

The Tuning

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV16

Being the working notebook of Emrys Morne, piano tuner, of Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire. Circuit entries, March–April 1819.

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3 March 1819. St Teilo's Church, Llandeilo. The Reverend David Pryce-Jones.

Broadwood square, five and a half octaves, the mahogany case. In fair order. The Reverend maintains the instrument better than most—keeps it covered, keeps the room dry, does not allow the children to pound the upper register as if they were driving nails. I have tuned this piano four times yearly since 1813 and it rewards the attention.

Method as standard. Fork struck, A above middle C, held to the ear until the pitch is clean and settled. Match the unison. Listen for the beating—that slow waver between two frequencies not yet reconciled. Turn the pin a quarter, an eighth, a sixteenth of a turn. The beating slows. Slows. Stops.

When the beating stops, the interval is true. That is the whole of it. That is the entire transaction between a tuner and a string. You listen to the disagreement, and you close it, and when it is closed, silence confirms the work.

I set the temperament outward from the A in both directions, tuning fifths slightly narrow and fourths slightly wide so that every key is usable and none is pure. Equal temperament is a negotiation. Every interval surrenders a small fraction of its natural proportion so that the whole instrument can function across all twelve keys. The mathematics are precise. The compromise is universal. The trained ear hears not the surrender but the system.

The Reverend's piano responded well. I completed the work in two hours, played a scale across the full range to confirm, and noted no anomaly. He paid three shillings and asked after my eye. People always ask after the eye. The left is darker than the right—has been since birth. I tell them it is a family peculiarity and nothing more. I have never known it to be anything more.

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7 March 1819. Plas Gwyn, Carmarthen. Mrs Euphemia Tremaine.

Tomkinson square, five octaves, the rosewood case with brass inlay. Neglected. Mrs Tremaine keeps the instrument in her drawing room beside the window, where the damp reaches it in every season. Two strings broken in the upper register. I replaced them from my kit and let them settle before tuning.

The tuning itself was unremarkable until the final octave. I had set the temperament cleanly and was confirming the bass register—the lowest strings, where the wire is thickest and the pitch most felt in the chest rather than heard in the ear—when I noticed a resonance I could not account for.

It was not a pitch. Not a frequency I could match with the fork or locate on the keyboard. It persisted after I lifted the damper and allowed the string to die. It persisted after I muted all strings with my felt strip. It persisted in the silence of the room itself, as though the removal of the piano's sound had revealed a sound beneath it that the piano had been covering.

I attributed the effect to the room. Old houses carry sympathetic vibrations—stone walls, timber beams, hollow floors. A resonance that appears only when other sound is removed is not uncommon in buildings of this age. I noted it and moved on.

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12 March 1819. Castle House, Laugharne. Colonel Henry Phelps.

Clementi square, five and a half octaves, walnut case. Good condition. The Colonel is particular about his instrument and keeps it tuned to concert standard. The work was precise and uneventful through the upper and middle registers.

In the lower register I heard it again. The same resonance. Not the room this time—Castle House is a different structure entirely, stone where Mrs Tremaine's is timber-framed, and the piano sits in an interior room with no exterior wall. The resonance should not have been the same. It was the same.

I checked my fork against the second fork I carry for confirmation. Both forks agreed. The resonance was not an inaccurate reference pitch. It was not the instrument, which I had tuned correctly. It was present in the interval between

the correctly tuned string and the silence that followed it—in the space where the beating had been before I removed it.

I begin to wonder whether removing the beating uncovers something the beating had masked. This is irrational. The beating between two mistuned strings is an acoustic phenomenon—an interference pattern produced by two frequencies in near-unison. When the frequencies are brought into true unison, the interference ceases. There is nothing beneath the interference. There is only the correct pitch, and then silence.

And yet the silence, in the lower register, at Laugharne as at Carmarthen, contained something that was not silence.

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19 March 1819. High Street, Newcastle Emlyn. Dr Rhodri Morris.

A wretched instrument. German manufacture of indeterminate age, the action stiff, the hammers worn to felt stumps, three pins that would not hold tension. I told Dr Morris the piano was scarcely worth the cost of my visit and he insisted I do what I could. I did what I could.

The resonance was louder here. This confounded me, for I had expected—if the phenomenon were real and not a deficiency of my hearing—that a superior instrument would reveal more than an inferior one. The opposite obtained. In a neglected piano, the interference between strings is constant. Every note quarrels with its neighbour. When I removed even a portion of that noise, the underlying resonance emerged with proportional force, as though I had lifted a corner of carpet and found the floorboard humming.

I am now certain the phenomenon is not produced by the instruments. It is present in rooms where instruments stand, masked by the ordinary imprecision of untuned strings, by daily noise, by the thousand small sounds a house produces. It is revealed by tuning—by the removal of interference—by the creation of a silence clean enough for the ear to hear what silence contains.

I do not know what silence actually contains. I know only that it contains something, and that I have begun to hear it, and that the hearing does not diminish between appointments.

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24 March 1819. The Assembly Rooms, Llandovery.

Concert instrument. Broadwood grand, six octaves, the new iron-braced frame. Finest piano in the county. I was engaged to tune it for a recital—Mr Prosser of Brecon was to perform sonatas—and I took particular care with the temperament. Every fifth set to the correct narrow beat. Every major third confirming the equal division. I tested every interval against every other and found no fault.

The instrument was in perfect equal temperament. I sat in the empty room for some minutes afterward, as is my habit, listening to the piano settle. The new strings find their tension. The soundboard adjusts. There is a period of quiet accommodation after a tuning in which the instrument accepts the compromise imposed upon it, and this settling has always been one of the most satisfying sounds in my profession.

Today the settling did not satisfy. The piano accepted its temperament, and in the silence that followed I heard the

resonance with a clarity I had not previously experienced. Not louder, precisely. Clearer. As though my ear, across the circuit, had been recalibrating itself to the frequency—as though each tuning had trained me to hear a little further below the floor of equal temperament, and now I was hearing through the floor entirely.

The sound was not a single tone. It was a composite—a structure of frequencies layered upon one another in a pattern that bore no relation to the twelve divisions of the tempered scale. I could not name the intervals. They were not thirds or fifths or sevenths. They were not any ratio I had been taught. They were organised—I was certain of that—but the organisation followed a principle I did not recognise and could not extract from what I was hearing.

I sat in the Assembly Rooms until the caretaker came to lock the doors. I took ten drops of laudanum that evening for the headache that has accompanied every tuning since Carmarthen. The laudanum dulled the pain but not the sound. The sound persisted through medicine as it persisted through silence—patient, structural, uninterested in whether I was listening.

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1 April 1819. Llandeilo. No appointment.

I have spent the week in consideration of my situation. My ear is my livelihood. If it is failing, I am finished. But I do not believe it is failing. I believe it is improving—extending its range downward into a register I did not know existed and do not know how to close.

My tuning is as accurate as it has ever been. I tested myself against both forks and against a colleague's instrument in

Carmarthen. My pitch discrimination is precise. The pianos I tune sound correct to every ear but mine. To me, every correctly tuned piano now sounds like a door behind which something is standing—the hinges oiled, the lock engaged, and the thing behind it breathing in a register too low for anyone but the man who fitted the door to hear.

I considered consulting a physician. I decided against it. What would I report? That silence has a sound? That equal temperament is an agreement to ignore a frequency beneath every interval? That the system works because it masks something the pure ratios might reveal more starkly? No physician would know what to do with this. No physician tunes pianos.

The laudanum helps, briefly. The headaches are worse in the mornings. The sound is worse in the evenings, when the house is quiet and the fire has died and there is nothing between my ear and whatever my ear has learned to hear.

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8 April 1819. Correspondence received.

A letter from one Mr Cadwallader, identifying himself as steward of the Morne property in the hills above the Towy valley. The property has a pianoforte that has not been tuned in some years. Mr Cadwallader writes that the instrument was acquired at his recommendation and has been well maintained but neglected in the matter of tuning. He requests my attendance at my earliest convenience and offers a fee of one guinea—generous for a single instrument, even accounting for the distance.

The property is known to me by name. It is old—older than the Normans, some say, though I do not know on what

authority. I have never been engaged there before. The previous tuner, a Mr Hopkin of Llandovery, died last year. I accepted the commission and wrote to confirm the fourteenth of April.

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14 April 1819. Tŷ Morne, the property.

I shall set down what occurred today with the precision my trade demands, though precision may not be adequate to the task.

The walk from Llandeilo took three hours, following the river and then the track into the hills. The valley narrowed. The oaks thickened and then thinned as the ground rose, giving way to open hillside and a prospect of the Towy below. The property sits in a fold of the hill where two ridges meet—a natural enclosure, sheltered from the prevailing wind. The house is stone, grey-brown, older than its chimneys suggest. The walls are thicker than any domestic construction I have encountered. I placed my hand against the lintel and felt a slow vibration too deep for the ear—felt in the wrist, the palm, the fingertips that have spent their working life measuring the tension of wire.

Mr Cadwallader met me at the door. He is a tall man, precisely dressed, with a manner of formal courtesy that seems older than his face. He speaks as though every sentence has been considered well in advance of its delivery. He led me through a hallway—stone-flagged, portraits on the walls, the air cool and still—to a room at the rear of the house where the piano stood.

The instrument is a Broadwood square, rosewood case, six octaves, the iron-strung model. A good piano—better than

good. The kind of instrument one does not expect to find in a property this remote. It was dusty but undamaged. The action responded crisply. The hammers were in fair condition. The tuning had drifted considerably—a semitone flat across most of the range—but the instrument itself was sound.

I set my tools on the bench beside the piano. Fork, lever, mutes, felt strip, notebook. Mr Cadwallader took a chair near the window and opened a book. He did not leave the room. I did not ask him to. I began.

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I struck the fork. A above middle C. The tone rang clear and true in the still room, and in the instant before I brought it to the piano string, I heard the room respond. Not an echo. Not a sympathetic vibration from the walls or floor. A frequency already present in the stone that the fork's pitch had momentarily illuminated, the way a lamp carried into a dark room does not create the room but reveals what was already arranged there in the dark.

I matched the string to the fork. The beating was wide—the string a full semitone below the reference pitch. I turned the pin. The beating narrowed. Narrowed. The waver between the two frequencies slowed from a rapid flutter to a gentle pulse, the pulse of two sounds approaching agreement. I turned the pin further. The pulse slowed. Slowed.

Stopped.

And the piping began.

I use the word advisedly. It was not a tone, not a pitch, not a note I could place on any keyboard or match with any fork. It was a vibration—complex, layered, harmonically

dense—that occupied the space the beating had vacated. As though the interference between the mistuned strings had been a wall, and behind the wall something had been sounding for longer than I could fathom, and I had just removed the last brick.

I set the mute. I moved to the next string. The same sequence: beating, correction, the beating slowing and stopping, and beneath the stopped beating the piping, clearer now, as though each correctly tuned string removed another layer of masking. I was not adding sound to the room. I was subtracting the sounds that had been covering something already in the room. Every correction I made to the instrument made the instrument more transparent—more acoustically invisible—and through that transparency, the piping poured.

By the time I had set the temperament across the middle octave, the sound was inescapable. It filled the room the way water fills a vessel—not from any single direction but from the substance of the space itself. The stone walls were conducting it. The floor was conducting it. The piano, now correctly tuned, was no longer masking it. The instrument sat in the sound like a window left open in a storm, and through the window came a wind that was not wind but frequency, structured and ancient and indifferent to the man who had opened it.

I continued. I do not know why. The professional habit is very strong. The hands know their work. The ear knows its work. The mind can be overwhelmed and the hands will still turn the pin and the ear will still listen for the beating. I continued through the bass register, where the sound deepened into my sternum, my teeth, the bones of my skull. I continued through the treble, where the upper partials

emerged—a shimmer of high harmonics that bore no relation to the overtone series of any vibrating string. The sound had structure: partials, fundamentals, a spectral envelope as complex as any orchestral chord. But the ratios were wrong. Not wrong as a mistuned string is wrong—wrong as a language is wrong to a man who does not speak it. Organised. Coherent. Alien to every system of tuning I have been taught or have taught myself.

Mr Cadwallader turned a page of his book. He showed no sign of hearing what I heard. He showed no sign of surprise, or discomfort, or curiosity. He turned the page the way a man turns a page when he has been reading in this room for a very long time and the sound in the room is as familiar to him as the sound of his own breathing.

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I completed the tuning. Every string in equal temperament. The instrument was as precisely tuned as any I have produced in sixteen years of practice. I played a C major chord and heard the chord, and beneath the chord the piping, and beneath the piping nothing—not silence, but the absence of any further floor. The frequency went down, and down, and there was no bottom. It was not a sound that had begun and would end. It had always been sounding—a vibration as old as the stone, as the hill, as the substrate beneath the valley—and equal temperament, with its elegant compromise and its twelve negotiated intervals, was a system built over it the way a floor is built over a cellar. I had spent my career maintaining the floor without knowing what it covered.

I closed the lid of the piano. I set down my lever. I placed my hands flat on the rosewood case and felt the instrument vibrating with a frequency it was not producing. The strings

were still. The soundboard was still. The vibration came from below—through the legs of the piano, through the stone floor, through the foundations of the house, from a depth that my hands could feel and my ear could hear and my mind could not measure.

Mr Cadwallader closed his book and stood. He said the instrument sounded excellent. He said he had not heard it so well tuned in the years since Mr Hopkin's last visit. He said it with the satisfaction of a man who has tested a tool and found it adequate.

'You have a particular ear, Mr Morne,' he said. He was looking at my left eye. He had been looking at my left eye, I realised, at intervals throughout the afternoon—quick, assessing glances that I had taken for ordinary curiosity about the heterochromia. They were not ordinary curiosity. They were inventory. 'I trust you will return for the next tuning. The instrument requires attention every six months at minimum. In this house, the pitch drifts rather more quickly than one might expect.'

I asked what was beneath the house. I could not help the question. My professionalism could not contain it.

He said: 'Stone. The house is built on stone. The cellars extend some way below the current foundations.' He paused. 'The property is old, Mr Morne. There are chambers below the house that are older than the house itself. The sound you are hearing—and I observe that you are hearing it—is the sound the stone makes. It has always made this sound. You are simply the first tuner whose ear has been precise enough to hear through the instrument.'

He paid me one guinea and walked me to the door. The afternoon light fell across the valley in long bands. I placed

my hat on my head, my tools in my bag, and walked down the track toward Llandeilo, and with every step the sound diminished, and with every step it did not diminish enough. By the time I reached the river I understood that I was not walking away from the source. I was carrying it in the instrument I could not set down: my ear, calibrated by sixteen years of professional tuning to hear through every interference pattern to the clean signal beneath. And beneath the clean signal was this, and this would not stop, and there was nothing to tune it against.

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15 April 1819. Llandeilo. Private review of working notes.

I have examined my notebook from yesterday's tuning at Tŷ Morne. The entries are in my hand. The corrections I recorded are accurate—I verified each against my fork and my recollection of the work. The pin adjustments, the string tensions, the interval checks—all consistent with standard practice.

But there are additional notations. Small marks in the margins beside certain corrections. Accents, sharps, naturals—musical shorthand I did not consciously write. My hand was recording the corrections I intended while also recording something I did not intend. The marginal notations, read in sequence, do not describe the temperament I set. They describe the intervals beneath the temperament—the piping, transcribed through the closest approximation my notation could provide.

I have extracted the marginal sequence and set it down separately. It is not a melody. It is not a harmony. It does not resolve. It proceeds through intervals the tempered

scale can only approximate—quarter-tones, sixth-tones, divisions of the octave no keyboard can produce and no Western notation can precisely represent. And yet, approximated into the nearest available pitches, the sequence is playable. It is coherent. It has structure.

I have not played it. I do not need to. The sound it represents has not left my ear since the moment I removed the last beating from the last string in the room at Tŷ Morne. The notation is a record of what I am hearing now, what I heard in my sleep, what I will hear for every remaining day in which my ear continues to function with the precision that is, simultaneously, my livelihood and my affliction.

I have placed the transcription in the back of this notebook. I do not know what purpose it serves. I know only that my hand wrote it while I worked, as though the hand understood before the mind that the recording surface—the page, the pencil, the professional habit of notation—had been claimed by something older and deeper than the temperament I was there to impose.

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22 April 1819. St Teilo's Church, Llandeilo. The Reverend David Pryce-Jones.

Broadwood square, five and a half octaves, the mahogany case. The Reverend's piano, again. Quarterly tuning. I arrived at ten o'clock, set my tools, struck my fork.

The work proceeded as it has always proceeded. The fork rings. The string answers. The beating narrows to nothing. The interval settles into the compromise that the system requires, and the system holds, and the piano sounds as a

piano should sound to a man who believes that the system is sufficient.

I tuned every string. I tested every interval. The work was flawless. The Reverend played a hymn and pronounced himself satisfied. I accepted three shillings and closed my notebook and placed it in my bag beside my forks and my lever and the felt strip and the small bottle of laudanum that I now carry as routinely as I carry wire.

The piano sounds beautiful. It sounds correct. It sounds, to every ear in the parish, like an instrument in perfect tune.

To my ear it sounds like a lid.

I maintain the lid. I travel my circuit and tune the instruments and place the lid carefully over each one. Equal temperament is as elegant and functional a system as has ever been devised for making the vibration of wire bearable to the human ear. I do my work with the same precision I have always brought to it. The precision has not diminished. The faith that correct tuning produces a true account of sound is no longer available to me.

I tune the lid. Beneath it, the piping continues. It continued before the first piano was built. It will continue after the last piano is silent. It does not require the piano. It does not require the tuner. It does not require the ear. It is the sound the real makes when nothing is in the way, and equal temperament is the last thing in the way. I remove the lesser obstructions with each tuning and leave the final obstruction in place because the final obstruction is all that stands between the ear and a frequency that has no floor and no ceiling and no interest in whether it is heard.

I will return to Tŷ Morne in six months. Mr Cadwallader expects me. The pitch drifts, he said. The pitch drifts because the sound beneath the pitch pushes against the tuning the way water pushes against a dam. The piano falls out of temperament because temperament is a human imposition on a vibration that does not accept impositions. It absorbs them, erodes them, and waits for the next tuner to come and rebuild the wall and hear, while he rebuilds it, what the wall is for.

I am a piano tuner. I tune pianos. I hear what my tuning uncovers and I cover it again and move to the next instrument and do the same. The pianos of Carmarthenshire are in excellent tune. Their tuner is in excellent health. His ear has never been more precise.

His ear has heard beneath the floor of the system his profession maintains. Beneath that floor there is a sound that was sounding before the system existed, and the sound does not care about the system, or the floor, or the ear, and the ear cannot stop hearing it. The tuner goes home in the evening and sits in his chair and the fire dies and the house is quiet and the quiet is not quiet and has never been quiet and will never be quiet again.