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Rhapsody Kinetic

Rhapsody Kinetic

by
Geoffrey Reiter

I am growing old now, and memories slip through my mind like liquid through cupped hands, but whatever else I may forget, there is no force on earth or below it that will erase Christoff Gothart from my thoughts. Every other memory was mere water, but he was like flame, searing his imprint on me. There has never been a day when his face has not flashed before me, so real, so near, and his eyes still so wonder-wide.

I was an assistant professor of piano at the Hertzbergen School in those days, recently arrived from my own education at Leipzig, new and flushed with the exuberance of my own newness. My wife Greta would smile at me once in a while and shake her head bemusedly, and ask in an ever-so-slightly plaintive voice, “Which means more to you, Johannes, your music or me?” A ferally romantic grin would breach my face and I would respond, “You are my greatest music, Greta.” Then I would loosen her dress till it fluttered to the floor, and together we would compose our own private symphony.

But at the school, the piano was my medium, and I would do anything I could to coax beautiful music from it. People would walk by and see me speaking to the instrument, reasoning with it, trying to convince it that it was capable of so much more. “One day,” I used to tell it, “you will realize just what songs can come from you. You will be alive with the notes that spring from your keys.” And then I would resume playing, each day persuading it to begrudge me a slightly more harmonious sound.

Many were amused by my unorthodox ways, but there was one who was most definitely not. He was Wolfhart Strauss, the institute’s primary instructor, and thus my superior. Wolfhart was a tall man, and

powerful, with thick and calloused fingers that never stopped tapping things. His face has become obscured in my mind by many opaque years, but I do remember one aspect: it was always tight, his brow furrowed, his teeth clenched, his nostrils flared, as though everything he did took the greatest effort. His hair, beginning to grey, looked as though it wanted to fall out, but it never did, and I wondered if that was because his scalp would not release it.

I soon realized the cause of his animus toward my methods. He never engaged in any playful badinage with his piano; he was a lord, not a merchant as I was. The instrument was his slave, and he would make it do what he wanted it to. Those meaty fingers of his would strike the keys like thick whips, forcing noise from them. He would wring every last note from that piano, and each cadence would reverberate throughout the building. They always sounded too perfect, like soldiers in formation, as though the moment he ceased applying pressure, they would collapse. Oh, Wolfhart’s execution was flawless, but in the way a siege might be flawless.

Hertzbergen taught music to especially bright pupils between the ages of eight and fifteen; it still does today. There was a specialist on hand in practically every instrument ever conceived of by man, and some that could be found nowhere else. One of our instructors, Professor Meyer, spent his entire life researching the Old Testament, trying to decipher the ancient musical scales and construct extinct instruments. Every now and then I would hear him passing by in the hall chanting, “Selah, selah, selah,” to himself.

But for all our expertise, Hertzbergen was most renowned for its piano teachers. When I

first learned that they had allowed me to teach there, I collapsed and began to lose consciousness. Greta had to slap me several times before I was fully lucid again. My reaction was perfectly understandable, however, for there was not another school on the continent with a better reputation than Hertzbergen in those days. To be chosen to tutor piano there, even as an assistant professor, was the highest praise I could possibly conceive of. And so, my dreams alighting and my pride somewhat swelling, I moved to Hertzbergen and began teaching.

I was two years into my tenure when first I met Christoff. I saw him then as I would always remember him, his bony wingspan stretched across a piano, limbs darting all about, but fluidly, as if choreographed. He was moving as fast as I had ever seen a human move, and yet, while I was watching him, everything seemed to slow, almost stop. His awkward arms and legs moved so quickly that they appeared not to be moving at all, and I just stared at him, astounded at the way every motion was at once graceful and economical, not really motion at all.

And the music! It was elemental in its brilliance, pouring through me like rain, scorching me like fire, chilling me like wind, impacting me like earth. Every note quietly screamed beauty, to the point where I could scarcely breathe, I was so overcome. A flash of envy rent the moment of ecstasy, however, and I was suddenly very jealous of the way he could create such harmony. I had implored my piano to sing, but never had it sounded like that. I stood even more amazed to see that it was Wolfhart's piano that this young boy was playing on. Wolfhart had abused the poor instrument so often that I sometimes wondered if it might one day simply die, its corpse refusing to concede another single note. Now it stood revived, alive under the influence of a child. He played in a way I had never seen; it was not persuasion, such as I employed, nor was it brute will power, Wolfhart's method. It was more like friendship, companionship, relationship, as though he had formed a

personal bond with the downtrodden piano. He was like a savior, liberating from bondage. More than anything, I longed to be able to control sound the way he could.

At last, he finished what he had been doing and looked up, for the first time aware of my presence. I got to see his face then, the face that will haunt me as long as I dwell on this plane of existence. It was such a small face, and frail, with skin that was pallid and ethereal, as though it were not fully there. His face was a mystified one, its expression never quite congruous with its surroundings, always seeming to react in just slightly the wrong way. Those pale pink lips of his, the color of berries too early to pick, were open just a little in what was neither a frown nor a smile, but most definitely not indifference. Behind the lips, I could see the periphery of his teeth, also white, with a thin gauze of saliva giving them an iridescent sheen, like a cloud the moment before the sun emerges from behind it. His eyes were like little seas of crystal, and I know—I *know*—I saw things dancing ebulliently behind them, though I cannot tell you what. Those glassy, glossy irises never looked directly at anything, or at least not at anything I could see. They were distant, distant with awe and with subtle, but very real, joy.

"What is your name?" I requested of him, for at least he knew I was here, though his gaze did not—*could* not—meet mine.

"Christoff Gothart," he replied simply. His voice was high and transient, and I don't know if it could even be called a voice. Even as he was speaking, I wasn't entirely sure what I was hearing, but whatever may or may not have been said, after his lips were done moving, I knew his name.

"How did you play that?" I wondered, trying to stifle the envy and the wonder I felt and look every bit the omniscient professor I was supposed to be. I could tell, however, that Christoff read all my most concealed emotions, for beneath the glaze of reverence in his features, I could make out the outline of that same bemused expression I had seen in Greta so many times. Undaunted, I continued, "What was that piece? I've never heard it before."

How did you learn it?"

"I play what I hear," Christoff imparted to me. I wanted to know more, but before I could inquire further, Wolfhart strode in, each footstep colliding violently with the varnished wood floor beneath.

"I see you've met my newest pupil," he observed, his lupine eyes glancing at the boy and then back at me. "Christoff is a prodigy, but unschooled. I am going to teach him the mechanics of the trade. When I am finished, he will truly be a great musician."

I never took my eyes off Christoff, for he fascinated me as much as Wolfhart disgusted me. The delicate features on that little face were incapable of showing fear, but beneath all the mystery, I could detect the presence of some disquiet.

"He already is a great musician," I informed Wolfhart, finally looking directly at him. "I heard him playing a minute ago. It was the most incredible thing I've ever encountered. He could teach us a thing or two."

"He is good," the senior instructor nodded, though it was more like concession than praise. "But only under our tutelage will he become great. His playing is ruled by emotion. I must teach him that music is a science. The key to harmony lies in the numbers behind the notes."

I shook my head vigorously and scowled. "You're wrong," I said flatly. "Music is so much more than the numbers. It's like all art; it comes from that middle ground between heart and mind, body and soul. I think... I think, perhaps, it comes from heaven."

"Heaven has nothing to do with it," Wolfhart retorted. "Nor does the heart. Music is Reason transmuted into sound. It must be flawless, perfect, mechanical, like a well-constructed clock. As long as Christoff is governed by his passions, he will never achieve the greatness that could be his."

"But Wolfhart, don't you think..."

"Silence!" he shouted, making a slashing gesture with his right arm, as though trying to disembowel my very words. "Christoff is not your student; he is of no concern to you. And if I see you talking to him again, your days at this

institute will be at an end. Have no fear, Johannes; I will instruct the child in the ways of music. You are dismissed."

I had no intention of leaving so obsequiously at Wolfhart's command, and I inhaled deeply, prepared to offer a caustic rejoinder. But then I caught Christoff's face out of the corner of my eye and turned to look at him. Buried deep in his glittering, dewy eyes I saw a note of warning, telling me that this was neither the time nor the place for me to be fighting this battle. I longed to debate Wolfhart, to crush his warped conceptions about what my cherished art was, but a single admonitory glance from that boy halted all my intentions. Looking back in the other man's direction, unable to meet his belligerent gaze, I conceded, "Very well, sir," and morosely stepped outside the room.

That night, I lay in bed curled up with Greta, glad to feel her smooth, pearl skin against my own. I ran my hand through her dark hair which, when fully loose, spilled glossily across her back like an evening stream. I lifted my right hand and gently brought it to her closed lips, slipping a finger between them until I could feel the warmth of her tongue against it. She did not object, humoring my odd mood until I dropped my hand back to my side.

"Sing to me, Greta," I beseeched her. "Sing to me a song that goes beyond numbers and notes, conductors and cadences. Sing something that will remind me what music is supposed to be."

She hesitated only a moment, then began,

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing.
Our helper He, amid the flood
Of mortals ills prevailing.*

Her voice was mellifluous, with that exquisite little Alsace lilt of hers that I love so much. I closed my eyes and listened as she sang, and for a moment, I was almost caught by the same current that had grabbed hold of me when I first heard Christoff playing. Earth and all its dross melted away like wax around me,

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and all that remained was Greta singing, every syllable of the old hymn inundating me in some glorious, unearthly flood.

At last, the song ended and I opened my eyes again. My wife lay propped up on one elbow, gazing at me with that expression I saw so often on her gentle features. She brought her free hand up to my head, running it through the blond folds of my hair, and it felt so relaxing. Knowing that she had me where she wanted me, she asked, "What is the matter, Johannes? What happened at the school today?"

I never once withheld anything from Greta, nor was I tempted to on this occasion. In truth, I had been waiting for her to broach the subject, for frustration had been brewing within me for some time now and craved release. Thus, I was more than happy to oblige her, explaining all that had taken place on that morning. She listened attentively, all the while still tousling my hair, until my story was done.

"So," I concluded, "I don't know what to do. Wolfhart will destroy that child if he is not stopped, I know it. The boy is beyond anyone—I mean *anyone*. Yet how can I save Christoff without losing everything I've worked for?"

"Perhaps you can't," was all she said.

I reached out and ran the palm of my hand over her breast; I think I was trying to remind myself that she was real, that a thousand Wolfhart's could not take *her* from me. She must have sensed what I was doing, and she leaned her face forward to kiss me. Those lips which sang so tenderly were now on mine, and creating a new rhythm within me. My pulse pounded out a private symphony, unheard by any but myself.

"Why did you want me to sing?" she asked when our lips parted.

"I wanted to remember what music is supposed to be," I replied.

"Do you remember now?"

"Yes, I do."

The next day as I entered Hertzbergen, I heard yelling coming from Wolfhart's

classroom. I picked up my pace until I reached it, peering inside tentatively. The renowned musician towered like some son of Anak over the diminutive Christoff, and he was unleashing a chain of expletives at the boy. I wanted to stride in there and pummel Wolfhart until his face was no more than a bloody pulp, all the while shouting, "You don't know music, you bastard!" But I remained out of sight, still afraid of losing my position and, truth be told, quite aware of the fact that I was physically no match for the imposing Wolfhart.

"What the hell is wrong with you, you little ass?" he was shouting.

"You're not even playing the right piece. G-minor, do hear? You're supposed to be playing in G-minor. Hey, are you listening to me, damn it?"

Wolfhart grabbed Christoff's tiny hands in his own massive paws and slammed them down onto the keys. I could see a little trickle of blood start to well up under one of the child's fingernails. But he never uttered a single noise of protest or of pain. His eyes never narrowed in anger or even annoyance. He was well-nigh limp, and only his nearly imperceptible breathing gave conclusive proof that he was still alive.

At last, every finger was in the position Wolfhart wanted it to be in, and he released his meaty hands. "Now play," he commanded, tight leathery features fixed on the keys.

Christoff certainly played, but it was not what his instructor had been hoping for. Those bony limbs began to fly again, and he was creating music *ex nihilo*, filling the classroom and the hall outside with exultant strains such as no lowly piano had ever generated before. For a moment, the music continued; Wolfhart was as paralyzed as I by the brutally holy beauty of what he heard. Then, he realized what was happening and grasped the child by the wrists.

"No!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing? God damn you, can't you follow orders?"



I was about to march into the room and stop him, when I heard a familiar voice cry out, “Selah!” Professor Meyer stood beside me, his ancient, hoary face all but glowing with palpable enthusiasm. He grabbed hold of my hand, and I could feel the veins beneath his thin flesh, like little canals, channeling his excited blood. “Did you hear that?” he asked me. “That was it. For decades I’ve been looking for the original melodies. I’ve studied fifteen languages and a hundred different instruments,

but in more than half a century I had never met with any success until today. Who played that? Well, Johannes, speak up.”

I pointed inside the room, where an infuriated Wolfhart was crouching beside Christoff. “That child played it,” I told him.

“Don’t jest with me, Johannes,” Meyer chuckled nervously. “I’m too old for it. Tell me truthfully, now. Who played that music? Surely it wasn’t Wolfhart!”

“Professor Meyer,” I said, “that child,

Christoff Gothart, was responsible for the music you heard. That is all I know.”

“But that’s impossible!” Meyer objected. “Why, no mere boy could...” He stopped, and scurried into the room. Glad to have an excuse to enter, I followed close behind him. Meyer walked over to Wolfhart, whose hands were clenched in barely contained rage.

“Wolfhart, my dear boy,” Meyer started, “this pupil of yours—he didn’t just play some melody by any chance, did he?”

“Yes, he did, but he’s doing it all wrong. That wasn’t...”

Wolfhart grew silent when he saw that Meyer was not listening to him. The aged teacher was kneeling beside little Christoff, and at that instant, I never saw two people look so much alike. A glance was all it took, and the two connected in a way I cannot describe, or probably even fathom. I am not even certain they fully understood it themselves. But their eyes met, each staring deep into the other in their unfocused way. Meyer took the child’s hand in his as he had with mine, getting some tiny droplets of blood on his own skin in the process.

“Christoff, child, tell me something,” Meyer whispered. “What were you playing just now?”

“The music I hear,” he responded in that inexplicable non-speech of his.

“How do you hear it?” Meyer implored. “Please, I must know.”

“He whispers it to me, and I play it. That is all.”

Meyer looked like he had a veritable cavalcade of questions to ask, and yet, he reined them back. For a few seconds, no one said anything, and the two used the silence to communicate things which will exceed my understanding as long as I dwell on this earth. It looked like the way Greta and I must look when we exchange a meaningful glance, but the relationship was different here. I laugh even as I write this, but in all honesty I cannot call it anything

but brotherhood. Yes, Meyer’s age was approaching a century whereas Christoff had

yet to complete his first decade, but the music had brought everything full circle. There was a filial bond between the two that I can write about but never convey, not with these words anyway.

Wolfhart, as he was so skilled at doing, interrupted this moment of spiritual communication by conspicuously clearing his throat. “Professor Meyer, Johannes, if I may see you outside a moment, please.”

Meyer spared one last reverent look at Christoff, who faintly nodded, and then the three of us got up and stepped into the corridor, leaving the boy alone at the piano.

“What is this foolishness?” Wolfhart demanded as soon as we had crossed the threshold and were outside. “How can you condone that boy’s disregard for the structure of...”

“Don’t speak to me of structure, Professor Strauss!” Meyer snapped more vehemently than I would have thought possible. “Have you forgotten what it means to be a musician, to feel the instrument in your hands and know that you can make it sing a beautiful song, because you love nothing so much? That boy’s music derives from something that transcends anything we can grasp. His notes are divine, his scales heavenly. What he just did a moment ago was more musical than anything this world has heard in the last three thousand years. How dare you try to silence it with your own paltry constructs! You do not know anything about music, Wolfhart, and I do not believe you know anything about life either.”

Maybe my mind is decaying in its age, but I hold an image that seems too clear not to be real: Wolfhart’s face tightening even more, as he petulantly tried to hold back encroaching tears. It frightened me because it was at once so uncharacteristic and yet so perfectly fitting. He looked like a toddler just taken to task by his parents, and now that I think back on it, he had always looked slightly infantile beneath that strained exterior.

I don’t know what he would have said, and I think it is better that I never heard it. But at that moment, Christoff began to play once

again. It was different this time, more intense than ever before. We three were assailed by the glorious sound, permeated by it. It was too much for me to bear, as though I were being fed another meal after already being gorged. My heart was beating ferociously against my chest, and I wanted to scream, but the melody wouldn't let my base noises infect its perfection. It was a rhapsody kinetic, holiness transposed into notes. No, more than that; it was almost incarnational. God was in those beats and cadences, and I was overcome with so much perfectly righteous joy it was painful for my lowly being to feel. How can I describe it? Maybe one day words will catch up with this music, but they have not to this point.

I could not see anything at that point, and I don't even think there was anything to see. All other senses had been overwhelmed by what Christoff's piano was releasing. I shuddered like a leaf caught in a gale, my body spasming to a rhythm of purity. All around me, glory was sung, sung with words that I could hear but not understand. I wanted to know what they were saying, but it occurred to me that if I learned that language, its perfection would probably kill me. Whatever the case, I was swept like a grain of sand on an ocean as tides of praise and glory eddied all around. And the music kept building up tempo, intensifying each moment in a way I would not have believed possible.

And at last, the crescendo's climax. The music of the spheres reached its supreme pitch, worship blazing all around me so powerfully that I wanted to scream, *No more! I am not worthy even to hear this!* I do not think I had a body at that precise moment, for if I had, I am certain that it would have been torn asunder by the spiritual rapture that was engulfing everything. At that moment in time, I was merely existence, listening with my spirit to praises that exceeded my ability to endure.

And then, it was over. I was lying on my back on the floor, my face so drenched with tears of joy and exertion that I was about to drown on them. I sat up, spitting out the saline liquid and trying to inhale, though there didn't seem enough air in all the world to satisfy me. I

was trembling so hard that it took ten minutes before I could even stand. In that time, I simply closed my eyes and tried to collect my thoughts, which were a dizzying mosaic of paradoxical, brilliant tesserae. Even now, though, years later, I have not managed to organize them in the slightest.

At last, I was able to sit up, and then tentatively get to my feet. I looked down at the ground and saw Wolfhart curled in a ball beside the doorframe. I knelt down beside him and took hold of his wrist, hoping to help him to his feet. But he would not let me, pulling away and whimpering incoherently. In that instant before he recoiled, however, I saw something that I had never thought I would. Wolfhart's face was awash with pure, childish terror, eyes wide and horrified of everything around them. Startled, my unsteady legs could not hold me and I fell backward.

Regaining my feet, I walked over to Professor Meyer. His body lay unmoving, eyes closed in what could only be described as contentment. I checked his pulse, but none throbbed through those veins anymore. His mouth was open just a little, and somehow I knew that he had spent his last breath uttering one final, triumphant, quiet, "Selah!"

And then I saw Christoff. He had toppled off the piano bench and was lying on his back, his unnaturally frail body so eerily still. I walked over to him, getting down on my knees to look at the boy. Actually, he did not look much different from the way he had appeared the day before. His eyes were the same lustrous, distant, window-pane color, though I couldn't see anything dancing behind them anymore. But his skin was still pale and translucent as it had always been, perhaps more so. Only one thing about him had changed, and I noticed it instantly. His lips, small and narrow though they might have been, were most definitely forming a smile.

Meyer had finally found the right notes, the voice of holiness transmuted. He was buried in a small cemetery on the outskirts of town, and I visit his grave from time to time, knowing full well that he hears me when I speak to him.

Wolfhart never recovered; he remained a babbling, mindless invalid for the remainder of his life, but I remember that when I visited him thirty years later, he would still tap the wall with his fingers.

Why was I spared? I can't say for certain, but I think it may have been because my music was meant for here. I had Greta as my anchor to this world; the others did not. I feel no ill will about this; throughout our marriage, our music together never ceased to be anything but wonderful. It was the rhapsody *we* were

designed to play, and I believe we have played it well.

And what of Christoff? His parents mourned him, never fully understanding what their son had been. They took him back home to Weimar and buried him in the ground there. But every evening I look into that vast, sparkling night sky and I know that behind it, Christoff Gothart is sitting at some vast celestial instrument, producing glorious music, with a chorus of thousands upon thousands of hosts singing in harmony with him

THE END

Unicorn Living

by

Kate Reilly

She follows night creatures in her dreams
where the unicorn meets her,
brushes its cold horn against the wind
and lets her feel the surface of the moon.

The mane of the unicorn is white
like the crystals from the den Winter inhabits
and where Snow exhales frost.

The clouds whisper to the trees
and the tire swing creaks
pushing itself further into the black space
we call night.