

Gottfried Heinrich's Dream

It is music: it has come from a heart.
J.S.B.

At four in the afternoon the old man sat up in bed and said Kaspar, son, where are you? B flat, A, D flat, B, C. The phrase had returned suddenly to his memory. Hearing how poor Gottfried played the clavier had always made him sad, very sad. He remembered Gottfried's gray eyes, open as if they wanted to flee from behind the notes strung together by his long, nervous hands. He imagined his unruly heart, which made him look at women with an anguish that more than once had made the old man tremble. And, especially, the disordered thoughts that forced him to live in constant mental chaos.

These things had made them both cry, he and his faithful Magdalena, when Dr. Müthel told them that Gottfried Heinrich wasn't all there; he would grow like other children, but they should expect no mental effort from him because he had no thoughts. Nevertheless, one day hope appeared, like a ray of bright light. They could see that the doctor was quite wrong: Gottfried thought. But it seemed that he thought with his heart and not his head. It was a cold day and very snowy, a day when he was particularly tired on the way home from the Tomasschule, ready to blow up the entire Ineptitude Brigade en bloc. As he was walking the short distance to the house, he heard a strange stammering from the clavier and he found Gottfried seated, at the age of seven, imitating his posture, leaning over the keyboard, his eyes vacant, playing a not very transparent version of *Contrapunctum VIII*, which he had been working on at the time, the child bent over the sounds, sweating, so transported that he wasn't even aware of his father's presence. No one had taught the art of the keyboard to Gottfried, because nothing can be taught to a child without thought. His father, standing, silent, with his wig in his hand and his mouth open, saw that his beloved Gottfried had thought, memory and will, because if he was able to reproduce something so difficult, he could think, remember and apply himself, God be praised. And the master wondered which school he should take him to the very next day. But, after several tries, the complete failure of this initiative forced them to the bleak conclusion that Gottfried had thought, memory and will only for music; for everything else, he was still what Dr. Müthel had told them: an idiot. And he always

would be. But after the day of the *Contrapunctum*, Gottfried had his father's express permission to play the clavier, like all of his brothers and sisters. They often listened in silence, the older ones respectfully and the younger ones somewhat fearfully, to the wild improvisations that could go on for a long time and that brought tears to Magdalena's eyes as she prayed to herself and said, My poor son, my poor son, he has thoughts only for strange music.

On February 26, when they were celebrating Gottfried's sixteenth birthday, all of the siblings who were present asked him to improvise and he, as he always did before he put his hands on an instrument, raised his eyes and looked beseechingly at his father, his mouth open, showing, without realizing it, the hole where his tooth had been broken in a brawl two years ago in the lane that vomited mud and sewer water into the Pleisse, requesting a dispensation that his feeble head could not understand had been granted him forever. And the father had to nod his head so that blessed Gottfried could play with a tranquil spirit. The old man remembered that that day was especially difficult because Gottfried started out with an unusual theme, B flat, A, D flat, B, C, which raised protests from his siblings, which he silenced to see where it would go. Everyone understood that Gottfried's improvisations on this theme would lead him straight to hell. But out of pity for the emptiness in his head, they let him play for much of the afternoon, until Elizabeth, dear Liza, to distract him from that diabolical music, suggested that they go throw snowballs in Saint Thomas square. B flat, A, D flat, B, C: a kind of phantasmagorical and unseemly version of the familiar theme, which took the form of BADESHC. Which meant nothing to anyone, except that in some strange and ancient language Badeshc was the occult name for Satan.

This theme and the music derived from it had come back into the old man's memory. That is why he sat up in bed, turned his useless eyes to the wall and murmured Kaspar, my son, Kaspar, don't you hear it?

"I hear nothing, master."

The boy shuddered. He'd fallen asleep, with the book open. The master had fallen asleep before he got to the end of the seventh chapter. And that treatise on the sounds of nature was so boring that the very memory of the pages he'd read had made him succumb as well.

"Has Gottfried come back?"

Kaspar woke up. He put, at the appropriate page, the piece of yellow leather with the embossed lion that the master always used as a kind of bookmark, closed

the book and left it on the bed table, next to the brownish medicine that was left in the glass. His recently awakened mind soon oriented itself.

“He’s staying with the Altnikols until...”

“Until I die.”

“Those were the arrangements you made.”

Kaspar, alert, expected the master to react strangely. But he neither got upset nor let his body rest against the pillows. Instead, he flung aside the thin sheet and made as if to climb out of bed. Poor Kaspar, frightened, didn’t know what to do.

“But, master... You can’t...”

“I certainly can. I’m not dead yet. Where’s my walking stick?”

“I don’t know. I don’t...” Disconcerted. “Your walking stick? You want your walking stick?”

“No one thought I would walk again. Have you thrown it away?”

“I can be your walking stick, master.”

The old man agreed, admiring the quick response of the lad whom he called son and whom he would have been glad to have as a son. Meanwhile, poor Kaspar was cursing his bad luck. The mistress had to be away until nighttime and they’d told him to respect the master’s desires, however trivial.

“Take me to the organ.”

Kaspar had to be the master’s improvised staff. He could imagine the long faces of the family when they found out what had happened. But he was there to respect the master’s wishes, however trivial.

They went through the family dining room and the clavier room to the door that led to the organ chamber.

“The key should be in the lock,” the master said. And, yes, it was. Breathing with difficulty from the effort, the master leaned against the wall and said to himself, Wall, blessed wall, you surely didn’t expect that I would lean against you ever again.

“Do you want to go back to bed?” asked Kaspar hopefully.

“Absolutely not.”

Once he had recovered from his fatigue, the master made some secret taps on the wall and, on the boy’s arm, went into the organ room. As if he were seeing it: not an especially large instrument, with few registers, but mechanically very solid and dependable and amazingly pitch-perfect. Kaspar opened the shutters and the early July light fell on his appreciative eyes, passed indifferently over those of the master

and lit up the keyboard of the organ and the Hausmann clavier, the master's favorite.

"The bellows, Kaspar."

The boy went to the bellows and opened the airway. He began to work the bellows and suddenly the theme appeared, B flat, A, D flat, B, C, poor Gottfried's diabolical theme, which Kaspar couldn't know because he hadn't been born when it was heard for the only time within these walls. And then he was developing the theme for a good thirty measures of counterpoint and producing some strange, dissonant screeches, and sevenths and ninths without any logical or structural basis, just what the master said you weren't supposed to do, and no care taken with the voices, because the chords weren't complete. Oh no, now in the trumpet register, the most piercing one, a bitter melody and its fleeting, dissonant imitatio... Well, Kaspar refused to admit that it was a melody. He looked at the master and was surprised to see him smile.

The master was smiling because he was accepting Gottfried's dream and realizing that what his son was saying with those whistles was that he too existed, in his way; and he intuited vaguely that one day this might be music. He ended in an abrupt way, with a brief, impossible chord: C, D flat, D, E flat, E, F. When silence fell, he heard Kaspar stifling his sobs, his head against the rusty metallic plaque in front of him confirming that Olegarius Gualterius sauensis me fecit in Markkleeberg, Anno domini 1720. From his place by the bellows, Kaspar did not dare to look at the master's blind eyes.

"I haven't gone mad, Kaspar."

"What is that?"

"The dream of an innocent. And I'm making seven variations. I have them almost finished."

Kaspar thought he was inside a hellish nightmare. And he shuddered when the master, instead of asking, Take me to bed, I'm tired, said, Copy what you've heard, Kaspar, because we still have a lot to do.

"But that's not music!"

"Don't tell me you don't remember..."

He said it in a softly menacing tone, the most frightening one. Accustomed to obedience, Kaspar went to the desk, took out the pen, the ink and the staff paper,

and began, with the ease conferred by his extraordinarily retentive memory, to write down that horror as if it were music.

“It sounds very ugly, master,” he said when he saw that he had to repeat the twenty-seventh measure of the theme.

“It sounds the way it’s meant to sound to the pure of heart.”

Now he was quite sure that the master had gone mad. He sighed and finished the job with the return of the initial theme and that horrifying ending of C, D flat, D, E flat, E, F. He put down the pen, unable to keep from grimacing in disgust.

“I’ve finished, master.”

“Now play it on the clavier.”

Utterly insane. But because Kaspar had been brought up to obey and make music, he obeyed. But he didn’t make music; he produced chilling, scandalous sounds, that not even the most mischievous children could imagine getting out of a clavier if left alone with one.

“F sharp, G sharp, A!” the master scolded.

“But it sounds even worse,” he replied, as an excuse. “If we start in E flat major...”

His blind gaze lost in a future he could not know, he muttered something that he would never have dared to say, were it not for his beloved Gottfried.

“It doesn’t matter where you start out. There is no tonic. Theme and development are just a mirage... There is unexpected music, always.”

“And the dissonances?”

“The Lord has created them too.” After pausing for a few seconds he put out his hand towards where Kaspar should be and, almost in a whisper, he confirmed the order: F sharp, G sharp, A...

And Kaspar did F sharp, G sharp, A, and the horrifying sounds were realized as the master had foreseen. Then the master started dictating, furiously, with the speed of a dying man who doesn’t want to go without having left, like an anchor for memory, his last thought, a thought enlightened by his daring, a canonical counterpoint, with a perfect equilibrium among the fugued parts, starting from the madness of the initial theme. And based on this, six more variations, all based on the same... on the same lack of tonic, as if all notes had the same value and there were no such things as tonic, dominant, subdominant and sensible. Kaspar thought that he would go mad, but he obeyed and copied with absolute fidelity what the master

dictated. After two hours, the master was pale and sweating with the enormous effort he had made. Then, without moving from where he was, gripping the sides of the table, croaked, Now, Kaspar, I'll play the whole thing on the organ. Listen as you work the bellows in case you've missed something.

"I haven't committed any errors, master." Kaspar said this without boasting; he simply made music well, always. "If there is a mistake, the one who..."

"The thoughts are not wrong, Kaspar." He cut him off somewhat rudely. "Try to be generous. If you don't, you'll never understand."

The master played the theme and the various counterpoints, and the walls of the house wept because they were unaccustomed to hearing, in that home, such uncontrolled moaning.

When he finished, the master was downcast and visibly fatigued, but gravely thoughtful about the realization of his son's dream. His blind eyes lit up and he looked towards the bellows.

"Can you keep a secret, Kaspar?"

"Yes, master."

"Bring the pen and paper."

The boy obeyed rapidly.

Pointing to him as if he could see him: "Write down the title of the piece." He looked away, as if searching the limits of his memory, and recited, "Counterpoint on a Theme by Gottfried Heinrich Bach." He waited, impatient. "Do you have it?"

"Yes, master."

"I like the organ better than the clavier. Tomorrow you'll make me a version for the lute. Do you hear, Kaspar?"

"Yes, master, for the lute." He swallowed.

"Did you like it?"

"No, master, not at all."

For the second time that day, the old man smiled.

"I do. Put my name on it."

"You want to sign it?" Poor Kasper was scandalized again. "That?"

"Yes, that, Kaspar."

In a shaky hand, Kaspar wrote out the signature that his master rarely asked of him: Johannes Sebastian Bach fecit.

“Thank you, lad.” The old man sighed, at the limit of his strength. “Now you have to take me right to bed. And the thing we’ve written... hide it for now.” He sighed. “Can I trust you?”

“You know perfectly well that I would give my life for you.”

The old man, pleased by the answer, let some time go by. Perhaps he was savoring the expression of loyalty; perhaps he was remembering Gottfried’s theme and imagining it for strings.

“When I die you will take it personally to my eldest son.”

“Mr. Friedemann will tear it up.”

“You will tell Wilhelm Friedemann,” he recited in a tired voice, interrupted by his effortful breathing, “that this theme of his brother Gottfried is the thing I love most at this moment, and that it is my wish that it be held back from the sale of my manuscripts and books.”

“But how can you think that anyone would sell a manuscript...”

“You’ll hear it spoken of,” the master interrupted him, “but this one must not be sold.”

“Why, master?”

“I don’t know.” As if he could see, the old man looked dreamily towards the window. “I really don’t know.”

“It’s not music, master.”

“It is music: it has come from a heart.” He turned his blind face towards Kaspar’s voice, putting an end to the discussion. “For now, hide it. Don’t show it to my Magdalena; it would make her suffer.”

He got to his feet with effort, and the boy ran to his side.

“I’m very tired. This is almost over... Do you think I’m mad, Kaspar?”

“Watch the step, master.”

Kaspar helped his master, whom the effort had exhausted, to get into bed. It was early afternoon and a heavy summer shower was falling. The boy was thinking, Why aren’t they back, why hasn’t anybody come, please, please come, because the master had begun to call in a broken voice, Magdalena, where are you, where are my children, I’m dying, where is my music, what is this darkness... And in a hoarse, tuneless voice he sang, facing the wall, This is enough, Lord: when you wish, release me from my bonds. Jesus, come. Oh, world, farewell. I go to the celestial mansion. I

go full of certainty and peace, leaving my sorrows behind. This is enough, Lord. And Kaspar wondered if he should leave him and go for help. But he was paralyzed by his side because his master had grasped his hand and breathed in all the air in the world. He held Kaspar's hand even harder, as if it were connecting him to life. Now he didn't breathe out. Kaspar, horrified, began to cry, because his master had just died and he was alone in the house and he didn't know what to do.

The summer rain was still beating against the windows of the room. All of a sudden, Kaspar freed himself from the hand that was holding his and stood up. He'd had a frightening thought: Mistress Magdalena, Mr. Friedemann, Mr. Altnikol... everyone would blame him for the master's death because he'd allowed him to work, against instructions, and because he'd allowed him to compose music that killed him. Filled with panic, he hurried to the organ room. With tears in his eyes he found all the papers he'd written that terrible afternoon and put them in a pile. He rubbed his forehead to erase any memory of that diabolical music, as if he were capable of forgetting any note he'd heard, left the room angrily clutching the scores and headed for the stove in the kitchen. Page by page, he threw them into the fire, to erase all trace of his disobedience, all proof of his crime, until with the last sheet the dream of a madman was consumed by the fire and went smoking up the stovepipe into the gray sky of Leipzig, as if it were a life.

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