Notes From the Underground

A newspaper columnist recounts his unlikely friendship with a homeless musician.

THE SOLOIST
A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and The Redemptive Power of Music
By Steve Lopez
Putnam. 273 pp. $25.95

Reviewed by Daniel J. Levitin

In 1980 I entered the Berklee College of Music, a fiercely competitive and, I soon discovered, disorienting program for musicians. The disorienting part was this: Although I had been the best saxophone player in my high school, I was barely average in music school.

On the commute home every evening I found no consolation. In every doorway, tunnel and subway station in Boston, there were great musicians: Even the bums were virtuosi. As Steve Lopez wryly observes in The Soloist, in music there is always someone better than you, someone with more time to practice, more willing to do without a meal, an extra hour of sleep, even if that will get him closer to his dreams.

Lopez, a columnist for the Los Angeles Times, first happened upon Nathaniel Ayers "dressed in rags on a busy downtown street corner, playing Beethoven on a battered violin that looks like it's been pulled from a dumpster." The guy sounded "pretty good." Later Lopez found out that Ayers had been a classmate of cellist Yo-Yo Ma at Julliard in the 1970s until he suffered a schizophrenic breakdown. Forced to leave school, Ayers ended up performing on Skid Row in Los Angeles, all but oblivious to the surrounding muggers, drug addicts, prostitutes and sewer rats.

The Soloist begins as "the tale of a man, stunned by a blow thirty years earlier, who carries on with courage and dignity, spirit intact." But it delivers far more as we follow Lopez's attempts to help Ayers bring a medicum of discipline to his life and music. Several readers of Lopez's column send musical instruments for Ayers, but Lopez becomes haunted by the idea that he may be doing the musician more harm than good, that the new bounty will increase the chances of his getting mugged or beaten to death. Lopez struggles with questions of how much autonomy should be accorded the mentally ill. To be sure, Ayers doesn't handle his life the way Lopez would (or wants him to), but the issue keeps coming up. To what extent does one individual have the right to try to influence another? When we try to help someone "for their own good," do we really know better than they what will ultimately make them happy?

Lopez arranges for a room in a nearby shelter to be designated as a de facto instrument locker, so that Ayers doesn't have to lug everything around in an easy-to-roll shopping cart. He tries to get Ayers into therapy and to spend at least one night a week in a homeless shelter. Ayers's own suspicions (some of them well-justified) and fierce independence thwart attempts to "mainstream" him. Lopez arranges for Ayers's estranged sister to visit from another state. The reunion is not without disappointment for all concerned. Each small victory toward bringing the homeless genius closer to normalcy is met with a backlash or a downward slide, paranoia and gratitude living in an uneasy alternation. Lopez hangs on, driven by the conviction that one more kind word, one more small intervention, will finally snap Ayers back into the real world.

Lopez is a natural storyteller, giving us a close-up view of the improbable intersection of musicianship, schizophrenia, homelessness and dignity. The result is a surprisingly lively page-turner, propelled by the close friendship developing between these two men and filled with eloquent passages: "Nathaniel isn't alone. Music is an anchor, a connection to great artists, to history and to himself. His head is filled with mixed signals, a frightening jumble of fractured meaning, but in music there is balance and permanence."

Scientists are just beginning to discover how music heals, through its boosting of immunoglobulin (IgA) levels and regulation of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Although this is not Lopez's focus, he beautifully conveys the effect that music can have on the battered soul of a true musician, a soul fighting to be heard through the din of dementia that crowds out the most perfect of human languages. Ayers, Lopez writes, "tucks the violin under his chin, blocks out the roar of traffic and leaves the known world. He scratches around a bit, chasing after ideas that aren't quite coming together, but then, as always, he finds a passage that works like a drug and the music pushes him free of all distraction. Eyes closed, head tilted to the heavens, he's gone."

The connection between the comfortable middle-class writer and the Skid Row musician is one of mutual respect and, to some extent, healthy suspicion. A new theory on the durability of music in our species helps explain their relationship: Called the honest signal hypothesis, it argues that music is a form of pure emotional expression and that it exists because it is a more honest signal than speech. In other words, it is more difficult to fake sincerity in music than in lan-