

Musicke

Music, I think, Woody was saying. He plays the organ, doesn't he? At some church?

Well no, I wouldn't have thought so either. But how would one get an organ otherwise? A really large one, I mean. These electronic things with the drums and the cymbals. It wouldn't compare, would it?

Something of an experience, I suppose, yes. To make that much noise. It must make one quite giddy, mustn't it? Very German.

Like that, yes. A minor god. Hair flying, wind and rain called up with a flick of his baton, a storm of brass and so forth.

Liszt, I suppose. Four manuals. It's been years since I've seen a really big one.

Yes, I would like to hear him. Oh, ages. He must be quite decent to have been kept on as long as that.

You know, I haven't any idea at all. I'll find out, shall I? Perhaps next weekend, or the weekend after. I haven't been in a church in I don't know how long.

The organ loft was overhead, so that the organist was not visible to the congregation whispering quietly below. She could not in any case imagine Roger striding forward, probably in great robes, to take his seat before a crowd of penitents, hushed in expectation. His legs were too short to be striding forward.

The valves opened, a thrum Woody felt mostly in her stomach, and with an inrushing of air as the great machine drew breath to begin. There was a small silence of attention.

I went to hear you play, Roger.

Did you. When?

The twenty-fifth, I think. Last month.

Ah, he replied after a moment's reflection, and smiled. The Couperin. A favorite of mine. Did you like it?

Indeed.

Chacone en re, Roger said. The registration buzzy, the notes in a dense swarm. No pedal, no attack, but simply beginning, sliding down from the fifth to the tonic as if continuing a conversation broken off a moment before.

He did play well.

His first teacher had been the usual one, remembered with distaste but no great fear. Some ability was found in five-year-old Roger, however, and a more expensive, imposing teacher was soon obtained. Poor Mrs. Ribier, always abandoned by anyone with talent, anyone really teachable. She'd lacked imagination, he supposed. He preferred to suppose. She hadn't noticed.

It was years since he'd thought of Mrs. Ribier, but now he was getting to be of an age when his mother was sending him newspaper obituaries. The parents of his childhood friends, and other people such as Mrs. Ribier who had become so small and distant. One grieves, he supposed, mostly for oneself, for being so undeniably little. Roger was not inclined to think himself ambitious, but then he must be, mustn't he? To sink his emotional life into the organ? Suppose he had been a tuba player? How unassuming tuba players are, with their magnificent instrument, its great range and singing power, so little heard or known. By comparison, Roger had hardly a double life at all. He hadn't thought about it.

There were, he supposed, a great many things that he didn't think of which puzzled other people unmercifully.

Woody had wanted to know was he religious. Was that like being musical? But he didn't know whether he was musical, either. He played well, it was said. *Ex cathedra*, though he could play lightly too, when it was appropriate. Still, he was without that great passion that he associated with musicality, not Romanticism of the Bruckner sort but rather of Beethoven's last two piano sonatas, or the Goldberg variations. Roger, however, was always competent. Always just, or just so. He doubted if he were musical.

Perhaps he had once wanted to be? A forlorn hope, poignant as a tiny coffin?

Why was Woody coming to hear him play now, after ten years? Wanting to know if he were musical?

He decided to make a test, and set himself to master the first Hindemith organ sonata, a not exactly alien work, but one he had always thought outside his emotional range, music inclined to brooding, only just speculative, with the sternness of a priest who will wink at a nervous altarboy. As he had done all his life, he practiced on Saturdays from about mid-morning until dinner time, now devoting an hour or so to the Hindemith before the cleaning woman and then the Rector began to bustle about with their preparations.

Massig schnell, the first movement admonished him, and *Lebhaft. Sehr langsam. Phantasie, frei; Ruhig bewegt*. Over and over he played it, more intensely after the demands of Christmas and Easter were over, and by May he felt able to *bewegen* the music enough to risk an outing.

It was a piece too long to fit anywhere within the liturgy. He would not consider breaking it up, and so played it before the service in place of the usual short prelude, beginning while the pews groaned not, with only a scattering of early worshippers. No one, he thought, noticed. For lunch he treated himself to a Napoleon.

But not entirely unnoticed. The next Saturday, before her usual time, the cleaning woman climbed the steps into

the organ loft as Roger was laying out his music.

She said nothing, only sat for an hour listening. Then she returned to her duties below.

Her name was Martha, and Roger knew nothing else about her. She had been the cleaning woman for at least as long as he had been the church organist. He supposed she had been listening to him at Saturday practice all that time, while she worked. Below.

Well if he were not going to be able to practice undisturbed he would have to put aside thoughts of learning any more unusual music.

It was now summer. The loft was warm even at ten o'clock. The cleaning woman wore a light shift to work. Martha was of a nondescript middle age, presentable and sufficiently unlike his idea of a charwoman to be suspected of dark secrets, of being someone of another class working out some penance. Roger was not sure he believed in dark secrets.

He wondered if she was paid for the work.

It seemed unfair to object to her presence. But he did object, nonetheless, as much as if she had been the soul of Paganini come for him. He did not want an audience. On Sundays he did not mind the congregation; it was hidden beneath him. Over the railing of the loft he could see only the Rector. They had grown old together, the Rector and he, without ever having gone down, either one of them, into the pit. Roger doubted whether they had ever spoken. To him, the susurrus of prayers and gossip and restless feet was nothing more than the heightened panting of his organ. The appearance of the cleaning woman in the loft surprised him no less than applause would have, and seemed quite as indecorous.

I hope you have enjoyed my playing, he said, hoping to suggest that the enjoyment was now at an end.

The cleaning woman nodded, a little bob of the head of the sort that Oriental people give when they don't under-

stand.

You know, he said the next Saturday as he was opening his music, I learned to play at a quite advanced age. It was a great effort, but music has been an immense solace to me.

The cleaning woman nodded again. Roger on the organ bench turned somewhat toward her.

I was twenty-two when my thirteen brothers and sisters were murdered. Even now it is difficult for me to speak of it. That was when I turned to God.

Again the little bob of the head. Satisfied with what he had learned, Roger set up the Vivaldi which he had planned for Sunday. He needed only to run through it to refresh his memory.

Deaf. Probably the music tickled her somehow, by making the floor quiver. Washed her with a great, silent surf. Something of that sort.

Two more weeks passed. Roger was beginning to think about the second Hindemith sonata when the Rector, who had been pottering about in the chancel plainly waiting for Roger to finish, waylaid him at the bottom of the loft stairs.

Good morning, said Father Ortega as casually as a little boy who is planning to ask his teacher for a kiss.

Roger nodded, a slow and very slight inclination, so that it might seem as if he were stretching out a cramp in his neck.

I wanted to tell you, the Rector went on, how much I liked your playing of the offertory last month. I don't think we've heard that one before?

Perhaps not. I don't recall.

Yes, yes. I don't recall myself, sometimes. I've had to begin a little file, you know, because of that. To keep from preaching too often on the same subject, you see.

Ah.

I might be thought a bit harping otherwise?

Yes.

But I imagine that you must be contemptuous of any little file which I might make. You know, it has been quite a few years since I have been to the university. There have been astonishing changes, I suppose. Probably I wouldn't know my way about, would I?

There have been some superficial changes, Roger allowed.

Bosh. Quite intimidating, I'm sure. It's difficult for me to imagine why we should need so many books. But then, who am I? As ignorant as the caliph Omar, no doubt.

Roger smiled faintly.

Señora Roba tells me you have led quite a life.

Who in hell is Señora Roba?

Something of a swashbuckler, to hear her. No doubt she exaggerates. You know how she is.

Yes, replied Roger, blinking. Somewhat exaggerated.

Ha, ha. Well, I only wanted to let you know how much your music enhances the worship of God. We are fortunate to have someone as able as you among us.

An awkward little pause. Belated pleasure.

Whatever it was, the Rector could not bring himself to say it.

Roger nodded, a bit more vigorously, and Father Ortega went on his way back up the aisle, through the chancel, and into his office. Only when the office door had shut did Roger lower the half dozen books of music he had been clutching across his chest.

Yess indeedy, for the high spirits of a moment one pays for a lifetime. If you're going to carry on that way, dearie, you ought to get your tubes tied, don't you think?

By now it was mid-summer. Señora Roba in her shift looked distinctly frumpy, rather like a chocolate bar which he had put in his pocket. Probably she smelled.

She began to sing.

Roger stopped playing in amazement. Martha Roba was humming loudly, swaying a bit in her chair, until she realized that the music had ceased and she, too, ceased, returning slowly to her attitude of patient attention with her head tipped slightly to one side. The next week she was a little bolder, and the next, at last wailing, keening an old song of abandonment, of Ulysses never unbound, of the last archaeopteryx high on a pinnacle of red sandstone beneath a bloody sun, black wings spread wide, giving voice to a thin piercing cry that rose higher and higher--

He stopped playing. The shrieking went on.

He waited, hands in his lap, for it to stop. Slowly the cleaning woman's voice faded to a distant nasal hum, then a vague tuneless whine that he seemed to hear long after, like those inaudible notes a pianist plays at the end of the concert.

Roger gathered up his music and retreated down the stairs and into the brassy August glare of full summer. The heat fell over him like boiling oil dumped from the battlements. He wiped the burning sweat from his eyes. The woman would have to be removed. If she were not removed he would not play. He would speak to the Rector.

The Rector, however, was reluctant. He seemed disappointed, as if he had expected to hear a memorable tale, not this precipitate demand that he fire the cleaning woman. Who was only a volunteer, after all.

But at last he promised to say a word or two. At the earliest opportunity. Not too obviously, of course. Tactfully suggest.

Roger was relieved that no ultimatum had been necessary. Before now he had never thought of quitting, and when he did think of it, it was with an unhappiness at least as great as Señora Roba's.

But the Rector bungled it. Next Saturday the cleaning woman was still there, silent and a bit grim about the mouth.

Roger laid out his music. He listened to the organ fill itself, take breath. He set up the stops and linkages. He waited. Señora Roba waited. Then he turned everything off again. The blower sighed and mumbled and Roger went home.

That Sunday he played the service cold. There were rough patches in the introit.

The next weekend was the same, and the introit was more rugged.

Señora Roba, he said, turning on the organ bench to face her. The cloth of his trousers hissed on the polished wood.

Martha. Get out.

There was a long moment filled only with the placid breathing of the organ.

The charwoman lowered her eyes at last, to her hands lying palm upward in her lap. Then she picked up her bag of rags and bottles and went down the stairs from the loft. A bit later the vestibule door closed, reverberating through the empty building the way it always did no matter how carefully it was pulled to.

My God, he thought, looking over the balcony rail into the darkness of the nave.