The Story – "The Juliet Letters" *by Elvis Costello*

So, there was this professor in Verona who answered letters addressed to Juliet....

Well, if that sounds like the start of a tall story I suppose it is. My wife, Cait, pointed out the tiny newspaper item about a Veronese academic who had taken on the task of replying to letters addressed to "Juliet Capulet." This apparently continued for a number of years, until some gentlemen of the press exposed this secret correspondence. Quite how he came by these letters in the first place remains unclear. We can only make a guess as to their content. After all, these people were writing to an imaginary woman, and a dead imaginary woman at that. Perhaps they were simply scholarly enquiries, or letters of sympathy from others disappointed in love, or even a plea from somebody forced into an unhappy arranged marriage. Whatever was contained in those letters and their replies, the idea of this correspondence provided our initial inspiration.

I first saw the Brodsky Quartet play at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, in 1989. They were giving a series of concerts in which they were to perform all of the string quartets composed by Dimitri Shostakovich. Having arrived in town in time to attend the concert in which they played Quartets Nos. 7, 8, and 9, we returned on two subsequent evenings to hear them complete the cycle. I recall running out of a B.B.C. television studio where I had anxiously completed a program presenting the album Spike in order to get to the last concert on time. Such was the impact of these performances. Not only did I come away with a clearer impression of the music, but also a strong sense of the love and dedication with which the Quartet played it. Over the next two years we went to see the Brodskys play some wonderful music: Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven and Bartok. Little did I suspect, but members of the Quartet had been to my London concerts during the same period. Somehow the connection was made, we exchanged letters and recordings, and finally arranged to meet after their next London appearance. It was after that lunchtime concert in November 1991 that we began our collaboration.

At first we just talked and talked and ... talked. This led to several informal musical sessions. We looked at the characteristics of the music that we loved and admired. The Quartet played pieces, I played songs, sometimes we listened to records. Naturally, some of the music introduced was unfamiliar, but this only added to the number of possibilities. Soon our own ideas began to emerge.

We wanted to explore the under-used combination of voice and string quartet, but were anxious to avoid that junkyard named "Cross-Over." This is no more my stab at "classical music" than it is the Brodsky Quartet's first rock and roll album. It does, however, employ the music which we believe touches whatever part of the being that you care to mention. It also conforms to, and occasionally upsets, the structures found in our respective disciplines and indiscipline!

With *The Juliet Letters* as our title, we thought of the many types of character that the letter form would allow us. Somewhere there is a list of the letters which we considered. Love letter, begging letter, chain letter, suicide note, etc. In order to make the work more personal we decided that each of us would contribute to the text, not forgetting the words written by Michael Thomas's wife, Marina. As the lyricist in the house, I could also act as a kind of editor. From these early drafts came a curious advantage. Of course, each of us had different approaches to the common subject, and through some unconscious poetry, and in the absence of much of the crafty language of the songwriter, we were able to assemble strong and varied texts. It seems that only poets and politicians write letters with a view to them being printed in collected form. In my experience the language of most letters swings wildly from

the lyrical to the banal and from the courteous to the confessional, sometimes inside the same paragraph. I hope we've caught something of this in the words of *The Juliet Letters*.

The process of composition and arrangement was varied and is mysterious to contemplate. Some pieces arrived with both words and music complete. Bridges were then built between smaller related items, while at least one song and a crucial passage of the music was effectively composed "spontaneously." While the job of compiling and creating the "draft arrangements" was shared among the members of the quartet, the process of arranging was often one of trial and error involving all five of us. This has continued throughout the rehearsals, the first two performances and even during this recording. Having previously been unable to read or write down music, my own recent studies have allowed me to progress, since January 1992, from picking out my ideas at the piano (using what is known in certain circles as "the crab method"), through piano scores to full proposed four-part arrangements. I have to give credit to the Quartet for their perseverance in deciphering some of my early intentions from the most wayward of playing. As I have found with other collaborations, the music that you most confidently attribute to one party invariably turns out to be the work of the person you least suspect.

The Juliet Letters begins with a short composition entitled "Deliver Us." It simply serves to open the story, for although the following letters are not intended to create a dialogue, you may choose to draw your own conclusions from some of the resulting juxtapositions.

One of the conventions which we have taken from classical song, or for that matter folk-song, is the acceptance of a man singing a woman's story. In "For Other Eyes" a woman confesses her jealous suspicions and fears.

The "letter" in "Swine" takes a more unusual form, being a piece of deranged, political graffiti carved on a wooden door.

For the next song, "Expert Rites," I have taken the liberty of imagining a reply made by a character similar to the Veronese professor who unwittingly provided our title. If he should ever hear this piece I hope he will not be offended by our presumption — in this version of the mystery the author of the letter is a compassionate and romantic soul. "Expert Rites" leads without pause into Paul Cassidy's "Dead Letter," which darkens the already melancholy mood into one of sadness and loss.

After a short introduction of my invention comes Michael Thomas's first song, "I Almost Had A Weakness," to which I added the tango passages. It is an eccentric aunt's curt reply to a begging letter.

The text of "Why?" was derived from Ian Belton's version of a child's note. I added the final repeated lines and the music.

Without dragging the listener through the mechanics of our working method, it should be stated that in naming the "main composer" we hope to indicate who was responsible for the initial music and defining structure of the collaborative pieces. Even if others have amended the melodic line or added further musical content, when such a credit is stated it is because we still regard it as "their" song. In the case of "Who Do You Think You Are?" this credit very much belongs to Michael Thomas. The song begins with a young man sitting down in a seaside cafe to write a postcard in which he details all his estranged lover's faults. The truth of the situation is gradually revealed.

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In performance, "Taking My Life In Your Hands" concludes the first half of the sequence. The music was developed from a piece first outlined by Jacqueline Thomas. The letter portrays an obsessive and deluded person, writing letters never sent, expecting impossible replies.

The second part of *The Juliet Letters* opens with a rather extreme form of junk mail: "This Offer Is Unrepeatable."

The text of "Dear Sweet Filthy World" is a suicide note that turns from blasé and bored with life to desperate, and is finally lost in a dream.

"The Letter Home" employs contrasting musical sections, predominantly from Ian Belton (I contributed the music for only the "Why must I apologize" section), as the story dissolves from the formal courtesies, through nostalgia, and into bitterness.

"Jacksons, Monk and Rowe" is the name of a firm of solicitors which reoccurs as a motif among images of both childhood and adult disillusionment. The authorship of the two verses is divided between brother and sister, Michael and Jacqueline, while the music is Michael's.

The music of "This Sad Burlesque" is mostly the work of Paul Cassidy, although between us Michael and I proposed the related material in the bridge section. The events described in the letter should be familiar to those who lived in England in the spring of 1992.

The next letter is spelt out by a moving glass. "Romeo's Seance" tells of a strange young man's struggle to contact his ghostly lover. He even claims that she composed this song. In fact, the music is by Michael Thomas, although I think I should admit responsibility for the rather daft tune which Jacky plays during the central "flying furniture" section. In concert performance, Michael, Ian and Paul all play standing up, with Jacqueline seated on a small platform. This not only allows us to maintain eye contact, but also to change the grouping of the Quartet in order to heighten the focus on certain unconventional instrument balances. Without the visual aspect we decided to minimize these changes of configuration in the studio. However, as Michael and Jacky create most of the rhythmic and percussive interest in "Romeo's Seance," Michael took up his "concert position" between the voice and cello. Do not, as they say, adjust your set.

In "I Thought I'd Write To Juliet" a cynical writer quotes the contents of a letter that he has received. This "soldier's letter" is closely related to one sent to me during the build-up to the Gulf War tragedy. I would not like to comment further, except to say that it is not included as a simplistic political gesture, either "for" or "against" anything, but rather to illustrate the predicament of the two characters in being forced to reconsider their assumed positions. From the concluding mayhem a single note emerges leading into Michael Thomas's "Last Post." Despite its title this piece does not have any military significance. It seems to me to have a clear sense of peace, though not without strong feeling. It also serves as a preface to the trio of songs at the conclusion of the sequence as it runs without a break into "The First To Leave." In this song, a man who believes in the afterlife leaves a letter for his atheist lover, which, we must assume, she is reading after his demise. "Damnation's Cellar" gives a glimpse of a fantastic kind of immorality. The final letter is also delivered from a place beyond death, although the intention is not at all morbid. So it is a song of condolence and renewal, "The Birds Will Still Be Singing," which brings *The Juliet Letters* to, what I believe is, a hopeful conclusion.

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The Juliet Letters was performed for the first time in public at The Amadeus Centre, London, on 1st, July 1992, and again at The Great Hall, Dartington, on 13th, August 1992. This recording was made and balanced at Church Studios, Crouch Hill, North London, between 14th, September and 1st, October 1992. It was recorded, as we say in the popular music parlance, "live in the studio."

Here follows a brief technical note. Our "Tonmeister" Kevin Killen, who engineered and balanced the disc, assures us that there was no equalization of the signal coming from the studio. There are no overdubbed or additional parts. In order to preserve the clarity of the Quartet's tone the vocals were recorded simultaneously, but behind isolation screens. Therefore, the only artificial reverberation that you hear is that added to the voice in order to match the natural reverberation of Studio B. Although this was a multi-track recording, employing a combination of close, distant and wide microphone positions, the very minimum of adjustments were made to the internal balance of the Quartet in order to preserve the integrity of the performances. The decision to make an analog recording was an aesthetic one, founded on my firm conviction that for everything that digital recording gains in noise reduction and supposed clarity, there are unacceptable losses of warmth and depth. For the same reasons, the record was mixed to half-inch analog tape. All other applicable methods of noise reduction were employed. We trust that the results justify these decisions.

— Elvis Costello
October 21, 1992