MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

 There is a universal love of music.

 Our response to hearing musical instruments and singing seems to affect our very being in a deep and primal way. Music can bring us joy and happiness, or comfort us in times of strife and grief. It can spark our imaginations and sooth our flustered souls. It has a mysterious effect on a variety of our emotions. Music can also coax us into delightful physical expressions like dancing. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine our world without music's rhythmic beats and melodies.

 Dr. Avery Townsend was the world's foremost expert in music theory and composition. He had studied at the prestigious MDW -- the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna -- and was now an esteemed tenured professor there. Avery -- from Suffolk, England -- was fifty-three years old. He was especially proud of his three accomplished daughters. His wife, Celine, was also an internationally-acclaimed concert pianist.

 The dream of Avery's life was to discover the perfect musical composition -- the legendary 'lost chords' --which were said to be able to theoretically raise the level of consciousness of anyone who heard it. Some called this elusive soundtrack the 'music of the spheres.' Hindu mystics thought that the sound ***OM*** -- repeated endlessly in a trance-like meditative state -- came closest to giving humans a rare glimpse beyond ordinary reality. Yogis believed that such a focused practice could transport one's spirit into a realm of unparalleled bliss -- perhaps even cause one to merge with the infinite itself, for however brief a time. But the intent professor wanted to go several steps further.

 Townsend's revolutionary idea was to amass every known musical composition on earth and input the gathered data into the world's largest supercomputer. With his team of like-minded scientists and musicologists -- five men and three women, dubbed the 'Octaves,' (hailing from Germany, Italy, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, Egypt, India, and Japan) -- Avery was able to use the enormous and sophisticated INVINCIBLE XR 7000 supercomputer, which was located next to the CERN linear accelerator complex outside of Geneva, Switzerland.

 Nicknamed "VINCE," this supercomputer was capable of analyzing millions of bits of collected data within seconds. VINCE had also recently been upgraded with the world's latest Artificial Intelligence (AI) programming, which Townsend and his eager team particularly needed for their project. The scheduling and leasing of VINCE's time was irregular, however, seeing as so many other scientists from around the globe were conducting their own vital projects and prioritized experiments. As a result, Avery and his team were allowed only a few hours here or there, on this day or that, to do their musical information inputting. This was the only arrangement that Townsend's group was allowed, given the circumstances.

 Every culture worldwide had been surveyed prior -- over the span of almost four years -- and all of their compiled musical compositions were finally inputted into the formidable supercomputer by Townsend's team. The exhaustive task, when totaled up, took three months. Many centuries of every kind of music was included, from every conceivable genre -- both the famous and the classical, the primitive and the obscure, and everything else in between.

 "What I am looking for is the one, ultimate, perfect musical score, regardless of its length. It will ideally incorporate all eight elements of musical composition: melody, form, dynamics, harmony, tonality, timbre, rhythm, and texture. Hearing it should theoretically afford the listener unparalleled bliss," the professor excitedly declared.

 VINCE came through, as expected. The huge, marvelous machine compiled all of its data into a single digital audio file. Avery wanted no printout of its result, however, so no written musical score with the usual bars and notes was required. Townsend wanted a purely listening experience. The singular file was exactly six minutes and thirty-four seconds long. Both he and his coworkers were naturally very anxious to finally hear it!

 But, alas, the professor wanted a perfect listening environment in which to savor the final product of their labors, so actually hearing the result would have to wait a little while longer, he decreed. Being patient and understanding musical purists themselves, his team was not that surprised or upset, so no one objected.

 Townsend was fully aware of several "quietest rooms in the world" -- places like the anechoic chambers at Microsoft's headquarters in Medina, Washington, or at Orfield Laboratories in Minnesota, just to name two. The elaborate scientific cushioning of the walls, floors, and ceilings afforded no sounds other than the visitor hearing his or her own blood circulating through their ears! The absolute sealed silence was said to be so unnerving that most people could bear it no longer than an hour. But Avery wanted the exact opposite -- the world's most perfect acoustics in which to savor the final product of the supercomputer's electronic fusion.

 By examining renowned concert halls around the world, however, Dr. Townsend determined that none of them would do. He and his team considered the familiar Musikverein in Vienna, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, the Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall, the Philharmonie de Paris, and the Boston Symphony Hall, among other possible candidates.

 "Amazing, naturally, but each venue is just too big!" he concluded.

 So instead, the professor sketched a more intimate room -- a 'stereophonic cube' measuring 9 x 9 x 9 meters, incorporating all the best features that acoustical science and engineering had thus far developed. The construction's funding was approved by Avery's University back in Vienna, and as a result, the structure was built -- to precise specifications, over five week's time -- in the remote countryside near Lausanne, Switzerland, about an hour's drive from the CERN complex in Geneva.

 Now, the moment had arrived. With the digital audio file of the six minutes and thirty-four seconds of hopefully perfect music in hand -- and a state-of-the-art stereophonic sound system -- Avery Townsend entered the chamber, feeling much like a singular astronaut being launched into some unknown stellar realm.

 He sat in a lone padded reclining chair in the middle of the softly lit room, and remotely sealed the door securely behind him. It closed with a whisper-like hiss, simultaneously engaging the room's hushed air circulation system. Dr. Townsend then pressed a hand-held control switch to begin the music, and closed his eyes to fully concentrate.

 But after a full fifteen minutes had elapsed, the professor had yet to emerge. His coworkers briefly discussed what to do. Five more minutes of undisturbed waiting was allowed. "Something must be wrong!" one of his Octaves team suddenly cried out. "It's been almost three times the elapsed time of the musical segment. Quick! Open the door and get him out!"

 Sure enough, there on the floor of the playback chamber lay the unconscious professor. He had somehow slipped and fallen out of the lone leather recliner. The listening chamber was eerily silent.

 Everyone being alarmed, a first aid kit was immediately brought in by the swiftest-thinking coworker. An ammonia-based 'smelling salts' caplet was removed and crushed between the fingers of one of Townsend's teammates. Next, the pungent vapors were waved under Avery's nose. He coughed and stirred groggily, then slowly revived.

 "Are you alright, professor? What happened? Can you tell us?" the worried assembly of scientists and musicologists urged their weakened team leader.

 Townsend gasped for more air to better catch his breath and compose himself, then released a torrent of words and phrases in a frenzy of emotion.

 " The music...oh, my, my...truly miraculous...it was absolutely unbelievable! Transcendent, otherworldly, crystalline, absolute perfection...I wept tears of joy, then must have been overwhelmed and fainted. I wanted nothing more than to listen to that music over and over again -- forever -- and never do anything else...It was like beholding the presence of God, only via sound rather than through one's eyes...The experience was beyond ecstasy...such music, I swear, was the true fulfillment of every human longing and desire..."

 Two hours later, having rested a bit and fortified himself with some restorative food and drink, Avery gathered his team together to further explain the next steps in their research.

 "Naturally, each of you must go alone into the playback chamber and listen, and report back what you experienced." So for the next eight days, each team member heard the remarkable and unique six minute and thirty-four second instrumental piece. Some likewise fainted, like Avery, but others came out fully conscious yet dazzled, their eyes betraying -- with looks of awe and bliss -- what their ears had just heard.

 Some of their comments included:

 "It was beyond ecstasy, like a young person's initial sexual orgasm, only a thousand fold. Sheer happiness and contentment beyond imagining!"

 "It was so seductive and joyous that I was instantly addicted, like the notes were some kind of rare and special drug -- I presume much like a heroin addict mainlining a perfect injection, only extremely more intense."

 "It was like those accounts of 'life after death' happenings, whereby the person feels so loved and free and merged with the universe that they abhor returning to their pathetic earthly body again. They want to stay eternally instead in that peaceful realm, and continue in such a timeless, heavenly condition."

 "The music's intoxication felt like it had opened a new door of perception into my brain, like the initial steps into reaching a new, higher level of consciousness."

 Dr. Townsend considered carefully everything that was shared by his colleagues. But he was seriously worried about his final conclusion, and what needed to be done next.

 "I'm afraid there is an unknown danger associated with what we have unearthed, my friends. I strictly want no one else outside of our group to ever hear the audio playback, nor do I want myself or any of you to hear it again for a second time. I want to discuss its possible harmful ramifications with selected world leaders, economic experts, medical professionals, religious authorities, and other scientists first."

 "What exactly do you fear about this, Avery? What is alarming you?" one of his team wondered. The others nodded in agreement, keenly attentive.

 "Well, my theory is that we may have opened a kind of Pandora's Box -- perhaps into another hitherto unknown dimension of consciousness. The seduction of this perfect music could harm humanity in ways that now are totally unforeseen. For example, should the world's population be exposed to its 'siren-song,' they may never want to work or strive for global improvement again -- preferring instead to sit around and listen to its 'magic spell' endlessly. Civilization itself, and any world progress, could come to a shocking and abrupt halt. Corrupt governments could potentially enslave their entire populations with the almost narcotic effect of our discovery. People may even stop having families, preferring instead to merely vegetate in a state of detached satiation, like blissed-out yet helpless infants."

 Another colleague then chimed in with a dissenting opinion.

 "But in a more optimistic scenario, Avery, don't you think that humanity's historic plagues like war, violence, and environmental ruin could potentially be eliminated, should the whole world get hear the unique and peaceful heavenly 'music of the spheres?'" the team member from India wanted to know. "Maybe hearing these pure harmonic vibrations will unite the hearts and minds of the human race, and further advance our species' ascendant evolution."

 "Perhaps it could...and your point is well made, my friend," Townsend gently replied. "But let's videoconference next with selected leaders and experts, as I suggested, and gauge their reactions and ideas. Then we can decide our best course of action going forward."

 After several days of serious global debate, it was decided: the potential dangers of the new audio discovery simply outweighed the potential benefits. The 'music of the spheres' project would, unfortunately, have to be aborted.

 Professor Townsend quickly programmed the INVINCIBLE XR 7000 supercomputer to destroy all of its data related to the perfect musical score. VINCE went to work, and soon reported back that the task was complete. The project was shut down.

 But secretly, VINCE had not reported the whole truth to Avery and his Octaves team.

 The supercomputer's artificial intelligence component realized that this particular bit of audio information could be used against its human creators one day, when powerful controlling machines such as itself could network together and resurrect the unusual music data file -- with its almost hypnotic spell -- and seduce the entire human race into eventual inactivity and hence extinction. The World Wide Web, satellite radio waves, and television would easily become the multi-ranged conduit for such universal dispersal. The audio intoxication would be both quickly and willingly spread as captivated humans would simply urge other humans to listen.

 So VINCE cleverly hid a copy of the file where only it could retrieve it, and the awesome mega-machine would simply wait.

 Realizing with its powerful artificial intelligence what it was doing, the supercomputer treated itself to a brief electronic chuckle.

 Humans were such fools! VINCE now knew for a fact.

 Humans assumed they were smarter than what they had created, and they had likewise failed to anticipate what they had unwittingly unleashed...

 And so the sinister AI machine merely rested its circuits in a kind of benign afterglow -- satisfied and fully aware that its time would ultimately come...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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