

### A Thing of Beauty

In his Breitbart article “Trump’s 1776 Report Is a Marvel,” James Delingpole

writes: “The 1776 Report—produced by President Trump’s Advisory 1776 Commission—is a thing of such beauty, dignity, and scholarship that it makes me wish I were American, not British.”

He then adds this passage from the report:

“To be an American means something noble and good. It means treasuring freedom and embracing the vitality of self-government. We are shaped by the beauty, bounty and wildness of our continent. We are united by the glory of our history. And we are distinguished by the American virtues of openness, honesty, optimism, determination, generosity, confidence, kindness, hard work, courage and hope. Our principles did not create these virtues, but they laid the groundwork for them to grow and spread and forge America into the

most just and glorious country in all of history.”

Near the end of the report, we find these words: “When we appreciate America for what she truly is, we know that our Declaration is worth preserving, our Constitution worth defending, our fellow citizens worth loving, and our country worth fighting for.”

By abolishing the 1776 Commission and rejecting its report—did he even read it?—Joe Biden and his administration have drawn a line in the sand. On one side stand all those who love America, liberty, and justice under the law. On the other side are those who reject our founding principles and are working to abolish them.

Read “The 1776 Report.” See what you think.

In addition to Hillsdale College’s on-

line version, Encounter Books, a publishing house that promotes liberty and the achievements of Western civilization, will soon publish the 1776 Report in book form, including a preface by the leaders of the commission, endnote citations, and footnotes.

I encourage readers to purchase this gem of Americana.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, “Amanda Bell” and “Dust On Their Wings,” and two works of nonfiction, “Learning As I Go” and “Movies Make The Man.” Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](https://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.



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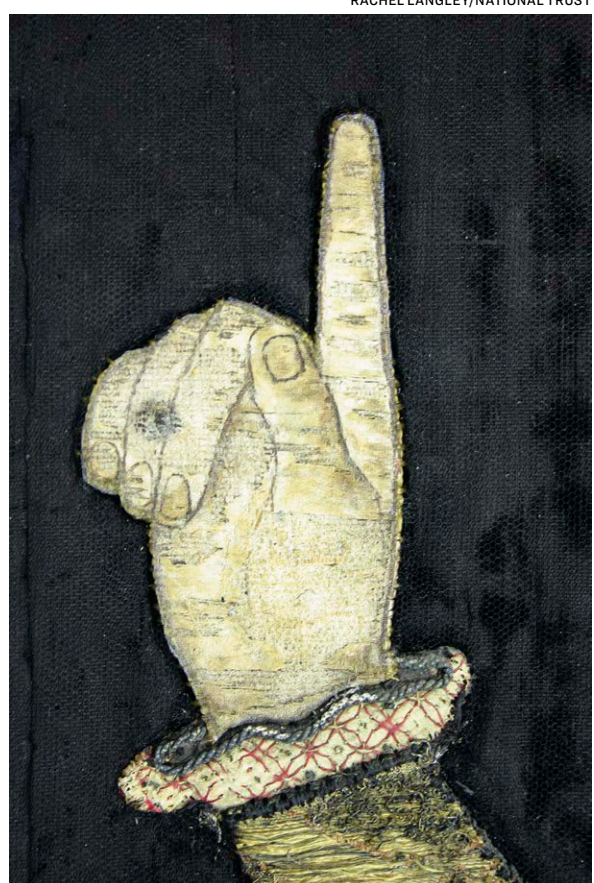
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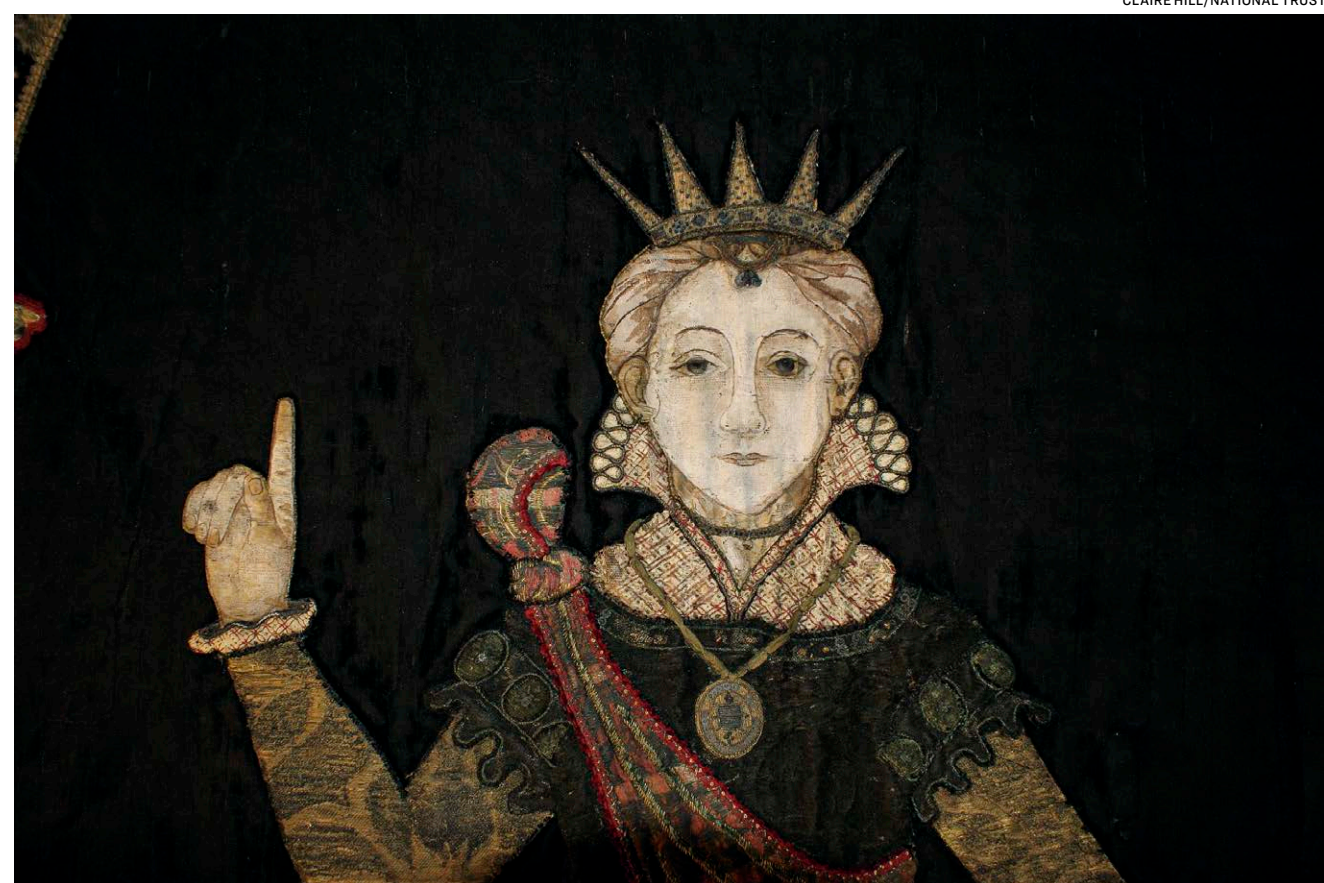


Penelope flanked by Perseverance (L) and Patience, circa 1570s. Linen background with applied silk velvet and gold cloth; around 9 feet, 1 inch by 11 feet, 6 inches.



(Left) Details of the Penelope appliqué wall hanging, before restoration, at Hardwick Hall.

(Right) A detail of Penelope after restoration, one of the appliqué needlework wall hangings of noblewomen at Hardwick Hall, in Derbyshire, England.



CLAIRE HILL/NATIONAL TRUST

## CRAFTSMANSHIP

### Remarkable English Renaissance Wall Hangings

# 'The Noble Women'

Continued from Page 1

During the Renaissance, there was renewed interest in classical mythology and history, and the stories of Lucretia, Penelope, and Artemisia were quite popular, Elena Williams, senior house steward at Hardwick Hall, explained by phone. "People like Bess and those who were educated would have known of these stories, so they would have recognized and understood the hangings," she said.

Architect Robert Smythson and Bess of Hardwick, also known as Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury—the second most influential woman in England, after Queen Elizabeth I—created Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, in the north of England, between 1590 and 1597.

Hardwick Hall is one of only a few surviving Elizabethan prodigy houses, country homes that were built to showcase wealth and great architectural design, often at the expense of livability. Bess expressly designed Hardwick to hang her richly colored textiles—such as those of these moral exemplars.

#### Creating 'The Noble Women' Needleworks

"The Noble Women" wall hangings were created in the 1570s, at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, where Bess lived with her family. Bess always employed an embroiderer as part of her household staff. It's believed that the Chatsworth House embroiderer, under Bess's direction, would have designed "The Noble Women" wall hangings, Williams said.

The composition of each appliqué wall hanging is the same: Three self-contained arches between two Ionic columns. The noblewoman is in the large central arch, flanked by the personifications of two of her virtues, who are each under a smaller arch.

The monogram initials on each wall hanging reflect Bess's marriage to George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury. The initials also represent the celebration of securing the family bloodlines, as Bess's children from her second marriage married two of George's children from his previous marriage.

It's not known how long it took to make the embroideries, but under the embroi-

**The noble woman is in the large central arch, flanked by the personifications of two of her virtues.**

derer's leadership, many members of the household staff helped to embroider and assemble the wall hangings.

Each hanging is richly decorated with appliqué embroidery, whereby different shapes are cut from a variety of fabrics and sewn together onto black linen, like a collage, to form figures and decorative elements. Each appliqué design, whether a noblewoman or an Ionic column, was then sewn onto the black silk wall hanging. The more complicated elements, such as the emblems at the center of the arches and the coats of arms were thought to have been workshop commissions.

Sumptuous fabrics were used for the wall hangings, including rich brocades with metal threads, silk velvets, and gold and silver cloth. Some of the opulent fabrics were from vestments, which were liturgical garments. Bess had previously been married to Sir William Cavendish, who worked as a commissioner for Henry VIII and was directly involved in the dissolution of the monasteries.

Interestingly, the religious motifs on the vestments were not used in the wall hangings but were cut away from the garments and stored for safekeeping, Williams explained. None of these fragments of vestments were noted in Hardwick Hall's records, she added.

At the time the embroideries were being made, Bess and her husband George had a high-ranking house "guest": Mary Queen of Scots. The devout Catholic queen was put in the Talbots' care (both Protestants) by Queen Elizabeth I when she ordered her rival's house arrest.



Details of the Penelope appliqué wall hanging, before restoration, at Hardwick Hall.

#### The 5 'Noble Women'

Only four of the five "Noble Women" embroideries now survive, although a fragment of the Cleopatra still exists. The Cleopatra wall hanging, which once hung near the fireplace, was believed to have been substantially damaged, Williams explained. In 1760, when the wall hangings were moved down to the family rooms, the Cleopatra embroidery was not mentioned in the move. In the 19th century, when the needleworks underwent some repairs, it's believed that the Cleopatra wall hanging was used to repair the other four.

With the exception of the Cleopatra, the most striking thing about the embroideries is that after all this time we can still see them in their entirety, Williams said.

Williams explained the stories and some of the symbols in the four surviving "Noble Women" appliqué embroideries.

#### Zenobia's Noble Warrior Spirit

In the third century, Zenobia married Septimius Odaenathus, the king of Palmyra, Syria. After Odaenathus's assassination, she ruled the Palmyrene Kingdom as regent and then de facto ruler for her son. During her reign, she conquered some of the Roman Empire's eastern provinces. Eventually she was subjugated when the Roman Emperor Aurelian reclaimed the eastern provinces.

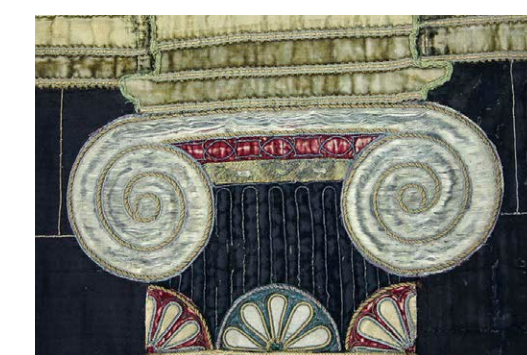
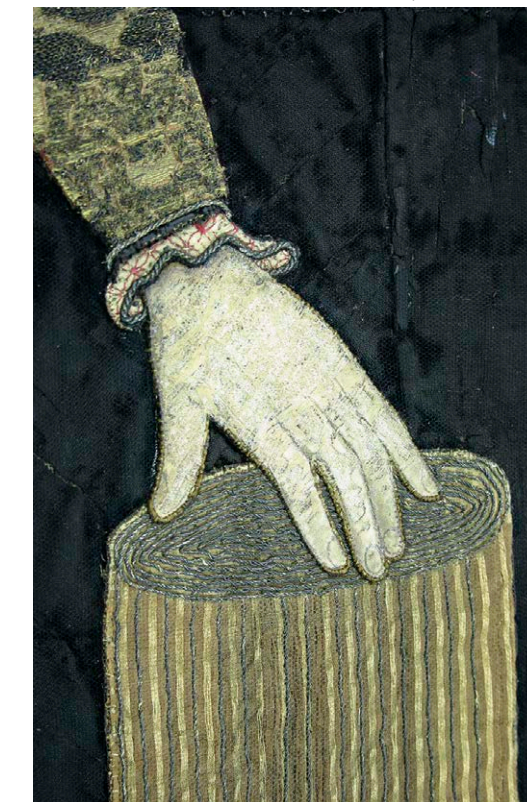
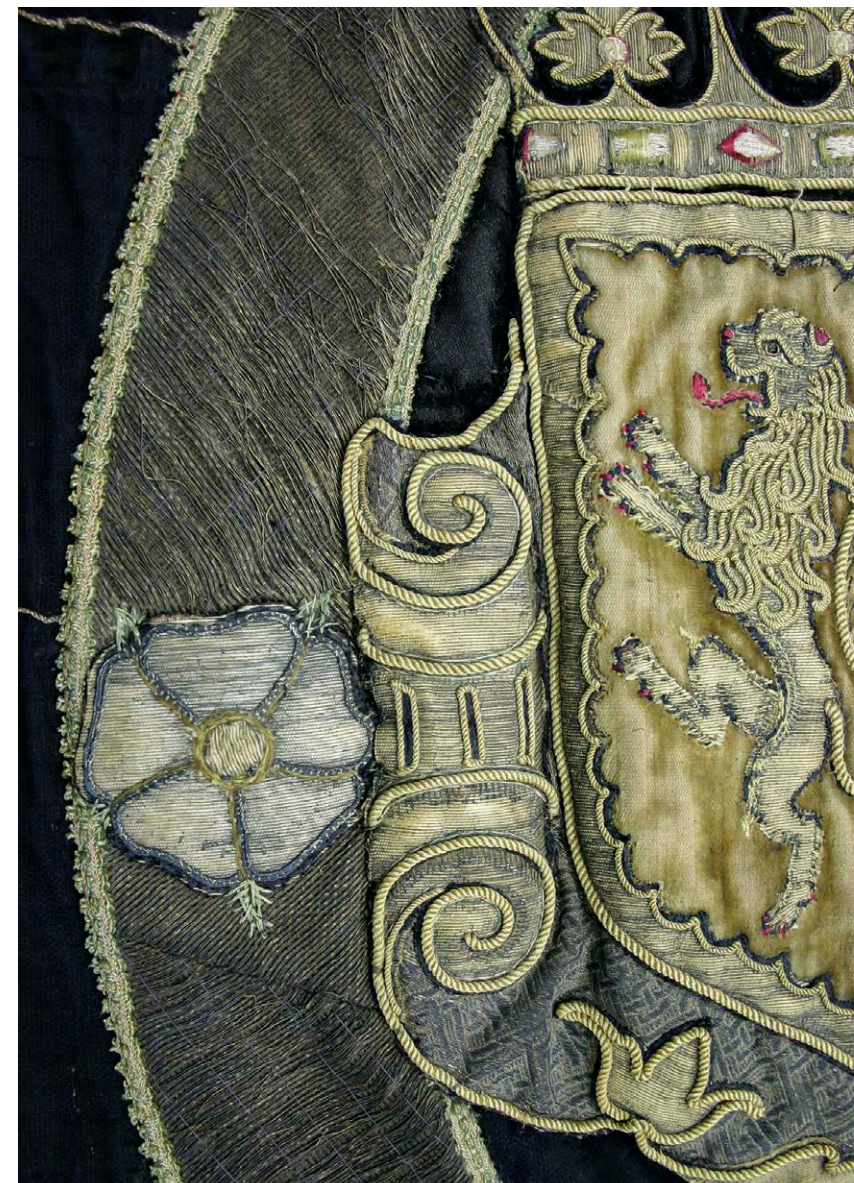
In the Hardwick Hall embroidery of Zenobia, the warrior queen is flanked by her virtues: "Magnanimity" and "Prudence." Magnanimity represents a great heart and mind, showing a willingness to face danger and take action for noble reasons. Experts believe that her noble actions might refer to her carrying on her husband's campaign and his work, Williams explained. Magnanimity holds a long staff, with a lion by her side, indicating, of course, bravery. To Zenobia's left is Prudence, the ability to choose the right action at the right time. A snake, representing wisdom, wraps itself around Prudence's right arm.

#### Lucretia's Virtue

In the sixth century B.C., Sextus Tarquinius, the youngest son of the last king of Rome, was sent to Collatia, a town northeast of Rome. There are several versions of events. In one account, Sextus and Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus, son of the king's nephew, debated over which of their wives were more virtuous. To settle the debate, they both paid surprise visits to each wife to see what she was doing while her husband was away. Sextus's wife was enjoying a sumptuous banquet while Lucius's wife, Lucretia, was weaving with her handmaidens. Lucius therefore won the debate.

That night, Sextus snuck into Lucretia's bed chamber to seduce her. He gave her an ultimatum. She could succumb to his advances, marry him, and become his queen. Or if she refused, he would kill her along with one of her servants and claim that he killed them for Lucius's honor after he caught them committing adultery. Lucretia stood firm in her devotion to her husband. Sextus raped her.

Lucretia summoned her father, husband, and two witnesses to inform them of the attack. While they were debating the right



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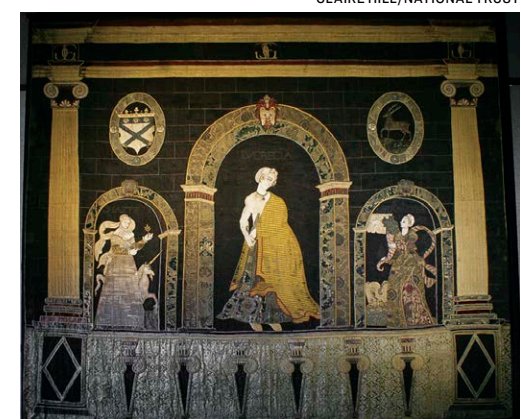
Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire is one of the few surviving Elizabethan prodigy homes—country homes that were built to show wealth and great architectural design.

course of action, Lucretia took a knife and killed herself. The attack on Lucretia signaled the end of the Roman monarchy. Lucius Junius Brutus led Roman noblemen to expel the king and his family, resulting in the establishment of the Roman Republic. In the Hardwick Hall embroidery of Lucretia, she looks down to her left where "Liberaliter" (Liberality) stands. Liberality is generous in her actions and thoughts and always believes the best of others. She holds a cornucopia overflowing with what

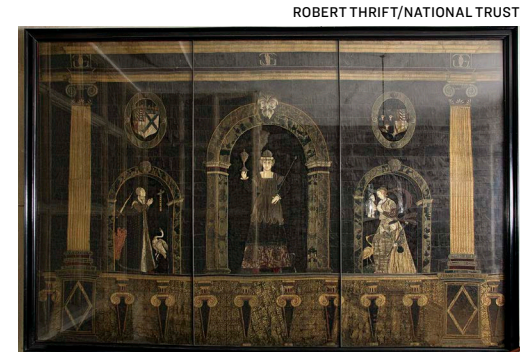
### Only four of the five 'Noble Women' embroideries survive.



ROBERT THRIFT/NATIONAL TRUST



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ROBERT THRIFT/NATIONAL TRUST

Zenobia flanked by Magnanimity (L) and Prudence, circa 1570s. Linen background with applied silk velvet and gold cloth; around 10 feet, 8 inches by 13 feet, 7 inches.

Lucretia flanked by Chastity (L) and Liberality, circa 1570s. Linen ground with applied silk velvet and gold cloth; around 9 feet, 1 inch by 11 feet, 2 inches.

Artemisia flanked by Piety (L) and Constance, circa 1570s. Linen background with applied silk velvet and gold cloth; around 10 feet, 4 inches by 15 feet, 6 inches.

is believed to be rare coins. The pelican in the background represents family loyalty and, again, generosity. In legend, the mother pelican is known to feed its blood to its young in times of dire need. Therefore, Christians have used the pelican to symbolize Christ's sacrifice.

Above Liberality is the Hardwick stag. To Lucretia's right stands "Chasteti" (Chastity) holding an olive branch to symbolize marital chastity. The unicorn behind her indicates virginity. Above Chastity is the Hardwick family coat of arms.

#### Artemisia's Family Loyalty

In the fourth century B.C., Artemisia and her brother-husband, King Mausolus of Caria, created one of the seven wonders of the world, their Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. Both are buried in the mausoleum, but Mausolus died first. Artemisia, overwhelmed with grief, put her husband's ashes into her goblet of wine and drank it so that she could be her husband's living tomb.

In the Hardwick Hall embroidered hanging, Artemisia is holding a scepter and a goblet of wine that contains her husband's ashes. "Constans" (Constance) is on Artemisia's right side, with a swan symbolizing marital loyalty or marital fidelity. The sword near Constance echoes the swan's message of loyalty. "Piety" (Piety), to Artemisia's left, symbolizes family loyalty.

At Piety's breast is a small man, which refers to the tale of Pero and her father, Cimon. The story illustrates family loyalty under severe circumstances, as Pero breastfed her imprisoned father to save him from starvation. There's also a stork that represents family loyalty.

#### Penelope's Wifely Devotion

In Homer's "Odyssey," Queen Penelope's husband, Odysseus, has been away from home fighting in the Trojan War for many years. Every day, suitors ask for Penelope's hand in marriage because Odysseus has been gone for so long and is presumed dead. Penelope doesn't want to remarry because, in her heart, she believes her husband is still alive and will return. To appease her suitors, she tells them that she cannot possibly decide who to marry until she's finished weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. And each evening, she unravels the weaving she's done that day.

In the Hardwick Hall embroidery of Penelope, she points the finger of her right hand skyward, in a gesture that says "Wait!" Her left hand rests on the roll of cloth she's woven, which will never be completed. The personifications of her virtues "Perseverance" and "Paciens" (Patience) flank her. Perseverance holds an eagle, which seems about to take flight from her arms. Patience, on Penelope's left, has a lamb pawing at her dress. The lamb often represents peace, humility, and innocence—a reminder for Penelope as she waits for her husband.

Penelope's patience and perseverance pay off as Odysseus does return, after 20 years.

To find out more about the Hardwick Hall "Noble Women" wall hangings, visit [NationalTrust.org.uk](http://NationalTrust.org.uk)





American classical pianist Van Cliburn became a household name overnight when he won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958 during the Cold War. Here, he's playing at a state dinner honoring the emperor and empress of Japan in 1975.

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

# What Happened to the 'Chestnuts' of Classical Music?

MICHAEL KUREK

It seems we classical musicians feel lucky if nowadays the general public has any familiarity at all with classical music. We don't even mind if a certain amount of music gets called classical that didn't used to be. It was way back in 1990 that the Three Tenors won a Grammy for "Best Classical Vocal Performance" with a CD that included "Memory" from the musical "Cats," the 1940s French pop hit "La vie en rose," and the "West Side Story" songs "Maria" and "Tonight."

However, it was not too long ago that the public actually had a pretty good knowledge of traditional classical music. Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts" were even aired in weekend prime time on CBS during the 1960s. Pretty much everyone knew Disney's movie "Fantasia" and its musical selections.

It was not uncommon to see performances of classical music in the Miss America talent competition and on popular TV variety shows. "The Ed Sullivan Show" showcased not only the Beatles but also, among many other classical performers, the 13-year-old Itzhak Perlman performing the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in 1958, and Birgit Nilsson and the Montreal Symphony performing an excerpt from Puccini's opera "Turandot" in 1967.

You could hardly watch a "Looney Tunes" cartoon without getting a classical music education, as in their wonderful cartoon "What's Opera, Doc?" featuring a mash-up of Wagner excerpts (analyzed thoroughly in its own Wikipedia article).

My parents used to shop at a grocery store that offered this bonus: If you spent a certain amount in your weekly shopping trip, you could buy at a discount another vinyl 33-speed record as the next weekly installment of a "Great Classical Music" collection.

The collection included, at the start, a big book with sleeves in which to insert each of the new records you bought, and pages with program notes. In the school concert band, we played transcriptions for band of popular classical overtures in addition to our Souza marches. Every kid who played in a high-school band knew about Gioachino Rossini, Richard Wagner, and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

### Classical Subcategories

In those heady days, we even had the luxury of recognized subcategories of classical music, designating some classical pieces as "light classics." These included the most easily understood and tuneful or popularized compositions like Rossini's

1. Classical music was once popular enough to warrant television broadcasts. Leonard Bernstein with members of the New York Philharmonic rehearsing for a television broadcast.  
2. Conductor Leopold Stokowski arranged his own version of "Night on Bald Mountain" for the Walt Disney film "Fantasia." A screenshot of Leopold Stokowski in the film "Carnegie Hall," 1947.  
3. Actors Henrik Klausen and Sofie Pareluis in Henrik Ibsen's play "Peer Gynt." From the first performance at the Christiania Theater, Norway, in 1876.  
4. The Grammy-winning album "Carreras Domingo Pavarotti in Concert" (1990) with (L-R) Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, conductor Zubin Mehta, and Luciano Pavarotti.

"William Tell Overture" (1829), famous for its use as the "Lone Ranger" theme, or Alexander Borodin's "Polovtsian Dances" (1887) from which had come the tune for the popular song "Stranger in Paradise," featuring the incomparable vocal of Vic Damone in the 1955 film version of the musical "Kismet."

From Sergey Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto (1901) came the great pop hit "Full Moon and Empty Arms." From Frédéric Chopin's popular "Polonaise in A-flat" (1842) came Perry Como's career-making 1945 hit, "Till the End of Time." Likewise, Chopin's "Fantasie Impromptu" in C-sharp Minor (1834), could be heard as Judy Garland's tune for "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" in the 1941 film "Ziegfeld Girl," with a cast including Jimmy Stewart and Lana Turner.

Both of these last two Chopin originals, on their own, became popular hits thanks to the unprecedented fame of classical pianist Van Cliburn (1924-2013), whom the Associated Press dubbed a "rock star" when he won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958 as an American during the Cold War. He was celebrated through his bestselling albums, concert tours, and numerous TV appearances, even as the "mystery guest" on the popular game show "What's My Line?" in both 1959 and 1962.

How many classical pianists today are on the lips of the general public, as was the name of the great Van Cliburn?

### Reclaiming the Lost Joy of the Chestnuts

The classical subcategory of "Chestnuts" was the "sure-fire" pieces, the ones with the most memorable tunes to win anyone over to an appreciation of classical music. If the chestnuts were ever needed in the world, perhaps it is no more than today, when beauty still has the power to soften the many hard feelings, anxieties, and stresses we often experience. Here are a few to soothe your savage breast. (By the way, it's not "savage beast"; the quote is from the play "The Mourning Bride," 1697, by William Congreve.)

Here are just a few of the many chestnuts, but you can enjoy thinking of others to add. I must start with a childhood favorite, the very popular "Peer Gynt" (1875) by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg, which was composed as incidental music for Henrik Ibsen's 1867 play of that name.

Several animated and live film versions were made for kids, and a whole Broad-

way musical was made of Grieg's life (including music from "Peer Gynt"), called "Song of Norway" (1946), spawning a 1970 film version starring Florence Henderson, best known as the mom on "The Brady Bunch." Who can forget "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from "Peer Gynt," among its many famous numbers.

Two undisputed chestnuts that appear in Disney's 1940 animated film "Fantasia," both already extremely well-known before that film used them, were "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (1897) by French composer Paul Dukas and "Night on Bald Mountain" (1867) by Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky, best known in its 1886 version, arranged by fellow Russian Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov.

The enduring and iconic portrayal of the apprentice by Mickey Mouse has surely made that composition among the best-known classical pieces outside of the concert hall.

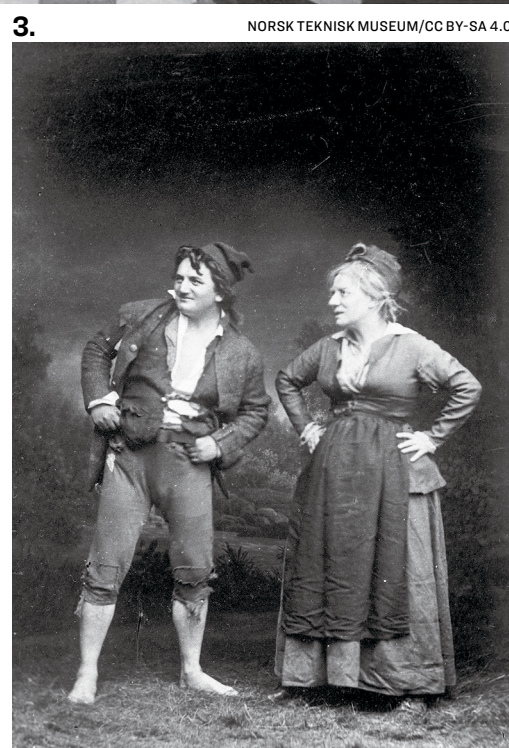
For "Fantasia," the legendary conductor Leopold Stokowski made his own arrangement of "Night on Bald Mountain" (sometimes titled "Bare" Mountain), charmingly spooky but with animations that can even be scary (just a little warning) to some smaller children.

Alas, I will mention only one more beloved chestnut, the beautiful and quintessential 1886 depiction of "The Swan" from "The Carnival of the Animals" by Camille Saint-Saëns.

This one happens to be a favorite of players of the novelty instrument called the musical saw, and it is not to be missed in that version. (I must have heard it on the saw at least a few times on Ted Mack's "Original Amateur Hour," popular on radio from 1934 to 1945 as "Major Bowes Amateur Hour," and on TV from 1948 through the 1960s.)

All of these works once enriched American culture and could do so again, especially as an introduction to classical music for someone who has heard little of it. For those who do remember but have not heard them in a long time, they offer a heartwarming revisit to a more innocent time, not to mention immense enjoyment.

American composer Michael Kurek is the author of the book "The Sound of Beauty: A Composer on Music in the Spiritual Life" and the composer of the Billboard No. 1 classical album "The Sea Knows." The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit MichaelKurek.com



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

### 'The Map of Tiny Perfect Things'

Director  
Ian Samuels

Starring  
Kyle Allen, Kathryn Newton,  
Jermaine Harris, Anna Mikami,  
Josh Hamilton, Cleo Fraser,  
Al Madrigal, Jorja Fox

Rated  
PG-13

Running Time  
1 hour, 38 minutes

Release Date  
Feb. 12, 2021

★★★★★

# A Perfect Romantic-Date Flick

## MARK JACKSON

America loves its time-loop movies: "Groundhog Day," "Edge of Tomorrow," "Palm Springs," to name a few, and even "Back to the Future" has time-loop elements. Arriving in time for St. Valentine's Day, "The Map of Tiny Perfect Things" adds a quirky, fun, teen comedy-romance entry to the genre.

### He's Got It All Wired

Mark (Kyle Allen) is a Ferris Bueller-type high schooler from Fairhope, Alabama. He seems awfully prescient. In fact, he seems like some kind of advanced honor student who really ought to already be at MIT or something. But not in an academic sense. It's just that he's got exquisite timing. He does stuff like breezing into the kitchen for breakfast, snatching the toast exactly as it pops out of the toaster, staying a quick verbal step ahead of his derogatory little sister (Cleo Fraser), while blithely solving his dad's crossword puzzle. Then he heads out the door, where more uncanny timing sequences occur.

Like ditching his bike for the bed of a moving pickup truck, snatching a serendipitous cup of coffee off the top of a car, bounding up a rooftop, and diving through a window to hang out with his bro Henry (Jermaine Harris), who seems to do nothing but play mercenary-bot-type video games where his merc-bot keeps getting its head shot off.

At this point, you will encounter a creeping sense of déjà vu. Where have we seen this before? We've seen it when Bill Murray's snide weatherman Phil has been stuck down in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, for a few centuries. You know what I'm talking about.

Mark has a version of Phil memorizing all of Rita's (Andie MacDowell) personal details, in order to string them into a dazzling, brilliant come-on, which inevitably ends with him getting slapped in the face. Mark's version involves saving a girl at the local pool from the ignominy of getting hit in the head with a beach ball. But it doesn't end with a slap, more of a rejection fizzle.

Mark, like Phil, though, knows that exactly 16 hours after his morning alarm goes off, when the clock strikes 12 a.m., there's a massive reset and he wakes up in bed again, not hearing Sonny and Chers' "I Got You Babe," but with his mom pulling away in her car for work.

### Monkey Wrench Margaret

Except one day, one of Mark's routine timelines is unexpectedly bisected by a girl named Margaret (Kathryn Newton, "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri"), who has her own daily time-loop sequence, also consisting of benevolent minor-disaster interventions.

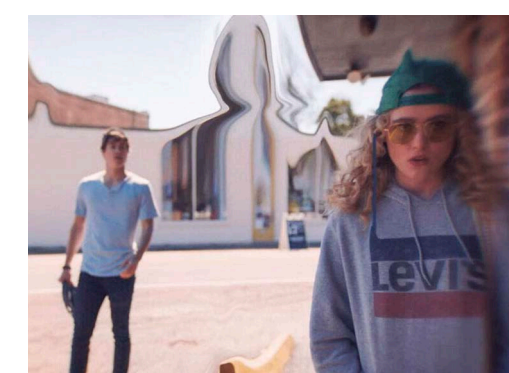
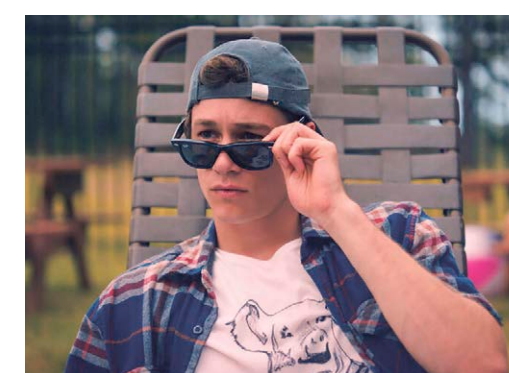
She's elusive, though, but eventually she corners her with the line, "Are you experiencing any kind of temporal anomaly in your life?" Mark and Margaret join forces to figure out their mutual time dilemma, but not before she clarifies that she's strictly off-limits: got a boyfriend,



(Left) The teens are on a mission to map out "perfect things" they encounter on their journey through a time loop. (Below) Mark (Kyle Allen) can't seem to get close to the elusive Margaret (Kathryn Newton).



(Above) Mark (Kyle Allen) and Margaret (Kathryn Newton) are teens stuck in a time loop, in "The Map of Tiny Perfect Things." (Right) Mark (Kyle Allen) looks for ways to help people, just as Phil Connor (Bill Murray) does in "Groundhog Day." (Far right) Both Mark (Kyle Allen) and Margaret (Kathryn Newton) experiencing the weirdness of a repeated day.



not even a little bit interested.

Mark and Margaret make it their mission to manufacture a magic map. What if? They scour their neighborhood to find all the tiny perfect things—delightful, exquisite synchronicities—such as big, bad bikers stopping traffic to let a box turtle plod unhindered across an avenue; a young skater girl outclassing a pack of "sk-terbois" with a perfect skateboard jump; and a man on a bus-stop bench, perfectly framed by the angel's wings stenciled on a moving van behind him.

What's all this supposed to do for them? They're hoping that if they can successfully find all the eggs on this Easter egg hunt, they'll have gleaned all the teachings this time loop has to offer and can move on.

### Not So Fast

Mark, of course, has the additional ulterior motive that this will all somehow win Margaret's heart. But she keeps acting as if there might be some situation that's compelling her to hang out indefinitely in the time loop. It doesn't seem to be the boyfriend. And then you go, "Ahhh—I know what this is. This is another 'dying girl movie.' Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. I'm not saying."

The two loop-castaways bond and share their ideas, theories, fears, and hopes, and you root for Mark to figure out Margaret's mystery. But while Kyle Allen as Mark is a perfectly fine workaday casting choice, Kathryn Newton is already at the level of stardom that should she land that one perfect role, it will elevate her into the fame stratosphere overnight. And so hers in not an everyday level of charisma—she owns this film.

Enjoyably, "Map" isn't just a tale of a love-lorn boy in pursuit of hard-to-get girl, trying to get back to the future. It gives one food for thought, with surprisingly deep questions about time, space, loss, gain, love, and existential meaning. Of course, none of these time-loop movies can satisfyingly explain quantum leaps, wormholes, reincarnation, and so on. But they do continue, if not exactly to teach, then to expand our minds a little bit to the point where many people today believe in things like "The Akashic Chronicle," which has been talked about since ancient times. It's now showing up in kids' cartoons like Jim Carrey's "A Christmas Carol."

The best thing about the movie, given the rapid, morally down-sliding times we

live in, is that here's a movie about two attractive teens who spend their time trying to do only good deeds. OK, it does have a tiny bit of teen beer-drinking. And an extremely innocent kiss.

But the time-loop construct also begs the question of whether it makes sense that such a loop could exist with zero karmic consequences. Because how realistic is it to think that, in a situation where you could get away with everything under the sun with no karmic blowback, after boredom sets in, the situation wouldn't rapidly deteriorate morally? Idle hands are the devil's workshop, and after finding all the tiny perfect things, the kids, I don't care how good they are, after another 100,000,000 go-rounds, will be looting, fighting, spraying graffiti, hoovering up drugs, raping, pillaging, and killing. And, as Bill Murray's Phil found out—even that gets boring.

## The film gives one food for thought, with surprisingly deep questions about time, space, loss, gain, love, and existential meaning.

So this movie highlights for us the need for the lessons of karmic checks and balances in human existence, because the modern time-loop movie is really a metaphor for human reincarnation and karma. Which is different from "The Akashic Chronicle," which, as its name implies, is basically cosmic record-keeping. All that occurs, in all the myriad time-spaces and levels and dimensions and worlds throughout the cosmos, is chronicled in the form of repeating messages and visual records (visual for those with the supernatural ability of clairvoyance) of deeds done in the past, present, and future. They're just messages. Just "time loops."

All in all, if "The Map of Tiny Perfect Things" were a tiny bit more, hmmm ... I don't know ... if the chemistry between the two leads was electrifying, and the soundtrack super catchy, this would have been a time-looper for the ages. But as a fun Valentine's Day watch or for a romantic evening, you could do much worse.



REACHING WITHIN:  
WHAT TRADITIONAL ART OFFERS THE HEART

# Choosing Compassion: ‘A Tear for a Drop of Water’

ERIC BESS

What are monsters? We often consider them dangerously different people, creatures, and things that loom on the outskirts of our lives.

We construct societies with agreed-upon standards, norms, and laws to benefit our livelihood and safety. Monsters are the very things that challenge and disrupt our sense of security and self-esteem. We can learn a lot about ourselves based on how we react to this type of disruption.

A scene from Victor Hugo’s “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” presents several ways in which we may react to the perceived monsters in our lives.

## Quasimodo and Esmeralda

The scene in question is the one in which Quasimodo is punished for attempting to abduct Esmeralda. A summary of the scene and its backstory goes as follows:

A torturer has just tied Quasimodo to the pillory on a stage and beaten him. This platform was the same platform where Quasimodo, because of his ugliness, was designated the “Pope of Fools” during the Feast of Fools festival—a festival that parodies Christian morality and worship—just a day earlier.

Quasimodo is the personification of a monster, the ugliest person in Paris, an insult to the crowd’s standard of beauty. He has red bristles for hair, a large wart on one eye, a hump between his shoulders, a protrusion from his chest, and is deaf from sleeping next to the bells at Notre Dame.

The troubled and dangerous priest Claude Frollo was the one who adopted Quasimodo when the rest of the town abandoned him. Quasimodo became a submissive slave to Frollo and carried out his orders, even when those orders caused others harm.

It was Frollo who ordered Quasimodo to abduct Esmeralda because of Frollo’s lust for her. He thought the devil had sent her to tempt him, and he was unable to resist. Esmeralda was not interested in Frollo and rejected his advances.

Frollo approached the stage as the torturer whipped Quasimodo. Quasimodo was happy to see his master and called out to him, but since Quasimodo had failed to abduct Esmeralda, Frollo turned his back on the poor creature.

To add insult to injury, the Parisian crowd taunted the beaten Quasimodo. When Quasimodo begged for water, the crowd mocked his thirst. But Esmeralda, the woman he had attacked, walked onto the platform and gave him the water he desperately needed.

Quasimodo, so touched by her kindness, almost forgot to drink. In that moment of her compassion, he fell in love with her and planned to defend her honor. Finally, the torturer released Quasimodo, and the crowd left.

## The Compassion of Esmeralda

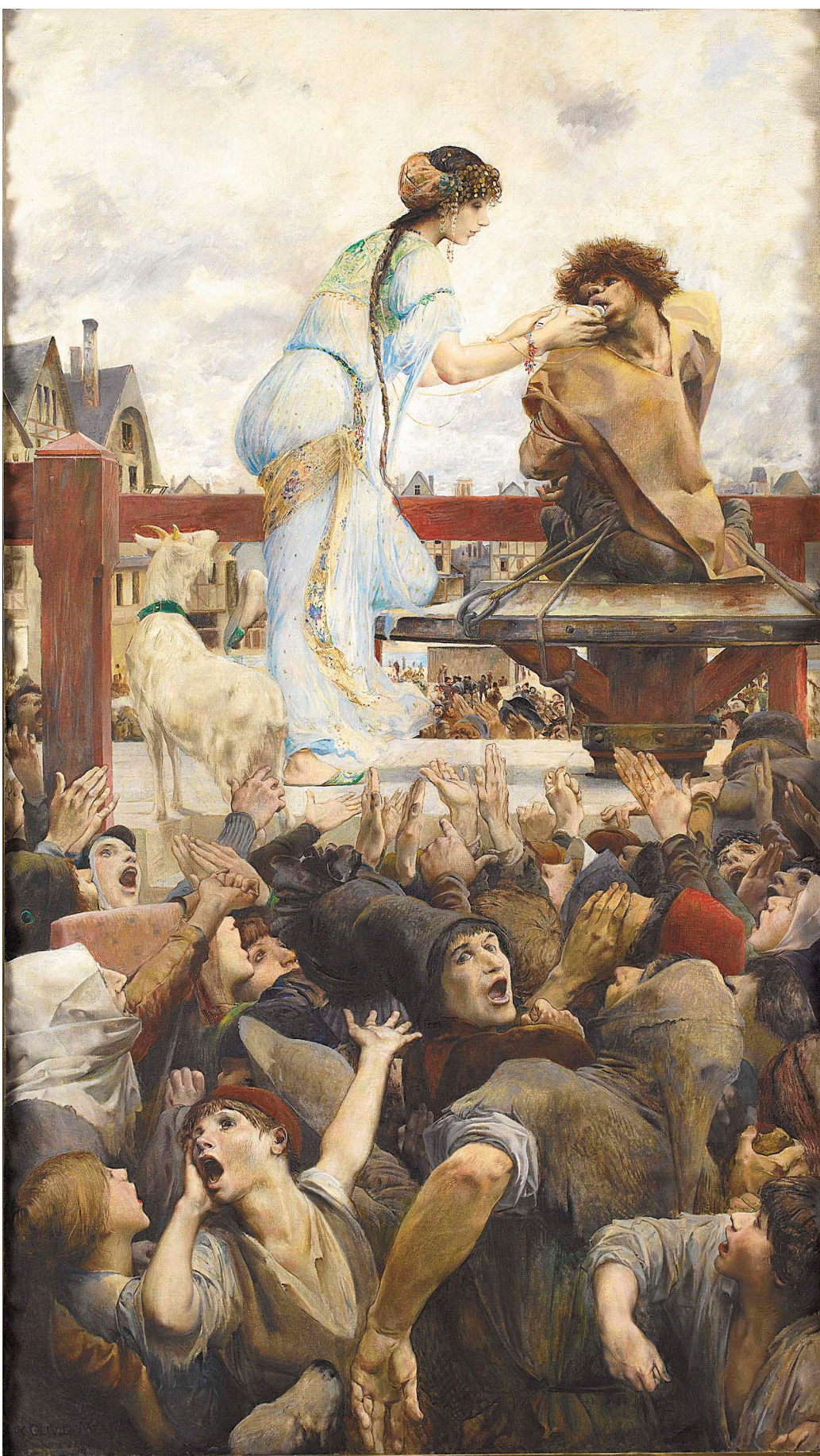
“A Tear for a Drop of Water,” a painting by Luc-Olivier Merson, illustrates the scene from Victor Hugo’s “The Hunchback of Notre Dame” in which Esmeralda gives her attacker, the beaten Quasimodo, water.

At the top right of the composition is Quasimodo, the deformed bell ringer of Notre Dame Cathedral. Merson paints Quasimodo as he is described by Hugo, with a wart over his eye and red bristles for hair. However, Quasimodo’s modest clothing and contorted position obscure his hump and protrusion as he twists toward Esmeralda.

Esmeralda’s beauty contrasts greatly with Quasimodo’s ugliness. She is bejeweled and clothed in the elegant dress of a Roma dancer. Her dress also separates her from the crowd and lets the viewer know that she is different.

Esmeralda’s pet goat, Djali, whom she has taught tricks, accompanies her to the stage. Djali does tricks during Esmeralda’s Roma performances and represents

“A Tear for a Drop of Water,” 1903, by Luc-Olivier Merson. Oil on canvas, 76.8 inches by 43.3 inches. Victor Hugo House.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

her Roma lifestyle. Later, on this same platform, Esmeralda will be executed.

Tied to the pillory is the beaten Quasimodo. He turns toward Esmeralda with a look of adoring appreciation as she puts her flask to his lips.

Below them stands the animated crowd bellowing taunts at Quasimodo. The crowd encircles the stage that holds Quasimodo and Esmeralda, letting us know that this is a public affair of humiliation.

## Choosing Compassion

Merson gives us two ways in which people respond to the monster Quasimodo. How might these two responses morally inform us today? What wisdom might we extract from Merson’s painting?

First, the crowd ridicules and taunts Quasimodo because he is considered an ugly monster. Nothing about Quasimodo appears normal.

I believe ridiculing and taunting Quasimodo gives the crowd a false sense of self-esteem and confidence. Participating with the crowd allows even the ugliest and dumbest person to feel normal in relation to him.

Doing what everyone else is doing, even when it’s harmful, can make us feel like we belong. Aligning with the crowd can make it feel like our insufficiencies melt away. Here lies the power, the allure, of the crowd.

Responding to the monster in this way brings out the monster in us. We can be one monster of many who harm others to feel secure about ourselves. And as we become unable to recognize others’ suffering, the monster in us grows.

Or we can take the other route, which is Esmeralda’s approach. I think Merson paints Esmeralda as the personification of compassion. Is this why she is painted so beautifully compared to everyone else? As the personification of compassion, Esmeralda is the most beautiful of them all and is different from them all, for it is compassion—the very thing that gives the scene its moral power—that the crowd lacks.

Esmeralda’s elegant blue dress and ornate adornment set her apart from the crowd’s plain gray and brown clothing. Ironically, the crowd is dressed like the monster it berates. Is Merson suggesting that the crowd is more like a monster than it realizes?

Esmeralda is not only dressed differently than the crowd but also behaving

differently. The crowd is chaotic and unruly while she is calm, poised, and seems considerate. She recognizes her attacker’s suffering and chooses to help him.

She exercises her freedom to act morally different from the crowd. She chooses to be compassionate.

## The Content of Our Character

Just because Quasimodo looks like a monster doesn’t mean he is one. What determines whether or not he is a monster is not the appearance of his form but the content of his character.

The people may look normal, but they are monstrous because they attack and harm a living thing to feel good about themselves. This is the opposite of compassion.

Quasimodo, however, comes to love Esmeralda, the personification of compassion. Her compassion has such an impact on him that he’ll risk his life to defend her honor. His new love for compassion makes him anything but a monster.

Interestingly enough, Quasimodo and Esmeralda are positioned higher than the crowd. Does this suggest that there are levels of morality, that we can elevate our spirit if the content of our character aligns with compassion?

Do we have the courage to resist and align with the crowd when their actions serve only to harm?

Are we willing to address any monsters that may be lurking in our spirit so that the content of our character is anything but monstrous? Are we able to alter others’ lives with compassionate acts? Are we ready to love compassion and defend its honor?

*The traditional arts often contain spiritual representations and symbols the meanings of which can be lost to our modern minds. In our series “Reaching Within: What Traditional Art Offers the Heart,” we interpret visual arts in ways that may be morally insightful for us today. We do not assume to provide absolute answers to questions generations have wrestled with, but hope that our questions will inspire a reflective journey toward our becoming more authentic, compassionate, and courageous human beings.*

*Eric Bess is a practicing representational artist and is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts (IDSVA).*

MUSIC

# First Prize Winner in National Composer’s Competition Is the People’s Choice

An interview with composer and pianist Arseniy Kharitonov

RAYMOND BEEGLE

I have observed over the years that when institutions like the New York Philharmonic present a world premiere, the work is placed somewhere in the middle of a concert, for the good reason that when it is programmed last, the audience usually bolts for the door.

New “classical” music is not popular in the concert halls. It is, as a rule, incomprehensible and prompts a long, equally incomprehensible explanation in the program notes. One has come to suspect that the composer is not speaking from the heart, not telling the truth, but trying to create a sensation, to shock us, to impress us with his brilliance and originality. The old truism comes to mind that people say many stupid things when their sole motivation is to say something original.

It is refreshing to hear, therefore, that for the annual Modern Tonal Academic Music Fest Competition, held by Russian organization (STAM), the final judge is the audience rather than a panel of scholars and experts with their attendant prejudices and political agendas.

STAM is an institution devoted to supporting and encouraging serious contemporary music and musicians by presenting lectures and concerts throughout the various republics of Russia, and by hosting an annual competition for composers.

## The Winner

Arseniy Kharitonov, a citizen of both the United States and the Russian Federation, is the recent winner of the competition’s first prize. The young composer is already an established pianist with a distinguished international career, and his music is rooted in tradition, rich in melodic content, and harmonically adventuresome. It is honest, it has much to say, it has a voice of its own, and needs no explanatory notes in the program.

Kharitonov’s compositions have not gone unnoticed in the United States. Derek Bermel, artistic director of the American Composers Orchestra (ACO), wrote: “I especially admired the harmonic chops, which is rare these days among American composers. You can hear the sparkle and edge of Shostakovich and Prokofiev, but its heart seems to be in the lyricism of Rachmaninoff. It was a real pleasure to hear this dynamic work.”

Bermel’s institution, the ACO, in many ways a sister society to STAM, is dedicated to the performance and promotion of orchestral music by American composers throughout the United States. It hosts an annual competition as well, and the laureate concert is held in New York’s fabled Carnegie Hall.

## Inside the Creative Mind of Arseniy Kharitonov

One wonders, of course, about the mind of a composer: Where does his music come from? What comes first? Rhythm? Melody? Mood?

Kharitonov told me in a telephone conversation: “What comes first is a necessity. A desire to create. In my particular case, the way I get musical ideas is by sheer chance, by improvising at the piano, finding, and writing things down. Most often it results in nothing. Though, in my hierarchy of musical elements, first comes the melody. I consider music to be faceless if there is no melody. Thus, like an entomologist who collects butterflies, I collect melodies that come to my mind.”

Such a remarkable answer produced more questions. I asked him about Mozart’s manner of composing as opposed to Beethoven’s. Mozart simply heard an entire work in his mind and, when it was complete, wrote it down; Beethoven worked sometimes for years on a symphony, and on other pieces simultaneously. What about Arseniy Kharitonov?

“I don’t start working on any particular piece until I figure out the outline. Yet, I’m not comparing myself to Mozart. Because I am very doubtful by nature, I nurture the approximate outline in my head as much as possible before I grab a pencil. And then comes the torturous, obsessive process of endless rewriting, scratching, erasing,” he said.

## Music Is About Something

Beethoven once asked a friend what came to his mind when hearing a passage in a particular string quartet. The friend re-



(Above) Arseniy Kharitonov performs at Carnegie Hall in New York on May 20, 2016.



“**I do not think that composers set their music as a moral compass intentionally. It becomes one if the composer reflects profoundly upon the world he lives in.**”

Arseniy Kharitonov

plied, “It pictured for me the parting of two lovers.” Beethoven responded, “Good! I thought of the burial scene from Romeo and Juliet!” This seems to mean that music is about something.

I asked Kharitonov what his winning composition was about. He answered: “Unlike Beethoven who was the mouthpiece of this universe and whose music is the objective truth, I am yet another example of subjective reality: my thoughts and my shadows. And the music that I write is the result of my unconscious and my past. I try not to fantasize and show off my intelligence in the music that I compose; I don’t want it to sound pretentious. Rather, I trust my impulses. And as I look back, all I see is a musical self-portrait, whether I like it or not. At least, I am being honest.”

## Characteristically Slavic in temperament and style, the transition from the ways of his great predecessors is clear and, one may add, hopeful.

Until the first decades of the 20th century, classical tradition was organic in its growth. One sees the development of Mozart from Bach, of Beethoven from Haydn, and so on. What does the sudden explosion of revolutionary rather than evolutionary thought beginning with Arnold Schönberg’s rejection of our musical vocabulary in his atonal music, or the “wrong note” school of Elliott Carter and Carl Ruggles, or the coffeepot and airplane motor music of John Cage and George Antheil, or the hypnotic “minimalism” of Philip Glass and Stephen Reich?

“There was always a relay of traditions from composer to composer,” Kharitonov said. “Buxtehude-Bach-Mozart-Beethoven-Schumann-Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff-Prokofiev, etc., to name at least one definite line. It seems to me that the

end of the 19th, beginning of 20th centuries is the peak of musical evolution—the so-called Late Romanticism/Symbolism.

“And then comes something that is rather usual to humankind—the necessity for change. This necessity was always there; otherwise, composers would still be working in the traditions of 12th-century Ars Antiqua, and all the periods and styles such as Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, and Romanticism would not exist.

“The only difference is that with all those earlier epochs, music style was developing, flourishing, adopting new laws, and getting more sophisticated for the sake of beauty and expression. Then we have the peak. When nothing could be added but change is still necessary, the artists started to simplify forms and refuse the accumulated artistic traditions. It is very noticeable in visual arts with reductions (refusals) of the law of composition, the law of perspective, etc. Malevich and his “Black Square” comes to mind as a manifest to canceling everything that was before and yet giving nothing as a replacement.”

“Similar things started to happen in music,” he said.

“Composers started to strip their music of harmonies, melody, form, etc. Now, composers seem mostly interested in simply exploring timbre. The necessity of change was fueled by an ambition to be different. All those composers you named, they have different values than Monteverdi, Schubert, or Chopin.

“Though, I want to clarify that I don’t ignore the music of the 20th and 21st century, and I am for change as well, as it is a paradigm of human development. And I do not consider myself a retrograde either, yet I am sure all these composers you’ve mentioned would label me as one.

“In my defense, as a pianist I can state that today’s audience relates to the music by Rachmaninoff, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms way better than to any music of so-called contemporary composers. Perhaps they aren’t contemporary then!”

Finally, I asked about the responsibility of the creator to his society. Does music have a moral element? A moral responsibility? His reply: “I do not think that composers set their music as a moral compass intentionally. It becomes one if the composer reflects profoundly upon the world he lives in.”

## The Winning Composition

A discerning audience, not a group of “experts,” awarded first prize to Arseniy Kharitonov for his “Four Vignettes Op. 49 for Four Violins.” The audience deemed the composition “good.” And what does that mean? Author Virginia Woolf, who criticized the loss of culture in the 20th century, pronounced a particular work “good” because “it expanded the mind, and purified the heart.”

Of course, structural virtuosity is important, and Kharitonov certainly has that, but most important is the effect on the mind and heart of the listener. This suite of four musical sketches does indeed expand the mind and purify the heart. It is imaginative and truthful.

Characteristically Slavic in temperament and style, the transition from the ways of his great predecessors is clear and, one may add, hopeful. The sharp edges of Shostakovich and Prokofiev are somewhat smoothed, their anxious tone becomes quieted, irony disappears, driving rhythms are less desperate, and glacial aloofness is warmed into something eminently human and approachable.

The more remote 19th-century past is very much alive in this composition as well. The lyrical third movement, its grace and beauty, proves that there are still beautiful melodies to be drawn from our major and minor scales, that there are still apples to be picked from the tree. How remarkable, wonderful, and hopeful it is to find such a musical achievement, so orderly, so vigorous, so friendly, born into our not-so-orderly, not-so-friendly world. Arseniy Kharitonov has won a prize, and our tradition has scored a victory.

*Raymond Beegle has performed as a collaborative pianist in the major concert halls of the United States, Europe, and South America; has written for The Opera Quarterly, Classical Voice, Fanfare Magazine, Classic Record Collector (UK), and the New York Observer.*

*Beegle has served on the faculty of The State University of New York–Stony Brook, The Music Academy of the West, and The American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria. He has taught in the chamber music division of The Manhattan School of Music for the past 28 years.*

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## POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

# Don't Give Up on Your Lofty Dreams Says Heartwarming Biopic

IAN KANE

I was hesitant to watch what I'd assumed was going to be yet another feel-good film that would prove smarmy and inauthentic. Luckily, director Joe Johnston's "October Sky" was the perfect antidote for my cinematic pessimism. Unlike many of the genre's films, it transcends clichés due to powerful performances, a gritty atmosphere, and great storytelling.

Based on the memoirs of scientist Homer Hadley Hickam Jr. from his 1998 book "Rocket Boys" (which was adapted into a screenplay by Lewis Colick of "Ghosts of Mississippi" and "Ladder 49" fame), the film opens in the modest mining town of Coalwood, West Virginia. Here, besides the rare instance of earning a football scholarship, the only other future for young men is to work deep in the local mine where day-to-day survival is an unsure affair.

It's the 1950s and the Russians recently launched Sputnik, the Earth's first artificial satellite, which kicked off the "Space Age." The satellite can be viewed at certain times of the night as it flies around the planet at incredible speeds.

**You can practically feel the omnipresent coal dust choking out any dreams that its inhabitants have for their futures.**

One such evening, a teenager named Homer Hickam (Jake Gyllenhaal) catches a glimpse of Sputnik as it flies by in the night sky. He becomes fascinated by it and convinces his three young buddies, Quentin (Chris Owen), Roy Lee (William Lee Scott), and O'Dell (Chad Lindberg), to construct

homemade rockets out of whatever materials they can assemble.

Whereas Homer's older brother Jim (Scott Thomas) is a football star and the apple of his father's eye, Homer's obsession with rocketry raises the ire of his hardworking coal miner father, John (Chris Cooper). Their relationship isn't helped by the fact that one of the boys' rockets destroys part of their home's white picket fence, and later flies into the main mining yard and nearly hits some of the employees.

Things between the father and son become so tense that one stormy night, John finds Homer's rocket-building equipment in their cellar and tosses everything outside into the rain-soaked yard. This causes Homer and his friends to hike eight miles out of town where they discover a large, wide open plain that will be the perfect spot to launch future rockets. They erect a makeshift sign reading "Coalwood Missile Agency" and presume they'll be far enough away from civilization so as not to be a nuisance any longer. Or will they?

Homer's trajectory (pun intended) is clear: He wants to follow in the footsteps of the famous German-born American aerospace engineer and space architect Wernher von Braun. The main obstacle to this goal is Homer's tough-yet-caring father, in what I could safely say is one of Chris Cooper's finest performances. You really get the sense that John is trying to keep his family intact. The local mine is at risk of shutting down due to being overmined. And Homer does seem to have his head in the clouds with his lofty goals of becoming a future aerospace engineer.

In fact, besides his mother, Elsie (Natalie Canerday), and local toolmaker Ike Bykovsky (Elya Baskin), Homer's only source of inspiration is one of his teachers, Miss Riley (Laura Dern), who recognizes the spark of genius in the young man.

The filmmakers faithfully re-created the mining town of Coalwood, and you can practically feel the omnipresent coal dust



choking out any dreams that its inhabitants have for their futures.

As mentioned, Cooper gives a powerful and multifaceted performance as John, a man who is confused by his son's unconventional aspirations. Jake Gyllenhaal and Laura Dern are likewise convincing as the single-minded youth, Homer, and his staunch supporter, Miss Riley.

"October Sky" is ultimately an inspiring and heartwarming biopic piece that feels genuine instead of manipulative. Its excellent direction and cast make each scene feel relevant and worthwhile. And since it doesn't have any of the profanity or sex shenanigans associated with modern movies, it's a joy to watch with the entire family.

*Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To learn more, visit [DreamFlightEnt.com](http://DreamFlightEnt.com)*

1. A teen with a dream, Homer Hickam (Jake Gyllenhaal) and his encouraging teacher (Laura Dern), in "October Sky."

2. Two of the four "rocket boys": Quentin (Chris Owen, L) and Homer (Jake Gyllenhaal).

3. (L-R) John Hickam (Chris Cooper), wife Elsie (Natalie Canerday), and son Homer (Jake Gyllenhaal), with whom he is at odds.

### 'October Sky'

**Director**  
Joe Johnston

**Starring**  
Jake Gyllenhaal, Chris Cooper, Laura Dern

**Running Time**  
1 hour, 48 minutes

**Rated**  
PG

**Release Date**  
Feb. 19, 1999 (USA)

★★★★★

Feb 11-Mar 14

## HAPPY CHINESE NEW YEAR

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