

Vienna 1908

Dolferl looked up from his manuscript. ‘Do you like it?’ he asked.

I was stunned.

‘When this is staged well,’ he announced, ‘it will have an impact on all future opera productions. Can’t you just see it?’

‘A horse and a bull on a stage. . . ’ I stammered. ‘Isn’t that a bit . . . elaborate?’

‘Well, what are operas if not elaborate?’ he snapped. ‘And besides, circuses do it all the time! Here... ’ he said, reaching for a stack of sketches on his cot. ‘That will be the set. There’s the horse, the bull, the men and the women. It all fits.’ He handed me the designs. ‘See for yourself.’

‘What stage can support all that?’ I asked.

Dolferl shook his head: details, details, details. ‘If you will it,’ he said, ‘anything can be done.’

I knew why this opera had to be performed. Dolferl had often preached about it. ‘Art,’ he would say, ‘is a unique form of perception. When we perceive art, we lose ourselves in the object. We forget about our individuality, and we become the clear mirror of the object. Through aesthetic perception of the manacled bull, we perceive the eternal notion of all bulls. It’s the Platonic Idea’. I endured these pedantic lectures nightly. Once his mind was going, his thoughts poured out of him relentlessly. Often these long-winded discourses lulled me to sleep, in which case Dolferl would rouse me back to consciousness so that I might savour some more of his wisdom.

‘This opera is too important not to be produced! It’s the story of our Nordic forefathers; how we almost lost our heritage. And it is our duty to bring that to the attention of our people!’

The book, *Legends of Gods and Heroes: the Treasures of Icelandic Mythology*, lay open beside him. He stared at me as if willing me to understand that bringing this opera to the nation was our destiny. ‘Art is the only way out; the only escape from our

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cultural mess. By creating art, we can elevate the spirit of each individual in the audience. It is only from here that something new can emerge: a cultural revolution! And we artists have been called to pave the way.’ He swept his hair away from his forehead and turned to me. ‘Your job is to score this scene. I want the music to be so vivid and precise that even a blind man can see what I’ve envisioned!’

‘Precise? With crude wind instruments, primitive harps and bone flutes?’

‘That’s all they had in Iceland at the time. Look it up for yourself in the Hof Library.’

The kerosene lamp cast a dim light over the grand piano in the middle of our room. It seemed stolen, taken from the parlour where it belonged. The piano was the most cherished hostage of our poverty; it was our altar. Its raised black lid was like the outstretched wing of a black swan, fighting for the limited space. It was a constant reminder of why we were both here in Vienna: we were here for our art. Dolferl’s class schedule at the art academy was curiously unstructured. It allowed him plenty of time to stroll through the city and spend entire days in the coffee houses, art exhibits, libraries and city parks. He was free to sleep until noon and let his mind wander wherever his shifting whims would take him. Painter, definitely. Architect, probably. Writer, perhaps. Composer and librettist – why not? For Dolferl, even the role of city planner was a possibility. ‘Whatever my passions demand of me, I become for the moment,’ he once told me. I, for my part, had passed the entrance exam and was now a proud student at the Vienna Conservatory of Music.

‘Now, I do have some ideas for the bull’s theme,’ said Dolferl. ‘I want all the notes on the scales, all at once. I want the sound of chaos and death from the orchestra, like this.’ He pounded on the keys with both arms bent at the elbows, fist to fist. He hammered on the ivories and stamped his feet on the floor in a violent rage. Down he slammed, again and again, screaming, ‘This, this, this is what I want!’

The socks and underwear that hung over our beds trembled. He hit the piano keys for a third time, blasting out another dissonant bombardment.

‘Dolferl,’ I warned, ‘the neighbours.’

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Dolferl was beyond hearing me. He pulled away from the piano. ‘I can feel this,’ he said, ‘I see it. The prelude to our opera!’

He stopped suddenly and stared at me. Nothing was said, but a thought was conveyed: he who attains his ideal thereby transcends it. I was in no doubt: I was in the presence of greatness. Dolferl stood up and began pacing the narrow, three-stride space between the piano, the table and our beds. Back and forth, back and forth he went, narrating. His elongated shadow was cast on the wall and up on to the ceiling. Back and forth it paced. ‘When King Nidur falls to his knees at the end, the audience will linger there, spellbound for a long moment, and then I can hear scattered claps that swell slowly to waves of applause. Followed by standing ovations and cheers! It’s clear that our music has touched them deeply: they’ve experienced a catharsis, they’ve reconnected with their true selves. We will have transformed them!’

‘I don’t know . . .’ I said.

His eyes widened. How dare you! How can it be more obvious? Then his expression softened. He grinned. ‘What do you want, then? Shall we write a nice little drawing-room comedy instead?’

Dolferl never doubted that he was a great artist, an artist of many faces and moods – ranging from bright and confident to dark and doubting. More often than not, however, he saw in himself an unacknowledged genius. A genius spurned and neglected; a genius so great that no one, not even other acknowledged geniuses, would have the brilliance to comprehend and accept his intimidating and revolutionary ideas.

‘We live in despicable times,’ he said. ‘We are resigned to the fact that art, in most cases, is nothing but cheap entertainment. But this is not what art was meant to be! Art was born as religion! And it must be reborn as religion! We must go back to a time before history. To the timelessness of mythology! As Wagner made clear, we need to delve beneath the superficial sentiment of these rotten times. This shallow society betrays the true, vivid nature of man! Our aim must be to uncover man’s lost vitality through art, and radically transform him!’

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‘I know, I know!’ I managed to interject. ‘But our piece isn’t even written yet, and it’s already too daunting to produce.’

‘Who’s designing the stage settings?’ he retorted. ‘You or me? Who designs all the costumes? I do! All you have to do is to put my ideas to music.’¹

‘I need to learn more about music if I’m to – ’

‘Oh, you and your Conservatory! It makes you trivial. Insignificant,’ he said with a growl. ‘The true artist can’t be bound by lessons in school. The true artist must free himself of all rules and restraints.’ He stared at me. His pale blue eyes seethed. There was an understanding, tacit but palpable: we share this squalid little room, but this is the conservatory for our complementary talents. Our joint effort will bring our vision into the world.

This is our fate. This is the story of our lives.

This is. *Is*.

‘Music is our religion!’ To emphasise his statement, Dolferl’s fists crashed down on the keys again. Uproarious discordant notes sounded from the piano’s reverberating body. ‘I’ll build an opera house worthy of our music,’ he declared and smashed his arms down again on the piano. An angry, haunting chord issued, like a dying gasp from the mythological bull. ‘I will build a temple!’ he proclaimed.

Muted thumping could be heard against the ceiling beneath, which only made Dolferl raise his voice and stamp his feet in response. ‘A sacred temple of music!’ he cried, slamming each foot down to a word.

Four booms resounded from the floor in answer. Oh Christ, now Schrobner was awake! Enraged bellowing could be heard through the floorboards.

¹ See: Appendix1, Hitler's Opera