

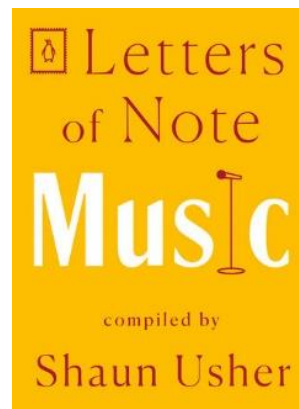


We Read - Letters of Note: Music

Compiled by Shaun Usher, 2020, Penguin Books, 100 pages

“Letters of Note was born in 2009 with the launch of lettersofnote.com, a website celebrating old fashioned correspondence that has since been visited over 100 million times.” There are also books and a website of live readings by very talented performers. All the letters in the book have introductory insights that provide perfectly succinct context for the letters and a glimpse into history.

- <https://books.lettersofnote.com/>
- <https://lettersofnote.com/>
- <https://letterslive.com/>
- Letters Live has a YouTube Channel with archives - <https://youtube.com/c/LettersLive>



This *Letters of Note* is focused on the topic of music, capturing a range of letters from composer/performers of rock, classical, jazz, folk and other styles along with letters from listeners and critics. It has 30 letters. All of these are interesting on some level. This is an easy read and would make a nice addition to one's "music" library and/or a gift to a musically appreciative friend.

<https://books.lettersofnote.com/products/letters-of-note-music>

Letters that caught my particular attention are highlighted on the next page – some funny, some tearful, some of wonder.

“My Heart Almost Stood Still” - a letter from Helen Keller to the New York Symphony Orchestra. “As I listened, with darkness and melody, shadow and sound filling the room, I could not help remembering that the great composer who poured forth such a flood of sweetness into the world was deaf like myself. I marveled at the power of his quenchless spirit by which out of his pain he wrought such joy for others - and there I sat, feeling with my hand the magnificent symphony which broke like a sea upon the silent shores of his soul and mine.” (Helen Keller) Here is a recording of actress Gillian Anderson reading the letter - <https://youtu.be/CQIWnphdx2Q>

“I am so Close Behind You” - letters between a later-in-life Leonard Cohen and a friend/muse who was passing away. Very tear-jerking exchange of a letter each. Reflecting the poetic Cohen, “Well Marianne, it’s come to this time when we are really so old our bodies are falling apart and I think I will follow you very soon. Know that I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine.” His friend received his letter just days before her passing. The letter was read to her, and she lifted her hand to reach out to Cohen. It was said that in her last hour, her companion hummed “Bird on a Wire.”

“Composer for Nitwits” - letters from Erik Satie to a music critic. These letters are over a very short period, very brief and dense with a lot of swearing by Satie. The critic sued Satie for slander. The composer spent eight days in jail as a result. The critic was also arrested for screaming obscenities in the court room. I cannot quote the letters here as it doesn’t seem appropriate to include such obscenities in *The Portland Piper*.

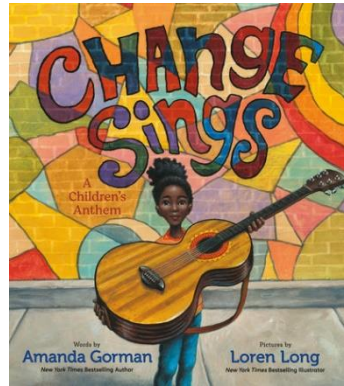
“Poppy Cock” - a letter from President Harry Truman to a music critic who gave a negative review of Margaret Truman’s vocal performance (his only daughter who was well understood as having an average singing voice). “Someday I hope to meet you. When that happens, you’ll need a new nose, a lot of beefsteak for black eyes, and perhaps a supporter below!” (Harry S. Truman)

“The Creative Urge” - a letter from John Coltrane (jazz legend) to the editor of Downbeat magazine who had sent Coltrane a copy of Aaron Copland’s book *Music and Imagination* (1951). This was Coltrane’s response, who felt the tenets were not “entirely essential or applicable to the ‘jazz’ musician.” “We are born with this feeling that just comes out no matter what conditions exist.” (John Coltrane).

“Do you Still Remember Me?” - letter from YoYo Ma to Leonard Bernstein. “Do you still remember me? Now I am ten years old. This year I learned with Prof. Leonard Rose three concertos: Saint-Seans’, Boccherini’s and Lalo’s. Last week my sister and I played in a Christmas Concert in Juilliard School.... If you have time, I would be glad to play for you.” (YoYo Ma) This is a live recording of Leonard Bernstein introducing the 7-year-old YoYo Ma for his high profile debut performance for President Kennedy - <https://youtu.be/dNvAUobb1y4>

We Read - Change Sings: A Children's Anthem

by [Amanda Gorman](#), illustrated by Loren Long, 2021 children's picture book (age range 4 - 8).



This makes a great gift for a little person in your life. It is a story of social change with music at its heart. Amanda Gorman is the young poet who read at Biden's inauguration (*The Hill We Climb*). This picture book by her and illustrated by Loren Long is a charming, and inspiring anthem, celebrating all the differences that make us whole, together, strong, and joyfully capable - an anthem indeed.

“As a young girl leads a cast of characters on a journey, they learn that they have the power to make changes - big or small - in the world, in their communities and, most importantly, in themselves.”

*I can hear change humming in its loudest, proudest song,
I don't fear change coming, and so I sing along.*



I also walk our differences,
To show we are the same.

I'm a movement that roars and springs,
There's a wave where my change sings.

We Read - The Quiet Music of Gently Falling Snow

by [Jackie Morris](#), (2016, 2020), 121 pages



This makes a beautiful gift for any artist, musician, or other special person in your life. Morris' books for children are unparalleled in their illustrative beauty. You can find them on her website. My favorite is *Song of the Golden Hare*. This book, *Quiet Music of Gently Falling Snow*, is illustrated and written by her. The illustrations are from her many years of work creating an annual illustration for [Help Musicians UK](#).

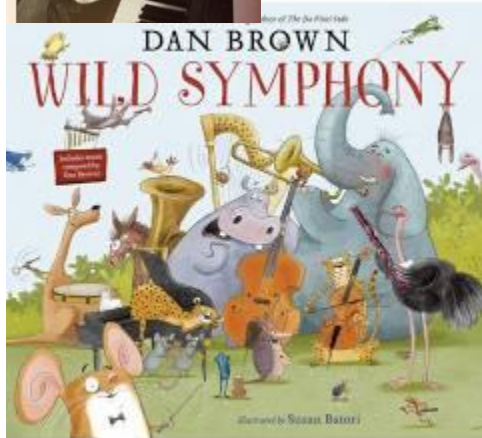
The book has 12 short stories (2-4 pages or so each) with an accompanying painting of hers. My favorite is "City of Music" - part of the painting is below. From the story Long ago, the city was found destroyed and in despair. In a moment of waiting in silent observation, a single violinist picks up her bow....



We Read - Wild Symphony



by [Dan Brown](#), illustrated by [Susan Batori](#), 2020, a children's picture book



Another great gift for the young person in your life or, in the spirit of music education among other themes, maybe even a donation to your local library or favorite children's center. The long-time, global bestselling fiction author Dan Brown (author of *The Da Vinci Code*) makes his children's book debut with this story [Wild Symphony](#), where every page is filled with rhythmic prose and/or musically inspired pictures with a moral to the moment.

Music is a kind of storytelling, and the orchestral movements in Wild Symphony combined with their accompanying poems and illustrations all work together (like a code of sorts!) to tell a story and reveal a funny or interesting side of an animal's personality. (Dan Brown)

The book includes a code to access online music he wrote. Turns out Dan Brown has loved, composed, and played an instrument since he was a child. It has always been part of his creative verve. *Long before I wrote stories, I wrote music.... My parents were both musicians and teachers.... Music was a secret sanctuary for me as a child.*



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