

(4173 words)

SYMPHONY IN F# MINOR

by

With so little else on his platter the aging composer, Erich Hermann Weissenberg, felt compelled to devote himself to the creation of one final masterpiece. It was to be a mammoth work for a Richard Strauss-sized orchestra, double chorus, vocal soloists and also would feature three solo instrumentalists. He laid out the form of the work, five movements, the third and final sections to include the vocal work and the second and fourth to feature his instrumental players, a flautist, a cellist and a pianist.

Weissenberg was seventy-eight years old. He had not composed a new work for

six years, not since his triple bypass surgery. Instead he had languished on his thirty-five acre estate in Dutchess County with its languorous Hudson River views. He listened to the trains in the distance as they plowed their way up and down the riverbank. He watched the movement of the cargo and fuel tankers plying the limpid waters of that majestic stream. He pretended to sketch the clouds that sat atop the hills across the expanse of water, but his sketches were simplistic and uninspired. To his consternation, music eluded him and he, as if in answer, avoided listening to music. The house was silent, except for the footfalls of a maid or his valet, the occasional ker-plop of mail coming through the door-slot or the daily jangle of the telephone when his daughter-in-law, Terry, would call up to see if he was still alive.

Terry Weissenberg was his son's third wife, considerably younger than either of the others. Erich had never been fond of her, never even liked her. She had seemed a shrew to him when they first met and he had never changed his opinion of her, not in the fifteen years she had stayed married to Arthur, his only son. He didn't care for her looks, her voice or her name. But then, he didn't approve of any of the people his children had married.

Terry's name was made-up; he knew that much about her when they first met. As soon as Arthur had called him and told him about the woman, Erich had set his usual detectives in motion, finding out all he could about the new threat to his

family's security. Her real name was Miriam Sokoloff, although she had presented herself as Terry Soloff, the Terry short for Theresa, he was sure she said.

She had been married once before, the detectives told him, to a man named Richard Summers. He was a stockbroker for a small investment house in Manhattan. They had been married for three years, had no children and she had divorced him on the grounds of mental cruelty. It was uncontested and she had her decree long before meeting Arthur. She had some money of her own and an investment portfolio valued at just under a quarter of a million dollars. Erich had been satisfied that she wasn't marrying Arthur for his own money, nor for his father's. He had not actually stood in the way of the marriage, but something about Terry bothered him, then and now.

It was her way of speaking to him on those infrequent occasions when they had visited, either at his home or his son's. Something always struck him as inappropriate. It was more tone than actual words, more inference than statement.

"Erich, you're looking well," she always liked to say on greeting him, even when he had not been feeling well. "Always such a pleasure to be in your company."

He would allow himself to be kissed and then, when she wasn't watching, he would wipe his cheek or his lips in order to remove any trace of her saliva or her lipstick or her perfume. Until he could manage all of this, he would remain where he was, an uneasy feeling dominating him. Terry definitely bothered him.

He was sure that this “bother” was not a sexual thing between them. Terry was not the type of woman that attracted him physically. She was small and spare, with breasts that hardly existed. Her hair, a light brown with a slight wave in it, was always cut short and close to the head, a look he despised on women. She dressed in loose-fitting, country clothing - as he thought of the slacks and long-sleeved pullovers she preferred to wear. For more formal occasions, she would don an ankle-length dress, equally loose and usually highly patterned. She never wore jewelry or makeup, never used popular perfume scents, preferring her own special blend of lilac and rose with a faint touch of something he assumed was patchouli. She didn't like to wear high heels either, preferring flat heeled shoes or tennis sneakers. Erich could never understand why his son had been attracted to her, why he had married her.

Still, they had remained a couple for fifteen years without so much as a ripple of dissension between them. They saw Erich as often as possible and, after his heart attack and the surgery that followed, they saw him weekly.

“She wants me dead,” Erich thought each time he heard her come into a room he was occupying. “She wants me dead.” He didn't understand the thought, where it came from, what it meant, but he knew that he was right and he knew he had to fight her.

At dinner, Quail prepared in the Basque manner, the night that he drafted his new symphony, he announced to his son and his daughter-in-law, that he had started to work again, that this was a large-scale work, and that he wouldn't be "up to" entertaining again for quite a while. Arthur seemed immediately resigned to reducing his weekly interactions with his father to a minimum, but Terry was actively upset.

"Erich, you surely don't mean to say that we're not welcome here?" she asked, her voice a bit louder than usual, but only a bit.

"I do, Terry," he responded. "The composition of a symphony, especially one on this scale, is an enormous undertaking. It doesn't leave much room, or energy, for entertaining."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," she said. "You mean that after all Arthur has put aside to spend time with you, that you're throwing us out of your life for...God knows how long?"

"Of course not," Erich said indignantly. "There's no question of throwing anyone out of my life. I just need the space and the time to do my work. That is my right, after all. I am who I am and I wish to devote the time I have left to me to some real work, something that I will enjoy, that will fulfill me."

"Please forgive Terry, Father..." Arthur began, but he was silenced by her hand, outstretched in a definite 'halt' signal.

“There’s nothing to forgive, Arthur,” she said, one decibel louder, “but your father should know the sacrifices that you’ve made for him this past year or two.”

“It’s nothing, really, Father...,” he said, but was silenced again by his wife.

“Do you know that Arthur and his children don’t see each other because of you?” she hissed at Erich. “Do you know that he and I have not had a vacation together for three years? Do you know that he has cut back on his work in order to take care of you and that I have done the same?”

“Do YOU know,” Erich responded, “how unpleasant it is to hear ‘do you know’ coming out of your mouth every ten seconds?”

“Father, there’s no call to...”

“You do know he’s speaking to me, Arthur,” Terry said, interrupting her husband for a third time, “and I think I should respond to his nonsense.”

Erich took a breath before speaking again. He wasn’t feeling quite right, his heart was beating a little bit too fast and his ears were ringing. He opened and closed the fingers on his left hand several times, allowing the bones in his knuckles to make the cracking sound he cherished, the sound that proved their function. He rubbed them with the palm of his right hand, then placed both hands on the arms of his chair.

“Terry, you really amaze me,” he said, his old Austrian accent slipping slightly

into the words, the 'r's rolling a bit, the 'z' a bit more sibilant than usual.

"I amaze you?"

"You do. In all these years that you and Arthur have been married, you have never understood me and my relationship with my son."

"I haven't?" she said, the question only half-realized in her tone.

"No. Not at all. Arthur and I have little in common. He was my third child, the baby, and he has been coddled by his mother and sisters, and by me all through his childhood. As a young man, he married an older woman who would have remained by his side forever. I drove her away. I was too extreme with her. I called too much on her time and her attention. I was newly a widower and she was very attractive to me. When she bore Arthur's son I was beside myself with happiness and with envy, too. I wished that child to have been my child. I told her so and from then on she could not see me. It made Arthur unduly sad to be denied my attendance. The marriage ended in disaster, much of it my fault."

"I gathered some of this from Arthur," Terry said to her father-in-law, but he had gone on without waiting for a response, so she missed a few words of Erich's monologue.

"His second wife was a beauty, an international beauty. She was devoted to him and also to me. Their child, Marinka, was a delicious baby girl and the two of

them would come to me and spend days, sometimes weeks with me while I wrote. Those were among my happiest times. I loved them both, and the other child, Arthur's son Robert, was always a welcome addition. I didn't know that the woman was unfaithful to Arthur, that she slept around, that she cheated him, cuckolded him. When I found this out, I was thoroughly disgusted with her and with Arthur, too, for knowing and for living with this situation. I made him divorce her, take away the baby, reclaim his life. It was my decision, again, and not Arthur's."

"Yes?" Terry prompted, taking advantage of his momentary pause.

"You, I have never understood. Why he would marry you, so unlike the other two, has never made sense to me. Perhaps it was to ensure that I would not want you, that no other man might take you away. Perhaps it was to protect himself from another insult, another hurt. You have given him no children of your own. You have tried to invade my life and take over the control of my activities, almost from the start. You have made yourself unpleasant and unwelcome, and yet you persist in penetrating into my daily life."

"I only want Arthur to be a part of your life," she said abruptly. She had left the table and roamed the dark cherry-wood paneled room as she spoke. "You have never understood that. When I married him, and it was for love, understand that, you and he were not on very good terms, Erich. You and Arthur barely spoke, and

although I didn't know the reason, it was clearly through a disagreement over his past. I resolved to never make his past repeat itself, not with you. Do you understand what I am saying to you? I have made a deliberate effort to never let you repeat the mistakes of your past, neither the ones you just confessed, nor any others of which I have no knowledge. I operate pretty much in the dark where you're concerned. I'm sick of it. Do you understand that?"

"Terry, would you let me say a word?" Arthur asked quietly.

She returned to him and gently laid her hands on his shoulders. Erich could see the small mouth smile at his son, could hear the deep breath behind the smile. He could feel his own heart pounding in his chest, could detect the melody of his main theme for the new symphony playing in a high-ceilinged, oaken room somewhere in his brain.

It was a lyrical, romantic tune, played on violins and clarinets that alternated the theme, repeating it over and over, then restated in canon form, then together. He smiled a broad, insensitive smile.

"What are you smiling about, Father?" Arthur asked him awkwardly, shocking him out of his reverie.

"I was composing, Arthur," the older man replied.

"Well, while you were doing that, I was decomposing," his son said simply.

Erich looked carefully at his son's face, staring into his eyes, trying to find something there that he couldn't instantly grasp.

"I don't understand," he said finally.

"You sit there, so smug, Father, confessing to your crimes, to your criminally emotional manipulations of my marriages, and you don't understand. You never had any interest in my two sisters and I don't think you've even seen either of them in ten years, not them, or their husbands or their children. No. Instead you concentrated on me, your third child, or your third movement, maybe. And what was I to you? Not the statement or the recapitulation of your life, no. I was the Scherzo, the joke. You liked my taste in women, so you made it your own. But I finally took a wife, a third wife, and made her mine and you've fought her and you've fought me for fifteen years because the joke wasn't fun any longer. You have no idea how I despise you."

"Do you know what he's saying?" Terry asked him, but Erich brushed her aside with a simple gesture.

"You've kept this back a long time," he said, instead, to Arthur.

"I thought I'd never say it," his son responded. "Now that I have, I have much more to say. You don't think much of Terry."

"I have never liked her, nor trusted her."

“That was my doing, Father. I asked her to be, with you, what she would never be otherwise, dowdy, a shrew, unpleasant. But, you need to know, in spite of herself, in spite of what she knew of you and of your relationship with me, she has loved you, cared about you, worked hard to make us companionable: you and me.”

“I don’t understand,” Erich said.

“Of course you don’t, Father, because you never think in any terms other than your own. You never believe anyone else can think.”

“You don’t think much of me, then,” Erich said.

“Do you not know we think the world of you,” Terry said, getting back into the conversation. “Do you not know that we both think only the best of you, in spite of everything?”

“Of course you don’t,” Arthur said, continuing his wife’s train of thought.

“How could you when you never bother to think about anything other than what satisfies you and your needs. We want nothing from you. We have all that we want. We only try to make you feel that you are not alone, not deserted. You would be a very sad man if we went out that door and never came back here, never shared a dinner with you, never brought your grandchildren to see you.”

“You already miss too much,” Terry said. “Alicia and Francesca never speak your name. Their husbands curse you and their children know nothing about you.”

Only our children, and Arthur, are your living legacy now, and you want that to end because you don't like me. I think more than just your heart is dysfunctional, Erich."

A second melody, harsher, more grating had begun to play in a different room in Erich's brain, the walls harder, more reflective, in this second secret place hidden deep inside the composer's mind. This theme involved percussive sounds and rhythmic patterns that mirrored Terry's words. Brass instruments echoed the tympani and choral voices, mostly baritones and sopranos in a dissonant harmony, sang a slow and painful counter melody, wordless and unflattering. He turned his head and looked away from Arthur and Terry. His son's voice brought him back into the conversation.

"Compose your symphony, Father. Compose your symphony in a key that makes people grind their teeth. Give it everything you've got, but remember this. When it is done, when you've completed the work, you may not have an audience for it. You just may seem passé, too much an iconoclast to be endured. I speak now of the public and possibly even myself. You may not find a welcoming market for anything you have to offer."

"Why would you suppose that the 'market', as you call it, interests me," Arthur said, rising from the table. His back, slightly bent with age, straightened suddenly and he felt younger than he had in years. "Music, my music in particular, is

for me, not for ticket buyers or record buyers or whatever you call those little plastic things or even radio listeners who pay nothing, know little, and experience less. I have never written twice in the same style or manner. That pleases me.”

“Listen to yourself, Erich,” Terry interrupted him, “and hear what you’re saying. You think you’re talking about your work, but do you know you’re really talking about yourself.”

He wheeled on her, his right arm thrusting forward with a masterful, conductor’s gesture. His eyes were half-closed and his lips were parching, but he paid no attention to these signs of stress.

“You only want me dead,” he shouted at her. “That’s all you’ve wanted since the day you married Arthur. You want what you suppose is coming to you through my son and that cannot happen while I live. That’s what you want. You don’t care about my music or about me. It’s only the money, the influence, the power.”

“You can’t speak to her that way,” Arthur shouted, standing up instantly and deflecting his father’s arm. “You mustn’t!”

“Arthur, please don’t...”

“No, Terry, I’ll say what I feel.” He turned again to address his father. “All of my life I have tried to please you. I studied to please you, I suppressed my own talents to please you. I married and fathered children to please you. I spend my free

time at your beck and call, just to please you. I won't try to please you again after tonight. It's a vain effort on my part, hoping for the praise, hoping for the approbation, the love that you cannot give, not to me, not to anyone, really. It's all over, now, Father."

Erich held tight to the back of his chair. Melodies, crippling in their density, were swimming in and out of the rooms in his brain, all of them now seemingly submerged in murky water. He tried to listen to the harmonics, the chromatic counterpoints, but all he heard were muted trumpets and sotto voce voicings, harp-string overtones and pianissimo passages. The voices of his son and daughter-in-law were not making inroads into the music which muffled everything, including itself.

"Leave me," he demanded. "I've had enough of this for one evening and if you want to please me, as you say, that would please me indeed."

Arthur turned from his father and left the room immediately, but Terry hung back a moment staring into Erich's face. He stared back, refusing to be intimidated by this woman he had always regarded as an enemy. He stood his ground, his heart pounding in an arrhythmical meter, both felt and heard in his ears.

"I don't want to kill you," she said quietly, yet loudly enough for him to hear her. "It was the last thing I wanted. I wanted to see you reconciled to me and to Arthur, to his love for you. I wanted, more than anything actually, to see you

embrace the humanity you must have within you, the same humanity that has called to millions of people through your music. The truth is that what you had to give you gave to your music. You saved nothing for us, nothing for yourself.”

She turned to go, but stopped about four feet further away, turned to him and spoke one more time.

“If you need a text for your big, important symphony, here’s something you can quote and quote in music, for that matter.”

She pulled several pieces of light blue paper from her bag and walked back to him, handing it over. Erich looked at it, recognized the paper, the handwriting and finally the words. He looked up at Terry, a question in his eyes, in his body, that he would not voice.

“I’ve had it for fifteen years,” she said. “Arthur gave it to me on our wedding night. He thought I should know. It’s yours again, now, as it always was and should have been. Do you know that it never affected me one bit? Well, maybe one bit,” she said with a little lilt in her voice. “Does that please you?” She left the room.

Still standing, Erich looked at the familiar note, one he had written on the occasion of Arthur’s marriage to Terry. He had forgotten the note, forgotten he had written the note, forgotten what he had felt compelled to write that day. With it held, tightly, in his hand, it came back to him all in one piece, rushed at him like an

allegro movement, a scherzo, and he had no need to look at it.

“Forget her...” his neglected note began. “Forget her now before she forgets you. Do you know that no woman can ever bring to you what I have brought? Do you know that no woman can ever be to you what I have been? Now and forever, there is no one in this world who can ever begin to replace me in your heart, your life, your work. Forget her.”

The note went on in this vein for three pages. At the end there was a simple inscription that read, “You have my admiration for the courage you show in making your life my own. Your Father.”

A new theme, played on three solo instruments, sounded in his head. It heralded a choral entrance that began with the words “Forget her.” He heard the words, heard them repeated again and again and again and he reached out to the chair once again for support. The orchestral accompaniment grew in size and volume and the double chorus grew to match it. The soprano shriek on the words ‘do you know’ was so strident, so Shostakovich in its outward presentation, that he reached to cover his ears, to protect himself from the sound of those words.

He could not shut out what he heard. The f-sharp minor chord, played repeatedly by the woodwinds and the brass, reinforced by the six tympani and the vibraphones, underscored the dissonance of the vocal passage that would end the

symphony. It was too loud to be endured.

Erich moved away from the table, away from the chair, toward the door at the far end of the room. He moved as rapidly as he could with the music smashing through his fragile brain and body. It was painful surging forward and he lurched left and right as he progressed through cavernous space. Finally, after the most painful journey ever covered in twelve bars of music, he reached the sanctuary of the archway that opened onto the central hallway of the house. Erich staggered through the portal, expecting to find relief from the sound that had so crippled him, but instead he found himself, almost stereophonically surrounded by the blaring of cornets and flugelhorns, the cacophony of mature composition for the trombones and piccolos, the sudden thrill of shimmering violins, sixty strong and playing triple fortes. He reached for the newel post at the base of the broad, cedar staircase, but missed as one final blast of sound from the orchestra inside his head struck him from behind. He staggered. He fell. The music faded to the shimmering of harp, castanets and tambourines, to the single flute playing the main theme one last time extending its influence into a vague, uncharted future.

The housekeeper found him there, not quite dead, three hours later. His eyes stared at nothing, his ears heard nothing. His tongue lolled gently at the left corner of

his mouth and his hands, one obviously still conducting, twitched rapidly and repeatedly. He could not speak or respond to her.

His symphony had climaxed triumphantly, but no one else would ever hear it. Only Erich knew that, through his own untalented words, he had finally received the curiously deadly accolade he had long anticipated.

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