

**My idea is that there is music in the air, music all around us,
the world is full of it
and you simply take as much as you require.**
Edward Elgar

Music in the Air

Tom stretched his front paws to put himself into his favourite sphinx-like mode. Warm summer sunshine streamed through the doors and rafters of his barn. He knew no more comfortable place than a straw bale – always warm even on winter days. Heavy-eyed, he was about to doze again when he heard the too familiar clucking. The old hen was back. He barely stirred, occasionally opening one eye as her clucks drew nearer. He was never sure if her constant chuckle was disguised laughter, expressions of disgust or just talking over to herself the gossip she had picked up around the yard. The constant gabble was a background to all the other farmyard sounds. He did know her present soft chirps meant she was in a contented egg-laying mood. She would be laying eggs out in the hedges somewhere again, where the lady of the house would not find them. Tom no longer bothered to look for the nests. That was for young cats and he had promised new chicks would be safe with him. Hen had no difficulty believing him. Tom was so well-fed and lazy he couldn't be bothered to chase a mouse even for the fun of it.

She clucked into the barn, head bobbing up and down as that sharp beak accurately searched for tiny morsels. Tom could never understand how she kept finding grains to peck from the ground. *Makes my neck ache watching her*, he had said. He turned around with his back to the hen and then rolled over to thrust all four feet into the air. Hen looked up, *Tom!* She scolded. *Don't you be so rude. Cover yourself up.* Tom nonchalantly flicked up his tail to cover both immodesty and pride. *You can keep you head still when you want to.* He disguised his irritation in a low growl while turning again to fix her with his most penetrating cat-scare.

Have you heard the music? Hen asked. *What music's that? The only music I've heard this afternoon is your clucking and that sparrow up in the roof. She hasn't stop chirping that one piercing note all day.* *Music! Singing!* She tried to explain, wondering if Tom knew any other songs than the one he rendered when his lady-friend came calling. *Like the birds*, she went on. *I keep hearing it. Not all the time, just now and then. It's like a well-tuned chaffinch, yet different. You can hear the wind blowing through it and a sound like rain drops on the barn roof.* *A chaffinch wouldn't sing in wind and rain.* Tom scoffed. *Maybe it was the magpies stomping their feet and flapping their wings.*

I don't think so. The hen totally missed Tom's irony. No. It was sweet music. I thought it could be a robin but it wasn't as sharp as that and it was too gentle for a blackbird or thrush.

Our blackbird here doesn't sing gently. Tom growled again. Certainly not when I creep up on him. He clatters away like the lad starting his four by four. He keeps doing it again and again till it roars like a bull. He smiled and licked a paw before adding, It's not unlike you when you want the whole yard to know you've laid an egg but won't tell anyone where. Sounds like egg-laying is a very painful job.

No, just relief! Hen dismissed his comment. She considered herself too much a lady to talk with a cat about the intricacies of egg-production. *I wish the music would keep on. Then I could see who it is who's singing.*

She actually paused for a few moments before continuing with an unusual sadness in her clucks. *And by the way you leave the birds alone, especially that poor sparrow. She's distressed. Her mate is lying dead just inside the field gate behind the milking shed. I think he's dead, but I saw a strange light all round him early this morning. It soon went away and he lay very still again with his wings stretched out.*

You've had too much barley grain! Compassion was not one of Tom's strong points.

No! said Hen, head high in thoughtful pose to aid thinking. Her bright red comb trembled excitedly. *Now I think of it there was that song too. I'm going to have another look.*

Good. Tom urged her on. *If he's still alive you tell that sparrow to get up and take this noisy partner of his away. I want to sleep.*

The sparrow had already stopped, and Tom did sleep, but not for long before Hen returned clucking excitedly.

I was right. I was right. Come and see! The sparrow shone again, and I did hear the music coming from out of him. Come on! Come and see!

Reluctantly surrendering to feline curiosity Tom stirred, slid off the edge of his bale slowly so as to enjoy the tummy-tickling sensation and followed the hen. Out in the yard Tom took the lead, tail held high. In a normal farmyard there is a certain decorum about who walks where, and in no circumstances whatever would Tom walk behind a hen. Anyway, he had seen the lady of the house at the kitchen door. She had a perfect memory. He would not want her to think he was chasing her precious chickens. However, she had seen cat and hen together, looking strangely sociable. Amused and curious she joined the procession at a respectable distance.

At the field gate Tom jumped through the bars while Hen took the easier option of squeezing through the hedge a little further along. When she caught up Tom stood staring at the dead sparrow. It was laid on a small black brick in a tuft of longer grass.

There you are, clucked Hen. *I told you!*

Suddenly the gate squeaked open behind them. The lady of the house joined them. She stretched out her hand towards the sparrow. She was holding a similar brick to the one on which the sparrow was laying. Both Hen and Tom drew back as the sparrow lit up and sang.

Oh, you clever cat! The lady of the house exclaimed, *You've found my mobile phone.*

Hen walked away quickly through the open gate, quite obviously peaked at the attention and praise showered on Tom. He stayed, relishing his double share. Rubbing his head around his lady's legs from all directions, he surrendered to an unusual measure of stroking. He purred deeply, waiting for more.

Extra supper for you tonight! Tom had still not mastered the complexities of human language, but he did understand 'supper' and easily detected the lady of the house's pleasure. He stayed to watch as she moved the sparrow's body and after picking up her phone, carried him across the field to place him carefully in the hedge bottom, covering him with a pile of old leaves. Tom observed the partner sparrow, the nuisance from his barn, drop down to perch quietly close by.

Returning to the barn and his favourite, still warm straw bale Tom saw the hen leaving. *Well, that's that,* he purred just loud enough for her to hear. She turned her back and flipped up her tail feathers. *I'm going to lay an egg,* she clucked triumphantly and with a hint of sarcasm added, *I never get thanked for what I do.* Tom grinned past his tail tip and thought of supper.

Neither Tom nor hen gave thought to the lone sparrow. Since they had left the field beside the milking barn the sparrow had remained in the hedge, watching and chirping spasmodically. As the evening sun began to send its first setting rays across the trees and fields, she fluttered her wings and flew up with a more rapid chirping like a lark, rising into the azure-pink skies. A magpie gave a single call to salute. A pigeon began to coo softly. A blackbird and mistlethrush joined chorus. The chaffinch and robin sang with dedicated sweetness and a whole sparrow colony called softly from surrounding hedgerows. Now a gentle evening breeze brushed the grass where the sparrow had laid, swept through the fallen leaves which covered him, and gathered up all the many notes of song into a melody of loving grief. Music was in the air as the solitary sparrow flew higher into that thin place where the music of silence robs sorrow of its pain.