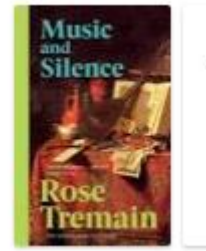


Rose Tremain
Music and Silence



William

I read the reviews on the book's cover that 'Music & Silence' weaves a tale from a number of different, distinct but interlinked points of view. Consequently I was expecting more because for me the narrative wanders and my recollections only include: a music-loving king; a queen who hates music; another character who dreams of divine music and drives himself to the threshold of madness; an English lutenist; and two negro slave boys who are told to take off their clothes by the aforesaid king.

I must acknowledge that this book is beautifully written, but the plot wanders and I was relieved when I had finished reading. Five hundred-plus pages to read in three to four weeks requires a great deal of time unless you can speed-read or find the book a real page-turner which I did not. Neither did I find it 'haunting and enigmatic'.

The story revolves around numerous personal relationships. A lutenist, Peter Claire is one of the principal characters. He arrives in Denmark to join King Christian IV's orchestra. He suffers a dreadful life, having to conduct his talent in the frozen confines of an unlit cellar and later suffering hearing loss. The King isn't much better off. He believes in his own divine right, and is aspiring to higher things. However, he lacks the funds to fulfil his dreams. If only he could come by financial wealth he would at a single stroke be released from his yoke of poverty. His second wife despises him and takes pleasure by ensuring that her husband is made aware of her philandering with the German Count Otto. There are numerous characters but their deeds and misdeeds didn't resonate significantly with me.

I must be an Anglophile because the section of the book that I most enjoyed was the chronicling of the meeting between the Danish ambassador and King Charles the First. The former who comes to plead for a suggested loan of one hundred thousand pounds on behalf of the impoverished King Christian.

I was touched somewhat by the problems manifested by Count O'Fingal whose life is being destroyed by his obsession with a heavenly melody heard only in his dreams, with the shadow of tragedy never far away. *'He sat silent and unmoving in his chair resting his gaze on some faraway scene of his own imagining'*.

Most of the characters seemed traumatised by the impact of their relationships. Even King Christian's buttons realised their shortcomings *'as they seemed to look beseechingly at him, to beg him to overlook their individual imperfections'*. Characters see snowflakes *'as an errant coterie of summer gnats'*.

As usual some extracts resonated by reflecting extremely intense emotions:

'... confined to pathetic gestures of sadness or reproach, an insubstantial spirit who pales and fades with the coming of the light'

'... these things constitute an interlude in his search for her.'

'...who had always striven to understand in what currency human happiness resided..'

'.. Descartes's cogito concerning betrayal and the obstinacy of hope..'

'... a chance resemblance to something she knows is past and gone '

I didn't agree with the eulogy by the literary critic of the Daily Express who stated that this was *'a book that will linger in the mind long after its last page has been turned'* and that of the critic from the Literary Review who stated that ... *'This is quite simply a wonderful novel - wise, humane and moving'*.

For me the book offered beautifully written text: *'the slap of water against the wooden jetties'* - but the pace of the story is extremely slow and a bit depressing - all conducted without a precise direction of travel. A rather prescient extract resonated with me: *'when the song was completed, it turned out to be a hopelessly mediocre thing'*.

Stephanie

This is a beautifully written book; a romantic novel set in the late 1620s/early 1630s and based around the Danish court of King Christian. It contains a number of intertwining themes including scandalous financial mismanagement, some appalling maliciousness (especially from some of the female characters) and very touching love affairs spreading across a range of countries including Denmark, Ireland and England.

The characterisation was brilliant, enabling the reader to build up clear, or sometime less clear, pictures of the many characters. For example whilst King Christian came across as besotted by his conniving and immoral wife, and hugely demanding of others the descriptions of Marcus left the reader wondering whether this was just boy seriously damaged by the loss of his beloved sister and the wickedness of his very selfish mother or whether he was an autistic savant able to perceive stimuli that others cannot. The mixture of such ambiguities with other very clear descriptions greatly enhanced the books and added to its mystical and dreamlike qualities.

The historic references were interesting as were the portrayal of the powers of some to own, or barter with, the lives of others.

Overall, a beautifully written, complex book which would continue to deliver after several readings. Highly recommended.

Margaret

Although I have read many of Rose Tremain's excellent novels I did struggle with this one. There were far too many characters and too many different stories, some of which appeared to a bit irrelevant. In addition we are also plunged into flashbacks of some of the characters' young lives as well. The book was quite gripping at times and it was also based on fact although I am a bit ignorant about Danish history.

Peter Claire arrived at the court of King Christian IV of Denmark as an English lute player in the King's orchestra. However, he soon finds out that the orchestra has to play in a freezing cellar, although it appears to bother him less than it does the other musicians. Peter Claire's love for a

young woman, Emilia who is one of the companions of the King's wife, Kirsten is the thread that runs through this complicated story, but we learn less about this young couple than we do about the other characters. There are entries from Kirsten's diary - to confuse even further - she is the King's second wife who is a selfish, manipulative woman who schemes against Emilia and Peter to keep them apart due to her own jealous nature. Magdalena, Emilia's stepmother, is also another unpleasant character and both Magdalena's and Kirsten's characters are well portrayed, by the author, as devious women.

Emilia's brother Marcus is treated particularly badly by his father, Johann Tilson, and his second wife Magdalena and suffers mentally because of this. We hear much about Bror Brorson, the King's childhood friend, who sadly eventually dies in battle. Then there's Vibeke Kruse who is fond of eating too many cakes so that she can't fit into the beautiful dresses provided for her, but Kirsten's mother has a plan and tries, and succeeds, in bringing her to the King's notice. Apart from her gluttony Vibeke is much nicer and kinder than Kirsten.

Queen Sofie, the King's mother is determined that her son won't get his hands on her wealth (gold) and hides it amongst the wine, even after getting a large pit dug to hide it - what happened to the pit?

Otto is the lover of the awful Kirsten but also the name of Marcus's cat!

Countess Francesca O'Fingal, married to Jonnie O'Fingal, was originally the lover of Peter Claire and when Jonnie dies due to his obsession she thinks that Peter will come back to her, but of course he is in love with Emilia.

There's a good deal about Charlotte, Peter Claire's sister who is due to marry George Middleton, who became ill and nearly died. But so much is crammed into the last section/chapters following the leisurely pace of the rest of the novel. George knew that Charlotte would be upset that her brother couldn't be at her wedding. HOWEVER, at the last minute Kirsten became bored with the Emilia/Peter saga and let the sick Peter go and even told him where the despairing Emilia was. Marcus appears to miraculously cure Peter's infected ear and Emilia and Peter also get married and are presumably able to attend Charlotte's wedding. The end of the novel was most disappointing, almost as if Tremain was desperately trying to finish it to a deadline having spent so long on the rest of it. Although at least it did end well as I had begun to think that there would be a Romeo and Juliet ending due to the couples' despair.

Jean

Although Rose Tremain is a gifted writer, I found this novel difficult to read and, for me, the narrative is distracting, changing, as it does, from one scenario to another.

Tremain, however, is versatile, and 'Music and Silence' has a fairytale quality. It tells of King Christian's embattled boyhood and abrupt accession to the Danish throne.

The novel commences in 1629, when Peter Claire, a young English musician, who plays the lute, is summoned to King Christian's Court in Denmark to become the latest member of the royal orchestra.

The writer explores a wide range of human responses to the overt expressiveness of 'music' and 'silence', which pervades hearts and minds given to introversion and secrecy.

Christian's adulterous consort, Kirsten, reveals a super-ego, who thrives on self-indulgence and subterfuge.

There is also a parallel tale of the love between Peter Claire and Emilia, Kirsten's handmaiden, who has been traumatised by a legacy of intrigue and lust, echoing the the royal drama to which it is linked.

However, I feel that the tale of Countess O'Fingal, whose Irish husband is destroyed by an obsession with a heavenly melody, existing only in his dreams, is somewhat contrived.

Nevertheless, I find the narrative concerning Peter Claire's sister, Charlotte and George Middleton, extremely touching.

Undoubtedly, the developing characterisation of King Christian, a man who is acquisitive and who believes in his own divine right, as he sensitively seeks greater things, is a masterpiece and, also, very moving.

Chris

This is a beautifully written story of historical fact blended with fictional lifestories set in 17th century Denmark with other threads to Ireland and England. Set in the royal court of King Christian and his wife Kirsten (interestingly, a morganic marriage, ie not his queen), the love story between Peter the English lutenist and Emilia, a maid to Kirsten, develops through cold and hard times, featuring cruelty and kindness, love and loss, music, greed and generosity. The writer creates a tremendous dreamlike atmosphere, mist and cold, snow and ice, a remote castle, with kings and queens, duchesses and poor folk who must serve their every wish. (The orchestra is kept in a cold, damp and dark cellar purely to hear only the music without distraction.) But the lonely king loves his unfaithful wife Kirsten and broods over his lost friendships, his wife, his country's wealth. Emilia grieves her dead mother, and when a greedy and cruel stepmother steps in flees her home and is sent to the castle. She befriends Kirsten as a kind and loving lady (she is actually cruel and selfish). Peter's story wends from England via a strange Irish noble family towards the Danish court, where he falls in love at sight of Emilia.

I enjoyed discovering the royal family characters are from real life, even Kirsten's lover Otto Ludwig. Christian and Kirsten had 12 children together, and Kirsten had another child believed to be fathered by Otto. The children are hardly mentioned here, but Kirsten's obsession with Otto is voiced by Kirsten in lustful and selfish terms and eventually causes a rift with the king. The cast-off Kirsten spitefully keeps Peter and Emilia apart until the final pages of the book.

This is an intriguing and atmospheric story, a good read and I enjoyed it very much. I would like to try other books by this author.

Angela

I have read and enjoyed several of Rose Tremain's novels and this one did not disappoint. It is an interesting romantic historical novel made especially atmospheric by the details about the weather. So much snow and chill wrapped us around in 1620's Denmark, it really gave a realistic feel for this story which is really a tale about relationships, desires and motivations. Themes of loyalty and power feature large. From the apparent hero, Peter Claire, the lutenist, through his family and to all those with whom he has contact and their families in turn we hear threads of lives which intersect or run beside each other, intertwining into a fascinating whole. Relatives, friends, acquaintances and even those on the periphery who we know only through various accounts, all make up both the context and the detail. The way the story is told, each of a selection of characters recounting their view, I found very effective. There is not one set timeline, events are recounted according to their relevance to the storyline. This certainly kept the reader on their toes, but it was good to have the changes of subject because I am guessing that everyone would have their particular favourite character whose story they looked forward to. A beguiling world, a novel of darkness and light, mystery and magic; I really loved it.



Anna

What a bewildering, topsy-turvy mixture of fantasy and historical fact!

I found this demanding book quite difficult to get into, as the narrative flow seemed to me to be interrupted by the changes in narrator - the author herself, Countess O'Fingal, Kirsten Munk - and sudden lurches of subject and place - Tycho Brahe's Recipe, At the Isfoss, Concerning Whales, The Ship Anna Fredericka, etc., etc. A further complication is the author's love of going off at a tangent to the main story, and becoming enthralled by characters who really have no bearing on the main events. For example, we do not really need to know what is happening to Peter Claire's family back in England - George Middleton is a delightful creation, but I do not think he contributes to the story - except to be one of the few decent people in a book with so many selfish, cruel and plain wicked characters. I think Rose Tremain writes about her grotesques with the same relish she brings to her uninhibited descriptions of sadistic and extreme sexual behaviour.

But she does bring her characters to life, and you do follow where she leads, even if it's sometimes off the main track of the story. I would say the same about another of her books which I read recently, *The Colour*, about the people who become caught up in a gold rush in New Zealand.

However, I did become enthralled eventually, and was relieved that Emilia and Peter Claire were happily united, and that, thanks to the simple kindness of Vibeke, King Christian was able to lose his horror of the death of his friend Bror and to start planning the restoration of Denmark, even if in his typically grandiose way.

Ann

I feel this story owes a great deal to Hans Christian Andersen. The wicked stepmother (Magdalena Tilsen), Old King Cole (Christian IV with his fiddlers), "Hansel and Gretel" (Marcus kept in a harness), Peter Claire and Emilia ("Cinderella" or "The Sleeping Beauty"). I could go on making comparisons. Set in and around the court of King Christian IV in the 17th century, Peter Claire, English lutenist is summoned to Denmark to keep the King happy by playing to him. It is a bizarre story, sometimes bawdy and at times comic; it is a number of tales of loyalty and deception woven together and amazingly fitted into one year from 1629 to 1630 it seems.

Magdalena, second wife of Johann Tilsen and Kirsten Munk, Consort to King Christian, who are characters in these tales, both seem to have an avid and insatiable desire for sex and manipulation. Bror Brorson, childhood friend of the King and Marcus, son of Johann Tilsen, both are ill-treated and misunderstood. It is all like a comic opera and has a quite unbelievable fairytale quality. However, looking up King Christian IV of Denmark online, it seems an awful lot of these tales are founded on fact.

I found this book a long and wearisome read, but having finished it with its happy endings, I felt rewarded for my constancy!