

The Origins of Elaia

A short history of a composition project

Utrecht 2025 – Amir Swaab

Wandering on the journey

Elaia is the soundtrack of my own journey—a journey that began with losing my way, or rather with the realization that I was already lost. When I was 32, my life was suddenly derailed.

The story begins earlier. At 18, in a composition class at the conservatory, I played one of my own pieces. The teacher said: "This could have been written by Chopin." Wonderful, I thought—but he didn't mean it as a compliment. He found it not innovative, and therefore unnecessary.

I concluded that I had been born too late and moved on. I worked as a pianist in theater productions and wrote songs and musicals. I founded a company producing commercials and TV tunes. I made what clients asked for, and I made a good living. But I often thought back to that moment in the composition class: what if Chopin really had written it, and it had only just been discovered—would it still be unnecessary?

From a spot to a destination

Everything changed when, at 32, I discovered a strange spot on my tongue. Would it go away on its own? It didn't. It grew. Then came tests, surgeries, emotions, weeks in the hospital.

The day I received the diagnosis—cancer—I sat restlessly in the garden, staring at the flames of the fire pit. If this is the end, what will I leave behind? Will I be remembered as the composer of a jingle for a mediocre game show?

I didn't die, but I did quit the company. Because I was doing exactly what I wanted to avoid: writing unnecessary music. I was using my talent to sell products I didn't even believe in, while my own story so badly wanted to be told. So I began to write the music I myself longed to hear.

Odysseus and the olive tree

Elaia is Greek for "olive tree." The olive tree marks the end of Odysseus' long wandering. He is only truly home when Penelope recognizes him—when he tells her about the trunk of the olive tree from which their bed was built, a secret no one else knew.

The olive tree is also a symbol of the long wait between sowing and harvest, and of how old roots are indispensable for new fruits.

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