

is a nod to Dostoyevsky) is a large and often loose account of Selin's first year of college. Over the course of the book, she falls in love with an older math student and eventually follows him to Hungary, where she teaches English in a village. (Among her responsibilities: judging a Hungarian leg contest.) It's animated by a voice that seems at once very much Batuman's own and fully recognizable to any student who enters Harvard Yard: overwise yet totally naive. At the opening of the book, Selin sets up an Internet

connection. "What do we do with this, hang ourselves?" I asked, holding up the Ethernet cable. 'You plug it into the wall,' the girl said."

Batuman has lamented, in criticism for *N+1* and *The London Review of Books*, that contemporary fiction is too often artificially concise and whittled down,

while "the ghosts of deleted paragraphs rattle their chains from the margins." The novel, she thinks, should contain seemingly inconsequential bits of daily existence: "all the irrelevant garbage, the effort to redeem that garbage, to integrate it into Life Itself, to redraw the boundaries of Life Itself." And so *The Idiot*, appropriately, has a delight-

ful fullness, going from what Selin is reading—Nabokov's lectures, *Bleak House*, Epictetus—to varied details about undergraduate life: the food at Annenberg, passages from a beginner Russian textbook, the conversations of other students. (In an art seminar called "Constructed Worlds," for example, "One student had constructed a world that was just *Star Wars*. It was completely identical to *Star Wars*, only she had given all the characters old Welsh names.")

Partly this fullness results from the book's creation process. By the time she got to Harvard, Batuman knew she wanted to be a writer, and was constantly writing everything down in spiral notebooks "to a very weird degree." Much of this material, including many emails she sent, made it into the novel. But she didn't yet know how to write for others, trying instead to cram dozens of points onto the page. "It didn't occur to me that I could say all the things I wanted to say in a way that anyone could understand." She credits her senior tutorial in Russian literature for teaching her how to write something someone might actually read. Her professor made writing "a situation of kindness," where the reader wants to have a good time—and so does the writer.

Batuman is now working on a book about Turkey, as well as a sequel to *The Idiot*. "I had this idea," she says, "that writing autobiographical fiction was cheating in some way, or it was less creative." But there's a problem-solving element to writing about oneself, she

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continues, when you realize that what gets you from one point to another in the text is an experience of your life you hadn't ever thought of before. During such moments of consonance between experience and literature, "It feels that reality is supporting you.... You're being carried on a cushion of the world as it is," she says. "It's the most exciting part of reading, too": noticing something you hadn't been aware of before, and wouldn't have thought could be described.

Harmonic Progression

Composer Robert Kyr embraces peace, love, and nature.

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

THERE ARE so many places to begin with composer Robert Kyr. Like here: "I grew up in a family where the scars of war were very much with us," he says. His father had served in the South Pacific in World War II; his uncle had lost a leg in the Italian theater. And his mother, working for the Red Cross, had been one of the first to see the death camps after they were liberated. As an administrative assistant to the American military, she walked through room after room with officers, taking shorthand on the atrocities that

had happened in each one. Then she wrote up a classified report and never talked about it again, until one day out of the blue when her son was 16. "She spoke for about 20 minutes and then fell silent, and we sat there for what felt like an eternity," Kyr, JF '81, Ph.D. '89, remembers. "And then she said, 'I just had to tell you, because I thought that someday you might do something with this.'"

Or one could begin in 1969, when the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught fire. Sparks from a passing train ignited oil-slicked floating debris, and smoke and

flames engulfed the water. It wasn't the first fire on the Cuyahoga—a polluted river in an industrial city—but it was the most publicized, and for Kyr, a high-school junior on the West Side who had recently joined a student environmental-outreach group, it was "a five-alarm bell."

Or maybe here is the place to begin: with Kyr at the piano. He'd been banging on the keys since he was two or three, and began taking lessons—and composing songs—at 10. At age 11, he started playing pieces from *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach*, a collection of music that the Baroque master wrote for his wife. "The first time I heard Bach was through playing those little pieces and his 15 two-part inventions," Kyr says. "I kept returning to them again and again because they spoke to me in a way that no other music ever had." Or ever would.

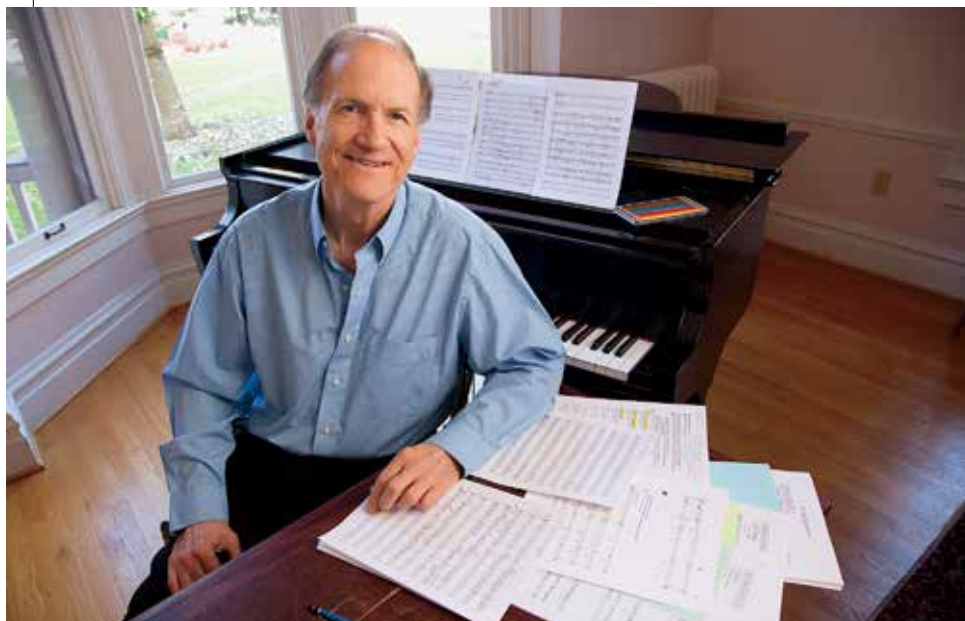
Now 64 and a professor of composition

and theory at the University of Oregon, Kyr is one of the most prolific composers of his generation. Some days he spends as many as 14 hours composing (it helps that he sleeps only four hours a night). He's written 12 symphonies, three chamber symphonies, three violin concerti, a piano concerto, and too many choral works to count: cantatas, oratorios, a passion. Patient, tender, emotionally complex, and easily approachable, his music draws on Western medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque styles—Bach is his lodestar—as well as Eastern traditions, especially the Balinese gamelan.

His oeuvre orbits broad themes planted deep since childhood: peacemaking, environmental concerns, love, compassion, forgiveness. That long-ago conversation with his mother influenced his 2012 work “The Unutterable,” which featured a narration of Paul Celan's poem “Death Fugue” as part of a three-month Holocaust remembrance project in Austin. Elsewhere, he has integrated testimony from witnesses and survivors of violence: the 2005 symphony “Ah Nagasaki: Ashes into Light,” sung in both Japanese and English, commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of the atomic bombing with performances in Nagasaki and its American sister city, St. Paul. More recently, “Waging Peace,” a five-movement work, emerged from 400 pages of written accounts by residents of Baton Rouge, a city torn by crime and conflict.

Kyr's home in Eugene sits 1,000 feet up from the valley floor, surrounded by 70-foot trees.

Before writing anything down, Robert Kyr composes his works—music and text—“internally,” he says, from start to finish.



Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Douglas R. Bunker asks if anyone can offer a citable source for a definition of power, attributed to Stalin, as the “strategic or intelligent use of cruelty.”

“Union” (January-February). Hiller Zobel noted that in the U.S. Constitution, “Union” appears in the preamble (“...a more perfect union...”) and in Article II, section 3 (“...information of the state of the Union...”), among other places. (Article VI, section 6, regarding the new nation's prior debts, refers to “the Confederation” among the states existing before

ratification of the Constitution.) Bernard Witlieb recommended examples from *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles* (1946), edited by Mitford M. Mathews, including, from the *Fredericksburg Virginia Herald* (February 1829): “To the purpose of party leaders, intending to accomplish the dissolution of the Union and a new Confederacy....”

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138 or via email to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.

Deer roam the yard and hawks fly overhead. “I live in a forest,” he says. “When I look out the window, I don't see neighbors. The architecture of the Pacific Northwest is trees.” Many of his works celebrate nature and call for its preservation. For his 2007 oratorio, “A Time For Life,” he wrote a choral text weaving Native American prayers, songs, and chants with Eastern Orthodox hymns and Old Testament verses; the symphony “Yosemite: Journey into Light” combined photographs and video of the national park with Kyr's music.

As much as anything else, Kyr's work is guided by spiritual exploration. His family didn't attend church—his father was raised

Catholic, his mother Lutheran—but when his parents died in 1981, he found himself exploring religions from around the world. “I discovered that I'm interfaith,” he says. “I celebrate with people of all faith backgrounds.” Since 1993 he has spent about eight weeks each year at Christ in the Desert Monastery, a Benedictine abbey in the gorgeous and remote wilderness of a New Mexico mesa canyon: “My spiritual home.” During solitary hikes along the Chama River, he composes music “internally” and then returns to the monastery to write deep into the night. There he created one of his most spiritually searching works, “Songs of the Soul,” a 47-minute cantata venerating and responding to music by Bach and three Renaissance composers. Its companion cantata, recorded by the Grammy-winning vocal ensemble *Conspirare*, is “The Cloud of Unknowing,” which takes its title and part of its text from a fourteenth-century guide to contemplative prayer.

This past year, he helped launch the Harvard Chorus New Music Initiative, a program for undergraduates. He mentored seven students through a seven-month process that





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Harvard Square as it was, 1962

Building Old Cambridge, by Susan E. Maycock and Charles M. Sullivan, M.C.P. '70 (MIT, \$49.95). From the Cambridge Historical Commission's survey director and executive director comes a massive, absorbing, and enthrallingly illustrated volume on the community's evolution—full of enlightenments even before chapter 10, on the “Development of Harvard University.”

Matters strategic: **The Imagineers of War**, by Sharon Weinberger, RI '16 (Knopf, \$30), is a comprehensive account of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—the folks who brought you the Internet, drones, and self-driving-car technology, plus some terrible ideas, some of them unfortunately implemented. **The Chessboard and the Web**, by Anne-Marie Slaughter, J.D. '85 (Yale, \$26), lays out the case for moving beyond a chess image of international relations (the United States vs. Iran, say) toward a “playbook for strategies of connection” (U.S. interest in Syria not as a strategic concern itself, but as a destabilizing source of refugees); it would be interesting to see that applied to coming trade confrontations with China. The U.S. negotiators might want to pack **The Girl at the Baggage Claim: Explaining the East-West Culture Gap**, by Gish Jen '77, RI '02 (Knopf, \$26.95), who turns from fiction to cultural analysis to sort out the roots of “so much of what mystifies us”—needlessly—“about the East.”

ended with a performance of their finished musical works by a professional chorus, the Antioch Chamber Ensemble. (He is mentoring a new group this spring.) He also led a workshop for Radcliffe Choral Society and Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum members that culminated with the creation of “In the Name of Music,” which was premiered in November at Sanders Theatre. “I wanted to engage the singers in the process of writing the text, so that they would ultimately be singing about a theme that deeply concerns

them,” Kyr says. When he asked them what issues concerned them most, their answers had a common thread: the transformative power of music.

It's a common thread for him, too. He sees music as a form of storytelling. At the end of a long interview comes a reference to Bach's “St. Matthew Passion,” a soaring, opera-like oratorio. “For me,” he says, “it expresses how each member of the human family experiences the suffering of the passion in his or her own way, regardless of one's faith background.” The story Bach was telling was one with human resonance: suffering and loss, decisions that relate to our own life and death. “Bach takes us on the journey of the passion, which reflects our personal relationship to suffering, and ultimately, the triumph of life over death.”

Holding Emotion “At an Observer's Distance”

Elizabeth Bishop's enduring privacy

by ADAM KIRSCH

BY THE TIME Elizabeth Bishop began to teach at Harvard, in 1970, she was nearing the end of an exceptionally brilliant career in American poetry. Though she published little—just four collections, a total of about 100 poems—her work earned the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She was regarded as a master by poets as different as Marianne Moore, her early mentor, and Robert Lowell '39, her close friend and longtime correspondent. It was Lowell who brought Bishop to Harvard, to take over his creative writing classes while he lived in England (see “The Brahmin Rebel,” May-June 2004, page 39). But while Bishop belonged to the first generation of American poets to make their living in the academy, she herself had spent almost no time in the classroom, and she didn't feel at home there. Neither her reserved personality nor her extremely high standards made her a natural teacher, and the enrollment in

her classes was usually small. Megan Marshall '77, RI '07, who took Bishop's class in 1976, recalls that the great poet often wore “a pained look”: “Miss Bishop really did seem to wish she wasn't there.”

If Bishop had known that, 40 years later, Marshall would write a biography—*Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast*—she would probably have been still less enthusiastic. Bishop belonged to a poetic generation that revealed more about itself in verse than any earlier poets had thought possible, or necessary. “Confessional” poetry, as the school of Lowell and Anne Sexton came to be known, delighted in putting as much fact as possible on the page, especially facts that were painful or shameful. “Yet why not say what happened?” Lowell asked in his poem “Epilogue,” and so he did—writing about his childhood,

Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast, by Megan Marshall (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$30)