ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

HISTORICAL

The Music . . . Oh, the Music
Francesca Noumoff
Xlibris
978-1-4797-0606-8
Three Stars (out of Five)

In her latest work, Francesca Noumoff offers an account of Elonora, a Russian Holocaust survivor and violinist whose love for music sheltered her through hardship. The book is narrated by an ambiguous speaker who declares, “I am the history of sand, the weightless walk that comes from the wings of music. I am the witness who discovered her a decade ago after the Second World War.” Thirty-four lyrical vignettes alternate between scenes in a white cell during the final stages of Elonora’s life and recollections of a thriving Vienna, once an intellectual nexus for émigrés. Other subjects include Elonora’s sister, Elena; love; imprisonment in Cambodia; and imaginative flights, from Shangri-La to ghostly visitations from past figures and nursing home residents.

Noumoff ably renders Elonora’s liminal state, exploring the “conjunction between appearance and reality” by splicing bygone splendor and loss with crisp dialogue that pierces through gauzy descriptions. These startling self-realizations—one character remarks, “I worked hard to be blind, I failed,” Elonora herself says, “we cannot tell truth from illusion”—linger with bittersweetness. On occasion, repetitions of the titular refrain, mentions of the cell, and other talismanic images risk losing potency, as does the structure, which often introduces a character who speaks about his or her experience, and frequently concludes with a question or literary quote.

The most memorable selections are concisely wrought and strong enough to stand alone; they either feature a strong theme, such as forgetfulness and German passivity (“As If Nothing Had Happened”), or an unusual artist (“The Puppeteer,” “Knots”). Noumoff is at her best when the narrative ventures beyond the confines of Elonora’s own memories, allowing multiple voices to echo against history’s silences.

While the author’s homage to the forgotten is commendable, the project may prove controversial for readers who question whether the fictional portrayal of survivors is poetic license or appropriation—especially in the face of a literature marked by nonfiction writers and

survivors such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, among others. Still, for readers open to creative interpretations, *The Music…Oh, the Music* offers a worthy invocation to hold fast to beauty amid travesty. Recommended for those intrigued by short forms that border between genres, and those intrigued by Europe's twentieth-century cultural elite.

Karen Rigby