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KREISLERIANA

First Series

E.T.A. Hoffmann

trans. John Louis Miller

Where did he come from? -- No one knows! -- Who were his parents? -- Also not known! -- Who was his teacher? -- An excellent master, for he plays splendidly, and because he has common sense and some education, he's even pleasant company. He might qualify as a music master himself. - -And he really and truly had been a *Kapellmeister*, they added knowingly, for one day when he was in a good mood he showed them a reference from the Director of the _____ Court Theater, which indicated that he, *Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler*, had been relieved of his post only because he had stubbornly refused to write an opera to the court poet's text and several times--from a table in the public tavern--had spoken disparagingly about the *Primo uomo*. Further, with all sorts of wandering and incoherent rigamarole, he had tried to promote a young girl who studied voice with him over the *Prima donna*. Still, he had been told he could keep the title of *Kapellmeister* and might even get back into good graces at the court if he would renounce certain eccentricities and ridiculous prejudices, as for example that true Italian music was gone forever and so on and if he were willing to acknowledge the eminence of the court poet, generally recognized as a second Metastasio.

Friends maintained that nature had tried a new recipe in the *Kapellmeister's* constitution, and that the experiment had failed. They said that because there was too little apathy in his makeup his hypersensitive fantasy didn't merely glow, it became a consuming fire, destroying the balance so

necessary for an artist to live with the rest of the world and create works the world really needs.

Be that as it may, it's enough to say that Johannes was driven by his inner apparitions and dreams as if on an eternally surging sea, that he seemed to search in vain for that harbor which would give him, finally, the peace and contentment without which an artist cannot create. So it was that friends couldn't persuade him to write down a composition or, if one *were* written down, to keep him from destroying it. From time to time, in the most agitated mood, he composed through the night. He would awaken the friend who lived next door, to play for him the music he had dashed off in a frenzy. He would shed tears of joy over the completed work, praise himself as the happiest of humans, but the next day the magnificent composition would lie in ashes on the hearth.

Vocal music affected him almost ruinously, for his fantasy became over-agitated and his spirit retreated into a realm where one followed at his own peril. On the other hand, he often amused himself at the piano by the hour, working strange themes through ornate, contrapuntal developments, and imitations into the most artful passages. Whenever this worked well for him he would remain in a buoyant mood for several days, and his conversation, spiced with a certain roguish irony, would delight his small, intimate circle of friends.

Suddenly--no one knew how or why--he was gone. Some said they had observed signs of insanity in him, and he actually had been seen hopping out of the city gate, singing merrily, with two hats jammed on his head and two music pens thrust like daggers into his red sash. But his closest friends hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, since violent outbursts stemming from some inner vexation had always been normal for him. When all investigation as to his whereabouts proved futile and his friends were trying to decide what to do with the musical sketches and other papers he had left behind,

Fräulein von B___ came forward, claiming that it was her duty to collect and safeguard the belongings of her beloved teacher and friend, whom she by no means considered gone for good. The friends quite willingly gave her everything, and when they found that Johannes had seized opportune moments to pencil several short, for the most part humorous essays on the reverse side of his music papers, the devoted student allowed them to be copied and shared, as modest witness to the composer's transitory moods.

1. THE MUSICAL AFFLICTIONS OF KAPELLMEISTER JOHANNES KREISLER¹

They've all gone. I could have known that from the rustling, scraping, whispering and rumbling through every tone and key. It was like a nest of bees swarming from the hive.

Gottlieb has set up fresh candles for me and left a bottle of Burgundy on the piano, but I can't play any more; I'm totally exhausted. It's the fault of my glorious old friend here on the music rack, who once again has carried me through the ether as Mephistopheles carried Faust on his coattails--so high I took no notice of the tiny people below, though they outdid themselves raising a din. --A rotten, worthless, wasted evening! But now I feel free--even feel good. After all, while playing I pulled out a pencil and with my right hand made sketches for few good variations on page sixty-three (under the bottom staff-system) while the left hand kept the stream of tones moving along. The back of the sheet

¹*Johannes Kreislers, des Kapellmeisters, musikalische Leiden*

is blank and that's where I'm writing these words. I'll abandon tones and symbols and with the zeal of a recovered invalid who can't stop telling about what he's suffered I'll record every hellish detail of today's tea party. Not for myself alone, but for all who might from time to time edify and delight themselves with my copy of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Variationen für das Klavier*, published by Nägeli of Zürich. When they reach the end of the thirtieth variation and find my notes, guided by the large Latin *verte* (I'll write it in as soon as my lament is finished) they'll turn the page and begin to read. They can supply the context for themselves. They'll know that Privy Counselor Röderlein maintains a quite charming house here, has two daughters; that everyone in Röderlein's elegant circle says the daughters dance like goddesses, speak French like angels, play and sing and paint like the muses.

Privy Counselor Röderlein is a rich man. At his quarterly *soirées* he serves the most exquisite wines, the finest food, everything is prepared in the most elegant way and anyone who is not divinely entertained at these teas has no tone, no wit and, above all, no appreciation for art. For this last is also included. Along with the tea, punch, wine, frozen desserts etc., some music is always presented, which is ingested in that Beautiful World as complacently as the other items provided. The arrangement is as follows: After every guest has had time to drink as much tea as he wants and the punch and frozen dessert have been passed around twice, the servants bring in the game tables for the older, more solid segment of the group, who prefer playing at cards to playing at music (in fact this *doesn't* make such frivolous noise, just the clinking of money now and then). This is the signal for the younger members of the group to fly to the Fräuleins Röderlein. A tumult develops in which one can distinguish the words: *Lovely Miss; don't deny us the pleasure of your divine talent -- be gracious, dear; sing something. --Impossible -- a cold -- the last ball -- nothing rehearsed. --Oh please, please we entreat*

you etc.

In the meantime Gottlieb has lifted the lid of the piano and burdened the music rack with the all-too-familiar songbook. From the game table the gracious Mama calls: *Chantez donc, mes enfants!* That's *my* cue; I take up my station at the piano and the Röderleins are led in triumph to the instrument. Now another dispute arises: neither wants to sing first.. "You know, dear Nanette, how horribly hoarse I am." -- "Am I any less, dear Marie?" -- "I sing so poorly." -- "Oh dearest, just begin, etc." My inspiration (I have it every time!) that the two might begin with a duet, is enthusiastically applauded. The book is leafed through, the carefully folded-down page eventually found, and then it starts: *Dolce dell' anima* etc.

The talent of the Fräuleins Röderlein is really not so slight. I have been here five years, and for four and a half years have been the tutor in Röderlein's house. In this short time Fräulein Nanette has advanced to the degree that she can take a melody she has heard only ten times in the theater and then practiced not more than ten times with the piano and sing it so that one knows right away what it's supposed to be. Fräulein Marie already has it by the eighth time, and even if she's often a quarter-tone flat with the piano, with her cute little face and rosy lips, who could complain? -- After the duet a general chorus of applause. Now *ariettas* and *duettinos* alternate and I try to hammer some energy into accompaniments I've plodded through a thousand times.

During the singing Financial Counselor Eberstein's wife lets it be known by clearing her throat and softly joining in: I sing, too. Fraulein Nanette speaks: "But dear Mrs. Eberstein, now you must let us to hear *your* divine voice." A new tumult begins. She has a cold -- she knows nothing from memory! -- Gottlieb drags in two arm-loads of music. There is thumbing through and *more* thumbing

through the music. First she wants to sing *Der Hölle Rache*, then *Hebe, sieh*, then *Ach ich liebte*. In a sweat I suggest *Ein Veilchen auf der Wiese stand*. But she is for the grand genre; she wants to show off; the choice remains with Constanze. Oh! shriek, squeak, miaul, gurgle, groan, gasp, warble and quaver away! I've pulled out the fortissimo stop and I'm pounding myself deaf. -- Oh Satan, Satan! Which of your demons from Hell has gotten into that throat to pinch and distort the tones so? Four piano strings have snapped already and one hammer is broken. My ears are ringing, my head roars, my nerves are in tatters. Can all the bastard tones of all the caterwauling, market-hawking trumpets in the world be banished to that one small throat? --That did it! -- I'm downing a glass of Burgundy! -- There was wild applause and someone commented that the financial counselor's wife and Mozart had really set my senses aflame. I smiled with downcast eyes, somewhat stupidly and well aware that it was stupid.

Now all the talents which had heretofore flowered in secret emerge in wild profusion. Musical excesses are agreed to: ensembles, finales, choruses are to be performed. The artillery man Kratzer is known to sing a heavenly bass, so says the man with the Emperor Titus curls, adding modestly that he himself is really only a second tenor, though a member of several singing academies. Soon everything is organized for the first chorus from *Titus*. That was "simply grand!" The artillery man, standing right behind me, thundered out the bass over my head as if singing in the *Domkirche* with trumpet and tympani obligato. He found the notes all right, but in his eagerness took a tempo almost half again too slow. He stuck to his guns, though, and dragged half a measure behind through the whole piece. Others expressed a decided preference for the music of the ancient Greeks who, not yet knowing harmony, were said to sing in unison. They all sang the melody with minor variations--random raising

and lowering of the pitches--somewhere around a quartertone.

This somewhat noisy production gave rise to a general tragic tension and some indignation, which reached even to the game tables. For a moment their declamatory phrases didn't weave so melodramatically into the musical texture as before. For example: *Alas, I loved -- forty-eight -- was so happy -- pass -- didn't know -- Whist -- the pain of love -- in the suit*, etc. It worked out quite well. -- (I'm pouring myself another one.)

That had to be the high point of today's musical extravaganza, and now it's over. -- Or so I thought as I closed the book and stood up. But the baron, my antique tenor, strode up to me and said: "*Herr Kapellmeister*, you're said to improvise quite divinely, do play for us, I beg you! Only a little, please!" I replied quite drily that all fantasy seemed to have deserted me that day, but while we were talking some devil disguised as a fop in a double vest snooped around in the next room and found the *Bach Variationen* under my hat. He thought: here are some charming little variations on the order of *Nel cor mi non più sento -- Ah vous dirai je, maman*, etc., and he wanted me to launch into them. I stalled and then they *all* got after me. All right, so listen and burst with boredom, I thought, and I went to it. By the third variation several ladies had fled, followed closely by Titus-curls. The Röderleins, because the teacher was playing, held out to number twelve, but not without some suffering. Number fifteen drove out the double-vested fop. The baron, out of greatly exaggerated politeness, stayed to number thirty, merely drinking a great deal of the punch Gottlieb had left on the piano. I could have let it end happily there, but the theme of number thirty took hold of me. The quarto pages suddenly grew into a giant folio that held a thousand imitations and variations of the theme. I had no choice but to play them. The notes came alive and flickered and leapt about me -- electrical fire flowed through my

fingertips into the keys -- the spirit from which it all streamed soared higher than mere thought -- the candles burned lower and lower in the heavy fragrance that filled the room -- now and then a nose or a pair of eyes peered out, only to disappear again. So it happened that I found myself alone, sitting with my Sebastian Bach, being served by Gottlieb as by a *spiritu familiari!*

Of course I'm drinking! Should an honest musician be tortured with music as I've been tortured today and so often before? No other art is subject to such vile abuse as glorious, holy *Musica*, who by her own gentle nature is so easily desecrated! If you have true talent and a genuine sensitivity to art, good--learn music--accomplish something worthy of the art and give your talent in full measure to those who can appreciate it. If you don't want to do that and only want to dabble, do it for yourself and among yourselves; don't torture Kapellmeister Kreisler and others with it.

I could go home now and finish my new piano sonata, but it's not yet eleven o'clock, and a beautiful summer night. I'll wager that next door to my house, at Sergeant-Major Katzentreffer's, the girls are sitting in the open window with their grating, jarring, ear-drilling voices, bawling "When your Eyes Beam On Me" into the street twenty times. (They know only the first stanza.) Across the way someone is martyring a flute and has lungs like Rameau's nephew to boot, and the horn-playing neighbor is doing acoustical research in long, *l-o-n-g* tones. All the neighborhood dogs are getting restless, and right next to my window the landlord's tomcat, excited by the girls' sweet duet, is making tender confessions to a neighbor's cat, in a wailing, ascending chromatic scale -- he's been in love with her since March. (You've guessed by now that my musical-poetical laboratory is a little garret room.) After eleven it gets quieter and 'til then I'll just sit here. Besides, there's some blank paper left and some Burgundy, and I'm going to have more of it right now.

I've heard there is an old law that forbids noisy tradesmen from living next door to scholars. What about hapless, harassed composers? Shouldn't they be able to apply the same law and ban the screamers and doodlers from their neighborhood? Even worse, the poor composers are forced to turn their passion into money to keep body and soul together. What would a painter say if nothing but a gang of contorted, grimacing faces were held before him as he painted his ideal figure? At least he could shut his eyes and go on fantasizing his image. Cotton in the ears doesn't help; one still hears the murderous spectacle, and then the idea--just the *idea*: now they're singing, now the horn comes in, etc., and the devil takes your most sublime thoughts.

I'm out of space; the page is written full. In the blank space around the title I just want to tell why I've vowed a hundred times not to endure any more at the privy counselor's and why I've broken my resolution a hundred times. It's Röderlein's wonderful niece who binds me to that house, and those bonds are tied with art. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to hear Fräulein Amalie sing the final scene from Gluck's *Armida*, or Donna Anna's great scene from *Don Giovanni* just once will understand that for this poor musical schoolmaster an hour at the piano with her is like pouring the balsam of heaven into the wounds of a whole day's false tones. Röderlein, who believes neither in the immortality of the soul nor in rhythm, considers her completely unsuited for the exalted ambience of the tea society, the more so since she doesn't even *want* to sing there! On the other hand, she's quite willing to sing for ordinary people--for example, for simple musicians--giving more of herself than they deserve. Röderlein says that the long, sustained tones which transport me to heaven were obviously copied from the nightingale, a creature with no common sense who lives in the forest and is unworthy of being imitated by that pragmatic master of the world, man. Now and then she is even imprudent

enough to play Mozart and Beethoven sonatas at the piano while Gottlieb plays the violin. No tea gentleman or master of whist could get anything out of that!

That was the last glass of Burgundy. -- Gottlieb is cleaning the lamps, and seems surprised at my writing so busily. -- You're right if you've guessed that Gottlieb is barely sixteen years old. *There* is a wonderful, profound talent. Why did his father have to die so soon, and why did his guardian have to put the boy into a servant's uniform? -- When Rode² was here Gottlieb listened intently from the next room, his ear pressed to the salon door, and then played his violin all night for several nights running, recalling what he had heard and dreaming through the day. The red mark on his left cheek is an exact imprint of the solitaire on Röderlein's ring finger. A gentle stroke on the cheek soothes and brings sleep and a sharp blow serves just the opposite purpose. Among other things I gave Gottlieb the Corelli Sonatas, and he stormed away in the attic until none of the mice in the old Osterlein grand remained alive and Röderlein finally gave him permission to move the instrument into his little room. -- "Throw down the despised servant's jacket, noble Gottlieb! and let me in years to come press you to my heart like the true artist you can become, with your wonderful talent and your deep artistic feeling!" Gottlieb was standing behind me and brushed tears from his eyes as I spoke these words aloud.

Silently I pressed his hand and we went upstairs and played the sonatas of Corelli.

²Well-known French violinist (1774-1830) whom Hoffmann heard in Bamberg.