

**“Grand Obsession” by Perri Knize (Scribner)**  
**Excerpt from “Revelation” chapter**

Michael sits before the Mason & Hamlin, and I take a seat in the farthest corner from the piano, the better to let the acoustics of the long room mix the sound before it reaches me. Then he begins *Revelation*.

At first the music sounds cacophonous, indistinct, confusing. But then my ear begins to adapt and I sense sound building under the piano’s open wing. The tone begins to pour out. Because the sound waves are consonant, they are free to continue moving and building. They do not jangle against each other and cut each other off, as they usually do in piano music. They spiral and swirl out from under the wing, launching great clouds of tone that seem to increase in density until I feel I am enclosed by a matrix of sound.

And then, bit by bit, I notice the character of the sound changing. First I hear a flute, indistinct, but then more and more clearly a flute. Then, other nonpiano sounds take shape. I hear an oboe, then a horn, then a violin. The flute soars up and down the octaves. A piccolo rings out. French horns join in, a bassoon, trumpets blast into the room in massive waves of sound.

Michael continues playing for so long, I begin to wonder when the music will end. But the longer I sit with the tone cloud, the more I realize that what I hear cannot be accounted for by what Michael is doing. He’s only playing a very small area of the keyboard, and yet the entire piano is ringing with overtones so alive, so persistent, it seems like the instrument has been turned inside out. It has a life of its own—the tone cloud reshapes and re-forms into sounds that are not from the piano. The harmonics are generating an orchestra. Either that, or Michael Harrison has ten arms.

In time, as the character of the tone cloud shape-shifts around me, I become entranced and give myself over to the experience of being wrapped inside a tonal maelstrom. The cloud becomes a hurricane, gale force winds roar about me. Finally a whole and complete orchestra is braying from beneath the hood of the instrument.

I’m struck by wonder. The instruments sound like occult manifestations, spectres emerging from the intense frequency waves of the piano’s harmonics. The tone cloud continues to evolve, building and building until the excited harmonics produce the sound of a sitar, then a tamboura, and finally, a chorus of angels’ voices, ringing and ringing through the room until I think they will blow out the walls and windows. When all the colors of the rainbow have been unleashed in a riot of sound, the tonal thundercloud finally subsides, and at last the work ends.

Michael rises from the piano, his gaunt face flushed with ecstasy.

“How did you create all those other instruments?” I ask, when I have recovered enough from my awe to speak.

“The sympathetic resonances combine and form whole new sounds, like a harmonic recipe,” he says. “They are literally recombining and producing the actual harmonics of those instruments. It’s physics.”

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