



a twilight concerto  
for rats and cellos

from

*T H E   L . A   T I M E S*

*05/29/2005*

A   T W I L I G H T  
C O N C E R T O   F O R  
R A T S   A N D   C E L L O S

an article by

Steve Lopez

-----

- <sup>1</sup> I know only part of his story. I know him playing the cello on a dairy crate in the morning sun, suspended somewhere between boy genius and lost traveler.
- <sup>2</sup> But where does he go after dark?
- <sup>3</sup> For answers, I've come to skid row in downtown Los Angeles to spend the evening with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers. The sun has dropped behind glittering skyscrapers, and hardened creatures roam the streets.
- <sup>4</sup> Strung-out prostitutes strut their way down trashed streets. Fallen drunks are sprawled like bodies in the desert. Dozens of human forms disappear under piles of rags and casket-shaped cardboard boxes. Predators and hustlers lurk at the edges, tossing glances sharp as knives. Sewer smells mix in with the stench of urine, rotting food and unending stress.

- 5 No sign of Nathaniel yet on Los Angeles Street. This is his spot, he has told me. We were to meet at dusk.
- 6 But dusk comes and goes. More than a dozen people have staked out their spots and turned in for the night. I wonder if he's decided to spend the night elsewhere.
- 7 Nathaniel told me earlier about a savage beating that happened around here the other night. He didn't see the assault, but he saw the results.
- 8 "The guy's bones were rearranged in his face. I don't know why you'd beat a person like that. It makes no sense."
- 9 As I wait, a San Fernando Valley ministry serves chicken dinners to a long line of takers. Then the volunteers form a circle, call me to join hands with them and bow their heads in prayer. When the missionaries leave, a dazed blond woman caked in filth dials 911 on a pay phone. Sirens echo off concrete as two fire rescue crews approach.
- 10 "It's my heart," she tells the rescue crew, and the chief tells me they respond to calls like this repeatedly, night after night. The woman is loaded into a van and taken to the hospital.
- 11 I'm beginning to give up hope on Nathaniel when, around 9 o'clock, I see the familiar orange shopping cart approach from a block away. Everything he owns after half a century on this Earth is in that basket. The violin he bought in Cleveland is in there, along with the violin and cello donated to him by a reader from the Inland Empire.
- 12 Nathaniel has stopped under an apartment building, where live rock music is pouring out a second-floor window.

- 13 "You like the music?" I ask.
- 14 "You call that music?" Nathaniel responds.
- 15 He's classically trained. Boy wonder in Cleveland. Scholarship to Juilliard. And then 30 years of voices, demons, unexplainable outbursts, mental hospitals, antipsychotic drugs, missed opportunities and tormented, heartbroken, worn-out relatives.
- 16 Two dead palm fronds rise from the front of his basket, Jesus entering Jerusalem. At the rear, two sticks form an X. They are slid into the slots of a Ford hubcap, and Nathaniel has painted "Beethoven" on one and "Brahms" on the other.
- 17 Nathaniel rolls the cart down to his spot in front of a locked-down storefront.
- 18 "I know these guys," he says, pointing to half a dozen sprawled men who don't acknowledge his arrival.
- 19 Nathaniel tells me that if a fight breaks out, he knows whom to count on, whom to run from, where to hide.
- 20 "Straight down that street is the Police Department," Nathaniel says.
- 21 His survival skills are sharp after years on the streets, but he moves warily at times, and feels for the sawed-off wooden chair leg attached to his belt and hidden under a sweater tied around his waist. He remembers how that man looked after the horrible beating. Maybe it was a drug deal, he says, or a hustle gone bad.
- 22 "Did they have to beat him like that?" he asks.

- 23 I ask Nathaniel if he ever thinks about sleeping on safer streets, or cleaning up a bit and getting an apartment somewhere.
- 24 No, he says. This is his turf.
- 25 "I'd rather die where I know my way around. I'm out here breathing fresh air, and I'm not trapped in some apartment, cooped up and unheard of."
- 26 This is exactly what's so frustrating about Nathaniel. He can sound so sensible, even eloquent. But his irrational choices reveal the depth of his mental illness.
- 27 Nathaniel takes a cloth strap and lashes his shopping cart to the metal door of the storefront. Then he unpacks for the night, a ritual he performs while telling me the meaning of his music and his life.
- 28 "My vision -- I hate to admit it -- but I'm going to have to do what Mozart did, and die. My vision is to stay in good with God and not worry about far-off stuff, just get across the street safely and be thankful. Honor thy mother and father, don't be disrespectful to people, be good, and maybe the music will take care of itself."
- 29 Not five feet away, a young ashen-faced man slumps down and lights a crack pipe.
- 30 Helicopters chop up the night, an amputee rolls by in a wheelchair and Nathaniel chases away cockroaches the size of Volkswagens.
- 31 "My god doesn't have a special name," Nathaniel says without my asking. "Beethoven could be my god."

32 He'd been to the library earlier in the day looking for sheet music, carrying a list of the pieces he wants. A Brahms double concerto. Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme for cello and orchestra. Mendelssohn's Third and Fourth Symphonies. Sibelius' Symphony No. 2. Strauss' "Don Quixote."

33 He couldn't find them, but was thrilled to come away with Camille Saint-Saens' Concerto for Violoncello.

34 "There's something like 18 or 19 notes in a single pickup," he says with a child's awe. "It's very pleasing that Saint-Saens had all those ideas and was fast enough to get this all down."

35 Out comes a whisk broom and Nathaniel, perhaps the most compulsively neat person I've ever met, sweeps the sidewalk where he intends to sleep.

36 "Have to get all this nasty business out of here," he says. He's particularly disgusted by cigarette butts.

37 The job done, he turns to me.

38 "Welcome to my humble abode."

39 Then Nathaniel reaches into the bottom of his cart and offers me a can of Shasta Tiki Punch soda.

40 "Care for a drink?"

42 I notice my name written in the center of a clock on which he's replaced the broken hands with a plastic fork and spoon.

- 43 "You work for The Times," he explains, "and this is a timepiece."
- 44 Out of the basket comes the cello, which he cradles as if it were his child, kneeling down and placing it gently against the wall.
- 45 "I'd go to war to defend it," he says.
- 46 Next comes the violin, which goes on top of the cello, followed by several layers of blankets and then a tarp.
- 47 "Gotta protect those guys," Nathaniel says.
- 48 Now he brings out the violin he bought several years ago in Cleveland at Motter's Music House.
- 49 "I use it for my pillow," he says, placing the encased violin on the ground against the wheels of his cart.
- 50 He pulls the "Beethoven" stick out of the Ford hubcap and sets it upright against the cart.
- 51 "When the rodents come," he explains, "this guy takes care of them."
- 52 I ask if he beats the rats.
- 53 "No, you tap it on the ground, like this. It scares them away."
- 54 How about when you're sleeping? I ask.

- 55     Instead of answering, he quotes Shakespeare.
- 56     "To be or not to be; that is the question.... "
- 57     I stand back, smiling.
- 58     Nathaniel gestures theatrically with a gloved hand, his shoulders riding the rhythm of the words. He forgets not a word, and his accent is pitch-perfect. It's Richard Burton's Hamlet in an exclusive skid row performance.
- 59     " ... For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil..."
- 60     A piercing human howl rises from somewhere unknown. Next to us, a rail-thin man scratches maniacally, as if his skin were crawling with bugs. Salvagers come jangling through the streets, plucking away bottles and cans.
- 61     Before bed, Nathaniel recites the "Our Father," head bowed, then opens his eyes to see prostitutes trespassing on his prayers.
- 62     "I think these children of God are going to be OK," Nathaniel says. "They're going to sleep and dream, like human beings do."
- 63     A rat the size of a meatloaf has arrived on the scene, darting up out of the storm drain and heading toward us in search of food. Nathaniel taps the Beethoven stick and the beast retreats.



64     Should I be more assertive, I wonder, in trying to steer Nathaniel out of skid row and into a residential program? Wouldn't a little arm-twisting be more humane than leaving him here on the streets, where decades of horrendous public policy have created a colony of lost souls?

65     As he prepares his bed, Nathaniel plays the gracious host and offers me his dairy crate.

66     "You can rest on there and put your head against the cart," he says.

67     Before he crawls under the covers, he has a comment.

68     "I love to think about musicians," he says. "I can imagine Mozart or Beethoven sitting in a room up there with the light on. They hunger and thirst like we do. It's angelic."

69     He sounds exhausted, but has one last thing to say.

70     "I hope you rest well, Mr. Lopez. I hope the whole world rests well."

Reach the columnist at [steve.lopez@latimes.com](mailto:steve.lopez@latimes.com) and read previous columns at [latimes.com/lopez](http://latimes.com/lopez)

Copyright © 2013, Los Angeles Times

# TEST REVIEW

## A TWILIGHT CONCERTO FOR RATS AND CELLOS

1. Read the article critically and actively. Make detailed notes on the text.
2. Be able to identify examples of the following in the article:  
  
metaphor  
allusion  
juxtaposition/contrast
3. Be able to answer meaning questions, such as: what does, a twilight concerto for rats and cellos” mean?
4. Be able to use evidence from the article to explain CHARACTER, CONFLICT (person vs. person, person vs self, person vs. society, person vs. nature), and SETTING
5. Be able to infer and and “read between the lines” for implicit (not obvious) meaning
6. Be able to connect the article, A Twilight Concerto for Rats and Cellos to:

The Suitcase Lady  
Continuities  
Lars and the Real Girl  
Mirror  
The Island

7. Be able to analyse how figurative images are related to the article and/or tell the story in the article, for example:

Find a quote that reflects the following image.

-----  
-----



Explain how the image relates or tells the story of A Twilight Concerto for Rats and Cellos.

-----  
-----

TEST DATE : OCTOBER 18, 2013