

## Fiction

Music of a Life  
 Andreï Makine  
 Translated from the French by Geoffrey Strachan  
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by Heather Finley

**M**USIC OF A LIFE is simple story but one that reveals much about a time and place in the past. Andreï Makine's novella begins with a scene depicting modern-day Russia's inefficiency: a station full of people waiting for a train that may be days late. Among those waiting are a prostitute, two soldiers, a young mother, and a snoozing old man. They are a sampling, survivors of the calamities of Russia's 20th-century, and an example of human endurance, man's ability to survive in near impossible circumstances.

Though the author refers to this group as "Homo Sovieticus," he does not stereotype Russians. Rather, the characters are archetypes of people everywhere, which is why this novel is immediately absorbing: we all know people who are like this woman or that man.

In the train station, in an abandoned back room, an old man pretends to be playing a dusty and abandoned piano. The man's hands are gnarled—his knuckles huge. We immediately conclude that he's an old labourer who's either drunk or senile. But then he stops this pantomime of a performance, bangs his hands onto the keys and begins to weep.

Flashback: The man's name is Alexei Berg. In 1941 he is a 21-year-old concert pianist with a brilliant future. On the afternoon before his first concert, he stops in front of a poster announcing his performance and reads his own name with anticipation. He turns to go home, but is stopped on the way by a neighbour who tells him that his equally talented and intellectual parents have been

taken away by the secret police, and that they are looking for him too. He barely makes his escape. For the next several years, Alexei survives, first by taking another man's identity, and then—ironically—by joining the Russian army as the Germans invade. He realizes that he can never perform again. It would be reckless and self-destructive.

There's nothing particularly new about such a tale. Yet the telling is beautiful. The prose is flowing, graceful and superbly translated from French by Geoffrey Strachan. The characters, their hopes, disappointments, and suffering are but a tiny and well-realized sampling of a much greater tragedy, the scale of which can only be glimpsed a few sad lives at a time.

The train station becomes a microcosm of Soviet life:

The shadowy beings around me on whom I have been focusing melt once more into a single mass. Their breathing blends together, the mutterings of nocturnal narratives are drowned out by the wheezing sounds of sleep. The murmur of the lullaby, recited rather than crooned by the young mother, reaches me simultaneously with the whispering of soldiers as they follow hard on the prostitute's heels.

The novel is brilliant. Andreï Makine effectively conveys the effects on those who witness the hallmarks of war. As Alexei leaves a hiding spot after several days of bombing raids, he is confronted with a scene of mind-numbing horror:

At the end of his second day of walking, he went down toward a river, and on the bank, at the entrance to a bridge demolished by shelling, saw a complete battlefield: dozens of soldiers to whom death had lent poses that were sometimes extremely banal, like the one of a body with its legs buckled beneath it, sometimes touching, like that of a young infantryman, his hand outstretched in an orator's gesture.

The novel's ending, while predictable, is nevertheless comforting. Peace will return, and when it does life will regain its proper rhythm. There will be joy to experience again. Andreï Makine captures this time and place with economy but with a richness that makes us think long after the book is put away.