

Saint Cecilia, or the Power of Music (A Legend)

By Heinrich Von Kleist

At the end of the sixteenth century, as the iconoclast storm of destruction raged in the Netherlands, three brothers, young students in Wittenberg, met up in the City of Aachen with a fourth brother, himself engaged as a preacher in Antwerp. They sought to lay claim to an inheritance left them by an old uncle whom none of them knew, and since no one was there to meet them at the place where they were supposed to apply, they retired to an inn in town.

After several days, which they spent sounding out the preacher on the curious incidents that had been occurring in the Netherlands, it so happened that Corpus Christi Day was soon to be celebrated by the nuns in the Cloister of Saint Cecilia, which, at the time, was located just outside the gates of the city; so that, fired up by the revelry, their youth, and the example of the Netherlanders, the four brothers decided to treat the City of Aachen to its own spectacle of destruction.

That evening, the preacher, who had already lead several such initiatives, gathered together a group of young merchants' sons and students committed to the new religious teachings, all of whom spent the night at the inn carousing over wine and food, heaping curses on the papacy; and as soon as day broke over the ramparts of the city, they equipped themselves with pickaxes and other tools of destruction to carry out their business. They triumphantly agreed upon a signal, at the sounding of which they would start smashing the stained-glass windows decorated with Biblical tales; and certain of the large following they would find among the people, they resolved that by the time the bells sounded in the cathedral, they would not have left a stone of the sanctuary intact.

The abbess, who had, come daybreak, been warned by a friend of the impending danger to the cloister, sent word several times in vain to the imperial bailiff in charge of keeping the peace in the city, requesting a guard detail to protect the cloister; the officer, who was himself hostile to the papacy, and as such, at the very least a clandestine sympathizer with the new religious teachings, denied her request for a guard detail under the pretext that she was imagining things and that there was not the slightest risk of danger to the cloister.

Meanwhile, the hour struck at which the service was to begin, and amidst fear and prayer, and with a dark foreboding of things to come, the nuns prepared themselves for mass. Their only protectors were a 70-year-old cloister caretaker and a few armed porters who stood watch at the gates of the church. In such cloisters, as is common knowledge, the nuns, who are well-trained in all sorts of instruments, play their own music; often – perhaps precisely on account of the feminine feel of this mysterious art form – with a precision, a mastery and a sensitivity not to be found in male orchestras. And to add twice-over to the sisters' distress, their Kappellmeisterin, Sister Antonia, who ordinarily conducted the orchestra, had several days before fallen ill with a nervous fever; such that, in addition to the danger posed by the four blasphemous brothers who had already been spotted, cloaked and ready, beside the columns outside the church, the cloister was all in a huff, worrying how the performance of a sacred musical

work would come off in a seemly manner. The abbess, who on the previous evening had ordered that a stirring age-old Italian mass composed by an anonymous master be presented, a work which the cloister orchestra had already performed on several occasions and to the finest effect, on account of its exceptional holiness and loveliness, now more adamant than ever in her command, once again sent word to Sister Antonia to find out how she was; but the nun who transmitted the message returned with the news that Sister Antonia lay unconscious in her bed and that it was altogether out of the question to think that she might direct the aforementioned work.

Meanwhile, in the cathedral, where more than a hundred evil-doers of all classes and ages armed with hatchet and crowbar had assembled, the most unthinkable incidents had occurred; some of the porters stationed at the gates of the sanctuary had been rudely shoved around and the lone nuns who every now and then passed through the aisles engaged in some pious matter were treated to the sauciest and most shameless remarks, as a consequence of which the old caretaker hastened to the sacristy, and falling to his knees, begged the abbess to cancel the service and put herself under the protection of the commandant in the city.

But the abbess was unwavering in her resolve that the prescribed service be celebrated in honor of God Almighty; she reminded him of his sworn duty to stand guard over the mass and the sacred festivities conducted in the cathedral; and since the bell had just tolled, she commanded the nuns who stood trembling around her to pick an oratorio, no matter which nor of what quality, and to immediately begin the service with it.

The nuns promptly hastened to the organ balcony; the score of a musical work that they had often presented was distributed; violins, oboes, and cellos were being tested and tuned just as Sister Antonia suddenly appeared on the steps, fresh and healthy, albeit a bit pale in the face; she clasped under her arm copies of the score of the age-old Italian mass upon whose performance the abbess had so adamantly insisted. In answer to the nuns' stunned question: "Where did you come from? And how did you so suddenly recover?"

Sister Antonia replied: "No matter, my friends, no matter!" distributed the score she had in hand, and sat herself down at the organ, glowing with anticipation of the thrill of directing this superb piece of music. Sister Antonia's sudden appearance came as a wondrous, heavenly consolation easing the hearts of the pious women; they promptly positioned themselves with their instruments on the balustrade; the acute tension that they felt served to vault their souls, swinging them, as it were, into the heavenly heights of harmony; the oratorio was played with the greatest and loveliest musical skill; during the entire performance not a breath stirred in the aisles and on the pews; especially during the *Salve regina*, and even more so during the *Gloria in excelsis*, it was as if all those present in the church were dead: for in spite of their evil intent, not even the dust was scattered on the marble floor beneath the feet of the four accursed brothers and their rabble, and the cloister still stood intact at the end of the Thirty Years War, whereupon, pursuant to an article in the Westphalian Peace Treaty, it was, nevertheless, declared secularized.

Six years later, when this incident had long since been forgotten, the mother of the four youths arrived from The Hague, and after sadly reporting their disappearance to the magistrate of Aachen, initiated an official court inquiry as to the road they might have taken. The last word received from them in the Netherlands, where, in fact, they came from, as their mother reported, was a letter written prior to the aforementioned incident, on the eve of Corpus Christi, by the preacher to a friend of his, a schoolteacher in Antwerp, in which he described to the latter with much merriment, or rather, a right free-spirited humor, in four tightly written pages, on a planned action to storm the Cloister of Saint Cecilia, concerning which the mother did not, however, wish to elaborate.

After several failed attempts to ferret out the persons sought by the distressed woman, the authorities suddenly remembered four young people, their nationality and place of origin unknown, who, for a few years now, a time period more or less in accordance with the dates she indicated, found themselves in the municipal madhouse recently endowed with imperial funds. Since, however, the four youths in question suffered from a delirium derived from a religious notion, and their comportment, according to the sad testimony taken by the court, remained altogether gloomy and melancholy, a description which accorded so little with the mother's sense of her sons' temperaments, she paid this news but little mind, especially since it seemed almost certain that the young people in question were Catholic.

Nevertheless, oddly struck by a number of distinguishing attributes used to describe them, she went one day to the madhouse, accompanied by a court officer, and asked the director to be so good as to permit her an exploratory visit with the four hapless troubled youths in his charge. But who can describe the horror of that poor woman, who immediately, upon passing through the door of their cell, recognized her sons? They sat in long black robes around a table on which a crucifix stood, and seemed to be engaged in silent worship of it, with their hands folded before them on the wooden plank.

Robbed of her strength, the woman collapsed into a chair. In answer to her question: "What ever are they doing in this place?" the director replied: "They are simply consumed by their glorification of the Savior, whom they believe themselves better qualified than most to recognize as the true son of the one true God." The director added that "these youths have for the last six years led this ghostly existence; that they slept but little and hardly ate; that no syllable passed from their lips; that only at the midnight hour did they rise from their seated position; and that they then, in unison, in a voice that made the windows shake, intoned the Gloria in excelsis.

The director concluded with the assurance that these youths were in perfect physical health; that one could not deny that they showed a certain high-spiritedness, however solemn and ceremonial; that, when declared mad, they merely gave a sympathetic shrug of the shoulders, and that they had already stated on several occasions: "If the citizens of the good City of Aachen only knew what we know, they would all set aside their petty affairs and likewise incline their heads before the crucifix and sing out the Gloria."

The woman, who could not bear the dreadful sight of these sad souls and promptly had herself led back to her room on shaking knees, proceeded the very next morning to the home of Mr. Gotthelf Veit, the reputed draper, to try to establish the cause of this dreadful condition; for this man was mentioned in the preacher's letter, and it was revealed that he had enthusiastically taken part in the plan to wreak havoc in the Cloister of Saint Cecilia on Corpus Christi Day. The draper Gotthelf Veit, who had since gotten married and fathered many children and taken over his father's considerable business, received the woman most graciously; and when he learned what business it was that brought her to him he promptly locked the door and, bidding her have a seat, gave the following account:

"My dear woman, if you will not involve me in any legal proceedings in connection with your sons, with whom I admit to having been in contact some six years ago, then I will bear my heart without reserve and tell you all I know: yes, we did, indeed, have the intention mentioned in the letter! For what reason this plan of action fell through I simply cannot conceive, for it had been laid out to the last detail with a truly godless ingenuity; Heaven itself appears to have taken the cloister of the pious women under its protection. For you must know that your sons had spurred on many a stout-hearted soul to take decisive actions, and that they had already disrupted the service with various pranks; more than three hundred scoundrels armed with clubs and torches lurked behind the walls of our misguided city, awaiting the preacher's signal to tear up the sacred place. But then, as soon as the music starts up, your sons suddenly removed their hats all at the same time and in a manner that strikes us as odd; one after another, as though gripped with deep inexpressible emotion, they raise their hands to their bowed faces, and the preacher, suddenly turning to us after a heartfelt pause, calls out to us all in a loud and terrible voice to likewise remove our hats. A few comrades in arms vainly egg him on in a whisper, simultaneously nudging him with their elbows to give the agreed-upon sign to storm the church. But in lieu of a reply, the preacher sank to his knees with his hands crossed over his breast, and his brothers did likewise, their faces pressed down in the dust, muttering the whole slew of prayers that they had mocked but a short while ago. Deeply troubled by this spectacle, the mob of wretched would-be rioters, robbed of their leader, stands around, irresolute and idle, till the end of the oratorio that wondrously rang down upon them from the balcony; and since, on orders of the commandant, at that very moment numerous arrests were made, and several miscreants who had caused disturbances were taken into custody and led off by a guard, the bulk of the rioters have no recourse but to hastily mingle with the mass of departing worshippers and exit the house of God. That evening, after asking several times in vain as to the whereabouts of your sons, who had not returned, with a dark foreboding and accompanied by a couple of friends, I go back to the cloister to ask after them among the watchmen the imperial guard had left behind to lend a hand. But how can I describe my horror, noble woman, when I spot those four men still lying prostrate before the altar of the church, fervently hugging the ground with breast and forehead, as though they themselves had been turned into stone! In vain the caretaker, who enters at the very same moment, plucks at their coat sleeves and rattles their arms, urging them to rouse themselves and leave the cathedral, as it was all dark and not another soul was left. They do not take heed, only half rising in a dreamlike manner when he had his lackeys grip them under the arms and drag them out through the portals; whereupon at last, albeit moaning and groaning, craning their necks

with a tormented look at the cathedral that sparkled behind us in the bright sunlight, they follow us back to the city. Our friends and I, we delicately ask again and again on the way back: what in the world happened to them, what experience so awful as to alter their cast of mind; to which, with a benevolent gaze, they squeeze our hands, peer thoughtfully at the ground, and from time to time – dear God! with a look in their eyes that still breaks my heart – they wipe tears from their eyes. Whereupon, having arrived back at their lodgings, they adroitly and gracefully fashion a cross out of strips of birch bark pressed into a mound of wax between two candles ordinarily used by the maid, and set it down on the big table in the middle of the room; and as the gathering of friends that grows from hour to hour stands by in scattered groups, ringing their hands, watching these silent ghostly goings-on, speechless with pity, the brothers each take a seat at the table; and as though their senses are closed off to any other apparent reality, they silently fold their hands in prayer. They crave neither the food the maid brought each morning on the express orders of their comrades nor, despite their apparent fatigue, the beds made up for them at nightfall in the adjoining room. And so as not to further arouse the indignation of the innkeeper, who is already vexed by this curious display, their friends are obliged to sit down at the richly laden table, and salting the dishes prepared for a goodly company with their bitter tears, had no choice but to gobble it all up. Then all of a sudden the clock strikes midnight; after listening for a fleeting moment to the dull clang of the clock, your four sons suddenly rise as one; and as we gaze with fearful anticipation in their direction, the folded napkins falling from our hands, wondering what in Heaven’s name might happen next after such a strange and disturbing beginning, with grisly, ghoulish voices they start singing the Gloria in excelsis. This is how leopards and wolves must sound when in the icy heart of winter they bellow at the firmament; the supporting pillars of the house shook, I assure you, and struck by the visible breath of their lungs, the windows rattled, threatening to shatter, as though pummeled by the force of handfuls of sand flung against them. Struck dumb by this terrible scene, we stagger apart in all directions, our hair standing on end; leaving coat and hat behind, we scatter hither and thither along the outlying streets, which, within moments, are teeming with more than a hundred other people torn in terror from their sleep; breaking down the inn door, the crowd storms up the stairs and into the room to seek out the source of that terrifying and sickening scream that sounded like a pitiful plea for forgiveness, destined for God’s ear, issued from the lips of eternally damned sinners in the lowest flaming fundamentals of Hell. Finally, when the church bell tolls one o’clock, without having taken the slightest notice of the innkeeper’s angry protests or the shaken outcries of the gathered throng, they fall silent; with a cloth they wipe the sweat – dripping in fat drops on chin and breast – from their brows, and, spreading out their coats, stretch themselves out on the floorboards to catch an hour’s rest from such torturous affairs. Indulgent up to this point, as soon as the innkeeper sees them shut their eyes, he makes the sign of the cross over their heads; and, relieved to be free for the moment from this calamity, he assures everyone that all will be better in the morning and bids the mysteriously muttering throng that has gathered to clear the room. But, alas! at the cock’s first cry, the poor unfortunates rise again to recommence the same desolate, ghostlike cloister life around the table, from which exhaustion alone had compelled them to desist for a while. Accepting neither the admonitions nor the offers of help from the innkeeper, whose heart melts at their piteous condition, they bid him politely turn away the friends who would otherwise faithfully gather every morning in their rooms; they ask nothing of him but bread and water and, if possible, a little straw strewn at night; as a consequence of which, the man who had previously made much money off their merriment feels compelled to report the whole unhappy

business to the authorities, and to ask that these four people, doubtless inhabited by an evil spirit, be duly conducted out of his house. Whereupon, on the orders of the magistrate, they are made to undergo a medical examination, and as they are found to be mad, they are brought to and lodged, as you know, in the madhouse founded within the walls of our city, thanks to the kindness of our late departed emperor, to benefit such poor unfortunates.”

This and much more was recounted by the draper Gotthelf Veit, the bulk of whose statement we have decided to withhold, as, in our view, enough has already been said to serve our examination of the context of what happened; whereupon he once again enjoined the woman to under no circumstances involve him in the event of a legal investigation into the matter.

Three days thereafter, still deeply shaken by this account and with the aid of a lady friend who held her arm, as the weather was nice, the woman went out to visit the cloister with the sad intention of seeing for herself the place where God had, as though with invisible bolts of lightning, laid her sons low; the two women, however, found the entrance to the cathedral all boarded up, on account of construction work, and could only with great pains, standing on tiptoes and peeking through a gap in the planks, make out the splendid sparkling stained-glass rose window in the rear of the church. Many hundreds of workers, singing merry songs, were engaged within, standing on narrow, intricately interlaced scaffolding, which added a good third to the height of the steeples, and decking the rooftops and spires, theretofore covered only with slate, with sturdy sheets of copper that shimmered in the bright rays of sunlight.

Deep black storm clouds rimmed by a golden glimmer hung overhead, framing the building; the thunderstorm had already played itself out over Aachen and the surrounding region, and after flinging a last few feeble bolts of lightning in the direction of the cathedral, it sank with a dissatisfied grumbling in the east, dissolving into a mist.

And it so happened that, just as the women, deeply preoccupied by their thoughts, descended the steps of the large cloister building in which the sisters lived, perceiving this double drama in the sky, a passing sister chanced to learn the identity of the woman standing under the portal; whereupon the abbess, informed of a letter in the latter’s possession concerning the planned acts on Corpus Christi Day, promptly sent a sister down to bid the Dutch woman come up to see her.

Though momentarily a bit taken aback, the latter, no less honorably inclined in her comportment, resolved to accept the request; and while her friend waited in an antechamber next door, the folding doors to the lovely loft itself were flung open before the Dutch woman as she climbed the steps. There she found the abbess, a noble woman of serene royal bearing, seated in a chair, her foot resting on a footstool with legs in the shape of dragon’s claws; beside her on a writing table lay a musical score.

After ordering a chair for the visitor, the abbess told her that she had been informed by the mayor of her arrival in the city; and after asking her in a kindly fashion as to the welfare of her unfortunate sons, and forthwith encouraging her to try to accept the fate that befell them, as it could not be altered – she expressed her wish to see the letter that the preacher had written to his friend, the schoolteacher in Antwerp.

The Dutch woman, who was savvy enough to fathom what possible consequences this might have for her sons, was momentarily nonplussed by this request; but since the honorable face of the abbess instilled immediate confidence, and gave no cause to believe that it was her intention to make public use of its contents, the visitor, after a brief hesitation, pulled the letter out from between her breasts and handed it to the noble lady, then fervently kissed her hand.

As the abbess read through the letter, the woman cast a fleeting glance at the musical score carelessly left open on the desk; and since, in light of the draper's account, she suspected that it might well have been the powerful effect of the music that on that awful day troubled and twisted the minds of her poor sons, turning around in her chair, she timidly inquired of the sister who stood behind her: "Was this perchance the musical work performed in the cathedral on the morning of that curious Corpus Christi Day celebration?"

Upon the young sister's reply – "Yes!" she remembered hearing about it, and that, when not in use, it tended to lie open in the room of the honorable abbess – the woman leapt up out of her chair, clearly agitated, and with all sorts of thoughts running through her mind, leaned over the desk. She gazed at the unknown musical notations, wherewith a terrible spirit appeared to secretly trace a circle, and when her eyes fell on the Gloria in excelsis, she suddenly felt as if the earth sank beneath her feet. She felt as though the total shock of the musical art that had destroyed her sons now passed in a swell over her head; she feared that, from the sheer sight of it, she was losing her mind, and after quickly pressing the page to her lips with a boundless stirring of humility and submission before the omnipotence of God, she sat back down in the chair again.

Meanwhile, the abbess had finished reading through the letter and said as she folded it up: "God himself shielded the cloister on that wondrous day from the insolence of your sadly misguided sons. Whatever tool he employed may be immaterial to you, as a Protestant. You would also find it hard to believe what I could tell you about it. For you must know that not a living soul can tell just who it was seated at the organ bench at that terrible hour, serenely directing the musical work that you find flung open there, as the riot of destruction threatened to break out in our midst. According to testimony taken on the morning of the following day in the presence of the cloister caretaker and several other men and duly deposited in the archive, it has been established that Sister Antonia, the only person able to direct that work, lay ailing, unconscious, her limbs motionless, in a corner of her cloister cell throughout the time of the entire performance; a sister, who, as a relative, was assigned to attend to her physical care, never left her bed the whole morning on which Corpus Christi Day was celebrated in the cathedral. Indeed, Sister Antonia herself would doubtless have confirmed and verified the fact that it was not she who suddenly appeared at the organ in so strange and astonishing a manner, if her altogether immobile state had permitted her to be questioned, and the poor sick sister were not laid low on the evening of that same day by the nervous fever, a condition not previously deemed life-threatening, but from which she died. And having been informed of this incident, the archbishop of Trier has already made the declaration that alone can explain it, namely that Saint Cecilia herself performed this at the same time terrible and wondrous miracle; and I have just received a brief from the pope in which he confirmed its veracity."

Whereupon, she gave the woman back the letter, which she had merely asked to see to get a more detailed account of what she already knew, with the promise that she would make no further use of it; and after asking the mother if there was any hope of her sons' recovery, and if perchance she could help with money or some other means of support, a prospect which the woman, kissing the hem of her gown, tearfully declined, the abbess offered her hand in friendship and bid her farewell.

Here ends this legend. The woman, whose ongoing presence in Aachen was completely pointless, after leaving the court a small sum of money for the care of her poor sons, returned to The Hague, where, the following year, deeply moved by all that had happened, she forthwith returned to the lap of the Catholic church; her sons, for their part, gave up the ghost at a ripe old age, succumbing to a serene and joyous death after having, as was their wont, sung the Gloria in excelsis yet again.