

The background of the cover is a photograph of a night scene. At the top, a bright, glowing full moon is centered in a deep blue sky. Below the moon, the sky transitions into a lighter blue. At the bottom of the image, a dark, rocky coastline is visible, with several jagged rock formations protruding from the water. The water is dark and reflects the light from the moon.

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NOCTURNE

A Journey in Search
of Moonlight

Absorbed by Its Shadows

For a deity that is so often addressed, admired and speculated upon, the moon remains remarkably unresponsive. Only in Lucian's *Icaromenippus* do we glimpse its frustration at being the centre of so much human attention and its wish to be allowed to sail on its way undisturbed, a Garbo of the skies. Menippus, himself frustrated at the lack of information he is able to find on the nature of the heavens, has ascended to the moon by strapping on mismatching but symbolically important wings, one from an eagle and one from a vulture. Just as he is about to leave the lunar surface, having had his fill of diverting himself by looking down at the activities of the people of earth, the moon calls out to him, asking him to bear a message to Zeus for her. She has, she explains, had enough of overhearing the spurious theories of scientists about her nature. 'They seem to have nothing to do but poke their noses into my affairs. They're always wanting to know who I am, what my measurements are and why my figure keeps changing into a semi-circle or a crescent. Some of them say I'm infested with living organisms, others that I'm a sort of mirror suspended over the sea . . .' In short, she wants Zeus to 'rub out those scientists, put a gag on those logicians, demolish the Stoa, burn down the Academy and stop those Peripatetics walking around all the time. Then I might be safe from their offensive calculations.'

Sadly, human behaviour has not improved; today the moon is at risk from more than words. Towards the end of 2009, American scientists crashed a 2,200 kg rocket into the permanently shadowed Cabeus crater near the moon's south pole. The rocket was followed into the crater by a probe, which collected samples

from the plume of debris shot upwards from the impact. To the great excitement of NASA scientists, the probe detected water molecules, which may have great implications for the sustainability of any moon colony that is established to mine the moon for its natural resources. The most significant of these is a substance called helium-3, which might be extracted by opencast mining and used to power energy generation back on earth. As many voices are now pointing out, such activities would swiftly destroy the pristine ecology of the moon, unchanged for billions of years. Meanwhile, as scientists analyse their discoveries, the rocket and its attendant probe will remain, joining the growing pile of junk left on the lunar surface by previous visitors. All of this garbage, from abandoned moon-buggies to spacesuits, cameras and even defecation-collection bags, is granted an eternal non-life by the thinness of the satellite's atmosphere. (I suppose we should not be surprised that the American astronauts, commissioned to plant their country's flag, should further mark their territory by shitting on the moon.) It is thought that as long as they avoid a direct asteroid hit or future human development on the lunar surface, Armstrong and Aldrin's footprints could remain visible for hundreds of thousands of years, ready to spook a future Robinson Crusoe washed up on lunar shores.

Today I have come to Modern Art Oxford to see a work by British artist Katie Paterson, in which the moon at last plays an active rather than a passive role, making its own mark on one of the great icons of European culture. Paterson, in a work that effortlessly combines poetry with technology, has translated each note of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 27 no. 2, better known as the 'Moonlight Sonata', into its musical letters, which in turn have been turned into Morse code. The code was then transmitted to the moon using an EME (earth-moon-earth) radio communication system from a 'moon station' in

Southampton, England. The signal was reflected off the moon's surface (a process called moonbounce) and received back on earth at a station in Sweden, 480,000 miles and 2.5 seconds later. However, this was not just a game of interplanetary catch. The music has changed. It bears the imprint of its journey. As Paterson puts it in some accompanying notes in the gallery, 'the moon reflects only part of the information back – some of it is absorbed by its shadows, lost in its craters'.

In the centre of the gallery space stands a solitary Disklavier grand piano, trailing the wires that link it to a computer. Remote, electronic fingers depress the keys, filling the room with the opening section of the Sonata, the movement that Beethoven marked 'Adagio Sostenuto', in which the haunting, impossibly simple melody floats above an ever-changing sequence of three-note clusters. It was this section that earned the Sonata the title 'Moonlight', when the critic and poet Ludwig Rellstab likened listening to it to the experience of gliding across the shimmering surface of Lake Lucerne in a boat at night, surrounded by the spectrally lit mountain landscape. Yet the music we are hearing has undergone a change, an extraterrestrial remix. Parts of the piece have simply been erased on its journey, inserting sections of emptiness where none existed before; spaces that speak of the distance the music has travelled on its journey. Curiously the transformation is rather successful; the construction of the original piece is of a robustness that allows it to sustain such editing. Indeed, it emerges from its lunar encounter in a form that is arguably more arresting to twenty-first-century ears than the original, rather as some buildings only come into their own when seen as ruins. Cultural artefacts gain an aura of authenticity through the patina that time bestows. Unlike works of visual art, however, music that is written down can be created afresh again and again – although the shift in the sensibilities of conductors and orchestra leaders, the increasing loudness of

musical instruments and the changing fashions in the manner in which they are played adds a veneer of cultural interpretation, like a thick and discoloured varnish on a painting, over the composer's original intentions. Now, with Paterson's help, the moon has given us a radical rereading of this much-loved work, revealing it for what it is; a piece of musical architecture as brittle as any classical ruin, that crumbles in the fingers like dust, while retaining the power to haunt our dreams.

Across town in the Bodleian Library, I come across another meeting between art, the moon and music. A recent acquisition, it is a rare illustrated autograph of a song by Felix Mendelssohn, decorated by the composer himself with a watercolour of a moonlit lake. 'Schilffied', translated as 'Reed Song', was composed in 1842, to words by Nikolaus Lenan. The lyric begins 'On the lake's unruffled surface rests the moon's fair beam', and it is this scene that Mendelssohn has painted, wrapping his depiction of the lake and its surroundings around and even between the musical staves; the drooping branches of a willow trail over the 6/8 time signature and a stand of trees extends its branches between the bird-tracks of musical notes, brushing against the words *andante con moto*. The whole vista is dramatically lit with the moon itself a white circle against an inky sky. The neutral paper, the ground on which the music is written, provides Mendelssohn with his moonlight effects on the water. Two elusive, ethereal substances that travel through space to reach our senses, moonlight and music, are captured and combined on this sheet of paper, itself one of the most miraculous creations of human civilization. Somehow, Mendelssohn implies, if music can emulate moonlight to the ear, and moonlight can infiltrate music on the page, and if the page itself can both bear the fragile imprint of music and stand in for the brightness of moonlight, then these things are connected. The task the composer has set me is to find out how.