

THE REASON OF TIMMY'S PLAYING

Unaccompanied Suite

David Cole

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137 Cottage St.
New Haven, Conn. 06511

Phone : 203-624-3982

CHARACTERS

TIMMY, a violinist

SETTING: A concert stage

TIME: Timmy's farewell performance

THE REASON OF TIMMY'S PLAYING

(About seven minutes before rise, the last movement of the Sibelius Violin Concerto begins to be played over the sound-system. At rehearsal number 12, the curtain rises.

Left-center, about where a violin-soloist usually stands, TIMMY is sitting in a wheelchair---actually, a normal orchestra player's chair, but fitted with wheels and a mail pouch hanging off one arm-rest. He is playing the solo part in the concerto.

Projected onto a large screen which hangs up-right-center (but not too far up: the stage should be shallow) is SLIDE 1. SLIDE 1 is a photograph of a Conductor making a grand gesture and his musicians intent on their playing.

Note: All the slides are coarse-grained photographs in which all faces---the Conductor's, the musicians'---are shown averted or blurred out. The slides should, however, show enough detail for the audience to be able to recognize that TIMMY's chair is exactly the same as those of the orchestra musicians in the photos, except for its having wheels, arm-rests, and the pouch.

SLIDES 1a, 1b, etc.: At the director's and designer's discretion, as the concerto nears its close some slides may be flashed on showing the Conductor and his musicians in different tableaux: e.g. the Conductor might be shown giving a cue to TIMMY; or several slides could be rhythmically alternated to give a sense of the musicians' movements. These slide-changes should come on a rhythmic emphasis, a sudden change in volume, or a dramatic shift in the instrumentation.

The concerto comes to a close. TIMMY plays the final measures and sinks back triumphantly. Recorded applause and cries of "Bravo!" TIMMY bows, exhausted, from his wheelchair, which he never leaves in the course of the play.

TIMMY gestures up to the Conductor on the screen.

SLIDE 2: Conductor bowing.

SLIDE 3: Conductor gesturing toward orchestra musicians, who have risen.

SLIDE 4: Musicians seated; Conductor gesturing toward TIMMY, who bows.

SLIDES 5 and 6: Two successively bigger enlargements of the Conductor's arm (isolated from SLIDE 4) gesturing toward TIMMY, who bows.

Applause reaches peak, and subsides.

SLIDES 7, 8 and 9: Each of these slides shows fewer and fewer musicians left onstage; some players are shown in the act of leaving.

SLIDE 10: Conductor and all musicians have left the stage. A few instruments lean up against, or rest upright on, the seats of the players' chairs, some of which are askew or overturned.

SLIDE 10 holds throughout the play.

TIMMY sticks his fiddle and bow in the mail pouch to the side of the wheelchair, and puts out his hand to the audience as if to keep them from leaving.)

TIMMY

Ladies and Gentlemen: We fiddlers are well-known for milking the romance of our farewell performances, but I'm thinking of transacting some serious business on the occasion of mine. You've all heard about this contest I'm running to unload my earnings from the violin--which, by the way, comes to more in two years than I made my whole working-life^{before} as a line-man, before I got sick. Well, I think I've decided to let you have the winner of that little game of chance tonight, on the occasion of the last music you'll ever be hearing from my bow--which is what that D-Major arpeg-hee-o

(As he says the words, "D-Major

arpeg-hee-o," he replays the final two measures of the Sibelius concerto.)

just was; for as most of you know, by next season I'll be dead and laid out as flat as Schaffner's reading of the Frankel cadenzas. So this'll have to be it for the concert-returns.

I should say right off, I haven't turned up a winner yet; if that amazes you, it's equally surprising to me. When I first made it known I'd will my entire earnings from the violin to whoever could guess my reason for taking it up, I expected to be swamped with winners--to have to split the loot fifty ways, it seemed to me that obvious. It still seems so to me; but--the fact remains: no one's guessed right yet, and I'm down to my last five entries

(taking a packet of envelopes out of the mail pouch)

from the mountain I started with; and then I've brought with me to open here in your presence tonight, because I can't help feeling the presence of my loyal public'll bring me a winner if anything can.

(starts to undo the packet, then looks up with an embarrassed smile)

You notice the way I assume four thousand people'll have an interest in this. My new-found sense of being a Figure-whose-every-move. Although,

(slowly nodding his head, with arch shrewdness)

I expect a good percentage of you have entries in--yes?--so

there'll be an incentive for you beyond what appears. Well!

Let's read our mail.

(undoes the packet, fans the five envelopes out in his left hand like a poker "hand," studies his "cards," "draws" one, and "discards" the rest back into the mail pouch. He opens the letter he has chosen, and reads:)

Sir:

The years, the application--when I think what my Second Violinist's desk in the Hayfield Civic Symphony has cost me--and you claim never to have touched an instrument till age 60? to have gone from line-worker to soloist in 30 months? Let the non-violin-playing public swallow that! I submit you have been a violinist all your life.

(as if anticipating an outraged response from the audience)

No, look, this is a misgiving anyone is going to have. Be certain, many more have had it than write it in.

(finding his place)

... a violinist all your life--only, never much of one, never favored with the public's gaze, languishing in the rear-desks of obscure ensembles--

(looking up)

Don't he write like an entire brass section, though!

(resumes reading)

Oh, what rear-desk player hasn't dreamt of

making it your way: going underground, surfacing in a new context, and giving out this was just now your first steps on the instrument; fantastic progress; talent-hours--and bam! celebrity is his, who the top line in a five-part divisi would've honored those days. Oh, who has not cherished such visions!--but I cannot at present enlarge upon that.

There, anyway, is the "reason" of your playing--and what do you propose to do about it? Shower me with recognition? The likelihood is small. No one who penetrates ~~the~~^{your} fraud is likely to receive public acknowledgment of having done so---which makes your contest still a greater fraud than your playing, even. I don't know why I bothered to write in, or what I supposed would ever be coming to me anyway.

Gottfrank Dessous
 Second Violin
 Hayfield Civic Symphony

(waving letter)

Not exactly tortured by uncertainties, this one. Well, brace your bones, because positive Mr. Dessous, here, is not entirely off-course: I have had a fiddle in my hands before two years ago, one belonging to a school-chum, who asked me to hold it while he went and took care of some gump who'd made a doubt of the Irish character. I held that instrument to me like it was a bit of crystal too fragile for big fingers, or like holding a sick kid, till Pat came in from his fighting and took it off me again. The next time I held a fiddle, it was the ~~corner~~^{men's} ward of

St. Andrew's and forty years later.

And what was the rest of it...?

(consults letter)

"That you have been a violinist your whole life long"--you know what I've been my whole life long, up to the ~~cancer~~^{illness}? I know, you've read "line-operator"; but you know exactly my job?

I sat before this transmission-gauge in the Canadian wilderness-- pipe-line running off to either horizon--and took good care that a certain needle never fluttered above a certain digit--90, I think it was. If you was to ask me, "90 what?"

(shrugs)

or what would have happened if it had--I couldn't enlighten you; because, you see, I took good care it never did.

(smiles ruefully)

Early years of a servant of the arts.

Well. I'm afraid Mr.

(consults letter)

Dessous comes not near the reason of Timmy's playing; although-- with all due apologies to the

(reading)

"Hayfield Civic Symphony"--maybe we could come a little nearer the reason of Mr. Dessous' writing. But then: maybe we could just go on.

(returns Letter 1 to pouch; takes out and opens another letter; reads:)

Dear Timmy, Dear Champion of the Human Spirit!

(looks up dubiously; then resumes reading)

Oh, it could only have been to hurl defiance

that you took up your instrument with so little time

before you. Being myself in poor health,

(owing to headaches and shooting pains in the back,
 or more like a throb, or even a mood, actually),
 I derive new strength from the heroic example you
 set of the human spirit triumphing over death---
 refusing to obey the nod of the Grim Reaper.
 Surely we must all take up our little fiddles,
 or whatever, as the storm-cloud approaches.

You may send my cheque to: etc.

Yes, I keep all these heroic ones in a sack marked: "While Rome
 Burned." And you know who I always point to in reply?
 Commodore Peary and Joan the Ark, two figures who seem to me
 to clinch it better than any fiddler, if it's the "human spirit"
 we're discussing. I mean, it's all very well to talk about---
 what is it she says?--

(consults letter)

"hurling defiance as the storm approaches," but Jesus, can you
 imagine a fateful gesture ^{coming} ~~issuing~~ from a little man

(pantomimes playing a fast, intricate
 passage)

tipped over to ^{the} ~~the~~ side and rapping his fingers like a bag of
 nerves? No, hero's a career in itself; if you're a fiddler,
 let's hear those spiccato runs. Anyway, it's wrong at the heart,
 this about "casting defiance"---quite out of place in a performing
 artist! Let me say to this correspondent, that if I was playing
 for a storm-cloud, I'd want the storm-cloud to enjoy the per-
 formance; and it's my sincere hope any grim reapers in the
 audience'll go back to their reaping with a new-found love of
 the violin repertory.

(waving the letter)

Too much about death; too little about music!

(thrusts 2nd letter into pouch, pulls out and opens 3rd letter, which should be distinctly different in shape and color from the 2nd. He runs his eye over the 3rd letter; then, triumphantly, as if the 3rd letter exactly confirmed what he's been saying:)

Yeah, and this one

(waves 3rd letter)

--just the other face of the coin. This one

(reaching 2nd letter up out of pouch and waving it)

says: "to show your contempt of death"; this one:

(waving 3rd letter in his other hand)

"to keep your mind off dying."

(crossing his hands with the letters in them)

"Just the opposite!" you'll say; but what's a little difference of opinion

(vibrating his crossed hands)

beside the way they both

(uncrossing his hands and gesturing emphatically forward with both of them)

bring it down to death, as much as to say, if death's in it at all, death must be all there is of it.

(replaces 2nd letter in pouch)

Sure, it's true I took up the violin

(consults 3rd letter)

"in the full knowledge of having only two winters left on earth,"

but that may just have happened to be the moment I got interested. A queer moment, I grant you--sort of like starting a ~~novel~~^{triller} in the prison library the night before you get sprung--but really, when all's said, SO queer a moment that I should hear nothing but death in explanation of my playing on all sides? Almost, you know, as if it was the mark to distinguish me by when the talk turned to fiddlers: so-and-so's fantastic triple-stops; A.'s crystalline harmonics; Timmy's ~~canon~~ sickness.

(slower; growing more inward and fearful)

Even in my own mind, you know, for some time now it has been growing difficult for me to get past the view of my dying as anything other than...

(mortified)

well, a feature of my technique. So that for this contestant to speak of

(tracing the words off Letter 3 with his finger)

"holding death from your thoughts"--

(shrugs wearily)

I have all I can do to force death into my mind for a moment now and then: that I'm really dying, besides its being a factor in the career. You find that beyond belief? You think death must be more demanding than the violin? I point you to the number of virtucsi at each!

(triumphantly stuffs 3rd letter into pouch; pulls out and starts to open 4th letter, but interrupts himself, looking up:)

But I tell you again, you ones who only have to hear the word "death" and that settles it, you might as well save yourselves a stamp.

(takes out 4th letter and reads:)

Attention Red Fabian Pig!

Well, that breaks the death-emphasis, anyway.

Attention Red Fabian Pig!

As if there could ever be any question regarding the motives of a Russki violin-player! Stringed music debilitates! Jefferson. Nero. Guarneri and the October revolution. Does not Mao Tse Tung play the violin? And did not Lenin before him? Let children and Mensheviks profess to see the hand of chance there! The only question in my mind touching your association with these Fabians is: Are you a tool or a dupe?

(signed)

Hoffnung Hoffe

on behalf of Certain Parties

(TIMMY drops his hand with the letter in it to his lap and lets his eye run over the audience, fixing now this member of it, now that, in a speculative gaze. Then he slowly shakes his head.)

How could I have forgotten the awful certainty you bring to these questions? "We bring? Putting us in with that crank?" But you're all more or less cranks, really: to give it out you know what sends an artist to his bench is to be a crank--and even the ~~hesitant~~ ^{timid} little guesses don't argue any great state of competency.

(glancing at the 4th letter again;

with a snort)

"Red Fabian Pig"!--I'm a "Red Fabian Pig" to all of you, whatever it is in your mind holds the niche "Red Fabian Pig" holds in his. And I had to go and set up a contest for you to tell me so! (Or rather, I may have thought I was setting up a contest: no doubt as far as each of you were concerned, no other entry was ever in the running.) Merely because I couldn't think where to dump some recital fees, I'm having to watch my life be run wild over by that one-string ingenuity of yours in its endless pursuit of the one motive it can buy in every case...

(hearing himself and catching himself)

Ladies and Gentlemen: I'd never think to ask for your pity because I'm dying, but I do now ask your forbearance.

That last,--

(shrugs in amazement at himself)

panic of a mind near darkness. Words meant for the darkness should not be taken up and applied.

(looking about in the 4th letter for something to lighten the tone)

"Fabian"... Wasn't that the thing Mr. Bernard Shaw was?--and he was in music, at least critically. Suppose we agree to let it all stand

(raises the letter like a train-signal above the pouch)

or fall

(opens his hand, allowing letter to drop into pouch)

by that sinister coincidence. So.

(takes 5th letter out of pouch)

Last of the lot. No great significance in that: any one of the ones I've opened tonight could have come up last--not to mention the thousands I've opened before tonight. Still, as this is my last hope of being understood on this earth, you'll pardon me if I grow a bit awestruck.

(holds Letter 5 out at arm's length and turns it over in his hand; then suddenly, decisively, tears it opens and reads:)

Brother:

How well I understand the yearning of one near death to fulfill a childhood ambition.

(TIMMY smiles vaguely; the letter has triggered a recollection.)

I was thinking of an old man on some street of my childhood who sat on a porch and gave the impression of having lived through everything. Sammy had it in his head to be a ball-player, and Nick a cop; but that old man was all I ever dreamed of coming out. The only

(jiggles 5th letter)

"childhood ambition" I ever cherished was... longevity.

(Pause. TIMMY turns the letter over several times.)

It's unsigned. Isn't that queer? You want the money enough to try the contest--and then forget to say who. Well, it won't result in a nationwide search; it's wrong--

(drops Letter 5 back in pouch)

and no great novelty as a guess , either: I've had maybe a hundred "childhood ambition" ones... Still, it's nice to finish on one of the less discouraging ones. For that completes the business of the day as between you and Timmy, it remaining only for me to take my farewell and vanish. Now that really is an awesome moment, I suppose, but hard for me to feel as such, "farewell" seems so accustomed a word to be forming on a fiddler's lips, all violin music having always that character, whatever it may read at the head of the page about gigue

(which he pronounces with both "g's" hard)
 or GAY-vot , or whatever. Very early in my playing--oh, I don't think I could have given you a decent portamento yet--I remember one of the nurses showing me a print from an old Illustrated called

(blocking the caption in air with his thumb and forefinger)

"The Fiddler Bringing the Party out of Town"; and that has come to seem to me what a fiddler is ever and always at, though he plays to thousands in a raftered hall: always speeding the company on their way, giving good journey...

(as if responding to a heckler, though none is heard)

What's the situation back there? The what? Reason of my playing? You want to know the reason of my playing? You realize the contest's over? You reply you still want to know?

(as if responding to a heckler,
though none is heard)

What's the situation back there? The what? The reason of my playing? Is it possible you still don't--? when I've all this while been--? Look, why don't we give that subject a rest and let me tell you some things about this violin, shall we?

(takes violin from pouch and holds
it up)

Comes to me from a string-player who died in the ward just before I went in. When I say, "comes to me"... he didn't entrust it or anything--just died and left it there, a thing that--at first, anyway--interested me more than the violin did: what kind of man would do a thing like that, make no provision, just--off? Imagine if I had thrown up my line-gauge that way instead of staying on, illness or no, till they trained the new man. It was the last type of behavior I could understand! I asked Nurse Cloyne about him. But the more I asked, the less seemed to come back to her. Whether it was they're not supposed to talk about the dead, or just that he hadn't made much of an impression on her, I don't know; but the only thing she ever succeeded in conveying about him was his hands--and then, only with the violin in them (I once set to try to imagine those hands cutting an apple, but could get no image). So I began to wonder less about the violinist, and about the violin more.

(lifts the violin by the neck and turns it around)

A real Cremona, apparently. Not a Stradivari; probably from the workshop of the Amati grandsons. But ten generations old, anyway--and so nearing the peak years of its effectiveness right now. You look at it and you think of it changing hands: the twilight concerts in a nun's garden; the half-century on a nobleman's sideboard; the millionaire's daughter whose passion for it lasted a week--and of course its last owner, those mysterious hands holding it, which I was more and more coming to see as holding it forth. At any rate I began to care for it as if it had been entrusted to me: moving it back out of the sun or damp, rewhittling a peg that warped, dusting the scroll. But for all the care I took, the instrument seemed to be falling apart: strings snapped, pegs popped, the purfling began to turn a funny color, and finally one day after a flash storm the glue on the blocks gave and sent a big crack across the upper bouts.

Then Nurse Cloyne made a joke: "She wants you to touch her, don't you see; she's asking for attention." This was nothing to me, but apparently something took root. Because I did actually begin to feel that fiddle was reproaching me for never playing it, though I took all care short of that and had never so much as had a fiddle in my hand before--except, as I told you, that once, to hold. The next morning, while draining out some juice an orderly had spilled down the sound-holes, I drew bow across strings for the first time, and that evening began to work out of a manual Nurse Cloyne brought me, following up her joke.

(again as if responding to a heckler)

What? What do you mean, never mind all that, just tell you--what do you think I've been telling you?

(thrusting the violin out at the audience)

There! There! There's your winning entry--in plain view from the start, undreamt of by all. Which to me is more amazing than all my progress on the instrument, even--that I... pose an enigma. Why couldn't you just know? Why did there ever have to be a contest? There's no winnings--anything I ever had is gone long since on doctor bills, violin repair shops... Any winner would have had to take his prize in the form of one Cremonese fiddle. Is that a swindle? But now, think a minute: who could ever have won this contest and not regarded the perfect prize as--not even the violin itself, really, so much as to care for it.

But that's a class of entrant we're not seeing too much of. So fiddle, lie there,

(gets stiffly out of wheelchair, and places violin on it in the manner of many of the instruments shown in the scene on SLIDE 10)

until such time as the next Timmy learns to look upon his ten thick fingers as appropriate hands.

(starts slowly toward the wings; stops and faces out)

And can all this really not have occurred to you?

(resumes his painful exit. The lights go to black before he reaches the wings. When the houselights come up, SLIDE 10 is still on, and the violin still rests on the chair.)

END