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Enlightenment

A Novel

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In the St Thomas School

The first time Mme Gottsched paid a visit, Hans Krebs and I were sitting at a desk, transcribing the individual parts from a score for the music at the next church service. An oil lamp burned above us, for the scant daylight was not bright enough that November morning. Anna Magdalena was at the clavichord, poring over the words of an aria my father wanted to incorporate into his *Christmas Oratorio*. When the bell jangled, Elisabeth ran to the pulley to unlatch the front door downstairs, and opened the door to the stairwell. She was eight at the time.

‘Say: How may I help you?’ Anna Magdalena continued to concentrate on her playing.

‘Who are you?’ we heard Elisabeth ask.

Fritz had also toddled to the door on his stubby legs, clutching his big sister’s dress for support. Mme Gottsched handed the children a bag of prune pastries, still hot from the confectioner’s fryer. Delighted, the two of them led her into our room. Anna Magdalena stood up from the clavichord and greeted her with a hint of a curtsy.

‘Oh, you’re working!’ Mme Gottsched cast a curious glance at the rastrum, with which I was drawing five perfectly parallel staff lines at the same time on blank paper.

‘By heck!’

Disconcerted, she turned around. In the next room, someone had silenced two boys singing out of tune. On the cembalo two doors down, a student was trying and failing to play

the same passage, over and over. Mme Gottsched listened attentively. I had not noticed for some time: the whole building buzzed and hummed like a beehive.

‘And you’d like to join the St Thomas School yourself?’ Anna Magdalena smiled at her. Just as Mme Gottsched was about to answer, a cane swished down somewhere, and a boy cried out.

‘Perhaps I should think better of it?’

We chuckled.

‘My husband’s *Clavier-Übung* was too difficult for you, you mentioned when we met. What do you play on the lute?’

‘To be perfectly honest, I usually improvise something for myself.’

‘And you’d like to learn to sing too? You must have sung before, surely.’

‘Yes, but I have difficulties with the high notes. And I notice that I can’t keep time because I don’t have enough breath.’

‘That’s all a question of practice, pacing and phrasing. Or are you short of breath because you’re expecting?’

Anna Magdalena! Wasn’t that a little too curious?

‘No, not a sign of it, and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry over it.’

‘Go ahead and laugh, my dear Madame; the crying will come of its own accord.’

‘My condolences on your sad loss, Mme Bach. I had two younger sisters who died too soon. I miss them every day.’

Regina had been just four, a particularly enchanting little girl. She had inherited her mother’s love of flowers and tended the pots on the windowsill with her, the past summer. Anna Magdalena sheer sobbed her heart out every evening. In spring, Johann August Abraham was born and had died on the spot. I counted, on one occasion: by the time Luise came to Leipzig, Anna Magdalena had already given birth to ten children, but had lost seven of them.

‘Did you know that even Martin Luther and Katharina von Bora doubted God when a child was taken from them? My husband showed me the passage in a book.’

Mme Gottsched seemed to be searching for words, gazing at the carnations on the windowsill.

Anna Magdalena followed her eyes. ‘Our faith says the innocent children have gone to the Lord and have it better in heaven than we in our vale of tears, does it not?’

‘Yes, certainly. But—’ Mme Gottsched fell silent.

‘But?’ I asked.

‘Perhaps we do not have to settle for that. For the vale of tears on earth.’

I asked what she meant by that.

‘My late father was a doctor, as was my uncle. Both of them often told me we ought to study nature differently, for her to reveal her secrets to us. We ought to pose new questions to find new answers, ought to learn new ways to learn, indeed new ways to think. The sciences—’

‘—have no consolation to offer.’ Anna Magdalena stared into the distance, dismal.

‘Tell me – when I arrived you were playing the clavichord so well. Where did you learn? Not here at the school, I assume?’

‘No, at home, of course. My father was a court trumpeter, first in Zeitz, then in Weissenfels. There are always ladies at court who wish to hear music while playing piquet, and for decorum’s sake it can be advantageous not to have to order a fellow, if a maiden’s available. Hence, I had lessons not only in singing in my youth, but also on the clavier.’

‘And you were the youngest daughter.’

Anna Magdalena threw me a questioning glance, then nodded. ‘That’s right. I’m the youngest of five, and much of the feminine work was done by my three older sisters.’

I, on the other hand, had never been allowed to practise a clavichord piece until I had mastered it, since I was always the first to be called to the laundry, by both my real mother and my stepmother. ‘You’re actually the only woman Papa has ever had in his master class.’

‘I wouldn’t go that far, Dorothea.’

‘What was it you were playing earlier?’

‘My husband wants to write an oratorio for the coming Christmas. He needs a lullaby for it, Mary at the crib. Let me sing it to you.’

Anna Magdalena sat back down at the clavichord. Before she began to play, however, she first gave a deliberate yawn and made her voice glide from the highest head register to the lowest chest voice. Blithely, she went on to slide up and down perfect fifths from different notes, trilling her tongue in a brrr. Mme Gottsched could not conceal her astonishment, but Anna Magdalena paid no attention. Instead, she placed her hands on the keys to play a prelude, taking its melody for her vocal line.

‘*Schlafe, mein Liebster, genieße der Ruh.*’

Elisabeth lowered the rastrum and I my pen. Anna Magdalena’s soprano was darkly timbred, in contrast to my light, youthful voice. She made the long sustained notes come up gently and blossom, ending with a slight vibrato. Mme Gottsched listened, utterly amazed. Once again, I believed I noticed what she perceived. Anna Magdalena was rocking her little Regina into eternal sleep. I heard it too, and had to dry my eyes on my sleeve. Then came an interlude.

‘*Labe die Brust,*

empfinde die Lust

wo wir unser Herz erfreuen.'

Mme Gottsched blinked. Starting at the syllable *freu-*, the melody descended in flattering garlands, modulating. On the repeat, Anna Magdalena embellished the first part with appoggiaturas, mordents and trills, as if incidental but full of dazzling brilliance. Musical decoration for the mother of God. I would never be able to sing as well as she did.

'My God, was that beautiful!'

'Oh, that was nothing.'

'I've never heard such beautiful singing. You said you learned it in Weissenfels?'

'From the great Pauline Keller herself.'

That's right. It was she who'd taught her the fine Meissen diction as well, to which she now switched all of a sudden.

'And do you ever sing in public?'

'Those days are over now. As a young woman, yes.'

'Tell her you earned twice as much at guest performances as your father.'

'Oh, Doro.'

Elisabeth gawped at her mother.

'My best days were before and shortly after my marriage. My husband heard me somewhere; I was invited to Köthen where he was court music director, and his prince, the musical Leopold, engaged me. My parents hadn't wanted to let me move to an unknown court, unmarried. But they couldn't begrudge me the opportunity to make music every day with Johann Sebastian Bach, a well-known man even then.'

The fabulous wages had been something else they couldn't turn down. I bit my tongue. Anna Magdalena's best days had been preceded by a nightmare for us children. While our father was gaining fame for the musical Leopold in Karlsbad, our mother first felt unwell, then took to her bed, and two days later she was dead. I was eleven at the time, Friedemann nine, Carl six and Bernhard five years old. These days, I believe a child died in her womb and did not miscarry. Our father did not learn of her death until he reached our door on his return. Oh God, I hate to think of it, I choke up at the very memory. – Afterwards, we children hoped he would simply marry Aunt Friedelena. She'd lived with us since I was born, so forever, helping her sister around the house. She was a second mother to us. But then along came this radiant young soprano. Our father married twice for love, and it seems he couldn't love Aunt Friedelena. And so Anna Magdalena came to us. She told me later that Aunt Friedelena made it much easier for her to accept his proposal. Without her support, she'd have hesitated to take on responsibility

for four step-children at the age of twenty. Aunt Friedelena did indeed stay with us; she died here in Leipzig in 1729, the good woman. She taught me to cook. But I digress.

‘Did you stop performing after your marriage?’ Mme Gottsched asked.

‘No, I went on, at least to begin with. But we soon moved here. Prince Leopold married an amusa, as my husband said, and we had to find a new engagement. That’s how we came to Leipzig. To start with, we gave guest performances elsewhere, but never here. The wife of the cantor – too unseemly. And anyway, I was always pregnant.’

‘Now too?’

‘Not at the moment.’

It would have surprised me if she had been. I could tell by looking at her by now, sometimes before she even knew it herself. I stood by her at every birth. I was fifteen when she had her first child, Christiana Sophia Henrietta. Died at three. I’ve never called Anna Magdalena Mama, and she’s never asked me to. She has cared for me like a big sister, while I’ve been the big sister to all the others. Me being allowed to sit at the table and listen in when the tutor came to Friedemann and Carl, was all down to her. She was the only one to teach me singing, as well. My father thought girls either can or can’t sing, so there’s no need to bother with lessons.

Anna Magdalena asked Mme Gottsched to repeat the aria she’d just performed, singing along with her. She wasn’t bad, sang clearly as practised instrumentalists tend to sing, but her voice was thin, no body to it, no feeling for her own instrument. She had difficulties with the high notes.

‘There’s something for us to work on.’ Was Anna Magdalena not rather strict?

‘More of an alto, I’d say. My father’s favourite. He says the value of a composition is determined in the middle voices. When he improvises with the strings, he always takes the viola to make the sound denser.’

‘The value of a composition–’ Mme Gottsched picked up my thread. ‘The piece you sang, the music, I mean, is very moving. But the words – may I say so openly? – are rather absurd. Perhaps they could be altered slightly here and there?’

Anna Magdalena swallowed. The words were hers. She’d been chewing her pencil all morning to put new lyrics to the old aria. After my attempts at a libretto had ended in a falling-out with Henrici, Anna Magdalena had volunteered her services. Mme Gottsched found she expressed a simple thought in far too cumbersome a manner. ‘All the mother says to her child is: Sleep now, for later you shall watch over everyone.’

‘Yes, but that won’t work, the syllables won’t fit.’

‘*Geniesse der Ruh* may do the trick for *enjoy the peace*, although *Geniesse die Ruh* would be more correct, would it not? But why is the part about watching over everyone’s success *Wache nach diesem vor aller Gedeihen*? It ought to be *Wache nach dieser*, since *Ruhe* is feminine. My conjugal friend, incidentally, thinks *vor* is wrong, he says one ought to say *für*. *Für das Gedeihen aller* or *von allen*.’

Conjugal friend? Did she mean Professor Gottsched?

Anna Magdalena frowned and reached for a pile of sheet music. ‘Have a look, Madame, this is the original, a drama per musica my husband put on last year with his Collegium Musicum, for the birthday of our electoral prince. It’s about lust and virtue squabbling over Hercules.’

‘Hercules?’

‘Why not?’

‘A large cast, a triumphant success!’ I interjected. But it occurred to me in a flash why Mme Gottsched was surprised. Prince Friedrich Christian had difficulty walking and was pushed around in a wheeled chair. Paying homage to him as Hercules – had none of us noticed what poor taste that was? Or had my father and Henrici done it intentionally?

‘My husband wants to reuse some of the arias for his *Christmas Oratorio*. This is the original version of the lullaby we just sang. My task is to find new content, but recreate the metre and the rhyme scheme. The emphasis on the words has to remain natural as well, the way they’re spoken. And all of it together has to fit with the music’s expression. It has to sound as if it was these exact words that were set to music, do you see?’

Mme Gottschalk scanned the music and lyrics. ‘Lust sings:

Schlafe, mein Lieber, und pflege der Ruh,

Folge der Lockung entbrannter Gedanken.

Schmecke die Lust

Der lüsternen Brust

Und erkenne keine Schranken.

Mr Henrici wrote this, is that right?’

‘Yes, as always.’

‘Follow the lure of thoughts afire. Hmm. Taste the lust of the lustful breast?’

‘And know no bounds.’

My stepmother and Mme Gottsched locked eyes. Then they burst into peals of laughter. I believe, if asked to date the beginning of their friendship, they would both have chosen that moment. I was left out. Though I was closer to Luise in age, though it was I who had first

noticed her, I was one of the children for whom pastries were brought along. It was a painful sting, at the time.

‘Are we thinking the same thing?’

Of course. I was thinking it too. It was so obvious.

‘My husband said you’d written a little, even published?’

‘Do you know what? It would pique my ambition. Perhaps I might have a stab at a piece?’

Anna Magdalena reached for another heap of sheet music. ‘Here, this one’s most urgent because it’s to be the start. It’s from another important birthday last year, our electress: *Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!* My husband wants to make it into the opening chorus for his *Christmas Oratorio*, the festive opening, exalted and joyful, he says. I told him, what do you want with drums and trumpets, they’ll only scare the infant Jesus, but he says, no, there has to be a fanfare to announce the ruler of the world, and the child himself isn’t born until later. Something like that – but I haven’t come up with anything yet. Feel free to unleash your poetic imagination.’

‘May I take the notes with me?’

‘Of course, but – ahem, perhaps you’d better not tell your husband.’

‘No? Why not?’ Mme Gottsched seemed less confused than interested. ‘My husband likes music.’

‘Yes, I’m sure, but–’ Anna Magdalena cast me a helpless look.

‘Well, perhaps he hasn’t yet told you about it. He and my father had a try at working together when they were both new in Leipzig, but, well. Their first joint commission was for a wedding cantata. Your husband wrote the lyrics, my father the music.’

‘It was a big society event,’ Anna Magdalena took over. ‘Mr Gottsched was not yet a professor and could be proud of the opportunity to show himself. I think, though, that, well...’

‘...that it riled him to stand in my father’s shadow. Librettists have to be dogsbodies, that’s the way it is.’

‘Working together, he didn’t want to just do the groundwork, he wanted, how shall I put it, he wanted to shine for himself. Our old electress had died, and the university held an academic memorial service. Your husband wrote a veritable ode, with the same number of staves in every stanza, in a strict rhyming scheme, and demanded that my husband put that symmetry into music, syllable for syllable.’

We fell into embarrassed silence.

‘I see. That was nonsense, of course. Just because a poem is convincing, it won’t necessarily work as music.’

‘Precisely. And so my husband carved up Gottsched’s ode and set a few verses to music as recitatives, others as arias or choral pieces. That upset your husband, however, who had put so much effort into his text’s even proportions.’

‘I remember him being particularly bothered by the repetition of single words, as is perfectly normal in any composition.’ I feigned a deep voice to imitate Gottsched. ‘The listener can’t possibly understand the meaning of the sentence! The singer has to spend half an hour on words like *Ächzen, Klagen, Heulen* and *Zittern*.’ As he had, I thumped the table with my fist. ‘He made a great racket with a lot of tremolo, and as – if I may say so – he can’t sing, it sounded, er, er—’ God, what had got into me? And how was Mme Gottsched looking at me now?

‘—not good. I see. Ladies, you’ve cleared up a passage in my husband’s *Critische Dichtkunst* that confused me even when I read it with my dear departed mother, in the chapter on cantatas that ought to be set to music only sparingly. The more the music wins, he writes, the more poetry loses. If the ear gets too much to hear, the mind has less capacity to think. Only a thoroughly unmusical man could write such a thing. Had we been married at the time, I would never have allowed him to publish such nonsense.’ Mme Gottsched laughed louder than Anna Magdalena and I.

‘His work is certainly very significant and meritorious. And our husbands buried the hatchet. We see each other regularly at Mme Ziegler’s gatherings.’

‘My father was very pleased to hear that the professor sent you his *Clavier-Übung*, incidentally.’

‘But because of back then, he’ll never ask him for lyrics again. And perhaps our idea, earlier, was—’

Mme Gottsched gestured at the sheet music with her chin. ‘May I try it anyway?’

[...]

Five drum beats

Two days after Luise Gottsched’s first visit, my father called through the house for us all to come to him. Anna Magdalena, Bernhard and I gathered around his best clavichord and quickly read through the first page of the new score. As always, his notes were extremely neat; even printed, they couldn’t have been more legible. Bernhard grinned and drummed the timpani part on the clavichord case:

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom.

I provided flute trills, with Bernhard backing me up:

Boom-doo-bi-doo-bi-doo-bi-boom-boom.

Our father imitated the rising trumpets with his voice, playing the falling violins on the clavichord. And then we sang unisono:

‘Jauchzet, frohlocket!’

Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom.

‘Auf, preise-et di-hie Tage!’

Only now did the choral movement split up into the four vocal parts.

‘Jauchzet, frohlocket! auf, preiset die Tage,

Rühmet, was heute der Höchste getan!

Lasset das Zagen, verbannet die Klage,

Stimmet voll Jauchzen und Fröhlichkeit an!’

We broke off at the end of the A section.

‘She’s done a pretty good job.’

‘Henrici didn’t exactly set a high bar.’

‘Jauchzet on the high A for the soprano works much better than *Tönet* – it really is a musical exultation.’

‘Joy at the arrival of the son of man. Wonderful.’

‘La – da – Za – ba – Kla – she’s found so many excellent words with a in them. It’s internal rhyme.’

Papa played, and we sang the interlude.

‘Dienet dem Höchsten mit herrlichen Chören.’

‘The coloraturas are always on the ö. Yes, that sounds perfect, ö is always easy to sing. What rich overtones.’

‘She’s added in the Chören because she’s cut out the drums and trumpets in the libretto – now they’re only in the orchestra. But with her choirs, she’s managed to bring back the idea of praising God through music.’

‘She’s pretty good at this.’

‘I think it’s fine as it is, now.’

‘Bernhard, run and say a nice hello to Mme Gottsched and ask her to come over as soon as it suits her. I’ve got lots to discuss with her.’

‘Take her a basket of gingerbread.’ Anna Magdalena put her hand in her pocket and pressed a couple of coins in his hand. ‘I saw some from Pulsnitz at the market.’

He grinned at me, and I stuck out my tongue.

‘And bring me back the change!’

[...]

Christmas Oratorio

On the 25th of December, the service at Saint Nikolai’s began at seven in the morning, as always. For us at the St Thomas School, that meant getting up at four. I had topped up the coal in the stoves before we went to bed, so that Beatriz and I could quickly rekindle the embers when we woke. No one can play an instrument frozen through, with cold fingers, and a person has to have been awake for a while to sing, or they won’t get a sound out. Everyone got buckwheat porridge and stale white rolls soaked in milk. My father knocked back a glass of brandy, for inner warmth. Anna Magdalena and I stayed with Beatriz; everything had to run smoothly today. When the first choir and the instrumentalists returned to the school after three or four hours of church service, the bowls had to be steaming on the table, for at one o’clock the whole thing was repeated at Saint Thomas’s.

Everything went fortuitously, in both church and kitchen, so Anna Magdalena, Elisabeth and I were able to take seats in the cantor’s pew, looking forward to the afternoon service. I had Fritz on my lap, but was still glad of the heat of the coal pan beneath me, brought along from home. As arranged, Mme Gottsched joined us. In those days, the women still sat downstairs and the men on the galleries. Not only scornful voices said the separation of the sexes in Leipzig’s churches undermined the clergy’s intentions. The gentlemen had a far better view, from above, not into their own sinful souls but down the ladies’ necklines below; and the ladies’ thoughts turned not to our Lord in heaven, but to the lords and gents up above them.

Mme Gottsched was not the only one to be listening to the first part of the *Christmas Oratorio* for the second time that day. The afternoon service also drew music-lovers from outside the city. Some three thousand people crowded little by little into the church – the believers set no store by punctuality. Confession of sins and promise of mercy, reading from scripture, confession of faith and so on took place as usual amid constant arrivals. Particularly the fashion-conscious ladies of the upper classes only entered the church one or two hours after the service began. Strolling at a leisurely pace, they used the seating plan to make a theatrical entrance. Much to my father’s chagrin, since his music was always played before the sermon and therefore had to drown out the commotion. Today, it silenced the annoying din immediately.

The five drum beats, the three ascending trumpets, the falling violins, the choir unisono – everyone swiftly took their seats in pleasant surprise. From the outset, the coming success was palpable. Oh, all I’ve heard, as the eldest child of Johann Sebastian Bach! My earliest memories date back to our Weimar days, where I had to watch over my little brothers in the fabled heavenly fortress of the royal chapel. Then, I heard everything our father composed in Köthen; the rehearsals for the palace performances were held at our home, in a spacious hall next to our sitting room. I recall marvellous concertos, such as the ones he dedicated to the Margrave of Brandenburg. I have a good understanding of music. And that’s why I knew, when the second part of the *Christmas Oratorio* began the next day with the Sinfonia, that there had never been anything like it. Even before the Evangelist tells of the *Hirten auf dem Felde*, the orchestra describes the events: four oboes (two d’amore and two da caccia) symbolise the shepherds in the field, playing a touchingly simple, vernacular theme, a pastorale. Above them in the flutes and violins rises a dotted angelic melody, daaa-ba-dab-deee-da-daa, gently contoured like a springy roundelay. Angels in heaven: high notes; shepherds on earth: low notes. And then the miracle occurs: the musical spheres, at first separated, inch closer, the earthly theme of the oboes and the heavenly of the flutes and violins interweave, and at the close the earthly oboes complete the angels’ heavenly theme. And so the believers learn on Christmas Eve of God’s incarnation. In deep joy, I sat in the church and listened. The composition was incredibly original, indeed new; above all, however, the expression of an *idea* in purely instrumental music, which has no words or concepts at its disposal. Is it not strange? My father never spoke to me about it. Only with Anna Magdalena and Luise did I ever discuss such matters.

I could not see who sang the angel in the following section, since the Thomana choir performed from the organ loft behind us. But it sounded so beautiful, childlike and pure, that I was very glad not to have Elisabeth next to me. Had she been there, she would have heard someone other than Heinrich singing the recitative even better than him. Elisabeth had attended the morning service at Saint Thomas’s alone, to sell the libretto booklets we always printed at our own expense; now she was looking after Fritz at home.

As soon as the service was over in Saint Nikolai’s, on that 27th of December, Professor Gottsched dashed down from the gallery to his wife. ‘He chickened out, our good cantor. *In the beginning was the word* – a musicus can’t abide such an idea. He failed to–’ Only now did he notice Anna Magdalena and myself. ‘Oh, ahem, is it not so, today’s reading is one of the foundational texts of world wisdom. It refers back to the creation, Genesis 1: God speaks, and the world comes about. He does not build the world, He does not conjure it into being, He does

not grow it; He *says: Let there be light!* Music would no doubt have preferred God to sing it, but what He did was speak. And thus, the primacy of the word over music is established once and for all. John the Evangelist writes in the original Greek: *logos*. Luther translated it as *Wort* – word. He could just as well have chosen “rule”, “law”, “concept” or even “logic”. And we could think endless thoughts about each of those concepts. Yet such literally ingenious debates are of course of no use for gaily illustrative, playfully decorative but deplorably concept-less music; hence, our hardworking cantor might be well advised not to undertake an attempt to set John 1:1 to music.’

Anna Magdalena and I exchanged glances during this lecture. Mme Gottsched, however, listened attentively to her husband. It had been she who had persuaded my father to expand the nativity story according to Luke over the first three parts and to cut the passage from the Gospel of John planned for the third day. ‘You would be right, my dear conjugal friend, had God *written* the world. But he did not. As you say, He speaks as He creates; that is, His act of creation must be *heard*. Language makes poetry and music into sister arts, which illuminate one another without one ever able to claim primacy over the other. Incidentally – don’t you agree that one must leave some things out for the sake of a good story?’ Mme Gottsched raised innocent eyes to her husband and linked arms with him. As they walked away, she turned and winked at me.

[...]