

Joseph Karasek

THREE MOVEMENTS IN A FORGOTTEN LIFE

I Maestoso

“You will play!” her uncle Manfred said. (all of them, at one time or another said it.) “Like Gustav, Otto, Stefan! In our family, we all play!”

*shrieking violins muffle their shrieks
whimpering violins stifle their wimpers.*

Momma and pappa did not play, but they were dead.
Only four uncles left, and Sara the housekeeper.

It is orchestra rehearsal time. Uncle Manfred, conductor, her violin teacher.

Start with Brahms:

Up-down, down-up, up-down down-up

*And down, and up, his body moves, swinging his arms in a huge circle,
his, arms, descending rising—.*

*An absolute clown, mumbo, jumbo, fingers! Fingers!
Sprightly floating, skipping*

“Up-bow, up-bow,” he shouts at her, G sharp, E flat, sing it!

*Smooth bow, angry, fitful bow, lift, up!
Short skirt, long skirt*

Raps twice on the conductor’s stand, baton down, stands there, glaring.

“Non troppo! Non troppo! E passionate! You all have souls. Why can’t I hear them?”

*nervous, trembling hands
smooth, smooth!*

Like silk

stare

intent

dolce, dolce

Bastard, Bastard, Bastard!

Cramps.

“Excuse me,” she says, gets up. She leaves for the ladies room, regurgitates.
When she gets back they are on the Ninth, last movement.

pappa, mamma, skipped beats
stricken, gut of string.. flopped!

Beethoven! Ode to joy!

Freedom!

Freude!

Freude!

“Two notes, two notes!” he shouts. “Eins-zwie, Eins-zwei!
All-e Men-chen Wer-den Bru-der!”

Gust-ave, Stef-an, Man-fred, Ot-to!

Cramps.

II Allegretto

At the concert, with Uncle Otto—
eyes, half-closed, half-listening,
a suite for string orchestra, by Cabbatino,
or some such other name—

He was the rage then, in 1931 Vienna—
Otto said. She watched, now intently,

bows soar, strings caressed, *legato*,
a piacere, the braided coils

weave, flocks of shifting wings,
a stately Sarabande, arms uplifted
in the masquerade, to the Courante,
its deliberate *marteles*, then flying—

diving in the circle of forms,
pirouette, a *danse capriccio*,
spiccato bows, bewitched—
leggiero, a finale.

III Mesto

They are gone now. Gustave dead, Stefan, Manfred, Otto. Otto the last. He had died in October. All were gone, but Sara, the housekeeper. None had married. The closets still filled with suits, tails, black bows, white shirts.

She had auditioned for the symphony. “You play like an angel!” the Maestro said, “You know that all of our players are men. Without tradition our way of life will fall apart. I’m sure you understand.”

They’d let her alone after that. Otto grieved the most. She knew. She’d put the Violin in its case, and taken it to the attic.

Alone now. Long strands of hair, now gray, cover her face. Wearily, she rests her head on the huge desk in Manfred’s room piled high with papers. Forty years! And still not a single woman in that orchestra!

Slowly she climbs the stairs.

Freude!

Freude!

Alle menchen werden bruder!

Wiping the caked rosin from the strings, she passes the rag under the fingerboard, slides it back and forth, opens the velvet pouch again, grasps the cake of rosin wrapped in velvet cloth.

Her forefinger stretched straight, held in her tight fist, she moves the bow in the deep groove where the rosin has worn away, tip-frog, tip-frog, tip-frog, until the hair begins to brighten, carefully wraps the band over the rosin’s cloth and puts it away.

Moving the groaning pegs, she strums the strings till it is tuned up. They are intact. None had broken. Perhaps Otto had played it secretly, so that it wouldn't lose its timbre: Perhaps he had put new strings on. He was a kind man, the best of the lot.

*A soul-sound welling up, tears fall over the heat-drained wood.
The songs move in her, pour out from her memory . . .*

The lumbering Dr. Kuntz, hovers over the orchestra—

“Non troppo! Non troppo! E passionate! You all have souls. Why can't I hear them?”

The afternoon sun, in from the east and south, the webbed corners, the old trunks, and mahogany furniture, dance in beams of dust.

She is standing very still, the bow tipped downward, holding the instrument by its neck.

*Eins-zwei, Eins-zwei
and-down, and-up, and-down, and-up . . .*

Brahms . . .