

Resonance and Resistance

By Scot Noel

3:00 AM. In his loft apartment, Aaron Gray pulled a throw blanket across his shoulders and kept playing. His instrument, a reciprocator he called Consolation, trembled against his chest. Its neural sensitive strings thrummed beneath his fingers. He was close, but a hint of discord jarred his little finger on the reverse strum.

Another sleepless night found Aaron at the loft's panoramic windows, his gaze sweeping across the city to Huntsman Tower, where the lights of the Resonance Chamber twinkled in the dark. That was his goal. *One more recital.* With the middle finger of his left hand, he pressed the *dex* string to the fretboard. *An audition really.* With his right thumb he plucked at the same string into *eso* mode.

There it was! His surgery was kicking in. *Finally!*

Aaron smiled and played out the chord, added another, moved on to a phrase and ended with a joyful cadence. *Was it cheating?* He did not care. For an elementary school teacher to afford a custom muselink, it meant mortgaging the future. With each rush of emotion from his curved, resin-wood instrument, Aaron's confidence grew. Combining the latest in talent-tech with Aaron's old Harmonia R-17 recipricator had been a risk, but he could never afford an implant *and* a new instrument.

Even though his first class was only a few hours away, Aaron felt he could never sleep now. He had to go on!

After a sip of cold coffee, he shifted to the *maeor* array, testing its mournful strings. The recipicator answered with a velvet sigh —perfect pitch, perfect tremolo— yet the note lodged in his throat like a warning. He closed his eyes, letting the resonance flood back through the MuseLink’s limbic circuit. *It tingled* A starburst of synesthetic color pulsed behind his eyelids. Cerulean blue faded to deep violet, then scattered when fatigue made his hands twitch.

Enough. He set Consolation on its cradle beside the sofa and rubbed the pads of his fingertips. The loft smelled of burnt coffee and rosin, the two great perfumes of failure. Outside, the eastern rim of the skyline bled from black to gray. Dawn was coming. Somewhere in that glow, Huntsman Tower’s beacon winked out, a lighthouse extinguished at daybreak.

Aaron’s head slumped forward. Just a moment’s rest, he promised himself, stretching out on the sofa with the throw blanket still around his shoulders, the implanted MuseLink humming like a miniature transformer behind his ear.

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A chime, sharp as a broken window, yanked him upward. Disoriented, Aaron fumbled for his slate. Three minutes to seven; it wasn’t his alarm.

INCOMING: Circle Audition Scheduling Desk

—Slot confirmed: 10:00 am today

—Venue: Resonance Chamber, Huntsman Tower

—Check-in cutoff: 10:00 AM

—Reply ACCEPT to confirm.

Aaron's breath hitched. Ten o'clock. He taught fifth-grade ensemble at nine. He'd already sacrificed his last sick day on the implant recovery. One more absence and Principal Giardello would gleefully end his embarrassing day job, along with any hope he had of making rent.

The message icon winked— the confirm was time limited. He had less than a minute to make up his mind. Was there really a choice? Success or salary. Validation or eviction.

With the dexterous thumbs of a *recip* player, Aaron typed ACCEPT in a flash and hit send. The slate blinked green. He wouldn't bother to call Giardello, he decided.

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The robo car arrived quickly, was clean, and had plenty of space for his instrument, his old-fashioned sheet music, and a small transmission amplifier. He felt a chill of happiness as he closed the door and answered the car's request for a destination. It was an inner smile with a half-life of only a few minutes. By the time they reached the City Center, the crowds were spilling over the sidewalks and into the street. There were signs being pumped up and down on angry arms. Loud and rhythmic voices hit the car windows like sticks on drumheads.

The car slowed to a crawl and stopped, as did all the others in front of them and behind.

"Can you get around this?" Aaron asked. Even he heard the slight hint of panic in his tone.

“No, sir,” the car answered in a voice modulated to recognize and echo his concern. “The streets have been blocked. This is a flash protest organized by the CLF. I would have rerouted had I known.”

“Cognitive Liberty Front,” Aaro mumbled. “Idiots!”

“Of course, sir. If you are lucky, they will only damage me.” The voice was as calm as only a machine in danger could be.

“Why would they damage you?” Aaron asked, genuinely curious.

“They believe I am part of a government conspiracy to read the thoughts of those who use my services or those whom I pass in the course of transporting others.”

“Can you?” Aaron asked, perhaps more innocently than intended.

“Not directly, sir. Be careful out there.” This last was said just in the moment before Aaron decided to place his hand on the door release.

“Why do you say that?” Aaron asked, not at all innocently.

“You play a reciprocator, Sir, paired with a muselink implant. The CLF is not your audience. I do advise, Sir, take care.”

This last part of the exchange startled Aaron, as he had shared none of that information with the car. Proximity comm signals he guessed. Would the Resonance Chamber scan for that? He had thought that having the doctor implant the muselink deeper was good enough; he couldn’t feel it when he pressed skin to bone behind his ear.

The crowd pressed closer and he backed into them as he exited the car, dragging his reciprocator and gear out after him. He wanted to say good luck to the car, but it didn't seem a good idea; they were already rocking the vehicle even as more people joined voices with the choir of disapproval in the street.

"Stop the Echosym Scans" and "Thoughts Are Not Crimes," they shouted! From the entrance to a nearby alley, loudspeakers entered the fray. The leaders of the protest were speaking. *"The police are using neural-intention scans—crowd control drones are in place. Be ready to disperse."*

###

Aaron pushed through the crowd, clutching Consolation to his chest like a shield. Someone jostled him, their elbow catching the edge of his transmission amp. A woman in a CLF bandana noticed his instrument case.

"Hey, you with that thing!" she called, pointing at his reciprocator. "You know they're using those to modulate crowd emotions, right? The government's patched into the neural feedback!"

"I'm just trying to get to an audition," Aaron said, hunching his shoulders defensively. The crowd parted slightly, a momentary river of scorn flowing around him.

"At the Resonance Chamber?" A tall man with tech-canceling glasses zeroed in on him. "That place is ground zero. They say the Circle can make a whole audience feel whatever they want."

Aaron's stomach clenched. An absurd accusation— the Circle was about musical purity, not manipulation. That's why they banned MuseLinks in the first place.

"Look, I'm late," he muttered, pushing forward.

His MuseLink hummed behind his ear, a gentle vibration that seemed to grow stronger as the crowd's agitation increased. Was it responding to their collective emotions? He'd never felt it react to anything but his own playing before.

A police drone hovered overhead, its speaker crackling to life: "This gathering has been designated unlawful. Disperse immediately!"

The crowd roared in defiance. Aaron ducked down a side street, his heart hammering. The clock on a bank display read 9:45. Fifteen minutes to check-in.

Huntsman Tower loomed ahead, its glass façade reflecting morning sunlight like a massive crystalline reciprocator string. Aaron broke into a run.

"Name?" The receptionist's gaze flickered over Aaron's disheveled appearance without emotion.

"Aaron Gray." His fingers drummed nervously on Consolation's case. "I have an audition at ten?"

She tapped her screen. "You're cutting it close, Mr. Gray. The Circle will be waiting" Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Standard neural scan is required for all visitors. Please stand still."

Aaron's mouth went dry. "Neural scan? Is that—is that new?"

"Security measure. The protests have everyone on edge." She gestured to a discreet panel beside the desk. "Just a moment, please."

A thin beam of light swept over him. Aaron held his breath, certain the scan would detect his MuseLink. His career would end before it began.

The panel beeped. "You're clear," the receptionist said, sounding almost disappointed. "Practice room three. Maestro Voss will meet you there."

Relief flooded through him. The museum-grade scanner must not be calibrated for a custom bone implant.

Aaron hurried down the marble corridor, passing practice rooms where other musicians prepared. Through sound-dampened doors, he caught fragments of music—pure, unaugmented performances by players who'd earned their skill through decades of discipline. Not shortcuts like his.

Practice room three was empty save for a single chair and a music stand. Aaron removed Consolation from its case and began tuning, his fingers trembling slightly. The MuseLink buzzed inside his skull, responding to his anxiety.

Just as he finished, the door opened. A woman in an impeccably tailored suit entered, her silver hair swept into a severe bun.

"Maestro Voss," Aaron said, jumping to his feet.

"Mr. Gray." Her voice was as precise as a metronome. "Always interesting seeing you again. What is this, your seventh audition?"

"Something like that," Aaron admitted.

She circled him slowly, observing his posture, his grip on the reciprocator. "And yet you have always shown a touch of improvement with each attempt. Hard work can, I suppose, emulate talent."

Aaron's throat tightened at Voss's slight. "I've been practicing intensively."

"Hmm." She gestured to the chair. "Play the Moretti Sequence. All seven emotional arrays."

Aaron sat, positioning Consolation against his body. He began with Eunoia, the joy string, letting his fingers dance across the subsidiary strings—Jubilante, Serenita, Ludica. The notes flowed from him with a perfection he'd never achieved before the MuseLink.

As he transitioned to Maeror, the melancholy array, something unexpected happened. Maestro Voss's expression softened, her eyes growing distant. A tear formed at the corner of her eye, then another.

Aaron continued, moving through each emotional array—Ira, Timor, Mirabilia, Desiderium, Concordia—watching in amazement as the stoic Maestro responded viscerally to each shift. When he finished, she stood silent for a long moment.

"Remarkable," she finally said, her voice unsteady. "I've never felt such... directness of emotion from a player at your level."

Pride surged through Aaron, followed by guilt. The MuseLink had amplified his playing beyond natural ability, creating an emotional conduit more powerful than raw talent.

"There's something different about your technique," Maestro Voss said, studying him intently. "The Circle would be most interested in exploring it further."

"You mean... I passed?"

"Conditionally." She handed him a card. "Report to this address tomorrow morning."

Aaron stared at the card. Department of Cognitive Security. A government agency.

"I don't understand," he said slowly.

"The reciprocator was originally developed as an emotional regulation tool," Maestro Voss explained. "The Circle has always known its potential extends beyond mere entertainment. Recently, we've been approached about lending the talents of some of our players to a study."

The protests outside suddenly made more sense. "Wait a minute. You don't want me as a player; you want me pawn me off on these people so your musicians won't have to..."

"Careful, Mr. Gray," Voss said calmly. "The offer is real. Your abilities speak for themselves. Let's call this... an initiation."

"You want to use reciprocator music to control people?"

"Not I, Mr. Gray. Think of it more as creating harmony in society." Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "Of course, the choice is always yours. You are free to return to teaching children how to play 'Hot Cross Buns.'"

Aaron clutched Consolation tighter. "I need to think about it."

"Not too long." Maestro Voss walked to the door. "You have an appointment to keep."

When she was gone, Aaron slumped in the chair, the MuseLink throbbing painfully behind his ear.

The sun was high as Aaron left Huntsman Tower, beating down upon the now-empty streets. The protesters had dispersed, leaving only remnants of signs and a police cordon.

His slate buzzed with an incoming message from Principal Giardello: TERMINATION NOTICE. No surprise there. He should have felt devastated, but a strange numbness had settled over him.

Halfway home, his MuseLink pulsed—an unfamiliar, uncomfortable sensation. It had never activated without his playing before.

He ducked into an alley and removed his slate, searching for "MuseLink unauthorized activation." The results chilled him. Reports of random emotional surges in users. A statement from MuseLink's manufacturer acknowledging "passive emotional monitoring for product improvement."

A notification popped up: MUSELINK UPDATE AVAILABLE. ACCEPT?

Aaron hesitated, then rejected it. If they could update the device remotely, what else could they do?

Back in his apartment, Aaron placed Consolation on its stand and paced. The offer from Maestro Voss represented everything he'd worked for— validation, recognition, belonging. A chance to play in the Resonance Chamber. Did he really have a choice?

He approached his window, gazing at Huntsman Tower. The Resonance Chamber's lights glowed softly in the darkness. So close, yet suddenly threatening.

Aaron's MuseLink pulsed again, sending a wave of artificial serenity through him. He recognized the pattern—Concordia. Tranquilla. A perfect third-string harmony designed to create calm acceptance.

Was someone playing him.

His reciprocator seemed to call to him from across the room. He picked it up, running his fingers along its strings without playing. Even without sound, the neural connection tingled.

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With grim resolve, Aaron found the address on the card Voss had given him. Despite his misgivings, he was out of options. No job, no Circle audition on the horizon—this government connection was his last chance.

The next evening, Aaron arrived at the address—not a government building as he'd expected, but a trendy lounge called Harmonic Convergence in the arts district. Inside, vintage

reciprocators adorned the exposed brick walls beneath strings of glowing orbs. A small stage stood at the center, surrounded by intimate seating arrangements.

"Aaron Gray?" A young woman with bright purple hair approached him. "I'm Petra, talent coordinator. We're so excited to have you. The Circle doesn't often send us players of your caliber."

"The Circle sent me?" Aaron's confusion must have shown.

"Well, not officially," she winked. "But we know how these things work. Get set up—you're on in ten."

Aaron found himself before a small audience of perhaps thirty people, all wearing the latest fashion tech—neural responsive clothing that rippled with color in response to emotional states, subtle implant scarring behind ears and at temples. MuseLink users, all of them.

He played cautiously at first, sticking to basic harmonies and simple emotional arrays. The audience responded with polite appreciation. When he shifted to Mirabilia, the wonder string, he felt something unusual—a faint echo returning through his MuseLink, as if his emotions were being amplified and reflected back to him.

He paused, adjusting his approach. When he launched into a complex Desiderium sequence, he felt it distinctly—a carrier wave riding his music outward, then channeling back through him, modulated somehow. The audience's expressions grew more uniformly entranced, their neural-reactive clothing pulsing in synchronized patterns.

Someone was using his playing as a conduit.

After his set, a well-dressed man approached. "Exceptional performance. We'd like to book you for a two-week engagement. Starting tomorrow."

"And you are...?"

"Just call me Marcus. I handle the talent acquisition here." He offered a generous contract on his slate.

Aaron hesitated only briefly before signing. Without Giardello's school salary, he needed this.

For the next week, Aaron played nightly sets. The crowds grew larger, more responsive. He enjoyed the attention, the validation—everything he'd sought from the Circle. But each night, he felt that strange carrier wave more distinctly, riding his emotional projections into the audience.

During a particularly moving rendition of Maeror's *Lacrimosa*, he noticed half the audience crying in perfect unison—not the natural, individual responses of moved listeners, but a synchronized emotional reaction.

That night, Aaron barely slept. He sat with *Consolation*, experimenting with discordant patterns, deliberately mismatching emotional arrays. When he played *Jubilante* against *Trepidante*, creating conflicting joy and anxiety signals, his MuseLink buzzed unpleasantly.

The next evening, he subtly incorporated these dissonant patterns into his performance, interweaving them with crowd-pleasing harmonies. The carrier wave stuttered, then reestablished itself. The audience shifted uncomfortably before settling back into uniformity.

Each night, Aaron refined his technique, increasing the intensity of his disruptions while keeping them just below the threshold of detection. He discovered that certain rhythmic patterns seemed to interfere more effectively with the carrier wave than others. By his fifth performance, he could briefly block the wave entirely during specific sequences.

On the tenth night, Aaron made his decision. He began with a conventional set, drawing the audience and unseen monitors into complacency. Then, during his finale—an ambitious Concordia sequence that should have united the audience in peaceful harmony—he unleashed his counter-melody.

The reciprocator wailed under his fingers, its strings vibrating with deliberate, calculated discord. Eunoia fought against Timor, joy and fear canceling each other in jagged waves. The carrier signal faltered, tried to compensate, then collapsed entirely.

Aaron felt something new through his MuseLink—a momentary connection directly to the audience, unfiltered by external control. In that instant of clarity, he understood he could redirect the neural pathways his mysterious handlers had been exploiting. With a final, precise sequence across all seven emotional arrays simultaneously, he "flipped the switch"—in a sense rewiring the neural receptors in every MuseLink user present.

The audience rose to their feet, applauding wildly. They didn't know why, couldn't articulate what had changed, but they felt it—a lifting of invisible pressure, a return to authentic emotional response.

Before he left he saw Marcus scowling at the young talent coordinator, Petra.

Aaron bowed and walked off, packing Consolation quickly. Petra caught his arm at the side exit.

"Whatever you just did," she whispered, "it was amazing. But you won't be playing here again."

She was right. By morning, his contract was terminated. His calls to Maestro Voss went unanswered. When he appeared at Huntsman Tower to inquire about his status with the Circle, the receptionist's smile was cold.

"I'm afraid evidence has been presented that you possess unauthorized neural enhancement technology. The Circle has a strict policy against talent-tech. Your application privileges have been permanently revoked."

The times to follow were the toughest of his life. Without a job or prospects, Aaron's finances dwindled quickly. Two months later, he was sleeping in shelters, playing Consolation in subway stations for spare change. His MuseLink still functioned, but the government seemed to have abandoned interest in him—a broken tool, no longer useful.

Then came another flash protest. Aaron followed the crowd, Consolation strapped to his back. When police drones appeared overhead, he felt it—the subtle neural pressure of crowd pacification signals.

He unstrapped his reciprocator and began to play, but no one listened. The crowd pushed past him, focused on their anger. Still, he played. He sought out the carrier wave and

tried to send it back to its hidden masters. Soon lost in the effort, Aaron played with a vengeance.

"Hey! Reciprocator guy!" A familiar voice called out. The woman in the CLF bandana from his first encounter was moving against the flow of protesters. "It's you, isn't it? From Harmonic Convergence?"

"You were there?" Aaron asked.

"Ha. Where aren't we? What you did that night—blocking the signal... well, we just have one question. Are you tired of starving yet?" She gestured to a small group of people wearing tech-analysis gear. "I'm Eliza. Want to talk?."

Over the following weeks, Aaron found himself in underground CLF labs, working with tech specialists to decode and counter government emotional manipulation systems. He taught basic reciprocator skills to volunteers, showing them how specific harmonies could block external influence.

They couldn't pay him much, but they found him an apartment—a tiny place with thin walls, far from Huntsman Tower's gleaming presence. Some nights, when doubt crept in, Aaron would look at his worn reciprocator and wonder what might have been if he'd chosen differently.

Six months after his Harmonic Convergence performance, Aaron sat in a community center basement, surrounded by a circle of students with beginner's reciprocators. None had his

talent, but they played with authentic passion, learning to recognize the patterns of manipulation in commercial music and government broadcasts.

"Remember," he told them, "the recipicator doesn't just project emotion—it can protect it too. Your feelings are your own. No one has the right to control them."

A young woman at the edge of the circle played a tentative Mirabilia sequence, her face lighting up as she felt the wonder string's resonance without augmentation or control.

Aaron smiled. It wasn't the Resonance Chamber. His name wouldn't appear in musical journals or on prestigious programs. But for the first time since his childhood, before ambition and desperation drove him to compromise, he felt the pure joy of music for its own sake.

That night, he stood on the roof of his apartment building. In the distance, Huntsman Tower still gleamed, the Resonance Chamber's lights a constellation of lost dreams. Aaron lifted his recipicator and played a simple melody—no neural feedback, no audience to impress, just the honest expression of his own unfiltered heart.

The sound carried down to the street where people paused, listening not because they were compelled, but because they chose to hear.

END

Notes:

Big space and time saver found was: Aaron was going to go meet with Government, but that would have been a 1,000 word scene as it was – so I had him go to the address given, take the gig offered, and over time find out that yes, that was the government interview and they are using him. This probably needs a few lines in the narrative to substantiate it.

The CLF aren't going to like brain implants – so perhaps Aaron short circuits his implant in the climax?

Also, during his two week gig, more people came – those without implants – and the government was happy with that at first. This is important, because for the CLF to accept him, the brain implant is probably a deal breaker, as is the limitation of only tech talent people being attracted. Perhaps two weeks turns into two months, and Aaron enjoys the time, but wonders what's going on and when he will be called back to Huntsman Tower.

Finally, the CLF people say – we've been watching you, you still have the ability without the implant being operational. Let's see how far you can take it.

To make the cool ending line in the narrative have "resonance" (ha ha) with the story, I think Aaron has to realize that the growing crowds he's entertaining are being brought in by what the government is doing in interfering with their carrier wave. Something like that.