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Gothic Story

Subito Piano

The streets of Vienna at night are lonely and dark as the sounds of Mozart and laughter from late night parties fade away to a hushed silence with little sound other than echoing of clicking horse hooves and the buckled shoes of midnight wanderers. The puddles of newly fallen rain reflect the moonlight coming through the gray clouds above that float down to create a wall of fog off in the distance. The candles flicker in the windows spreading their light through the thickening fog creating an eerie lighting rather than a beacon shining through to guide a ship to safety. Tobias Schwarz walks along these cobblestone streets alone with a sense of fright and urgency. "Why does he want to meet me there?" he wonders as he follows the directions sent to him in the letter. His footsteps break the silence as he turns left out of his apartment and continues to turn in what seemed to be a haphazard arrangement of lefts and rights. With his beloved violin safely in its case beside him, Tobias makes his last turn down a dark alley way behind the Vienna Court Opera.

"And here we are at the Vienna State Opera which was first opened in 1869 under the name "Wiener Hofoper" or Vienna Court Opera. Can anyone tell me what the first performance was? Anyone?" The tour guide's constant yelling and questioning over the sounds of the cars streaming past was beginning to get on Jasper Harper's last nerve. "Mozart's *Don Giovanni*," he

mumbles to himself. Having a father who is the renowned Juilliard professor Dr. Matthew Harper makes every music history trivia question seem like common knowledge. The love of the piano and cello for the whole of his seventeen years just adds to the knowledge. Just a couple of weeks ago, he had decided to take the opportunity to live in Austria with his dad while he taught a class at the Mozarteum Salzburg. “Who wouldn’t want to live in Europe?” his friends all told him before he left for the summer. “C’mon Jasper. You would be CRAZY to let this opportunity slip!” “Why did I even listen to them?”, Jasper thought as the walking tour continued inside the famous opera house.

Simon Schwarz, Tobias’s father, used to tell him stories about the Angel of Music when he would come home from rehearsals with the Künstlerverein of which he was the conductor. It is said that every one of the greatest musicians has been visited at least once by the Angel of Music. He is never seen, but is heard only by those who were made to hear him. Afterwards, they cannot pick up an instrument or open their mouths to sing without producing music that to the common man is pure genius. Although his father had always claimed he had never been visited by the Angel, Tobias was convinced even after that cold December day when his father died that he had been visited and that like his father the Angel would speak to him too. And now the Angel had spoken. Well, written to him. But he was about to hear his glorious voice. He just knew it. “All I have to do this open this door. Then, the Angel will make me the greatest violinist Vienna has ever heard!”

The light reflects brilliantly off the gold moldings and appliquéés that are so elegantly designed into the architecture of the 144 year-old marble staircase at the main entrance of the opera house. Jasper closes his eyes and tries to imagine what the atmosphere would have been like every night before a performance. Ladies in long silk gowns and whites gloves with pearl

buttons stretched along their lanky arms. Men in their formal coattails and top hats with their wives on one arm and their opera glasses on the other. Jasper continues up the stairs until he entered the interior. From there he walks straight through the middle aisle and got up on the stage. After counting to three, he turns around to take in the beauty that was surrounding him. The crushed red velvet seats and intricate moldings that separate each of the five upper levels display the elegance that can only be associated with music. “So much better than Madison Square Garden,” thought Jasper. His magical moment however is cut short when the tour guide returns to her rambling. Except this time, she says something that caught Jasper’s attention. “Many of you have seen or the read the *Phantom of the Opera*. While Gaston Leroux is said to have based the setting of his gothic romance novel after El Palais Garnier in Paris, rumors and stories circulate about the existence of a real life “Phantom of the Opera” here that could have been the true inspiration. Our Phantom was not limited to falling in love with beautiful singers and writing horrible operas. Oh no, his “students” were every kind of musician, and not one of them had a happy ending.” “What do you mean?”, a young American tourist girl asks. “What I mean is, not a single one of them turned up at their debuts or they were all never seen again for that matter.” “Now this is what I’m talking about,” Jasper replies a little louder than he thought.

The heavy wooden door of the cast entrance creaks as Tobias opens it and starts in to the pitch black in front of him. The slamming of the door echoes through the emptiness of the backstage area. Off in the distance, he spots a single burning candle. This candle however is not like the candle he had blown out in his room before he left. No, this one is blood-red with an orange flame that shown brighter than any he had ever seen. The wax looks like blood dripping from a freshly dead human corpse as it travels down the length of the candle into a pool at the base of the silver candlestick. He begins to walk towards the candle in a hypnotized state, but

just as he reaches his hand out to grasp it the floor below him give way, and he starts a free fall into even more darkness below.

He had only seen the *Phantom of Opera* on Broadway about a million times. His dad's music connections got him into practically every musical imaginable in New York City for free, but Jasper could not resist the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical genius that is the *Phantom of the Opera*. From Christine Daae's ballads like "Think of Me" and "All I Ask of You" to the Phantom's "Music of the Night" and the classic Phantom of the Opera theme, this Broadway musical can compete with no other. The idea of a real life phantom was something of true excitement for Jasper. The rest of the tour group was looking at him as if he was crazy as they were all scared out of their minds by the sheer notion of a ghost tale. "It's like the first musical serial killer!" he exclaims. "Luring musical prodigies to their deaths by claiming to be able to make them incredible professional musicians. Genius!"

As Tobias begins his descent, he snaps back into reality and begins to scream. To his surprise, he does not land on brick or stone but a soft, feathery mattress. It was only when the mattress began to move that he realized that he had landed on a small boat. The boat floats down a series of underground canals whose water reflects the flickers of candles that light the entire passage. All of this with the addition of a layer of mist just above the water level and large cobwebs and brown lichens hanging from the cold, gray stone walls creates a world fit for Lucifer himself. The journey through this dark and eery world abruptly comes to a halt when the boat hits a huge cast iron gate. On either side of the gate is a gargoyle with large dragon wings and claws that jetted out from each of its massive claws. Their mouths are large enough to fit the head of an adult male and are fitted with teeth that appear to be as sharp as a butcher's knives. "Welcome my child," a low and booming voice rings through matrix. "It is you, The Angel of

Music?" Tobias asks hesitantly. "Why of course my child!" he responds. "How could you think I were anyone else? I have called you here to become my next student. Will you accept my call and your glorious gift?" "Yes," Tobias exclaims this time with not hesitation. The Angel of Music had finally come for him. The gate lifts slowly and the boat continues further into the unaccessible depths of the opera house to the home of his new tutor. The underground lair of a musical genius. "It's kind of strange that an angel sent from Heaven would live in such a dreary place," he thought. However, not even his own suspicions could keep him from deciding that this was his long awaited dream.

As the tour continues through the dressing rooms and upper balcony, Jasper cannot stop thinking about the Phantom. "What if he is still down there?" he wonders. It was that question from which his idea blossomed. He had to go down into the basement and find the lair of the Phantom. And so, the idea churned in his brain until Jasper had come up with the perfect plan. The Vienna Philharmonic was performing Schubert's Unfinished Symphony that night, so it would not be hard to persuade his father to let him stay the night in the city. No one can say no to a good Schubert. Once they begin the second movement, he would go into the restrooms where we could stand on top of the toilet so that no one would know he would be in there. Then, once the coast was clear, he would make his way to the basement and discover the truth about Vienna's own Opera Ghost. "Even if he is dead, the lair should still be intact."

The hundreds of dull, wax covered candelabras illuminate the dark cave that is the home of the Angel. Heavy black drapes hang from the ceiling on the far left wall as if they are concealing some great and wonderful mystery. A couch of crushed red velvet covered in cobwebs sits against the middle wall with a large ornate and dusty book shelf directly to its right filled not with books, but musical literature. Handwritten scores of operas, concertos, duets, and

symphonies that are haphazardly arranged on each of the fifteen shelves. The trunk of a decaying tree with its twisting and deformed limbs stands directly in the middle of the room. To the right of the room is a long and winding staircase leading upwards to a balcony with an organ. The brass pipes do not shine, and the keys had begun to turn rusty red in color instead of their normal ivory beauty. Sitting at the organ is a man in a long black robe with jet black hair. His face is not visible, but Tobias can see what seems to be an outline of a mask running from behind his right ear to the middle of his nose. From his fingers with their blackening fingernails comes a painful melody that pulled at Tobias' heartstrings with each striking of a chord. "Your lessons begin tonight my son," came from the raspy voice of the Angel of Music. "Take out your precious violin and play for me so I may hear your beautiful talent. The opera company will be very excited to hear you next month at your debut in Massenet's *Thais*. The *Meditation* violin solo deserves to be played only by a violinist delivered from and trained by Heaven. Walk over to the bookshelf and find your solo, Tobias. We must begin. The Angel of Music has not patience for those who waste his valuable time."

Jasper's black dress shoes make a thud as he jumps down on to the restroom floor. A tuxedo was not exactly what he had had in mind for wondering a basement, but no one shows up to a classical concert in an Aerosmith T-shirt, gray hoodie, and jeans. It was ten before midnight and everyone had finally exited the Vienna State Opera. He opens the door as quietly as he can and steps out into the darkness of the empty hall. The light of his phone acts as his flashlight as he makes his way to the stage. Just as he turns the corner, Jasper feels a cold wind come upon him and all of a sudden his phone dies. He is left standing alone in complete darkness. In the dark, he cannot see the beautiful reds and golds that he could see during the day. The couple of shadows created by the full moon shining through a skylight above him are his only glimpses

into his surroundings. Then, he notices that in the middle of the stage is the flame of a burning candle. The candle is blood-red with an orange flame that shines brighter than any he has ever seen. He begins walking down the center aisle to retrieve it. He is one step from the candle when the wooden floorboards below him crack and his scream begins to echo through the building.

“Wrong. Wrong. WRONG!” The Angel yells in frustration at Tobias. “The F sharp must be higher. And the phrasing, don’t even get me started on the phrasing. Full bow! Use the whole bow.” The redness of his eyes and the popping of his blood vessels shine vibrantly through the black mask that conceals his face. They have been conducting their lessons for about a month, and Tobias is due to debut that night. He has been taught so much from his new tutor. His left fingers move swiftly from string to string. His notes ring with a beautiful vibrato whose sound fills the entire room. It is time to show the world his talent. He is ready. The solo is all his. After one last run through, he starts to descend the stairs to his boat that will lead him to his dream. The final victory. “I want to give you one last piece of advice before you go, Tobias.”

Jasper’s back hits the ground hard with a sound that in no way could be a good sign. He slowly picks himself up and begins to take in the mysteriousness of the place he has landed in. “This has to be the basement,” he says as he observes the cold walls and black water that fill the canals to his right. The walls have begun to crumble and silver figures can be seen moving through the water. Jasper begins to walk forward when he sees two pieces of paper lying on the ground. He collects the first and realizes it is a program for a 1896 production at the Opera House. He begins to read: “Saturday October 15th, 1896. The Wiener Hofoper presents Massenet’s Thais. Starring Sybil Sanderson and introducing violinist Tobias Schwarz.” Next he discovers a newspaper article announcing: “The much anticipated violin prodigy Tobias Schwarz did not appear at his debut during the performance of Thais Saturday. He had claimed his tutor to

be “The Angel of Music”. No body has been discovered”. “The Phantom of the Opera,” he whispers. He continues around the corner to find what is left of a gate and its once proud gargoyles whose heads lie crumbled next to their defeated guardians. Jasper than begin to hear the sound of an organ and to see the flickering of candle light. Then, all suddenly falls silent.

A splashing of water is heard through the underground by a security guard who had heard screaming. “That tour guide’s stories must be playing with my mind again,” he thought and headed back up the stairs to see the sunrise illuminate the beauty that is Vienna during the day. The world with no more night. The world no longer alone in silence.