***Chapter 8***

**The velvet curtains rose on the stage of the Academy of Music at precisely 8 PM to a roaring ovation from the red plush upholstered seats of the auditorium. Gilbert Fabre, seated and anxious in an easy chair in his lonely redoubt in Germantown, put a pocket watch down on the table to his right and opened a score of Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion. With his left hand he pushed a button to activate the mechanism that would begin feeding a pile of records of the masterful 1961 Otto Klemperer recording of this towering masterpiece ( *Peter Pears, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Christa Ludwig, Nicolai Gedda)* into the quadraphonic system cradling his living-room.**

 **The tuxedo he was wearing had very recently been dry-cleaned, while his shoes had been polished the previous evening in the halls of the Reading Terminal. Face and body were clean as a hospital ICU. All in all, he was dressed exactly as he would have been, had he been hired to appear that night as the tenor soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra Chorus. (Not only had the soloists been paid, a certain number of professional opera singers had been hired to buttress the amateur chorus. This is normal procedure. )**

**It was 1981, still many years before the advent of the compact disk. Fabre normally bought two copies of a 33 1/3 rpm record album; it allowed him to listen continuously to both sides of each record without having to flip them over. The somber opening chorus of Bach’s supreme masterpiece, *Kommt ihr Tocher, hilft uns klagen* would always hit him with a greater impact than any other piece of choral music, the genre of music to which he’d dedicated his life. Its spiritual impact could only be compared to being caught without warning under a thunderstorm in open countryside. Instantly working its magic on his psyche, he was transported into a higher dimension, lifted far above the distasteful realities of an obnoxious job and his crematorium of failed human relationships. It also opened up a flood of opportunities for wallowing in near-bottomless self-pity for his missed opportunities and wasted life.**

**The short dizzying descent from “hilft *uns* klagen” to “hilft *mir* klagen” was accomplished by Gilbert in the blink of an eye, from the opening bar of the throbs of the crocheted double-bass pedal point that persists for so very long in the opening chorus of Bach’s masterpiece.**

**This profound, grim, grandiose accompaniment of doom, unmistakably the march to Golgotha as portrayed by the orchestra and pitched choruses, reverberated in multiple echoes about the room. Totally succumbing to emotion, Gilbert Fabre sank deep into his easy chair. His whole body was wracked with sobs, his his face buried in his hands. It was music such as this (and there is an entire category of great compositions that tally to this description) that incited this wretched and miserable man to indulge to the full his insatiable appetite for self-pity. It was in narcissistic rituals such as these from which he derived his sole spiritual nourishment since adolescence.**

**At the front of his home, facing the street , stood an unshielded porch enclosed by 4 wooden pillars. Entering by the door into the vestibule led to the spacious living-room. Apart from the enormous amount of clutter it did not have much in the way of furniture. A low-hanging arch separated the living room from the relatively narrow but high-ceilinged dining room. Off to the left one entered the small, modern kitchen. Fabre took the major meal of the day in downtown Philadelphia, and only used the kitchen for small suppers and snacks.**

**The trappings of an empty life may reveal themselves either in barrenness or clutter; Gilbert Fabre had opted for clutter. More precisely, the over-stuffed character of his living spaces stood in acute contast to the ascetic barrenness of his work spaces, that is, his offices at City Hall and the business office he maintained in the second floor of his home.**

**The first impression a visitor was bound to get from an encounter with Fabre’s private living-room was that of entering a music school library whose contents had been wildly scrambled by a hurricane, its piles and boxes of sheet music, books and records scattered in all directions.**

**In a corner adjacent to the dining-room stood a concert grand piano, its surface almost bent double by mountains of opera scores. The 40 volumes of the J.S. Bach *Gesellschaft* , or Variorum edition, traced a wide spiral at the foot of the staircase, terminating in the entranceway, volume falling against volume like dominos. Some of them were opened; most were not. Over the years, water damage and neglect had left their indelible marks. A similar construction around the fireplace had been formed by the 10 volumes of the 5th edition of Grove’s dictionary of Music and Musicians of 1966.**

**Dispersed at random between scores of operettas and musical comedies were records, either singly or in albums, books of lieder with pages showing signs of heavy use, even a few popular song scores, (mostly musical comedies) , pedagogical treatises on vocal production, on ear-training and solfeggio.**

**The mounds of cigarette butts languishing in unemptied ashtrays gave them the appearance of ant-hills. They and their ashes spilled over onto the carpets where they joined the piles of empty soda bottles and cans. A clever detective could have used these containers as evidence to reconstruct Fabre’s most recent passage through this savannah.**

**Most, but not all of the scores were of vocal music. Instrumental music was present largely in the form of piano reductions of symphonies and concertos. All the editions were worn, with many torn pages or falling apart; Fabre had bought no new instrumental music since leaving the Philadelphia Musical Academy in the 60’s. Peeping through this wilderness like spots of crimson in an impressionist painting were numerous miniature scores for chamber music, mostly string quartets . Fabre sometimes read along with them when listening to recordings.**

 **Apart from the medleys of show tunes, which constituted only a tiny percentage of the total, virtually every item having to do with music came from the period from the birth of Bach to the death of Brahms; but the few exceptions were significant. There was nothing to be found relating to folk music, for example the ballad collections of Cecil Sharp. Fabre knew, of course, of the role of folk music in the works of many of the composers of the 19th and 20th centuries, including Liszt, Dvorcak, Janecek , Ives, Vaughan-Williams, Bizet, Kodaly, Bartok and others. Yet he hated modern ‘folk-singers’ with a passion, allowing only that Pete Seeger or Woody Guthrie might have enough musicianship to make them tolerable.**

**Yet the sound of the voices of Joan Baez, Judy Collins, “Peter ,Paul and Mary”, Phil Ochs and others, could set him flying off in a rage; let alone Barbara Streisand! More than once Gilbert Fabre had stalked indignantly out of restaurants the moment her voice floated out over the loudspeaker. He’d walked out of his dentist’s office after sitting in the waiting-room for an appointment and hearing her voice on the Muzak. It took him a year to find a new one. Typical of monomaniacs, his body, and teeth in particular, exhibited the symptoms of systematic neglect.**

 **To his mind, the real art of music had ended with Debussy – and half of his opus hadn’t made the grade! Of course no conservatory-educated singer could dismiss the power of *Das Lied von der Erde*, the lieder of Richard Strauss, the songs of Charles Ives, or modern operas such as Leos Janacek’s *Jenufa,* or Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*  .**

**But Fabre appears to have suffered from an addiction, that is the only word for it, for Mozart, 19th century French and Italian opera, Romantic Lieder, and the Cantatas and Oratorios of the Baroque period, notably Bach and Handel. He didn’t necessarily dislike other fashions, periods and styles of music, it was more a matter of a neurological predisposition to stop listening whenever music of a different sort was being played.**

**Though he had little time to waste on jazz, he had no trouble in tolerating it when competently performed. If pressed on the matter, he would have confessed that he sincerely believed that hardly anyone knew how to write music outside of his handful of paradigms, and that jazz, well, really wasn’t music at all!**

 **Yet musical taste is a strange phenomenon, even with a hidebound fanatic. Gilbert was rather taken with ragtime piano, Scott Joplin in particular, and could be as sentimental as any teen-ager with regard to certain musical comedy melodies. He could tolerate, even listen appreciatively for an hour or so to Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington. His crush on Billie Holiday was exceeded only by his passion for Joan Sutherland!**

 **All the evidence for these exceptional affinities could easily be found by digging through the piles of sheet music around the room, on shelves or scattered around on the carpets. Since his wife left him a decade ago his living-room had, apart from clearing away food or the occasional sweep, been cleaned or dusted at most once every 6 months. He found its musty aroma strangely comforting, however unpleasant it might be to the few persons he invited to his home, usually for professional visits. He did have a few friends, many from his days at the Philadelphia Musical Academy, but no close associates.**

 **Otherwise the furnishings of the living-room consisted of 4 armchairs, a sofa, 2 tables and a few bookcases. An antique chest of drawers filled with music and laden with scores was shoved against the front wall; on its surface stood a decanter of Scotch which Fabre rarely touched. The illumination in the living-room came from fixtures in the ceiling, from the 2 table lamps and 3 tall floor lamps. All the lights in the living-room were turned on this Christmas eve, casting a bright, garish sheen over the macabre setting. Framed reproductions of banal subjects dangled askew, seemingly at random, on faded wallpaper streaked with waterstains, monotonous landscapes: the Mona Lisa, Gainsborough’s “Blue Boy”, some Matisse landscapes to remind him of his origins in southwest France. Family photos were crowded together on the mantelpiece: his mother and father, his brother, 2 children and ex-wife.**

 **One can not conceive of a greater contrast between the condition into which his living-room had descended and Fabre’s office on the second floor. It was difficult to grasp that they could be the product of the same person. It was up in this room that he kept his files, his personal correspondence, and all documents, files and books relating to his job at City Hall. The room was spotless, up to date in furnishings and accessories, indeed a model of Its organization, down to the placing of postage stamps, rulers, pens and pencils, notepads and paper clips was maniacal. Not a single food stain, not a speck of cigarette ash. One would look in vain for a scrap of paper discarded at random holding, say, a hastily transcribed phone number, an itemized receipt, an appointment. The cleaning woman came every two weeks; her instructions for this room were as detailed, as those for the living-room were few and simple: apart from emptying the ash-trays and the trash cans, and disposing of scraps of food, everything else was to remain untouched. Even the vacuum cleaner only used when Fabre was present, at intervals of several months.**

**The cold perfection of his upstairs monastic cell could be interpreted as the eloquent metaphor for the burning hatred he felt for the occupation that society and necessity had forced upon him, and in direct proportion to Fabre’s vengeful resentment towards every minute he was obliged to take away from his consuming passion: to sit alone, in an ecstasy of self-indulgent commiseration, in the embracing security of his musical opium den.**

 **Yet it would be a considerable over-simplification to think that the grandiose disorder that reigned over his living-room bore any direct relationship to the contentment he felt at being there, nor the joy afforded from absorption of its many musical treasures. This relationship was rather more ambiguous, a sort of sticky satisfaction, a masochistic wallow in ecstasy and misery, a coupling of love with revulsion. Music infested every nook and crevice of his tormented psyche, haunting him in sleeping and waking, a riding obsession, vocation and goad at once, veritably a demon that rode him, the one secure link indissoluble with all things transcendent, the vessel for unburdening his loathing for life, the moonlit aura of a punishing goddess, a devouring praying mantis, the piercing spear of Artemis rather than the diving ennobling arrow of Eros.**

**Thus: although Gilbert Fabre would race to his dingy refuge on the ground floor far more readily than he would make the reluctant climb to his monk’s cell on the second floor, this was not because he suffered less! Quite to the contrary! Many of his bitterest hours of recent years had been spent alone in this wilderness. No one else was present when the voices of Dietrich Fischer-Deskau, Gigli, Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, Beverly Sills, Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi mingled with his moans, his endless soul-wracking sobs and long sighs. No noble pursuit of excellence had motivated him to shut himself off from the world in this way. It was rather his way of protecting himself from the world, to wade for hours in shameless self-pity, reveling in fatuous dreams, lamenting the fame that should rightfully have been his, had he had the money, luck and courage to pursue his rightful vocation!**

 **Sadly, and this is true of the general run of mankind, there was no one to tell him, or even to offer the suggestion, however gently made, that it may have been his emotional attitudes, his psychological handicaps, that figured to a far greater extent in his failure to achieve independence through a career in music. He had the talent, the love for the art, the training; yet he could no more have gone onto the operatic or concert stage than he could have climbed Mount Everest.**

**The failure of his marriage was a mere corollary to the failure of most of the rest of his human relationships. He knew that if he’d had the luck to land a job he found meaningful to him, he could not have held onto it. The same petty, hostile, self-denigrating personality, built on grandiose dreams and a limited capacity to honestly face up to himself, was sufficient to account for most of his personal defeats over the years.**

**For, if there is one simple way of characterizing Gilbert Fabre’s addiction to music, it is that it gratified a personal craving for suffering, raising him to the heights of aesthetic ecstasy in the very act of piercing his fragile ego with the reiteration of his own personal failure, his self-loathing and conviction of his own inferiority, his sense of unworthiness and, on the other side of the coin, his vindictive hostility towards the mass of mankind.**

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