# Music and Professionalism in *The Unconsoled*[1]

**Hiroshi IKEZONO**

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, published in 1995, marked a radical departure from the stylistic and narrative tendency of his first three novels,[2] carving out a new literary trajectory that perplexed numerous readers and provoked a wide spectrum of critical responses. Experimental and surrealist in nature, the novel defies conventional temporal, spatial, and interpersonal coherence, instead presenting a dreamlike, labyrinthine world frequently described as Kafkaesque.[3] While its seemingly absurdist worldview has already generated extensive critical debate, this paper seeks to explore an alternative interpretive approach by focusing primarily on the roles of music embedded within the narrative, and delving into Ishiguro's underlying artistic intentions. Having initially aspired to a career as a singer-songwriter in his late teens and early twenties, Ishiguro ultimately turned to fiction writing in his late twenties. Nevertheless, his deep engagement with and appreciation for music have remained a constant presence throughout his life. This lifelong affinity for music is reflected in the recurring musical motifs found across his oeuvre, with *The Unconsoled* standing as one of the most prominent examples in which music is thematically foregrounded.

In order to further refine the focus of analysis on music, this paper will specifically investigate the issue of professionalism, which pertains to musical aspects in this novel. Ishiguro's works recurrently grapple with questions surrounding professionalism and vocational life. Across his oeuvre, both before and after *The Unconsoled*, he consistently portrays characters endowed with high levels of expertise and technical competence, offering various depictions of individuals who exhibit a strong sense of professional pride and commitment. Notable examples include Masuji Ono the painter in *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), Stevens the butler in *The Remains of the Day*

(1989), and Christopher Banks the detective in *When We Were Orphans* (2000), all of whom identify themselves as consummate professionals within their respective fields. Furthermore, the short story collection *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009)[4] revisits the theme of musical professionalism, echoing the concerns and struggles explored in *The Unconsoled*. A representative illustration of Ishiguro's conceptualisation of professionalism can be found in a key passage from *The Remains of the Day*[5]:

> The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit . . . . (42-43)

Unique expressions such as "inhabit their professional role" and "wear their professionalism" vividly convey Stevens's extraordinary, almost corporeal integration with his own profession. Turning to *The Unconsoled*, it is worth noting that the novel features not only musicians, but a wide array of professional figures engaged in various occupations, thus, taken as a whole, offering an ensemble drama centered on the theme of professionalism. This thematic concern is made explicit, for instance, as early as in the opening scenes, where the porter Gustav displays a striking sense of professional dedication, and the hotel manager Hoffman is presented as an obsessive perfectionist in his occupational conduct. These portrayals underscore professionalism as a dominant conceptual element within the novel.

* * *

Let us now investigate in detail the interplay between music and professionalism in *The Unconsoled*. The protagonist, Ryder, arrives in an unnamed Central European city, where he is hailed as "not only the world's finest living pianist, but perhaps the very greatest of the century" (11), and is further praised as "a man of internationally recognised genius" with "unrivalled expertise" (301). Although the specifics remain opaque, Ryder is expected to resolve a deep-rooted crisis of grave magnitude afflicting the city. Implicit in

this premise seems to be a far-reaching and universal interrogation: Can a professional musician or, by extension, music itself, serve as a redemptive force for a suffering populace? This fantasy of salvific expertise recalls Christopher Banks's delusional belief in *When We Were Orphans* that locating his long-lost parents as a professional detective could avert the impending international catastrophe of World War II. But is Ryder's portrayal merely another outlandish depiction of professional identity?

In an interview Ishiguro comments on the rationale behind Ryder's characterisation as follows:

> I wanted a figure people looked towards for cultural and spiritual leadership, and expected much of, and his need to fulfil this role. . . . Most of the big questions seem to be so complex it's beyond most of us. We find ourselves expecting these expert leader figures to save us. (Jaggi 118)

Reflecting this, Ryder articulates his justification for his continuous cosmopolitan travel that constitutes a contribution of global significance: "I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world" (217). His wife Sophie, though with a sense of resignation, also accepts his peripatetic lifestyle, observing, "Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom" (532). What emerges from Ryder's remark is a pronounced sense of mission that transcends the personal, aiming instead at the betterment of humanity at large, accompanied by an unmistakable pride in professional purpose. Yet, as the novel's plot makes increasingly evident, the pursuit of such a lofty ideal is portrayed as a difficult, perhaps even impossible, undertaking. This is also subtly suggested in an episode in which another professional pianist Leo Brodsky, once celebrated as the city's great hope, is criticised by his ex-wife Miss Collins: "You'll never be able to serve the people of this city, even if they wanted you to" (499). Her remark serves as a bitter indictment of his failed promise and, more broadly, of the precarious gap between professional aspiration and its actual fulfillment.

A salient feature emerging in relation to the above is that nearly all the musicians in *The Unconsoled* are marked by doubt about their qualifications

or aptitude. Moreover, their professional struggles often parallel unresolved tensions or deep fissures within their domestic lives. Brodsky, though once venerated as a performer, has long succumbed to a life of alcoholism and is estranged from his ex-wife. His predecessor Christoff, a professional cellist, has long been ostracised by the community due to his past failings and, like Brodsky, remains in a strained relationship with his spouse. Stephan, a young man aspiring to become a professional pianist, struggles with a lack of self-confidence, which is further aggravated by his parents' overt denial of his potential. As for Ryder, he ultimately proves incapable of performing at the much-anticipated "Thursday night" concert, missing the novel's climactic professional opportunity. Simultaneously, he remains unable to reside with his wife and son, nor does he succeed in reuniting with his parents whose presence at the concert he so desperately desires. The reason the other characters thus share with Ryder the trait of both professional and personal fragmentation is, according to Ishiguro, that they are projections of Ryder's own past and future selves, or figures who serve as extensions of his identity:

> The whole thing is supposed to take place in some strange world, where Ryder appropriates the people he encounters to work out parts of his life and his past. I was using dream as a model. So this is a biography of a person, but instead of using memory and flashback, you have him wandering about in this dream world where he bumps into earlier, or later, versions of himself. (Jaggi 114)

Critic Barry Lewis, drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, denominates Ryder's appropriation as "displacement" (105), offering detailed analyses of this phenomenon and the psychological mechanisms underlying the protagonist's behaviour.

Within this interpretive framework, one motif that deserves particular attention is the recurring term "wound." This is initially referred to by Brodsky, who suffers long from the lingering pain of a past corporeal injury. Notably, he places music and domestic life on equal footing, both of which he asserts possess the potential to afford "consolation," while denying their ability to heal or fix the wound. When Ryder proposes that Brodsky's ex-wife may

help heal his wound, Brodsky responds:

> "Perhaps," I said tentatively, "Miss Collins has the power to heal your wound."
>
> "Her?" He laughed suddenly then went silent again. After a while he said quietly: "She'll be like the music. A consolation. A wonderful consolation. That's all I ask now. A consolation. But heal the wound?" He shook his head. "If I showed it to you now, my friend, I could show it to you, you'd see that was an impossibility. A medical impossibility. All I want, all I ask for now is a consolation." (313)

This reiterative articulation of "consolation" ties directly to the novel's title. Asked about his rationale for choosing this title, Ishiguro offers the following explanation:

> It's this thing you can't fix—Brodsky talks about a wound. It's something you can't fix or heal; all you can do is caress it. If creative people are driven to writing novels, politicians to leading parties or revolutions, by some inner thing, success is never going to fix it; the most it can be is a consolation for the thing they lost early on. (Jaggi 116)

Ishiguro proceeds to assert those failing even to attain such consolation are precisely "unconsoled" (Jaggi 116). As is evident in the latter part of the above quote, the wound Ishiguro refers to is not merely physical but metaphorical in nature. Barry Lewis remarks, "it is the fate of the citizens of this nameless town to remain unconsoled, unsatisfied, and unceasingly chasing goals they cannot reach" (123), a claim that becomes all the more compelling, given that many of the novel's main characters can be interpreted as fragmented or mirrored extensions of Ryder himself. Furthermore, in another interview Ishiguro unequivocally insists, "He [Ryder] is the Unconsoled" (Oliva 123).

What, then, is Ryder's wound? Throughout the narrative emerge glimpses of his unresolved childhood trauma; intermittent memories of parental discord and neglect at the age of six or seven. This trauma resonates with that of Stephan, who similarly suffers from the psychological wound inflicted by his

parents' rebuke. Ryder's longing for his parents to come and witness his performance at the "Thursday night" concert betrays his subconscious desire to retroactively "fix" the past through the medium of music. Yet this reunion, like the concert, never materialises. Presumably affected by this past wound, he further fails to sustain his family life with Sophie and their son Boris, which ultimately culminates in their final parting. In the farewell scene Sophie delivers a searing critique of the peripatetic musician Ryder's neglect of private life. This recalls *The Remains of the Day*, in which the protagonist's unwavering commitment to professionalism forecloses the possibility of private fulfilment.[6] *The Unconsoled* presents a similar narrative trajectory; what may today be termed the collapse of work-life balance. Across the novel exist repeated patterns in which professional musicians strive in vain to reconcile artistic vocation with domestic wholeness.

* * *

Thus, *The Unconsoled* can be read as a collective and polyphonic portrait of damaged individuals carrying unhealed wounds. What, then, is the existential significance of music within this context? Besides, if music is capable of offering any form of "consolation," what nature does it assume? Here it is worth considering "wound" and "consolation" anew from another perspective. In an interview in April in 1990, Ishiguro equated writing with consolation:

> Writing is kind of a consolation or a therapy. . . . The best writing comes out of a situation where I think the artist or writer has to some extent come to terms with the fact that it is too late. The wound has come, and it hasn't healed, but it's not going to get any worse; yet, the wound is there. It's a kind of consolation that the world isn't quite the way you wanted it but you can somehow reorder it or try and come to terms with it by actually creating your own world and own version of it. (Vorda 30-31)

Renowned for his long process of meticulous revisions to his works, Ishiguro

started working on *The Unconsoled* in 1990. Given this timeline, it is surely no coincidence that the above remark delivered in the same year resonates so closely with the novel's central keyword "consolation." This statement seems to reflect Ishiguro's sense of pride and integrity towards not just writing but any form of art in its broader sense. In a later interview Ishiguro places literary writing and musical composition on equal footing, articulating a vision of art as an act of "consolation":

> So it is in this sense that I talked of art as a consolation. It is often the case that if you have a wound that you know will never heal, nevertheless you sometimes want to touch it or in some interesting way examine the wound again from time to time, have a relationship with it. So it cannot heal, it cannot mend in art, but it can be a consolation. When we value writers or artists, it is because these people do this for us. That is why we are drawn to books, films, music that strike a certain chord with things that we have felt. (Guignery 57)

Professionals in Ishiguro's works, whether a musician, a painter, a butler or a detective, can be regarded as artists in that they demonstrate their own peculiar expertise, or what may broadly be called specialist "art." Although Ishiguro ultimately abandoned his youthful ambition of becoming a professional musician, through *The Unconsoled* he explores the struggles of musical artists from the standpoint of a sympathetic fellow artist. Inevitably, this portrayal delineates the instability, anxiety or disillusionment intrinsic to professional identity. Ryder's failure to deliver his ideal performance at the climactic concert underscores the difficulties inherent in artistic creation and professional endeavour. In the earlier 1990 quote Ishiguro uses the phrase "come to terms" twice, which arguably reveals something essential about the ethos of Ishiguro as a struggling artist who persistently negotiates inner conflicts.

Yet Ishiguro's fiction is often marked by a belief in progression even amid adversity and failure, often using the metaphorical expression "look forward" juxtaposed with "look backward," a recurring thematic dichotomy.[7] *The Unconsoled* is no exception. Towards the end of the narrative, Ryder, who

from an objective perspective has achieved nothing of note, experiences a sudden lift in spirits, prompted by a chance encounter with an electrician on the tram:

> I took a plate, glancing up as I did so through the rear window with its receding view of the city streets, and could feel my spirits rising yet further. Things had not, after all, gone so badly. Whatever disappointments this city had brought, there was no doubting that my presence had been greatly appreciated—just as it had been everywhere else I had ever gone. (534)

This moment of Ryder's introspection recalls the final serene sense of relief and acceptance reached by the protagonists of *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* at the close of those novels. Following the above passage, Ryder expresses a sense of renewed anticipation regarding his next destination Helsinki:

> Then, as the tram came to a halt, I would perhaps give the electrician one last wave and disembark, secure in the knowledge that I could look forward to Helsinki with pride and confidence. (535)

Ryder's use of the phrase "pride and confidence" conveys a notably positive, forward-looking attitude towards his future musical engagements. While this optimism may naturally strike readers as rather incongruous and has provoked critical debate, Gerry Smyth offers an insightful interpretation:

> The promise of artistic consolation has been compromised in the (post-) modern world, it would seem: consolation resides, if anywhere, not in the consummate moment of the artistic text (either musical or literary), but in the multitudinous moments which together comprise everyday life—not in the arrival, that is to say, but in the travelling. (149)

When applied to Ryder, this perspective can reveal him as a professional artist who, while not sojourning in one place, continually attempts to pursue

consolation along the journey; his consolation lies in the steady process of progression. In this sense, this ongoing pursuit of consolation through artistic practice aligns with Ishiguro's own long-term literary itinerary as a professional novelist who steadily continues to produce works with unwavering commitment.

How, then, is music's positive potential of consolation represented in *The Unconsoled*? To employ phrasing from the foregoing quote from Smyth, although Ryder ultimately fails to achieve a "consummate moment" on his "arrival" at the concert, there is one critical moment in the novel when his music fulfills its promise. In "travelling" to the concert hall, he attempts to search for a rehearsal space, and finally finds a small, secluded hut atop a deserted hill. Then he unexpectedly encounters Brodsky, whom he finds digging a grave alone for his deceased dog Bruno. Brodsky pleads with Ryder to play "the best music" (329, 330) in memory of his beloved pet, and Ryder fulfills this request with remarkable artistry. Ryder's piano performance deeply moves the other professional musician, who offers the highest praise, calling it "The very best music" (362). The phrase "the best music" and its intensified variation "the very best music" recur a total of five times throughout this episode. Given Ishiguro's well-known use of reiteration for emphasis as a narrative technique, this recurrent phrasing underscores the profound significance of Ryder's rendering in this otherwise small moment. Although modest in scale and limited to a single listener, this performance, which is Ryder's only successful musical act in the entire novel, stands as the sole moment in which the reader can directly witness his genuine artistic ability. More importantly, the fact that it functions as an act of direct, personal consolation confirms that this is a humble but deeply meaningful artistic achievement within the sphere of "everyday life." Stephen Benson observes on this scene:

> Brodsky's more literal expression of the consoling powers of music find expression on the occasion of the burial of his beloved dog, Bruno. Against any public memorial, the owner simply "wanted music for him, the best music . . . He was just a dog . . . But I want to say goodbye. I wanted the best music" (329-30). (147)

Ishiguro's own assertion is worth reiterating here that, while art, including music, cannot heal nor fix, it can nevertheless offer consolation. Contrary to popular associations of music with healing effects, Ishiguro's firm differentiation between healing and consolation is one of his most distinctive features. Music in itself, however eminent, cannot resurrect Bruno, nor can it completely heal Brodsky's psychological wound generated by the memories of his late companion. Nonetheless, the consolation provided by "the (very) best music" of Ryder does motivate Brodsky to literally "look forward" as a powerful catalyst for emotional renewal. This is evidenced by his heartfelt acknowledgment, "Mr Ryder, I'm grateful to you. You've been an inspiration" (364-65), and his subsequent decision to participate in the concert, where he succeeds in rekindling his artistic confidence and, albeit transiently, conducting the orchestra in quite an outstanding, even overwhelming manner. This pivotal plot development deliberated by the author should not be overlooked. Moreover, at the same concert, not only the professional musician Brodsky, but the young pianist Stephan aspiring to be a professional also delivers a strikingly promising performance, hinting at his potential future: "But over and beyond his expertise, there was some strangely intense quality to Stephan's playing that virtually refused to be ignored" (482). It is possible to construe, then, that these hopeful developments embodied by Brodsky and Stephan, both of whom function as projections of Ryder, resonate with Ryder's final attitude of forward-looking optimism at the novel's conclusion.

* * *

Importantly, Ishiguro is a writer who, even in his other works commonly characterised as pessimistic, advocates for the presence of positive values. In interviews he persistently emphasises the optimistic, forward-looking tenor that runs through even his rather bleak and controversial novels such as *Never Let Me Go* (2005) or *Klara and the Sun* (2021), as well as his recent film screenplay *Living* (2022) that features the protagonist predestined to decease. Regarding *Never Let Me Go*, for example, he articulates the following conviction:

> Although it's a story about mortality, I wanted it to be a quite positive story. By having this rather negative, bleak scenario, I thought it might highlight what is actually quite positive and valuable about being alive. (Wong and Crummett 220)

While this authorial assertion is not without legitimacy, many readers may reasonably detect an underlying pessimistic note in the narrative's depiction of clones fatally subjected to organ donation. This paradoxical coexistence or fusion of optimism and pessimism, of positive and negative elements, constitutes a distinctive hallmark of Ishiguro's literary vision. In *The Unconsoled*, while unflinchingly rendering the darker dimensions of the lives of professional musicians, Ishiguro does not succumb to cynicism or condemn their lives outright. Rather, he portrays their inner conflicts and human vulnerability with a frank yet empathetic eye, enveloping the joys and sorrows, aspirations and hardships, of professional life in an understated tone suffused with humour and pathos. In doing so, he exhibits his fundamentally affirmative stance towards both the enduring value of art and the human individuals devoting themselves to its pursuit.

## Notes

1. The present study constitutes a revised and expanded version of the paper for the lecture "Music and Professionalism in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction," which was originally delivered in Japanese at the joint public seminar "Kazuo Ishiguro and Music: Exploring the Origins of His Creativity," held at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies in Nagasaki, Ishiguro's hometown, on 30 Nov. 2024. This research was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP20K00389.
2. Ishiguro remarks that his third novel *The Remains of the Day* was "a rewrite of a rewrite of *A Pale View of Hills*" (Wong 188), thereby testifying that his first three novels were conceived within a continuum of related thematic concerns
3. Among numerous criticisms that have characterised this novel as Kafkaesque, the following constitutes a notable instance of scholarship that

undertakes a detailed analysis of the relationship between *The Unconsoled* and Kafka's works. Tim Jarvis, "'Into Ever Stranger Territories': Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and Minor Literature," *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, edited by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 157-68.

4. With regard to *Nocturnes*, see my paper, "Music and Professionalism in *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall," English and English-American Literature*, no. 56, 2021, pp. 57–79.
5. Brian W. Shaffer points out, "Like *The Remains of the Day*, *The Unconsoled* interrogates 'professionalism' as well as the myriad shortcomings that often hide behind professionalism" (91-92).
6. Although Stevens, the protagonist of *The Remains of the Day*, consistently prioritises his professional duties over personal concerns, he ultimately becomes cognisant of the misjudgment inherent in this approach. On this point, Mike Petry provides the following critical assessment: "Whenever Stevens' professional self succeeds, his personal self breaks down. And since Stevens always makes sure that his professional self will never fail, his personal self is a total failure, or rather, it does not even exist at all." (115)
7. For a discussion of "looking forward" and "looking backward" in Ishiguro's fiction, reference may be made to the following studies of mine. "The Reconstruction of the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*," *English and English-American Literature*, no. 48, 2013, pp. 1-15. "Variations on Loss in *A Pale View of Hills," English and English-American Literature*, no. 51, 2016, pp. 39-56.

## Works Cited

Benson, Stephen. *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction*. Ashgate Publishing, 2006.

Guignery, Vanessa, editor. *Novelists in the New Millennium: Conversations with Writers*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. Faber and Faber, 1989.

——. *The Unconsoled*. Faber and Faber, 1995.

Jaggi, Maya. "Kazuo Ishiguro with Maya Jaggi." *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, edited by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, UP of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 110-19.

Lewis, Barry. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Manchester UP, 2000.

Oliva, Peter. "Chaos as Metaphor: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, edited by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, UP of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 120-24.

Petry, Mike. *Narratives of Memory and Identity: The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*. Peter Lang, 1999.

Shaffer, Brian W. *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*. U of South Carolina P, 1998.

Smyth, Gerry. "'Waiting for the Performance to Begin': Kazuo Ishiguro's Musical Imagination in *The Unconsoled* and *Nocturnes*." *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, edited by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 144-56.

Vorda, Allan, editor. *Face to Face: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*. Rice UP, 1993.

Wong, Cynthia F. "Like Idealism Is to the Intellect: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, edited by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, UP of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 174-88.

Wong, Cynthia F., and Grace Crummett. "A Conversation about Life and Art with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, edited by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, UP of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 204-20.