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John Matthias

Different Kinds of Music

(A Few Things about Timothy Westmont)

A Novel

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Teapot</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music 1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont at Walloon Lake</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music 2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Bagpipe Music</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music 3</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Bear</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music 4</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and Tar Hollow Camp</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music 5</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont as Talbot Eastmore</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music: 6</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music: Epilogue</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
i.m. Joel Barkan
Westmont and the Teapot
Timothy Westmont realized that he had managed to get his hand stuck in the teapot. He had taken it down from a high shelf and, as it had not been used for several years, was trying to dust out the inside with a small cloth. Then he found that he couldn’t remove his hand. He was entertaining a representative of the neighborhood historic association after a meeting at the City Hall where he had been obliged to argue before a committee chaired by the architectural commissar, one Ms. Angela Copstoner, Ph.D., that the charges against him for having restored his front porch columns with the wrong style of capitals should be dropped. Where there had been Scamozzi capitals before the storm there were now Doric capitals…

…It had all been a very unpleasant business. When the storm blew through the neighborhood Westmont had been on the telephone with his doctor’s secretary trying to obtain information about a recent medical test. Suddenly the electricity all went off and there was a terrific crash at the front of the house. The telephone, however, continued working perfectly. The secretary was saying, “You’ll be glad to know that test turned out to be completely normal, Mr. Westmont.” But Westmont was then shouting at her through the phone as if she had been responsible for what had just happened: “A big fucking tree just fell into my house, and there’s a huge limb filling up the entire living room.” The secretary said: “Well, there’s also a big fucking stain on your chart where I’ve spilled my coffee, and the doctor would like to see you again in six months.”

Westmont put down the phone and surveyed the damage. A formerly tall limb of the large maple tree that had been standing in his front yard was now lying diagonally across his living room. All of the windows were broken and he had actually to climb over the limb in order to reach the door. A neighbor was already waiting there, concerned that Westmont might have been injured when the limb thrust itself through the window. He had not been hurt, he said. He had been on the phone in another room. The neighbor said goodbye—and to let him know if he needed any help cleaning things up.

It was a good deal more complicated than “cleaning things up.” When Westmont’s wife came home from work she was appalled at the damage and immediately announced that her long delayed trip to see her family in England would begin at once. She was on the phone to a travel agent even before Westmont could find the name of his home insurance company in the phone book. They spent the evening sitting on opposite sides of the great limb in the living room talking about the house and their future together. Sally Westmont thought they needed some time
apart. Would Westy mind a whole lot if he were left in charge of house repairs?

While his wife talked on about the things he should do when she was away, Westmont was thinking about the time when he was eight or ten and an oak tree blew down in his back yard in Columbus, Ohio. He and his cousins played for days among the dying leaves, crawling up and down the limbs that jutted out at every imaginable angle into the sky and down into the ravine at the edge of the family property. They pretended they were lost on a capsized ship within sight of an island. “Ahoy, ahoy,” they shouted. In the end, men came with saws and cut the capsized ship into firewood, which was stacked in the shed at the end of the yard. His father, who had pushed him on a swing tied to a nearly horizontal limb of the old oak—an experience that was one of Westmont’s primal memories—lugged the pieces of wood into the house for years. It kept them warm through many a winter night.

Westmont’s wife was packed and gone within forty-eight hours. The Tarkington College steno pool, where she had worked for many years in a clerical capacity, had only recently awarded her some extra vacation time. As the Brandine Construction Company already had men working to realign the front door in its frame, she left by the broken window, Westmont passing the luggage through behind her. “I’ll call you from my sister’s sometime tomorrow,” she said. Westmont sat down miserably on the limb.

During the three days it took before the limb was cut into pieces and removed from his living room, Westmont spent his evenings reading by candlelight. When leaves dropped from the smaller branches, he patiently gathered them up and put them in the trash. When his wife phoned to say she was in London, she said he sounded odd. He felt odd too. None of the downstairs lights in the house were working, he told her, and he was feeling depressed. She said she was sure the electric company would fix things up very soon. She was tired and jet-lagged and going to bed. Hanging up the phone, Westmont again surveyed his domain. He thought about the cost of all the repairs, the negotiations with insurance men. Brandine Construction had only agreed to fix the door and temporarily board up the broken windows until all of the insurance estimates were in and they could make a formal bid. On the second day, while Westmont was out shopping for food, they cut through the tree’s great trunk and took away the parts of it that had crashed through his roof and porch. Because he wasn’t home and the door was locked securely in its repaired frame and the windows were by then boarded up, they
left the limb in his living room. That night he phoned his cousin in Denver. Did Richard remember the time a great tree had fallen down in Columbus and all the cousins played on it for days pretending it was a sinking ship? Richard had no memory of this, but he hoped Westmont was well. They hadn’t seen each other for years. They really ought to get together one of these days.

II

Westmont stood before the entirely unsympathetic jury at the City Hall. He had prepared a formal statement and was determined to read it. His wife was leaving him. He had been drinking for weeks. To make matters worse, he had caught a terrible cold from one of the Brandine Company carpenters who had come back to inspect his work on the new columns and smart Doric capitals that had been installed—illegally as it turned out—at their tops. The jury was made up of three Historic Preservation Commission members, two members of the Chamber of Commerce, and his neighborhood representative on the County Council. He had, said Ms. Copstoner, the chief of the Historic Commission’s architectural police, replaced and destroyed the original Scamozzi capitals on his house in violation of the new ordinance passed on September 5, 2005. The Scamozzi capitals had been made of local mud and horsehair and dated, the Historic Commission estimated, from the time the house was built, in 1907. Westmont was responding to the charges. The work had cost him $3,000 more than the insurance company had paid Brandine and Company. The Historic Commission argued that the columns must be torn down and authentic replicas of the Scamozzis must replace the Doric capitals. In violation of a recent city ordinance, Westmont would have to pay.

Westmont first said that as far as he was concerned, the so-called Scamozzi capitals were Ionics, but they could agree to disagree on that for the moment. The point was that the story of these repairs went all the way back to the storm in the fall of 2001 when a large tree fell on the left side of the porch at 840 Clark Ave., destroying the ceramic capital on the left column (as one faced the house) and cracking all of the others. He insisted that he must foreground this date because all work on the capitals actually began as a result of the 2001 storm, and all of his subsequent work was a response to that. He understood that he would eventually have to replace all of the capitals, but could only get the insurance to
cover one at the time (the one that had crumbled into dust). This was all, of course, before the recent ordinance was passed, as was the start of follow-up work that Joseph Brandine and Co. began doing for him in July, 2004.

Immediately after the storm the entire porch roof had to be restored, beginning in November of 2001, while work on some of the porch, including the capitals, was delayed until spring of 2002. The delay was due to the difficulty of finding an appropriate capital. He could locate nothing Ionic—okay, or Scamozzi—which he could afford until Brandine came up with a ten-inch-diameter plaster replica ($274.00) which was finally installed. The plaster, however, looked nothing like the original clay and horsehair original. It appeared even from a distance to resemble a plastic imitation, a kind of Disneyland version of the real thing, and he disliked it from the beginning. (The source of the plaster imitation was Decorator's Supply Corp., 3610 South Morgan, Chicago.)

All of the other Ionics—Scamozzis—were, as he said, badly damaged. By the summer of 2004 they were porous and disintegrating, letting water into the columns which had begun to rot from the inside out. Joe Brandine began looking for replacements for these in September, 2004; the continuing work of restoration could be said to have begun at that time. Nothing that Brandine was able to find seemed to him satisfactory. He did not want to use the plaster imitations again as he had come to dislike the one previously installed. There was some urgency that the work should get under way, but still he delayed beginning, looking around until the summer of 2005.

As Westmont spoke he slowly began to notice his surroundings. The old radiators hissed and steamed like those he remembered from his elementary school house in the late 1940s. The meeting room, in fact, recalled the school’s “Room 100,” the largest gathering place in the building, where there were weekly “all school assemblies.” This room had even more clanking and steaming radiators than the big classrooms, and he remembered liking to listen to the xylophone music they played and the hiss of the ill-matching pipes and fittings. Mrs. Swales, his fourth grade teacher, would lead the singing: mostly patriotic songs, but also occasionally some rather subversive versions of what she called “folk tunes,” which were really written by living contemporaries like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, both banned from the O.S.U. campus during those years. He never wondered in fourth grade if Mrs. Swales was a leftie, but he suddenly wondered now, losing his place in his text.
Looking up, he apologized. Sitting at the table in front of him were those officials already indicated, but also an “architectural historian” brought in by Ms. Copstoner. Westmont suddenly noticed that she was quite good-looking. She gazed at him with what he took to be a sympathetic stare. But as he prepared to find his place and go on, he noticed that she had a withered right arm and a kind of baby’s hand at the end of it. He tried not to stare at it, but then realized that he had shifted his eyes to her breasts. She must not have been wearing a bra, as he could see her really quite marvelous nipples pressing against a sweater. Her business-like jacket was unbuttoned, dropping straight from her shoulders. The word “deformity” formed on his lips.

The whole of his porch, he said, was deformed. The winter of 2005 was an extremely difficult time for him. His wife had suddenly left for England after the initial storm in 2001. She never returned. Once in England, she took up with an itinerant musician and, in 2005, filed for divorce. He himself had not been well, and he was able to do only those things necessary to get by. He supposed it was at some point in the winter that he missed the discussion of the new ordinance that was passed, he believed, in April of 2005. At any rate, he was unfortunately unaware that forms needed to be filled out for the Historic Preservation Committee if he was going to make any changes in the capitals. If letters, brochures, or other information had been sent to him during this period, he was afraid he hadn’t read them. He was focused on a major upheaval in his life, and he might possibly have thrown these missives away, considering them to be “junk mail.”

While Joe Brandine continued to look for capital replacements, the existing capitals deteriorated further over the winter. Joe could not find Scamozzi capitals of the correct size. They would need to be made in two halves, in order to fit around the tops of the columns. Full Scamozzi capitals could only be installed by removing columns from the porch and jacking up the porch roof, a complicated and expensive task. In the end, still unaware of the new ordinance, he decided to replace the Scamozzi with Doric capitals. He made this decision, he said, only after looking at all of the other houses up and down Clark Avenue, and especially at the two on either side of him, both of which had Doric capitals. On July 11, 2005, Joe Brandine and Jeff Dierbeck were photographed by the Historic Preservation Society at work on…

…and he realized that the woman with the withered arm and hard nipples was asking him a question. “Mr. Westmont,” she asked. “Do you believe in history?”
“What do you mean?” said Westmont, flustered.
“Well,” she smiled, “in preserving and honoring the past.”
“Of course,” he said, “I’m a professional archivist at the college.”
“But not on the street?”
“The street?”
“Yes, on your Clark Avenue home turf where you’ve knocked down one-hundred-year-old Scamozzi capitals made of local mud and horse hair, an exceedingly rare example of typical Queen Ann ornamentation from the period around the turn of the century. In fact, they were the only surviving Scamozzis in the entire Historic District. The abacus was beautifully formed, both the fillet and the cyma reversa, and so were the volute, the embellished echinus with its unique egg-and-dart, the astragal, necking, and flute.” And she held up a photograph for all to see.
Westmont, feeling the effects of his cold and wiping his nose with a red handkerchief, hadn’t quite taken in what she said. “I don’t know about the embellished necking and eggs,” he said, “but my own point is that I knew nothing at all about the ordinance until after the work was done. Otherwise, I would, of course, have filled out the forms.
“Ah,” she said. “Ignorance of the law is no excuse.”
Westmont went back to his statement. “I was about to mention the pictures,” he said. “One of your agents arrived with a camera once the work had begun. I think his name was Dane. This Dane began taking pictures and shouted out to the carpenter that he’d better stop what he was doing. I was inside and did not hear the exchange, so I’m not certain what was said next on either side. But the carpenter got in his car and drove off. The first I learned of the encounter was when Jeffrey Dierbeck of Brandine and Co. phoned me to say that Dane and Ms. Copstoner, who had been lurking under a tree, had frightened off their carpenter by telling him he was in violation of a new city ordinance and would get a subpoena himself to appear before this body if he didn’t cease and desist. The weathered harm done to the columns”—but Westmont realized he’d said “withered arm”—and paused. “The weathered harm”—this time he said it correctly—“done to the columns had reached a point when Brandine and Dierbeck believed…”
“This is really all beside the point,” Ms. Copstoner said. “The only issue is whether you did or didn’t replace the Scamozzis with something else. We even sent you our own estimates and plenty of options available from Classic Tops and Trim as early as September 17th, 2004. We mailed them out to you twice, along with information regarding how you might jack off your roof to install them at absolutely minimum cost.”
Westmont blew his nose. He was certain now that he had a fever. And, of course, Ms. Copstoner had said jack up the roof, not jack it off, which is what he thought he had heard. He now began to ramble on about the crisis of his domestic affairs. “You don’t really get it,” he said. “My wife had left me with a tree in my house. Can you imagine how I felt? She just walked through the window and disappeared from my life. She never liked this country much. She’s English, you see. She knows a good deal more than this commission about Queen Anne style, I can tell you. Her brother-in-law’s in the House of Lords. You ought to see her beating the members silly in chest. She castles her king and prompts her bishop and knight. If she were here she’d make you ashamed of how you speak the language when even so I’d comply with it in principle. The ordinance. It’s just that the work’s already done. Moreover, since you’ve gone and introduced photographs, I’d like to point out you haven’t got any pictures of the columns before 1926, twenty years after the house was built. There have been plenty of changes over the years, including the addition of two full rooms at the back of the lot. Scambrozis could have been addled at any point before 1926 say 1925. So maybe at the start there were Dorics. Even so I did give all this a try. After the twelve-inch Tuscan column caps from Classic Stairs and Trim the stuff high-density and molded-plastic wooden at the top additions and we found the porch railing was also in a state and so to reinforce the paint the same kind of time. Please see invoice for the work already done, $2,302.00. Please see also invoice estimate for the cost of taking all that down and doing the Scamozzi over $4,353.00. I am not barbarian or even out of sympathy with general aims of the Historic Preservation Commission. But even under Period Homes website fiberglass—looking nothing like original ceramic—cost-prohibitive. I have spent a great deal of money. When I called my cousin Richard when the tree was in the house he sadly had forgotten how we played a sinking ship on all those limbs and big trunk that fell in the ravine, ahoy, I don’t suppose a single one of you has spouse who left you through a window without giving notice or have had to come before a court like this when feeling poorly and ought to be in bed.”

Westmont blew his nose and sat down, dizzy.

Ms. Copstoner said that perhaps the commission had enough information and could adjourn until the next week’s meeting.
He had walked home with the architectural historian. His house was less than a mile from the City Hall, so he hadn’t thought to drive. She too lived in the immediate neighborhood and said she was concerned about his health. Having regained his composure after he sat down in the meeting hall, Westmont thought that she was probably even more concerned about his state of mind. Anyway, he had appreciated the company. She seemed a nice enough lady in spite of her having asked him sarcastically during the interrogation if he believed in history “on the street.” And she had told him as they walked along that her name was Jennifer Armstrong.

When they reached his front door Westmont was feeling better. Maybe it had been the heat in the County-City building that had made him feel so ill and strange. Anyway, trying to make light of the issue between himself and the organization that Jennifer Armstrong worked for, he had said: “And these are the offending capitals. Doric capitals. Classically austere. I like them.” Jennifer had said she liked them too, but that her liking or disliking them had nothing to do with the case against him. He was, she laughed, “a criminal in the eyes of the committee.” As they stood rather awkwardly in front of the porch, which was still under repair, Westmont suddenly asked her if she’d like to share a pot of tea. Thanking him for the offer, Jennifer followed Westmont into his house and sat down comfortably on his sofa. At that point Westmont almost immediately made a bad mistake. He said: “And that Copstoner woman! How can you work for such an irascible person.”

“Oh, she’s not so bad,” Jennifer said. “In fact she’s my lover.” And when Westmont looked embarrassed she said: “You do look embarrassed.” She shook the fist of her little hand on her withered arm and repeated: “You do, do, do, Mr. Timothy Westmont, look a little embarrassed.” She gave him what the feminists had taught him to think of as a “male gaze.”

Westmont awkwardly excused himself and went to his kitchen in order to make the tea. Reaching up to the top shelf, he lifted down his wife’s favorite Victorian teapot, which he had not used since she left him but thought Jennifer Armstrong might appreciate. Holding it under his left arm pressed against his side, he took a small dishcloth in his right hand and pushed both the cloth and his hand into the pot. He thought he should dust it out and then give it a good rinsing before putting in the boiling water and loose tea in the English fashion—was it hot water first and then tea? or tea first and then the water?—but soon he was thinking
about something else more urgently procedural than the question of whether the water or the tea was first in the pot. He realized that his hand was stuck. Trying to make it as thin as possible inside the pot, he pulled and pulled until he had begun to scrape the skin from the knuckle of his index finger. He tried running a little water from the tap around his wrist, but this made it worse. Then he tried a bit of cooking oil. Then a little butter. Nothing seemed to help, and now the knuckle of his little finger was also skinned and beginning to bleed. He feared he was going to have to ask Jennifer for some assistance.

As he walked into the living room with the teapot dangling from his right hand, Jennifer laughed, he thought, sympathetically. “Oh my, Mr. Westmont,” she said, “you seem to have got yourself in a bit of a pickle. Shall I give it a tug?” He held out the hand with the teapot on the end. “But first,” she said, “do hold it up in the air for a moment.” Westmont did so. “It looks,” she said, “rather like a Scamozzi on a somewhat wounded column. Can you hold it even higher? Ah, ha!” she said. “Statue of Liberty now. If you had a hand the size of mine, you could get it in and out without difficulty. You could get, Mr. Westmont, right to the bottom and out again. Perhaps we ought just to leave you like you are. Now let’s see…”

But Westmont didn’t want to see anything else. He realized at last that he was being mocked. He felt himself to be a victim of aggression. His nose was running badly and he could only wipe it on his sleeve. “What are you up to?” he asked, alarmed.

“Up to? Or down to?” she said. “Always down to business, Mr. Westmont. Always down to business. And you people who don’t understand codes. You’re always up to trouble. Up to no good. You think you can get away with murder.”

“Murder?” he said.

“It comes to that. You’ve murdered the historic happiness and smiling face of your own front porch. You are, you are…”

But Westmont’s landline was ringing in the other room and he trotted in to answer it. It was his cousin Richard in Denver. Richard had called to chat. He said that he had remembered that day when the tree had fallen down in Columbus and how all of the cousins had played on it, just as Westmont had reminded him a while back. He said they were all getting old and he thought it was important to share these things with others who remembered them, and that he was sorry he had forgotten the incident when they spoke about it some years before. He had realized that it was a really great moment in his childhood, part of a childhood
idyll he had shared with his brother Robert, and Westmont, and their cousin Jim. He said he had been having this dream…

But Westmont’s cell phone was ringing in his jacket pocket. “Richard,” he said, “my other phone is ringing, I’ve got to hang up. I’ve only got one hand.”

“Only got one hand?” said Richard.

“One hand,” said Westmont. “I’ll call you back.”

He managed to get the cell phone out of his left inside pocket with his left hand. Not an easy thing to do. It was his wife phoning from London. She had split up with her boyfriend and was having a hard time. In fact, she was completely broke and wondered if Westmont could manage a small loan. She promised she’d never ask for anything like this again, but things were quite desperate, and it was really urgent. Westmont said he only had one hand and would have to call her back.

She said, “What’s happened to you, Westy?”

He said, “There’s someone here.”

He pressed disconnect.

Westmont walked back into the living room with the teapot still dangling from his right hand. “Miss Armstrong?” he said. But there was no one there.
Westmont and the Different Kinds of Music