

## WILLY VAN FRITZ

His wife holding onto his right arm and leading the way, Willy van Fritz, the great maestro and composer, the virtuoso, burst into the clubroom! He strode through the noisy gathering directly to the great Steinway concert grand piano. Recently cleaned and tuned, it seemed to be waiting for him. Bending down, he adjusted the height of the stool. He removed his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. Waving good-bye to his wife who had wandered off to mingle with the crowds, Willy sat down before the piano and Bang! Bang! Bang!, churned up a fiendish racket!!.

The invited guests milled about in small circles on the thick Oriental rugs, inventing idle chatter as best they could, valiant in their efforts to ignore him. The thought of raising some sort of objection never entered anyone's mind. van Fritz was a great man, entitled to his eccentricities. There were even those who, despite the fact that their heads bulged above their necks blood-red from the agony and strain, claimed to enjoy listening to his playing. Willy's wife stood by the punch bowl at the long oak table placed parallel to the big stone fireplace, distracting persons in her vicinity with nonsensical and idle commentary.

The reception was an exhibition opening, a vernissage for a certain mediocre though fashionable society painter. He could be seen, a tall, frail man in a dashing pinstripe, his hair wispy like a bush crocheted from silver threads, fortyish, ample of means and of astounding ancestry, waltzing about the room while putting forth a face upon which he'd slapped a grimace of simpering affectation.

Nor was it totally unexpected, though it must certainly have been irksome to some, when strings began to snap and wood crunch as Willy, his long mane wild and flying lion-like about, his lips slobbering with foam, his feverish face clammy with cold sweat, threw off the final vestiges of restraint, losing himself completely in the morass of his inspiration, and ploughed into the keyboard with all his might!!!

Eventually, as was bound to happen, his antics became unbearable!

Each note emanating anew from the stringboard sounded its' autonomous calumny. The very air seemed to suffocate from the endless reverberations of curses and oaths.

Even then no one dared make the suggestion that his behavior be, at the very least, called into question. People seemed unable in fact to leave the room, either

singly or in droves. They knew it would make a bad scene .

Well! He stopped, anyway. Bending over to reach down to the briefcase at his feet, van Fritz pulled up half a dozen pads of blank music paper. Forthwith he gave himself over to composition , throwing notes onto the pages with amazing rapidity, using the fantastic collection of pens he'd tucked away in his jacket and vest pockets. Swearing to frighten the devil, van Fritz covered sheet after sheet with scribbling, crumpled them up into tight wads , then threw them back over his head into the room.

What, pray, was one to make of all this? As some of the guests crowded around the piano to watch the genius at work, others got down on their hands and knees, crawling about on the floor to retrieve the scraps. Apart from their brilliance, which was universally acknowledged, opinions differed greatly as to the proper interpretation of these random fancies. On both sides of each page he'd slapped together some sort of chaotic jumble of symbols, including such things as upside down or mirror-inverted clef signs, arbitrary numbers of ledger lines to a staff, and absurd combinations of sharps and flats conforming to no known system of tonal organization. Also, lute tablature, Labanotation, words from more than a dozen languages, mathematical symbols and even some Egyptian hieroglyphics. There wasn't a single person in the room - apart from Willy himself - who could claim to understand what they meant ; yet , as the wads of paper flew thicker and faster, descending in regular volleys like hail or snow, everybody began dashing wildly around the room catching them from the air and stuffing them in their pockets.

Only the painter, in whose honor the reception had ostensibly been organized, staunchly maintained a stoic if futile indifference. With relentless cadence these scorched tokens of Willy's inflamed imagination continued to gush forth until all the pads of paper were empty. Whereupon he, once again, turned his attention to the piano to savagely bang away, reducing the noble instrument to a pitiable shambles.

The feeling had now become quite general among the invited guests, that they had had enough. Most of them would have made their excuses and quickly left, had not their hosts prevailed upon them to stay for the refreshments that were about to be served. Shortly afterwards, caterers in livery entered the clubroom to lay out plates holding canapés; crumpets and crackers; neat little triangular sandwiches filled with pastes, spreads and patés; saucers of heaped olives; tomatoes small and tight as marbles ; frayed celery stalks; tea, coffee,

punch and Chablis. Madame van Fritz did her best to apologize to the painter, who for his part, though he affected to acknowledge her, was not able totally to conceal his irritation.

However the opinion had gained currency a long time ago, that Willy's personality was a textbook case of Promethean genius floating on a sea of infantile exhibitionism. Knowing this made it that much easier to put up with him - just a little longer.

Above the rumble of conversation one heard the results of further experiments, exotic musical horrors dense with bone-wracking trills, unspeakable dissonances and chilling modulations, as van Fritz, while ranging up and down the compass of the keyboard like an escaped lunatic, hooted and sputtered obscenities in an unbroken stream. The dazed guests strolled aimlessly along chaotic trajectories, compulsively stuffing food down their throats, chattering trivia.

Piercing the cacophony, a woman's voice rose to a terrifying

shriek !!! Everyone - including Willy by the way - froze. The matter appears to have been this, more or less: Willy's wife and the painter had gotten caught up in an altercation concerning the canapé recipes; or it may have been the prices of his paintings; or it may have been something else. Whatever it was, it ended with him taking out some ... kind of ...Moroccan dagger with a jeweled hilt... and... running it, (forcefully), through her chest, until it poked through on the other side.

The clubroom fell silent, as fear and confusion took possession of the gathering. Nobody disputed the fact of her death, although many other details of the situation remained in doubt. The painter, in some sense still the guest of honor, stood apart, neither remorseful nor guilty, at most embarrassed, perhaps awkward, the gory knife gripped firmly in his right hand, wiping away some of the blood-stains that had gotten onto his suit, (with a handkerchief from which there emanated a faint odor of lilies.) Men rushed about every which-way, stressing their self-importance, as they will do in such situations. Several of the women fainted. They were carried to couches and laid out, their dresses unbuttoned, their temples stroked with ice-cubes taken from the punch-bowls. All the windows were thrown open so that people could stand in the casements and shout into the streets for help. The painter having been seized and flattened onto the carpet, lay unresisting, emitting vindictive chuckles although probably uncomfortable with four men squatting on his arms

and legs. As they berated him for his criminality they also used the opportunity to let him know in what low esteem they held his artwork.

"Willy", one of them snorted, " Now; there's a real artist!"

Only then did van Fritz get up off the piano stool. The way was cleared before him as he slowly walked the room's long diagonal to arrive at the crumpled corpse of his wife. For 10 minutes he stood there without uttering a word, observing her curiously. Tears spurted from his eyes and he was heard to emit a deep sigh. Finally he nodded his head, turned about and went back to the piano. Visibly shaken but not about to be upstaged, Willy reached for a sledge hammer leaning conveniently against the wall, grappled it in his two hands and began breaking down the grand Steinway piano, first crushing it in two, then pounding it to bits!!!

As panic descended and order collapsed, the throngs went out of control. They surged through the exits - it was about time! - not pausing to say their goodbyes, forgetting their coats in the vestry, allowing their prisoner to get away, leaving the body of van Fritz's wife abandoned and soaking in the pool of its own blood. He alone remained, standing before the ruined hulk of the piano, his chest heaving, his arms hanging like a gorilla's, his face crimson with power and rage, aggressive, triumphant, the veritable anger of the Almighty, indeed as Samson himself must have looked when he routed, single-handedly, the Philistines. Willy stalked and stomped about the room like a heavy beast for awhile, until he grew tired of it. Then he picked up his hat, coat and cane, and went home.

It was not until the next morning that an ambulance arrived and a crew of workmen entered the building. The body was transported to the morgue, and the clubroom thoroughly disinfected and cleaned. Restoration costs were conservatively estimated upward of seventy-five thousand dollars, and it is little wonder that the next meeting of the board of directors should have been entirely taken up with the question of where to raise the money. After various proposals such as subscriptions, benefit concerts and grant applications had been passed around for consideration, somebody made the suggestion of calling up Willy van Fritz himself to ask for his ideas. A direct contribution however was out of the question. He was known to be so poor that he scarcely had enough money to pay for a new pair of shoes, let alone cover the cost of a grand piano.

To everyone's surprise and before this decision could be acted on , Willy himself telephoned to offer his support! He would, he said, commit himself to the composition of a symphonic masterpiece, based on the tragic events of that afternoon and dedicated to the memory of his dear, departed wife. He was confident that performances of it around the world would bring in thousands of dollars. Anything left over from the cost of repairing the damage he would gladly turn over to the family of his in-laws, he himself despising money in all forms .

Willy's orchestral tableau in five movements , Eternal Bliss , is now performed almost as often as The Blue Danube . The new piano, a Bösendorfer, arrived last autumn. It is both bigger and better than its predecessor. Willy is not likely to ever have a chance to play on it, as he is permanently banned from the premises. He considers this affront deeply wounding to his vanity and a monument, unparalleled in history, to human ingratitude .