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*Ombra adorata!*¹

E.T.A. Hoffmann

trans. John Louis Miller

As surely as music is mankind's most wonderful achievement, so surely can mankind never fully plumb its deepest secrets! -- But doesn't music live in the human soul itself? Doesn't it so fill the heart with its blessed manifestations that the whole being turns to it and finds new, transfigured life there? Doesn't music lift one from one's daily toil, from the denigrating torments of the earthly? Yes! One is filled with divine strength, just as the apprentice, chancing to read aloud his master's magical incantations, called forth wonderful entities from inside himself, found himself speaking the occult language of that secret, romantic spirit-world. Just so, with childlike, humble spirit, one surrenders to the spirit within. One joins these wonderful entities in their shining dance of life--and those with eyes to see this dance are forever filled with nameless, unquenchable longing.

How oppressed I felt as I walked into that concert hall! How burdened by sordid, worthless annoyances! Like stinging, poisonous insects these irritations, singling out the artist, making his life so

¹Hoffmann's note): Who doesn't know Crescentini's magnificent aria, *Ombra adorata*, ["Adored Shadow"] composed for Zingarelli's *Romeo e Giulietta*, and performed in a manner all his own?

(Translator's note): Girolamo Crescentini (Italian, 1762-1846) was the last great castrato. Niccolò Zingarelli (1752-1837) composed more than 30 operas before 1811, when he turned to church music. The opera in question was composed in 1796.

miserable that finally the single stroke that ends all earthly pain seems preferable to the interminable, prickling torment. You, my loyal friend, understood the mournful glance I threw your way, and I thank you a hundred times over for taking my place at the keyboard, letting me seek refuge in the furthest corner of the hall. What pretext did you find; how did you manage to substitute a modest, short overture by a fledgling composer for Beethoven's great C-minor Symphony? For that, too, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. If Beethoven's mighty spirit had taken hold of me as I was feeling at that moment, had seized me in its burning, steel embrace, if those thundering tones had swept me into that realm of invincible heroes, how could I have borne it, feeling, as I was, almost crushed by the mundane?

The overture ended in a kind of juvenile exuberance, with trumpets and tympani, and an interval of silence followed, as if in expectation of something quite special. I found that soothing; I closed my eyes, seeking a more pleasant place inside myself than that which surrounded me, forgetting the concert and with it the fact that I was supposed to be at the keyboard.

The pause must have lasted quite some time, when finally the *ritornello* of an aria began. In gentle, sustained tones, with utmost simplicity it seemed to speak the very language of longing, touching the core of one's being, lifting the devout soul to heaven, restoring the beloved things one had been robbed of here below. — Then, like a divine light, the bell-clear voice of a woman soared over the orchestra: *Tranquillo io sono, fra poco teco sarò mio vita!*²

Who could describe the feelings that surged through me? — How the gnawing pain inside me dissolved into melancholy yearning, as though a divine balsam had washed over my inner wounds. —

²“I am content; soon I will be with you, my life!”

Everything was forgotten and, enthralled, I heard only those tones from another world, enfolding me, consoling me.

The theme of the aria that followed, *Ombra adorata*, was as simple as the *recitative*: sustained, soulful, touching the innermost spirit, lifting it above earthly pain, expressing hope for blessed fulfillment in a higher, better world. How naturally, how unpretentiously everything aligns itself in that simple composition. The phrases move only between tonic and dominant--no jarring chromatic excursions, no contrived figurations; the song flows like a silver-bright stream between iridescent flowers. But isn't that precisely the occult formula the Master has at his command? --To give the simplest melody, the most artless structure the power to reach a receptive spirit? As on swift wings the soul flies through shining clouds in those wonderful, bright, clear tones. It is the jubilant celebration of transfigured spirits.

As does every composition arising from the deepest feelings of its creator, this composition calls for deep understanding from the performer--I might go so far as to say it calls for a refined intuition that transforms feeling into a supersensible union with that which the melody contains within itself. The genius of Italian song calls for certain embellishments, in the recitative as well as the aria, but it is unpardonable to add bizarre, unstylistic curlicues and twists to the melody. That great master of song, Crescentini, showed the way through his performances, defined the tradition of beautiful singing and ornamentation. — With what understanding Crescentini enlivened the whole with his occasional ornaments! These are the sparkling jewels that add their beauty to that of a beloved face, causing the eyes to flash more brightly, heightening the crimson of lips and cheeks.

But what can I say about you, splendid singer?! — With the burning enthusiasm of the Italians

I call out to you: “You, kissed by the Gods!”³ for it is a gift from heaven that lets your fervent soul peal forth in magnificent, shining music. Your tones caressed me like chaste spirit-beings, each one saying: “Lift your head, troubled one! Come with us to that faraway land where there are no painful, bleeding wounds, where the breast wells with exquisite longing, with delights for which there are no words!”

I shall never hear you again, but whenever I’m awash in mediocrity, when that silly, run-of-the-mill pack tries to pull me down to its level, when the mob mocks me, tries to wound me down with its poisonous barbs, when I’m almost overcome by my surroundings, then, in *your* tones a ghostly voice will comfort me, whispering, *Tranquillo io sono, fra poco teco sarò mia vita!*

In rapture such as never felt before I shall soar up on mighty wings, over the humiliation of all earthly. All those tones, frozen in this wounded heart, shall find new life, shall bestir themselves, soaring forth like glittering salamanders, and I will be able to touch them, to hold them, to bring them together in a bundle of fire, a flaming image of your song--glorified, transfigured.

³(Hoffmann’s note): The Italians called out to our German soprano, [Charlotte] Häser, now unfortunately retired, “*Che sei benedetta dal cielo*” [“May heaven bless you”].