

The Music Copyist

* *
*

ONCE upon a time there was a music copyist.

He made copies of scores, and he was good at his business, competent and reliable, and worked free-lance for the best symphonies and performers.

One day he had a rush job. He'd been working ten hours straight on scores for a man considered by the World to be the master of the viola.

It was evening when he finished, and he bundled the big music sheets in a fold of newspaper, and took a cab from his mid-Manhattan apartment to Long Island to the house of the Master Violist.

He arrived about ten in the evening and he found a festive party in progress.

He handed the music to the Master Violist who glanced over it casually and thanked him, and said, "Well, as long as you're here, why don't you take off your overcoat and have a drink."

The music copyist took off his coat and he got his drink, and he stood holding it.

But he felt a little out of place because here he was surrounded by high music society, diamonded people, millionaires and heiresses, dressed in tuxedos and clothes from Paris, while he had ink smudges on his thumbs and cuffs, and he was bleary-eyed from working ten hours, and he was dressed in a regular suit.

The Master began to speak of his hobby which was collecting programs of great musicians performing great music, and a small crowd of people gathered around him to hear him talk, and the music copyist joined the crowd and listened.

The Master finally led the group upstairs to his den to view his collection, and oh! here on the walls were programs of Casals soloing in Madrid, of Albert Schweitzer playing the organ in Africa, Paganini's first and last public performances (framed side by side), Handel conducting the Palace Band for a wedding in England, Bach playing Buxtehude, oh! and more and more. . . .

Finally the music copyist spoke up. Suddenly, and in a little loud voice, he said, "You know, I have a program which deserves to be in this collection."

"Oh," said the Master.

"Yes, and as a matter of fact, I have it right here." The music copyist pulled out his thick wallet and fished down into it among the many torn scraps of paper on which were scrawled telephone numbers and addresses, and he pulled out a tiny folded-up square of paper which he unfolded carefully, and which turned out to be a mimeographed program of a music teacher's recital of her pupils.

He handed it to the Master Violist, who, after glancing at it, said, "What's this?"

"Let me tell you about it," said the music copyist.

"Several years ago I went home . . . to Octagon, Ohio. . . . I hadn't had any occasion to visit my home town in oh ten years. . . . I stayed there at the house of my cousin. . . . Her young son was studying the recorder and I noticed at the time that he really seemed to enjoy his lessons . . . not like most kids his age . . . he actually seemed to enjoy it. . . . One

night the teacher . . . his music teacher was a woman . . . she also had a choir . . . was to give a recital of her pupils. . . . My cousin invited me to come along, but I didn't want to go. . . . Perhaps I should explain that, although I'm not a musician, I am, in a way, in that business . . . and I have an ear . . . for instance, I can name any performer on a recording by his style . . . that is, I mean, of course . . . the great musicians . . . and I have a record collection that is one of the . . . ah . . . of which I'm proud. . . . Anyway I didn't want to hear any *music teacher's* . . . well anyway . . . I went, mostly to please my cousin, and resolved to try not to be sarcastic. . . . My cousin drove to the small-town auditorium. . . . I escorted her to some seats, and we sat waiting an interminably long time for the thing to begin, and while we waited I glanced over the program I'd been given (that one you're holding there in your hand) . . . and I noticed the music was entirely old music . . . pieces by Bach and Handel, Couperin, Vivaldi, Scarlatti, and Frescobaldi and . . . well it was all good music, but they were simple things, not technically very difficult, suitable for children to perform. . . . The recital began . . . and after a while I realized that I was sort of enjoying it . . . and was glad I'd come. . . . The children weren't prodigies any of them . . . but the kids played with such a spirit, with such an obvious joyousness that the whole thing—little sour notes and all—was transformed for me into pleasure . . . there even seemed an appropriateness to those little sour notes like a crow's caw or a frog's croak among country morning finch songs . . . in fact I became so absorbed in the music that when, during an intermission, my cousin, sparkling-eyed proud mother, exclaimed, "Wasn't he wonderful!" I stared at her blankly wondering exactly what on earth she was talking

about, until I realized I hadn't distinguished her son, and had just been listening, rather than watching. . . . Finally . . . just before the last number the music teacher stepped between the curtains and made an announcement. . . . She said there had been a change in the program and that instead of "Two Songs" by Vivaldi, that the choir would sing the *St. Matthew Passion*, by Johann Sebastian Bach. . . . Well I remember I frowned, a little irritated by the announcement, because I knew what she had said was simply incorrect . . . because the great *St. Matthew Passion* takes four hours to perform . . . it's one of the few greatest and among the most complex pieces of music ever written, and only the best professional choirs ever attempt it . . . and besides it takes a full orchestra to perform it. . . . But then I became distracted by some usherettes, high school girls, moving down the two aisles handing out things, and whispering loudly to the first person in each row, 'Take one of each and pass them on!' . . . which I did, and I found I had in my hands a pointed paper hat—a dunce cap—and a light wooden stick with short crepe paper streamers attached at the top. . . . Well I noticed everyone else was putting on their dunce caps so I put mine on too and sat there clutching the little stick and I remember the thousands of little streamers made a funny quiet noise in the warm summer auditorium air like autumn leaves stirring. . . . Then every light dimmed out . . . and the dunce caps turned on . . . they were luminous . . . the paper streamers too . . . and I looked above and saw dim purple bulbs which I realized was the black light source causing the luminosity. . . . All the dunce caps were shining sea-blue . . . except . . . directly in front of me there was a line of bright white dunce caps . . . and I glanced to the right and left and noticed everyone in my row were wear-

ing white hats . . . and I stared around in back and all the caps were blue except that directly behind me stretched another line of white dunce caps. . . . The white caps formed the design of a Cross. . . . I looked at my own hat . . . it was white . . . and suddenly realized I was wearing the center cap . . . it was just an accident, I just happened to be sitting in that seat . . . but before I could think much about it the choir began to trickle one by one from between the closed curtains wearing luminous brown robes—hands, face and feet invisible, finally forming a solid brownly shining blot across the front of the stage. . . . Then the music teacher appeared on the center dais . . . a silhouette . . . and after the applause there followed the silence . . . broken by a creaking noise which sounded as if the curtains in back of the boys were opened . . . but the stage itself was in complete darkness . . . nothing was visible beyond the bright brown blot. . . . The choir accompanied by a full orchestra began to sing the great *St. Matthew Passion*. . . . The children were trained! they sang . . . but the orchestra . . . they were playing ancient instruments . . . real Bach trumpets, thirteen feet long! shawms! viola da gambas! dull tabors! the actual instruments for which Bach wrote that *Passion* . . . but their performance! I had never before in my life heard anything nearly like it . . . they were like a band of angels. . . . But then for a moment I remembered something . . . an incident . . . I hadn't paid any attention to it at the time but . . . that afternoon I'd gone out to buy cigarettes and I happened to glance in a window of a car stopped for a light and thought I recognized a French horn player . . . a great musician I'd always thought, but he'd never become well-known . . . I'd done work for him several times, hadn't charged him much because I liked him and admired him and I knew he couldn't

afford . . . but then the light changed and the car drove on, and I said to myself, 'Oh, it couldn't have been. What would he be doing here in Octagon?' . . . But now I listened to the ibbletorks . . . yes . . . I became sure . . . my friend was playing in that orchestra! . . . For the next four hours, throughout the complete performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, I lived in the wonderful daze, listening. . . . Finally it finished, and a few lights went on. . . .

"But the audience . . . the way they reacted . . . it was very strange . . . very peculiar . . . you see—

"Nobody clapped.

"Nobody whistled, or shouted—Bravo!

"Nobody moved, or got up to go home.

"For the phosphorescent fish who live four miles deep in the depths of the ocean off the coast of Japan know no silence as tranquil as that which they left in the dark air of the concert hall.

"Almost one by one the audience began to stream up the aisles toward the entrance, and I got up also . . . and began to work my way through the crowd in the opposite direction. . . . I was moving toward the stage and toward a door at the side which I knew would lead backstage . . . the music teacher appeared in the doorway . . . she was standing there blocking the way . . . and so I just said I wanted to go in and say hello to my friend . . . the French horn player . . . and I named his name and explained that I was a friend of his from New York. . . . She looked puzzled and said, 'What do you mean?' . . . and so I explained again, the French horn player, he was a friend of mine, I just wanted to stop in and say hello, if you'd give him my name I'm sure he'll want to see me, we're good friends. . . . Her face was puzzled and she frowned, and repeated, '*What do you*

mean?' . . . I didn't know what else to say . . . I was looking puzzled at her . . . she was looking at me, I felt, the way one looks at an insane person, and finally she said, 'I'm sorry . . . only performers are allowed back here' . . . and she stepped inside and the door closed. . . . I walked out of the theater and got into the car where my cousin sat waiting. . . . It had been ten o'clock, the regular concert almost finished, when the *Passion* had begun and now it was two in the morning . . . the kid was already asleep in the back of the car . . . my cousin drove . . . finally I said, 'Well didn't you notice anything—strange—about the concert?' . . . and she answered, 'Yes, it's nonsense her keeping the children up this late at night! Just nonsense!' . . . 'But the *music*—who was playing?' . . . 'Oh!' she said, 'I think it's a little band from Lopert down the highway that comes over to help her out occasionally at her recitals.' . . . But I knew that I hadn't been listening to any little band from *Lopert*, Ohio . . . and then I said, 'But what about all those lights . . . that Cross . . . what did it all mean?' . . . And my cousin laughed, 'Oh, she's always doing crazy things like that . . . you can see why the children love her.' . . .

"Well, that's all."

The music copyist looked around the den at the silent group.

"The story's finished.

"I left Octagon that morning and haven't returned. That program, that program there, that's the program from that night . . . look . . . see! . . . the last number on the program. It says, 'Two Songs,' by Vivaldi. . . ."

"Ooooh!" said a voice sarcastically.

"Stop it!" said someone with a disgusted wave.

"Come down, mister!" snarled a beautiful girl.

The group turned downstairs, mumbled asides answered by grimaces, and the Master himself made a very nasty, biting comment which the music copyist couldn't help but overhear.

The music copyist turned white. Nobody believed his story.

He asked for his coat from a butler, and had to wait a long time for it, and then pushed his way through the laughing, drinking bunches toward the door, and just as he stepped outside—the Master Violist appeared in the doorway behind him.

“Let me walk you a ways,” he said.

The Master took the copyist's arm as they walked and he said, “I'd like to apologize for what I had to say on the stairway back there. Look . . . by chance you heard something you weren't intended to hear. I know you heard what you heard, but please . . . just *don't talk* about it. Those people,” he said with a gesture back at his brightly lit, noisy house, “they can't understand.”

The Master's fingers tightened around the copyist's arm, tightened with a violist's grasp, with all the strength in a violist's fingers, and he whispered, “But that night! that night in Octagon—wasn't it great! Wasn't it great!”

The copyist jerked his arm away. He was rubbing it gingerly, and said, “Yes, certainly, but how do *you* know?”

“I was there, of course,” answered the Master, and then he said (and did he really blush proudly in the moonlight as he said it?): “I was playing second viola.”