

WINTER SONATA

Dedicated to Maximiliana Brentano.

195

SONATA in E.

BEETHOVEN, Op. 109

Vivace ma non troppo. Sempre legato.

30.

p dolce

cresc.

Adagio espressivo.

[*p*] *f* *p* *cresc.*



by Siu Wai Stroshane

A package has arrived in the post from Vienna today. That's not unusual. What is unusual is the way my mother Antonia thrusts it at me impatiently and says in a trembling voice, "It's for you, Maxie - hurry and open it."

I shrug off my snowy wraps and rub my chilly hands together. "Another art book? Mother, we still have plenty from Grandfather's house!"

She winces as she always does when reminded of Grandfather Birkenstock, who had been a renowned art dealer and had a vast and valuable collection in his mansion in Vienna. After his death twelve years ago, it had fallen to Mother, as his adored only daughter, to sort through and dispose of a lifetime's worth of possessions. He had summoned her to be with him during his final days, and in our family, his word was law. Mother took all four of us children with her, while Father stayed behind in Frankfurt.

I, only seven at the time, had dreaded having to visit his bedside each day. I remember a glowering face with white bushy eyebrows that reminded me of engravings of King Lear, with breath so horrible I nearly fainted. I would shut my eyes tightly for the perfunctory kiss and flee the sickroom as soon as Mother gave me permission. But my older brother Georg and I loved wandering through the forty-room house with its marvelous oddities from all over the world - here an ebony walking-stick topped by a lion's head with fierce golden eyes, there a porcelain vase adorned with deliciously indecent scenes of ladies bathing among lily pads.

There were collections of strange salty-smelling sea insects, musty ancient maps of lost lands, and to my brother's great delight, even the sword of a Roman emperor. We had no trouble hiding from our nanny in the shadows of those forbidden delights.

The autumn passed. Grandfather grew weaker but stubbornly held on. Father finally turned over his business to Uncle Georg and joined us in Vienna. After Grandfather died in November, Mother found it so difficult to relinquish any reminders of her childhood that she often collapsed in tears and took to her bed.

"Where could I possibly put any of this in Frankfurt?" she wailed.

She began to find excuses for lingering, often claiming she was too ill to see prospective buyers. Father was anxious to go home, but dared not complain. We had all learned to tread lightly around our beautiful, volatile, unpredictable mother, knowing we'd risk near-decapitation from a hurled vase, or tongue-lashings that scorched our souls. Her weeping penitence the next day seldom assuaged our hurt. It was better not to cross her will at all.

Father adores Mother, but back then, he seldom showed it. Nor did he show much interest in us when we were small, though we always had private tutors and fine clothes. Still, he has always been gentle and kind, and it hurt me to see how indifferent Mother was toward him in those days. But I was secretly glad our stay in Vienna lasted so long. Our nanny amused us at first with trips to the bustling marketplace, pony rides in the Prater and puppet shows. These diversions worn thin as the months stretched to years, but our tutor kept us busy with French, geography, and music. Vienna began to feel like home to me, away from dear old quiet Frankfurt. I loved to watch the magnificent carriages clattering through the city streets, and wake up to the daily clamor of bells from all the churches. And I still miss those glorious pastries!

"Maxie, stop daydreaming!" Mother is quivering impatiently. I hastily take the flat brown parcel and tilt it toward the late afternoon light. "It's from Uncle B! Mother, have you written to him lately?"

Mother bends over her embroidery and jerks the thread taut. "No, dear, not since that fiasco with the Mass he promised to Father and never sent. I've stayed out of matters since then." Her face is hidden from me, and somehow I don't believe her. After a moment she glances up. "Maxie, for heaven's sake, open the package! I've been waiting all afternoon."

I settle myself on the green velvet footstool and carefully tear away the outer wrapping. A folded sheet of cream-colored vellum falls onto the floor and I scoop it up before Mother can move from her chair. We both recognize those bold loops and dashes - over the years, many such letters have arrived for my parents, or for my mother alone. She reads hers quickly and gives us only a few tantalizing bits of information - "Uncle B is hoping to rescue his nephew Karl from that evil mother," or "Uncle B writes that he has

begun working on a new symphony - " then locks the letters away in her oaken jewelry chest, not even showing them to my father.

This letter is clearly addressed to me. I read it aloud wonderingly.

" A dedication! Well, this is not one of those dedications which are used and abused by thousands of people.

It is the spirit which unites the nobler and finer people of this earth and which time can never destroy...which calls you to mind and makes me see you still as a child, and likewise your beloved parents...So at this very moment I am in the Landstrasse – and I see you all before me..."

He comes back to me so clearly, the stocky, black-haired man with the ruddy face and flashing eyes, whose loud laughter rang through our house so often he seemed part of the family. "Uncle B", as we children liked to call him, would toss us little ones in the air and call us "melschoberl" - dumpling - and other nonsensical names. His pockets were always full of bonbons and pennies for us, and until we knew better, we thought he was a magician. And in a way, he was. He would improvise on the pianoforte in the evenings, and though he was hard of hearing and sometimes hit wrong notes, he cast a spell over all of us. Sometimes he would play parts of his latest works, singing along in a hoarse voice that made me giggle. But if he asked me to play for him, I was petrified. After all, he was already vastly famous and I was a mere student.

When he sat down next to me, I was overwhelmed. He wasn't large, but his clothes smelled of tobacco and cologne, and his hands were very broad and hairy. Still, his touch was always gentle as he corrected my fingering, and if I played well, he would exclaim "Brava, little one!" and kiss my cheeks heartily. He even wrote a little trio for me as a farewell present the last summer we saw him. That made my brother terribly jealous.

Sometimes when Father was away and Mother was ill, Uncle B came and played for her alone. We children would press our ears to the door, listening breathlessly to the glorious sounds from within. He began to visit us so often our cook put out an extra plate for him at every dinner. I was not too young to notice the secret glances that

passed between him and my mother at table. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks turned pink, and she laughed at nearly everything that was said. It puzzled me that she never seemed this happy when Father was home. Our Uncle B was far from elegant, and so awkward he often dropped things and bumped into the furniture. Yet Mother's gaze followed him everywhere as if he were some god descended from Olympus for the evening.

Sometimes Mother took Georg and me to visit Uncle B in his rooms, where he had a breathtaking view of the mountains. We'd climb and climb and climb, and finally arrive at his door gasping for breath. A stout old woman would answer our knock and admit us to a scene of perpetual confusion and disorder - shirts, socks, books, and dirty dishes decorated every table and chair, while manuscripts tumbled from the open pianoforte by the window. Whenever the servant tried to straighten up, Uncle B chased her from the room. We were awed that an adult was allowed to be so slovenly. At our mansion in the Landstrasse, Nanny would scold us for spilling so much as a crumb of cake on the polished floors. But Mother never seemed to mind the mess in Uncle B's room. She would shrug and say smilingly, "Genius need not be troubled with such trifling matters."

At the end of the visit, Georg and I were allowed to choose a small present - a quill from the silver inkpot on the piano, or a flower from the Vienna Woods where Uncle B loved to roam. Then we would wait restlessly in the musty hallway while Mother and Uncle B lingered at the door saying endless good-byes. It was always a big relief to run back down those stairs and escape into the fresh air again. In the carriage, Mother often seemed lost in another world. If we spoke to her, she barely heard us.

"Maxie, let me have the letter!" I am brought back to the present. Mother is holding out her hand eagerly. I look down at her and a strange feeling comes over me, as if I am seeing her through adult eyes for the first time. Slowly I hand her the letter. She takes it from me reverently and pores over Uncle B's almost unreadable scrawl.

I turn back to the package, wondering why he has dedicated something to me and not to her. What could it be? A rondo perhaps? Or some variations? I draw out a freshly engraved score of some

twenty pages. I can hardly believe my eyes. "Mother, it's a new sonata!"

I have barely read the title when she snatches it from my hands.

*'Respectfully dedicated to Fraulein Maximiliane Brentano,
December 6, 1821.*

From her friend and admirer, Ludwig van Beethoven.'

She stares at me with wide eyes. "A sonata? For you?"

"What's wrong with that?" I exclaim.

She collapses in her chair, half-laughing, half-sobbing. Her head lolls back and I spring from my stool, afraid she might faint.

"Shall I fetch your smelling salts, Mother?" I feel that familiar mixture of exasperation and concern whenever Mother has one of her "spells." But she straightens up and brushes her graying auburn hair from her eyes.

"Here. Here. Take your fine Opus 109 and play it for me, Fraulein Maximiliane Euphrosyne Kunigunde Brentano." I wish she wouldn't mock my fantastic string of names. After all, it was she who chose them all.

I seat myself at the Erard and take a long look at my new sonata. The music is not difficult, but rather strange, unlike his usual big bravura works. It opens with delicate broken arpeggios and questioning cadences, a melody that wanders all over the keyboard. Then comes a short fiery tarantella, and I try to do justice to its mad spirit, even on this first reading. As I begin the final movement, a small sound catches my ear and I whirl around. Mother is fervently pressing the letter to her lips, her eyes closed. After an instant's denial, the truth flashes through me. I have been no more than a go-between, a lightning rod grounding the sparks of an illicit passion. For a moment, I am singed by its heat. And then the moment passes, and anger wells up in me. I spring up from my seat and snatch the sonata from the rack.

Mother opens her eyes and gasps. "Why, Maxie, what's wrong?" She hastily puts down the letter and picks up her embroidery with trembling hands, but I wordlessly thrust the open score onto her lap. Two or three pages spill onto the floor.

"You - you'd better take this after all, Mother," I stammer.

"Maxie - "

"It's really meant for you, isn't it?" Tears well up in my eyes and suddenly I run from the room. In the dark foyer I lean against the wall, trembling, not knowing whether to rage or weep for my shattered illusions.

"Maxie!" Mother calls from the drawing room. I hear her getting up from her chair. I turn frantically and dash up the thickly carpeted stairs. On the landing, I stop for breath and find myself face to face with Beethoven himself. Or rather, the portrait he sent last year. I stare in horror at those deep-set eyes, that familiar uncombed mane now turning steely gray.

"How could you?" I hiss. "You and my mother - "

"Please come back!" Mother's voice echoes from below. My knees are trembling so violently that I sit down on the steps and clutch my belly, feeling sick. In the silence, I hear the ticking of the grandfather clock and my own pounding heart. Carriage wheels rumble past the house, and the wind whistles through the bare lindens, rattling their branches like bones.

Mother appears on the bottom step. She looks tiny and vulnerable, and I feel an instant's remorse as she climbs painfully towards me. Then I see that she is still cradling the sonata, and suddenly I leap to my feet and run down the long hall to my bedroom. I slam the door and lean against it. After a moment my knees give way and I slide onto the icy floor.

"Maxie, please listen to me." She is outside the door now.

"No!"

"It isn't what you think."

"How do you know what I think?" I shout. "I saw you with that letter!" And suddenly all the memories come pouring out, years of half-knowledge hardening into conviction. "All those visits when Father was away - all those letters you've hidden from us, and the gifts for 'my beloved Toni' - and now this filthy sonata - "

"Maxie!" She gasps. "How can you say such a thing about Uncle B's music?"

"Don't call him that! He's not my uncle." I grit my teeth and pound my fists silently on my knees.

After a moment she rattles the doorknob. "*Herzchen*, let me in."

"Does Father know? Or do you hide your feelings better when he's home?"

"Stop it!" She is close to tears, and I hear the echo of my ugly accusations. Slowly I get to my feet and open the door. She looks like a stranger, with her thin trembling shoulders, red-rimmed eyes, and lines in her face I have never noticed before. I stumble to my bed and fall against the pillows. Mother follows, and sits beside me. She takes my hand but I pull away, unable to meet her eyes.

"Please try to understand, Maxie. I love and honor your father. I have sworn to remain his wife until death parts us. But..." she gropes for words. "Goethe says...'In this life, there can exist between people a spiritual and emotional community which need not be prepared. They understand each other in an instant. Their lives contain related points of contact even before they know each other.' Do you understand me?"

"No," I say stubbornly. She sighs.

"From the moment Tante Bettina took me to meet Beethoven, I felt as if I had known him since time began. It was not idle flirtation or just an evening's diversion that drew us together."

"Why?" I burst out. "Why him?"

"Because he embodied all the good and noble things I longed for in my life. We shared the same dreams and understood one another's suffering. And his music! Do you remember how he used to come and play for me when I was sick?"

I laugh bitterly. "How can I forget? He always came when Father was away."

Her eyes flash at me. "He understood me more than your father ever has. Maxie, listen to me. I was only seventeen when Grandfather betrothed me to Franz. I had to leave my home and all that was familiar, and come here to Frankfurt. I had to be a stepmother to all of your aunts and uncles, and run this big household, and be a good and faithful wife to a man I hardly knew. Do you wonder that I was so unhappy?"

"Weren't we any consolation?" I burst out, unable to bear her self-pity. Now she laughs with the same bitterness.

"Oh yes, you babies gave me diversion and something to call my own. You know I am proud of you, Maxie. You're so accomplished, and bold, and forthright. So much stronger than the

other girls. But in those days, you children were too young to give me what I needed most."

"And Father was too old?" I am shocked by my own impudence, but she only sighs.

"I welcomed the chance to return to Vienna when Grandfather died, even though I mourned his passing." She gets up and lights the candle on my dressing table. Her face glows. "Oh, Maxie, there is no other city like it in the world! The opera and the theatre, all those languages and cultures flowing together - I still miss it terribly. I remember those early morning strolls in the Prater..."

"With Beethoven?" I interrupt somewhat nastily, unable to use the old affectionate nickname.

Mother sits down again and answers patiently, "No, I went alone. I needed time to collect my thoughts. I was so frightened by what was happening. The power and the passion of it all! I hope someday you find such a love. You don't know how fortunate you are to have a choice."

I am silent. That strange blundering man, a Launcelot to my mother's Guinevere? The image is too painfully absurd to grasp.

She twists the ends of her shawl between her hands, her face contorted with anguish. "Believe me, Maxie, I had to wrestle with my conscience and my faith - why, after I had been pledged in holy wedlock to your father, did God show me the face of my true love?"

"How did you - what finally - " I stammer, hardly knowing what I am trying to ask.

She glances at me and draws a deep breath. "We were happy at first, in spite of our doubts. I had turned to him for companionship, you see, and escape from all those dreary domestic chores. And he loved the mother in me, and the devoted wife. But as the months wore on, we realized we were trapped in a hopeless situation. I could never be wholly his, no matter how great our love. It became a living hell for both of us."

Her voice is barely more than a whisper. "That final summer, when we went to Prague and you stayed with Nanny in Vienna - I doubt if you remember..."

"Of course I do! When you went away, I was so angry I locked myself in my room for almost two whole days."

"Oh, Maxie, you never told me that!"

"It doesn't matter." I shrug. "Nanny bribed me not to tell - she spoiled me so much, I was sorry when you came home. What happened in Prague, Mother?"

Mother nervously twists the gold wedding band on her finger. "He came to Prague too, and we...met. I wish...I could have stayed in his arms forever. He needed me so much! It was terribly wrenching when we had to part."

A hot tingle of embarrassment goes through me. She has never talked about a man in such intimate terms before. I sense that she is turning to me as a woman for the first time, seeking understanding after living with her secret for so many years. Her trust is an oppressive weight. What am I to do, caught between her and my gentle, inarticulate father, whose love is no less real? Does he know they still love each other?

"What happened after that?" I croak.

She leans her head on my shoulder and sighs. "He went on to the baths at Teplitz and our family went to Karlsbad. We had come to a dead end. I could not break my marriage vows, nor could he betray your father, whom he loves dearly. Then, too, Beethoven was and always will be wedded to his art. No mortal woman can take its place." Her fingers stroke the score in her lap.

"By the end of the month, the decision was out of our hands. And in a way, it was a tremendous relief, despite the pain. Something had to break."

Mother discovered she was with child--but not his. She tells me now that she had no choice but to return to us. (Not inspiring news to me.) Vienna had become a graveyard of broken dreams. The Birkenstock goods had been auctioned off before their trip to Bohemia, and she could no longer see her beloved. And so she resigned herself to returning to Frankfurt with her new burden. There was no question of her leaving the family, as if indeed there ever had been. Father tried to understand the reasons for her near-flight and treated her with a generosity worthy of King Arthur. He must have felt very much like that betrayed English king!

In due time, the young pride of Brentano "lions" left home to pursue their literary careers, and Mother was able to choose her own art and company, and make the Frankfurt house hers. It was almost enough.

Now she grips my hand so tightly I wince. "Always be true to yourself, Maxie," she says, her voice trembling. "Never sacrifice your dreams for the sake of convention. Love can grow from a barren soil but it blooms at great cost. Better to live alone than to marry for the wrong reasons. Don't suffer as I have, and your father, and most of all, our beloved friend. He has sacrificed the most, but his music will make him immortal. The rest of us must do our best with the gifts we have."

We sit in silence for a long time. The chilly afternoon light fades from the window. At last Mother says softly, "Forgive me, Maxie. I never meant to hurt you." She looks down at the sonata in her hands. Then she holds it towards me, smiling. "Will you play it for me again?" And suddenly I feel as if she is passing to me a secret torch of hopes and dreams, her own small spark of Promethean fire. I hesitate to take it even now, fearful of such power. But I accept the charge. I am her daughter.

Together we go back into the hall. The sconces have been lighted, and they cast a warm glow on the face of our friend. For the first time I see the haunting sadness in his dark eyes, the firmly closed lips suppressing pain and desire. And I try to forgive him too - after all, my father did so long ago.

(Based on Maynard Solomon's research on Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved")