

The golden pianist

A song of freedom.

I opt for a table at the back of the club, like always. Its wooden surface is decorated with layers of graffiti, much of which is probably older than I am. Running my fingers over the grooves, I admire it for its honest expression. So unlike the world today. A giggling group of patrons passes through the dark curtain separating the stage from the gallery. Here there are hundreds of paintings and sculptures that are found nowhere else, some because of their illegal subject matter, most because they were created by an artificial intelligence. I myself have little interest in the art; I am here for the music, and the company of like minds.

I look to my right to see my friend Carlo ascending the stairs from the library. He spends much of his time browsing the collection of forbidden works, for enjoyment and inspiration. He is a composer of dramas, but I know he has a deeper dream: to perform in those plays himself, not in the hidden basements and safe houses of the Freedom of Expression Society, but in a real theatre with velvet ropes and revolving glass doors. One look at his glinting steel fingers reminds me that that will never happen.

He sits in the chair next to me. "Good evening, Jesse," he says, adding the double-eye blink that I have come to recognize as his way of smiling; his face is incapable of the action.

"It isn't it?" I smile back.

Carlo is, as a rule, reserved around humans, a rule that he breaks with me. Trusting the wrong human has dire consequences, so his friendship is a mark of great confidence. I wear it proudly, like a badge of honour. Our conversation has hardly started when the blast of a trumpet sets the air alight with a blazing jazz number. My toes tap in time as I let myself get lost in the pure jazz-joy being pumped into the atmosphere. The blended group of humans and robots fills the stage completely, rubbing

elbows as they play. Their gaudy costumes are decorated with feathers and glitter, with colours as loud as their music. This group specializes in jostling tunes, by the time their set is over, half of the patrons have taken to the dance floor. As the last notes fade they are drowned out by the cheering of the elated crowd, no one here cares if the musicians are biotic or silicate.

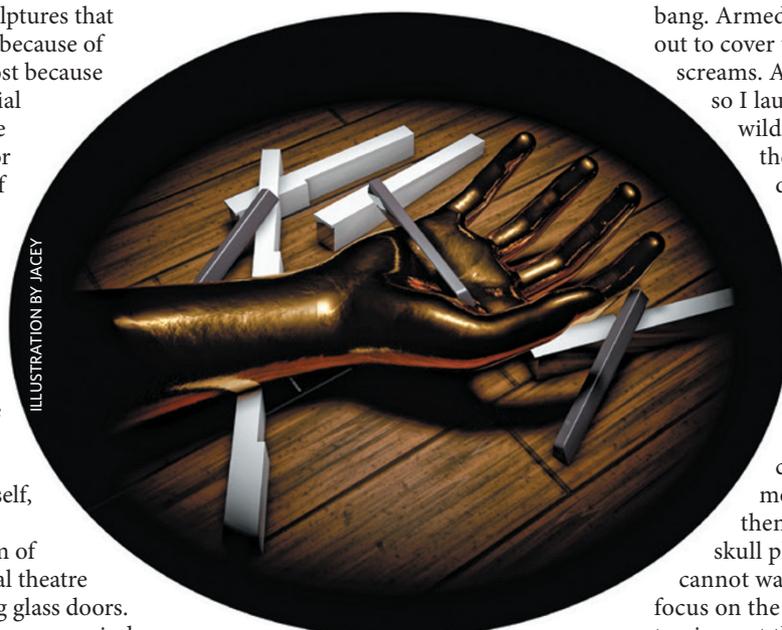


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The next performer takes the stage without the flourish and celebration of the last group. The lone robot moves purposefully, bowing to the audience then sitting on the velvet-padded piano bench. It is a new model, sleek and clean with golden flesh; the glossy grand piano looks disgracefully dull in comparison. When the room is silent it reaches for the keys. Slowly, it begins weaving a soft tune with echoes of sadness and regret. The song feels repressed like an animal trapped in a cage. It takes me over, now I am trapped, chained to a sinking anchor. It is as if I am struggling, fighting for air. At the last second, when I can take no more, the song bursts free: the animal set loose from the cage. I can breathe again.

The piece picks up then slows, again and again, washing over us like the surf. The audience is captivated. Silent. The curtain to the gallery is pulled back and the stairs to the library have filled up. We are drawn

to the music like bees to nectar, bears to the hive. We are taken to dizzying heights, like lofty clouds that float over mountains; and into terrifying darkness, as though we would never see light again. I have never experienced anything so real, or beautiful. The golden pianist has immersed us in its soul.

The club door explodes with a massive bang. Armed peace officers rush in, fanning out to cover the entire crowd. Someone screams. A trio is coming in our direction so I launch myself at them, flailing wildly. If they are busy with me they can't get Carlo. The piano does not stop. The song picks up speed; it is as if we are trapped in the vortex of a tornado.

My desperation is no match for their honed precision. One of the officers throws me to the ground, pinning me there and pressing my face into the concrete. I am helpless as two more slam Carlo into a table, then to the floor. They pull off his skull plate. I squeeze my eyes shut. I cannot watch him be deactivated. I try to focus on the piano but still I can hear them tearing out the circuitry that is his brain. My friend is dead, without ever having been free to live. As a human, my presence here will go unpunished; facilitating AI creativity is not a crime. It cannot be. The legal definition of personhood, the dividing line, is the ability to feel, love and be creative. This line keeps them separate. This lie keeps them slaves.

The pianist still plays, it has become a whirling dervish, delivering a melody impossibly fast and yet immensely nuanced. My heart pounds in my ears. Suddenly the music stops. The officers have reached the stage. My tears fall on the unyielding concrete; tears for Carlo, tears for the golden pianist, but mostly tears for the world that refuses to hear them. □

LYSSA L. MARTIN is currently a graduate student in molecular biology and biochemistry, although by the time this is published she will have graduated and be on to whatever is next.

➔ NATURE.COM
Follow Futures:
@NatureFutures
go.nature.com/
mtoodm

of humans and robots fills the stage completely, rubbing