

MATTHEW BIN

TEMPO RUBATO

THE OLD MUSICIAN'S JOKE was: the four greatest composers of all time were Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and whichever other one was your favourite. Arabella Peckham had laughed when I told her that, and I knew I was hired. I named an outlandish weekly fee for my services, and she agreed readily.

The Peckham family's house was outside the village, and their lane-way was a long walk up from the road. So every week for six months, as I trudged up the neat gravel lane, I cursed myself for thinking that money would make up for the inconvenience. Never more sternly than in today's icy winter rain. It found its way around my umbrella, slunk down my neck, infiltrated my shirt collar. Nasty, brutal stuff, and it was only January: there was worse to come. At least the daylight would last until I left, as the season wore on. At this time of the year, night would fall by the time I completed the lesson.

I stood shivering on the doorstep for a couple of minutes before my knock was answered. This was not unusual, and at least the Peckhams could not be accused of pretension, allowing even a piano teacher to use the main entrance. But I was surprised to see the face of my charge, Thomas, behind the door when it opened.

"You're here," he said glumly. "Come in." Like many young men of the modern age, he treated manners as something to be doled out, a dear price paid for interacting with their betters. I knew not to take it personally: he displayed the same attitude with his mother.

"Good afternoon, Thomas." I closed my umbrella and stepped inside. "How are you? Is your mother well?"

Arabella was most often there to greet me when I arrived. She was Rumanian, one of those continental women with an exaggeratedly passionate love for the arts. It was she who ought to have been taking lessons from me, not Thomas. She would have appreciated it more, and would have been a better student. "I have ears of brass," she told me the one time I suggested

it, “and fingers of wood.” It was a shame, as she was quite engaging to converse with, and rather appealing to the eye as well.

“She’s—not well,” he said, closing the door and latching it.

“How sad,” I said. “Caught a cold, this time of the year, I expect.” Thomas did not offer to take my coat. The coat rack was just beside the doorway, empty, and I hung it up myself.

He did not reply. “Well.” I gestured slightly with my music case. “We ought to proceed. Do give her my best wishes for her health, will you?”

We walked into the drawing room, just off the foyer. The Peckham house was not large, or old, or even interesting: they were well-off, but not rich. Henry Peckham had been overseas since I had first known the family, Hong Kong if I remembered correctly, and the elder son was at Cambridge.

I led Thomas to the piano and set my case on the table beside it. “Have you been working on your études?” I asked.

“A bit,” he said. He hadn’t warmed the piano bench once all week, then.

“Let’s give Czerny a try, shall we?” I said. “We were on the Andantino, I believe.”

He leafed through the music on the piano, as if he had never seen it before. He went past the Czerny album the first time, but got it on the second. I waited.

He flipped through it until—finally—he found the Andantino. After some time arranging it in the direct centre of the stand, he took his place at the keyboard.

“Now, recall,” I said, as he made an elaborate show of stretching out his fingers, “Czerny wrote to develop precision and skill in his students. We play him confidently and precisely. He is not open to interpretation. You remember?”

“Yes, yes,” he said, peering at the music. Some of my students listened to my pointers: not Thomas. He would be barely capable of plodding through this little piece. No matter; I was paid for my lessons—not paid for the beggar to learn anything.

We had been working on this étude for some three or four weeks. As I feared, he attacked it like a child seeing the music for the first time. He halted and restarted so many times I lost track of which bar he was playing. Frightful.

I leaned forward once or twice to point out a phrase he missed with the right hand, or to correct the timing of the melody in the more complex

phrases; otherwise, I sat silently, waiting for the end. The final arpeggio, landing on the low A—no, G—no, try again, A—was at least a relief. He raised his hands from the keyboard, then turned and looked at me, met my eye for the first time.

“I don’t like Czerny,” he remarked.

“No one likes Czerny,” I answered with a smile. “He isn’t meant to be liked. But he is excellent to learn from.”

He nodded. “I did practise it—a bit.”

“Sometimes we practise and find that we play a piece worse, not better,” I said. “But over time we improve.”

“My brother was killed,” he said.

I was glad, more than anything, that I had not been ungenerous in my comment about his playing. “Oh dear,” I said. “What on earth”

“In France,” he said. “He was in—I can’t remember exactly. Givenchy, I think.”

Difficult to tell whether his eyes were tearing up: they were usually wide and watery. But I could hardly let it drop there. “Was it—” I began, but quickly stopped myself from asking for details. “Has there been a service?”

“We’re waiting for the—you know. Remains.”

“I see.” So it was probably shell-bursts. There were more and more of those casualties, these days.

“I didn’t realise he was there,” I said. “I thought he was at Cambridge.”

“He went in October,” Thomas said.

“He was—Edward? Your brother?”

“Yes. Edward.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, and took the rare liberty of patting the lad on the shoulder. “You must be terribly upset. We need not continue, if you’re feeling”

“No, let’s continue,” he said. “Mother will be annoyed if I don’t do my lesson.”

“Oh, your poor mother,” I said. “She must be” I seemed to have some difficulty finishing my sentences.

“I’m afraid I’m not going to be much good today, though,” he said, turning back to the keyboard.

“I say, here’s something fun we could try,” I said. Poor Arabella, off in her bedroom no doubt, crying inconsolably, but I could at least amuse her

son for the rest of the hour. “We’ve never tried the Romantics. You’ll find them quite enjoyable.”

I pulled the leaves from my case and placed them on the stand, on top of the Czerny. “Have you heard Mendelssohn before?”

“I don’t think so.”

No doubt. “He’s a minor composer, but a favourite of mine. The fourth great composer, if you’ll recall my little joke.” He wouldn’t, I knew, but I felt like keeping up a cheerful conversation, for the lad’s sake as much as my own. “In any case, we may play him *tempo rubato*. Do you know the term?” I smoothed out the *Chanson Sans Paroles* on the piano and gestured for him to stand.

He seemed to ponder the words seriously enough. “Red time?” he asked.

“Your Latin is stronger than your Italian,” I chuckled. “Stolen time, or robbed time. We take time from part of a phrase, and then pay it back a little later.” I took his place on the bench. “Now watch the music as I play. You’ll see.”

I launched into the easiest one, number two, the *Gondolier’s Song*. Far from my favourite, but I thought it might appeal to Thomas’s taste. “You see,” I said as I played the opening phrase. “I’m slowing down, and then speeding up later. Ever so slightly. You see?”

I sensed him leaning forward, looking over my shoulder. “It’s just”

“You can hear it, can’t you?” I allowed my body to sway back and forth as I played, to indicate the rhythm, exaggerating the Romantic style. “You can feel how it flows, can’t you? Like the waves on the sea.”

“I don’t”

I repeated the opening, pointing with my idle right hand and slowing down considerably. “You see these are eighth notes here. Yet notice how these ...” (I played the slower notes a little more firmly) “are slower than these.” I quickened the pace and lightened my touch.

I reached the end and took my hands from the keyboard, but keeping the pedal down, letting the notes ring. The Peckhams did have a rather nice instrument; it resonated well.

When the sound died, I stood up. “Now you try,” I said. “Try to feel the music, not play it. We may be a little loose with our Mr. Mendelssohn. He’s no Czerny.”

Thomas nodded seriously as he took his place, staring at the music with a concentration that surprised me. He looked at his left hand, checked the music, checked the hand again, and began.

It went surprisingly well; he caught the pattern right off, and found the tripled eighth notes on the left hand without too much trouble. The right hand was far simpler, allowing him to expend most of his energy on the left.

“Very nice,” I said, mostly out of surprise. Rarely did Thomas play—understand—a piece this quickly. I ought to have brought him some Mendelssohn earlier.

He stopped, looking at the music. “I’ll start again,” he said.

“Of course. Feel it out.”

He returned to the opening, and there it was: the ebb and flow of the rhythm. “Wonderful,” I said quietly, hoping it would not put him off. “Go on. Here.”

It was a little like watching a horse at the racetrack, quietly willing it forward, knowing that it couldn’t hear you but needing to say it nonetheless. “Now here. Yes. Here.” Thomas was even imitating my movements now, leaning to the left as he lost pace, then right as he found it.

Then he stopped. “I can’t speed up as much. I feel like I’m just slowing down.”

“When you learn the piece better, you’ll find it easier and easier to pay the time back.”

“Perhaps.”

“In any case, you were doing very, very well,” I said, perhaps the first sincere compliment I’d ever paid him. “You have a Romantic soul, clearly.”

“I like this,” he said.

“I might bring you some Chopin and Schubert. They are lovely as well. Liszt, well, that’s an acquired taste. But you’ll enjoy Chopin, I’m certain.”

He stayed silent. Was he reading the music, perhaps? Again, unprecedented in my time with him.

No—I was wrong. He was crying.

I placed a friendly hand on his shoulder again, felt him stiffen under it. “Is your father returning soon?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

“This is a heavy blow for your family.”

We sat a little longer, and I retrieved my hand.

His head sank. "It doesn't matter."

"Will your mother be all right?" I asked softly.

"I turn eighteen in March," he said. "I'm going to join up then."

Back in August, when it all began, they said it would be done by Christmas; that was now little more than a wry joke. The war had already gone on too long to save Edward, but perhaps Thomas would be spared. Either way, there remained only a few more walks up the Peckham's lane. "I see," I said.

"It doesn't matter," he said, raising a hand towards the music on the stand, and dropping it again in his lap.

"Here," I said. "Let's change places again, and I'll play for a while."

I sat at the keyboard, playing a different *Chanson*—number six, the *Duetto*. Thomas sat beside me, and we both wept together until the piano fell silent and the light was gone.