

*Three Reflections on Der Shönen Blauen Donau.*

*Wien Loop Tape:*

Sad, spotted face. The old man pulls up a coat sleeve and taps his watch, scowling at the woman. Her mouth a creased, lipless slot, she hisses, but not at him, “Papa Haydn. You say the parrot said only Papa Haydn.” The man’s shiny trench coat churns, as if he is treading water inside it. Our tour guide points at the dusty, stuffed bird with its shaggy feathers, “perched” above the glass cabinet that holds the MS of a late symphony, and nods. “They loved him here in Vienna, even more so in London. He never wanted for money. Not like Mozart. Although it’s a myth, Mozart’s poverty. Nothing like Schubert.”

She looks around the group, most of us staring at the man and woman. His scaffolding has collapsed, his trench coat deflated. We are unable to move. Everyone seems to have added some personal space.

I, Esterhazy, watch from my Plexiglas frame. “They call it ‘The London.’ It was his No. 104.” End of the Spiritoso. I still love him, just as always. My gaze is fixed on his travel keyboard, with its delicate black and ivory keys, set in a dim case at the center of the room. Is the WiFi signal good here? Did the house sitter remember to water, they wonder? They shuffle on to the Beethoven room. Clearly, everyone is running out of steam, even the old couple. There’s one such in every group, though more often status post or pre. Again, the loop tape. The

Adagio/Allegro opens once again. The room is now empty. Too much technology here. Very little love.

*Grein Volks Quartet:*

To be sure, she was once a great beauty, now a gaunt, sallow old woman, no longer petite, merely shriveled. Her hair is creamy white, coarsened by perhaps eighty years under the exacting brush, perfectly cut to her squared off shoulders. We shuffle sideways down rows of high wood stools. She clears my knees without our touching, slots herself easily into the narrow space beside me.

Our tour group is packed in at the Stadttheater, oldest theater in all of Austria. It once served as the town hall, complete with jail. Our Emcee relates her bedtime story in squared-off bites of perfectly toasted English, dipped in a honeyed Austrian accent.

“The shows were sometimes five hours long. Prisoners were allowed to watch through a window facing the stage over here in this side room which, as you can see, is now used as a ticket office. They were bribed with cigarettes and food, you know, to keep them from disturbing the performance.” She pats down a plump bun of golden hair, sweeps an open hand demurely across her brocaded bosom halter.

“And for a bio-break, there is still this one-hole latrine.” She leans down from the side, smiling at us, and pulls open a red, velvet curtain, as if to begin a puppet show. We see a small, plain closet with a wood bench against the back wall. She lifts an oval cover and points down the hole. “You will note, I am sure, that this small

room opens directly into the auditorium. The sitter would wrap the curtain around his or her face, so as not to miss the show. The audience heard *unt schmelt* everything.”

The woman next to me whispers something to her other neighbor, and they giggle. I'd believe it if she told me she was once a ballerina. The face is stretched taut over the skull, and, at the same time, plumped. Silicone? Botoxed? The nose was fixed long ago, when the operation was new, and results not nearly so predictable. Was she happy with the tip? A bit boxey, especially after all this time, if you ask me.

But still, I cannot help myself. Even with my wife seated beside me on the other side, I examine the woman sidelong, up and down her coat, the shiny, black belt, and below that, I imagine bony knees clamped together, lost in darkness. I edge closer, pressing my arm into the invisible space between us, searching. Airy scaffolding is all, stiff fabric. Gabardine? I imagine its rustle as I carefully compress it, the fragile framework of bones embedded within, the cool, creep of her skin. I feel her withdraw, inflating a safety zone of inaccessibility, even if only conceptual. I feel a small, stern slap of propriety.

The row of Asian ladies in front of us erupts in applause, begins to clap in time with the polka. Arms linked, they sway in tandem. Two of the Tyrolean quartet up on stage, in lederhosen and green velvet vests, moon and dip, make a mawkish love duet of tuba and clarinet. I've never heard a tuba play so softly. The accordionist is down on bended knee, smiling broadly at his mates, least at home on stage, but with the most authentic devotion.

I tip my camera upward at an unfurnished box at the far end of the balcony, it's greasy walls flocked in fleurs de lys. A cold light radiates from two bare bulbs in a forked brass wall-sconce, shedding a macabre, surreal Lautrecian glow down below, applying a patina of unwonted years to our faces. On the last day of our cruise, one of these happy, applauding ladies will suffer a stroke in her stateroom.

Just look at the tuba player still atoot, balanced on one knee. His is the most authentic get up. Surely he was once Hitler youth, his father no doubt SS. These jovial men with their sparkling aquamarine eyes, round, rubrous, inviting faces and thinning hair, Jugendfreunde now in middle age, the children of monsters, of reviled Gespenster. How many of us Jews, bundled in darkness, have roared approval, ignoring the whispers of their ancestors, and yours, and wandered off in contentment to Class 5 staterooms to sleep off their Sachertortes and Glühwein?

*Melk Abbey:*

I am Sixtus Propertius. Ausculda et parvenis. Call me Liupald. Yes, *that* Liupald! Tonight, I bend a knee to the Margrave himself!

Explaining how peasants felt in this place, the tour guide says that, standing near a relic, you stand closer to heaven. In the monastery you see what heaven is like.

You have seen me in a Breugel or two, weary from the Winter hunt, observing skaters through the bare birches below, hounds exhausted in the snow at our feet. True, I too was once a peasant, but my village sent me here to this great abbey where I have learned to read. Here, we too know plague, famine and war, 28

years of war. But there is enough to eat. Physical piety. The ward where we sleep has a ceramic furnace. There is a God who is here. A better God. Near in Joy and Sorrow. Me, I am on my way. Ora et Libora, as we say.

The Romans named the river Danubius. We have called it Donau for hundreds of years. On Komoda's feast day, I am to serve the Margrave in the great hall. On that day, music will rain down from our great organ through the high round windows. From the treasury, we will bring in the Saint's jaw, its handles sawn down and sanded smooth, just one tooth remaining in back, yellow as ivory. The precious relic is fitted into a magnificent gold monstrance, studded with gems.

A clue to how we live: Ora et Libora as I have told you. That's how I live, anyway. In answer to God and the Honorable World. Is the word celebrate or celebate, asks a young novice, attempting a joke?

They tell us that soon, we are to translate the scrolls into German. Still, they send us seven year old boys from the countryside, from my village even, to live here, among us young monks. What could they be thinking?

1360 Words.