

# AN INTERVIEW REVIEWED

OR

# MUSIC IN THE STUDY

By

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Of Centretruths Digital Media



CDM Prose

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## CHAPTER ONE

After what seemed an eternity the taxi turned into Ravensthorpe Drive, where it eventually came to a sudden halt outside a large detached Hampstead house bearing the rather enigmatic name *Tonkarias* on a small metal plate dangling from above its front entrance. With a distinct feeling of apprehension, Anthony Keating, junior correspondent for the influential monthly publication 'Arts Monthly', climbed out of the taxi and, resting his black attaché case on the pavement, satisfied the driver's financial demands. Then, turning towards the house, he sighed as deeply as he had ever done at the prospect of what lay in store for him behind its impressive dark-green front door.

Picking up his attaché case, he stood for a moment seemingly undecided what to do. There was still time for him to turn back, resign from the magazine, and have done with this sort of apprehension once and for all! What rotten luck that Neil Wilder had suddenly gone down with influenza and been obliged to withdraw from his professional commitments all week! How disconcerting to be informed by the editor that, other correspondents being ill, on holiday, or otherwise engaged, he would have to deputize for the sick man and interview the composer instead! As if he had nothing better to do than interview someone whose music he had little knowledge or understanding of, never mind inclination towards. Really, things were becoming more than a trifle farcical at the offices of 'Arts Monthly' these days!

He pushed open the plain metal gate and slowly walked up the gravel path towards his professional destiny. He didn't have the courage to back out of the assignment, after all. It would only further complicate matters to find oneself being pompously lectured at by a cunning Nicholas Webb and induced to retract one's resignation because, in his editorial estimation, the magazine couldn't afford to lose such a talented young correspondent at such an inconvenient time, since people like Keating weren't easy to find, etc. Besides, what would he do if he didn't slave for Webb five days a week? What else *could* he do?

He stood in front of the front door and, with stoical resignation to his fate, pressed its bell a couple of times. Almost immediately, a loud bark issued from somewhere deep inside the interior of the house, followed by a dutiful scampering of paws, as a large dog bounded towards the door and,

drawing-up just short of a head-on collision with it, began to bark on a still fiercer note, until the sharp sound of a woman's voice served to create a temporary lull in its aggression. "Be quiet, Ludwig!" the woman shouted again, as the dog, a golden labrador (and not a rottweiler or pit bull terrier, as Keating had at first feared), renewed its barking at sight of the caller. She gave the brute a sharp slap on the nose and held it by the collar to restrain its aggression. Then, turning to her visitor, whose attention was largely focused on the over-zealous animal, she apologized for any inconvenience.

"Oh, that's nothing!" Keating politely assured her, smiling apprehensively in self-defence. He gripped the handle of his attaché case more firmly and then informed her who he was and for what purpose he had come, as previously arranged.

"Ah, do come in!" cried the grey-haired lady, ushering him, with her free hand, into a brightly-painted, elongated hall. "My husband has been expecting you. What name was it again?"

"Er, Anthony Keating."

"Right! Just wait here a moment whilst I tell him you've arrived." She smiled reassuringly and, dragging a reluctant Ludwig along by the collar, shut him into an adjoining room. Then she headed down the hallway and disappeared round a corner at the far end. Ludwig barked gruffly a few times from his new place of confinement, but his initial aggression had considerably subsided, and soon he grudgingly resigned himself to the presence of a stranger in the house by growling a little for form's sake, as it were, and then relapsing into a brooding silence.

Meanwhile Keating had taken out a small notebook, which contained a number of hastily scribbled questions which he intended to put to the composer in due course - assuming his illustrious quarry would be willing to answer them, of course. Unfortunately, they hadn't been compiled by him but by Neil Wilder and, since he wasn't particularly familiar with Wilder's methods of conducting interviews, he considered it worth his while to check them over once more, even though he had already checked them over in the taxi. But before he could get beyond the fourth question, Mrs Tonks duly reappeared in the hall to inform him that her husband would be ready in a minute. "He's just completing some work on the garden," she explained, as she led Keating down the hallway and into a large room to the right, which gave on to the back garden. Sure enough, there, no more than thirty yards away, stood Howard Tonks with a watering can in his hands and a bed of bright red roses directly in front of him.

"Would you like a tea or coffee while you wait?" asked Mrs Tonks,

offering her guest an armchair.

"A tea would be fine, thanks," he replied, waiting until her plump middle-aged figure had vacated the room before, abandoning his seat, he ventured to tiptoe towards the French windows. He didn't want to go too close to them in case the composer, who had his back to the house, suddenly turned round and caught him staring through them. But from where he stood he could just about discern the body of a bikini-clad young woman lying on an air bed a few yards to the right of the rose bushes. Overcoming his timidity, he tiptoed a couple of paces closer to the windows to get a better view of her and discovered, to his additional satisfaction, that there were in fact two young women lying side-by-side on adjacent air beds - one in a pale-blue bikini, the other in a pink one. He almost whistled to himself at the sight of them, for they appeared to be highly attractive. That, at any rate, was the case as far as their bodies were concerned; for he couldn't, as yet, see much of their faces. Perhaps if he tiptoed a yard or two closer...? But at that very moment the composer turned towards the two bikini-clad sunbathers to his right and stared down at the nearest of them - a development which served to freeze Keating in his spying tracks!

Slightly disappointed, he turned away from the garden and, catching sight of a medium-sized portrait of Bela Bartók above the mantelpiece, gazed up at it with mild curiosity. But Bartók had never been one of his favourite composers, so he quickly lost interest in the portrait and turned away from it in disgust. He soon discovered, however, that there were some other portraits in the room as well - a large one of Stravinsky on the wall opposite and, on the wall facing the garden, two smaller portraits of what appeared to be Ives and Varèse respectively. It was evident that Mr Tonks liked to be surrounded by his musical precursors or heroes when he composed. Perhaps they prevented him from losing faith in himself, or precluded any untoward frivolity from marring the austere atmosphere of his study? Standing in the middle of the room with the oily gazes of these particular composers upon him wasn't exactly the most uplifting of experiences, however, for Anthony Keating and, as though in a determined effort to break the spell which their stern miens had momentarily imposed upon him, he smiled to himself in seeming defiance of everything they stood for.

Taking mental leave of the portraits, he turned his attention upon an open music score resting against the stand of a Steinway grand piano, which stood, at that moment, with its ivory keys bathed in bright sunlight. He stared down at it with a slightly puzzled expression on his face, since

the many lines and dots scrawled across its cream-coloured surface presented him with one of the strangest-looking musical hieroglyphs he had ever beheld. Should he attempt to decipher it? He bent closer to the manuscript and managed to make out the words "Sonata in indeterminate key for solo performer" above the first treble staff on the left-hand page, followed immediately underneath by "At one's own pace". With mounting amusement he scanned the treble bars of the first line, which contained a profusion of quavers, semiquavers, and demisemiquavers, and, calling upon the remnants of his youthful education in music, attempted to distinguish between the various notes on display there. Tentatively he groped his way deeper into the score, smiling to himself and, in spite of his contemptuous attitude, almost feeling proud that he could still differentiate between quavers and semiquavers, crotchets and minims. But there were many notes and signs there which neither the eccentricity of his school music teacher nor the concentricity of his private piano tutor of several years ago had intimated the existence of, and he wondered, while persisting in his investigations, whether he was really looking at music at all? However, just as he was about to extend his gratuitous curiosity to line five of the treble staff, the door burst open and in came Mrs Tonks bearing a heavy-looking tea tray in her hands. Startled out of his preoccupation with the score, Keating blanched at sight of her, then blushed when she smiled at him and apologized for her husband's delay. "Unfortunately, he's had to go upstairs to wash and change after his gardening," she explained, placing the copiously stocked tea tray on a small coffee table to the right of the piano. However, with nothing more to say on that subject, she pointed to a plate of assorted biscuits and informed him that he needn't feel obliged to eat any of them if he didn't want to, it simply being a custom of hers to serve biscuits with tea.

Politely thanking her for her generosity, Keating reseated himself and, when she had withdrawn again after pouring him some Chinese tea, selected a pink-topped biscuit from the plate and devoured it in a couple of ravenous bites. He was really quite pleased to savour the taste of a sweet biscuit, for he hadn't eaten one in about six years and had virtually forgotten such things still existed. Washing it down with a mouthful of tea, he turned towards the garden, where the mid-afternoon sun, shining high in the right-hand pane of glass, momentarily caught his attention. Its brightness quickly dazzled him, however, making him see sparks in the air as he averted his gaze, but it served to remind him of the sunbathers outside and, prompted by a lustful desire to spy on them afresh, he abandoned his armchair for the second time and, with cup in hand, tiptoed across to the

French windows again.

To his surprise he discovered that the sunbather in the pink bikini had risen from her horizontal position and was applying suntan lotion to her shins, massaging them slowly and steadily - first the left and then the right. As she bent forwards Keating noted, with especial avidity, the curvaceous outlines of her ample breasts, snugly nestled in the cotton material supporting them. They appeared to hang loosely and to swing gently backwards and forwards, like a pendulum, with her undulating movements. He was almost hypnotized by them. But what if she were suddenly to look up and catch him standing there in such an uncompromisingly voyeuristic position, teacup in hand and mouth hanging open like a dog in heat? He felt a reluctant misgiving at the thought and would have abandoned his curiosity there and then, had not the subtle pleasure resulting from it induced him to stay. Lifting the china teacup to his lips, he took a few absent-minded sips of tea and continued to stare at the young woman, whose long fair hair, having adjusted itself to her movements, was now partly obscuring his view of her breasts. But as though in compensation for this intrusion, the other young woman suddenly raised herself from *her* back and said something to her companion. Almost immediately, she unclipped her pale-blue bikini top and exposed a pair of the most ravishing-looking breasts Keating had ever seen! In his excitement the young correspondent almost spilt some tea down the front of his shirt. For he had been about to take another sip of it when the unclipping took place and had quite forgotten to adjust the angle of his cup, which he held an inch or two in front of his quivering lips. And now he was half-hoping that the informal striptease act wouldn't stop there; that she would remove the lower part of her bikini as well when, to his dismay, she turned over onto her stomach and lay with head turned towards the rose bushes, while her companion applied suntan lotion to her back. He took another sip of tea and had time to note the seductive contours of her cotton-covered buttocks before a deep male voice, sounding a few yards behind him, made him start violently awake from his self-indulgent preoccupations. Turning sharply round, he recognized the silver-haired figure of Howard Tonks advancing towards him with outstretched hand. He almost dropped the teacup in his embarrassment, as the composer's gesture of introduction obliged him to transfer it to his left hand.

"So sorry to have kept you waiting Mr ... er ... er ..."

"Keating," he obliged, blushing to the roots of his hair. Was that irony he saw in the man's eyes? His right hand went limp as it encountered the firm grasp of the composer's predatory handshake. He hardly dared look

into his face.

"The weather has been so fine recently that I simply had to water the flowers today," Mr Tonks informed him with an ingratiating smile.

"Yes, I was admiring the roses when you came in here," explained Keating, who wondered whether this ruse might not serve to justify his presence at the French windows.

The composer, having terminated his python-like handshake, directed his attention towards the garden and commented approvingly on the way his plants had thrived this year. Not only the roses, he ventured to stress, but the dahlias and fuchsias as well. And with an air of satisfaction he pointed to the respective beds in which the majority of those plants were reposing - the dahlias to the left of the garden and the fuchsias to the right. "You like fuchsias?" he asked, briefly turning towards the figure in profile at his side.

"Most beautiful," replied Keating, the consciousness of renewed embarrassment endowing his response with a degree of irrelevance which only served to embarrass him the more, insofar as the part of the garden the fuchsias were to be found in caused one to look in the general direction of the two young women to the right of the roses, and the sight of them somehow implicated one in an opinion not wholly confined to plants! The tingling sensation beneath his skin was virtually at fever-pitch. "Yes, I'm very fond of fuchsias," he added, automatically stressing the noun, as though to preclude any possibility of ambiguity being inferred from his statement. And, resolutely, he kept his gaze riveted on the shrubs in question.

"Such charming things," opined Mr Tonks, as his eyes came to rest on the sunbathers. "Incidentally, in case you're wondering who those immodestly clad young females are, the one on the left is my daughter, Rebecca, and the one on the right is a friend of hers, a fellow-student from Music College by name of Margaret."

"Oh, really?" exclaimed Keating, feigning surprise as best he could. One would have thought that he hadn't noticed them until then. His attention wavered and focused, wavered and focused again. And the tingling sensation beneath his skin actually reached fever-pitch.

"One can hardly blame them for taking advantage of the weather in such an unequivocal way," remarked the composer, smiling delicately. "Though they looked sufficiently well-tanned when they arrived back from the South of France the other day. It's a kind of addiction young people suffer from these days - call it tan-for-tan's sake. How long it will damn-well last, God only knows! But I shouldn't be particularly surprised if the



next generation revert to the pallid complexions of their grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations, to the detriment, temporarily or otherwise, of such godforsaken places as St Tropez and the Costa del Sol. Then any attractive young woman with a well-tanned body will be considered a pariah, to be shunned from decent society."

Anthony Keating was wondering to what extent *his* red face was making *him* a pariah when the composer's next words, applying to the business at-hand, quickly cooled him down and restored it to something like its normal colour. Instantaneously the spell of fuchsias and breasts, buttocks and roses was broken, as he returned to the sober context of a correspondent for 'Arts Monthly' who was there to interview the world-famous composer and conductor, Howard Tonks, on the important subject of his life and music.

"I was quite impressed by an article your magazine did on Berio a couple of months ago," continued Mr Tonks, turning away from the French windows and slowly walking towards his Steinway. "One felt that you had a genuine interest in the man."

Keating feigned a smile of gratitude on behalf of Neil Wilder, the author of the article in question, while feeling less than grateful for this allusion to something he hadn't even bothered to read, let alone write. There was certainly a genuine interest in the man as far as Wilder was concerned. But as for himself ... he hastened to change the subject and, since Mr Tonks was standing in front of the piano, ventured to suggest he had noted a Berio-like quality about some of the music in the score there which, out of idle curiosity, he had taken the liberty to scrutinize, shortly after entering the room.

"How interesting!" exclaimed Mr Tonks, eyeing his score in a detached manner. "In point of fact, this work is a little more complex than Berio." He sat down on the velvet-cushioned piano stool and, positioning his fingers on the keyboard, informed Keating that he hadn't yet completed it, there being a number of bars in the last movement still to be composed. "But listen to this," he went on, and immediately commenced playing the opening bars of his new piano sonata with obvious relish.

At first Keating's reaction was one of dismay for having blundered with his reference to Berio, made on the spur-of-the-moment and without any genuine conviction. But as Mr Tonks proceeded with his playing, the young correspondent's attitude became tinged with amusement until, by the time the composer had got to the middle of the first movement, he was obliged to grit his teeth together in an effort to prevent himself from exploding with laughter. Really, this was becoming more than a trifle

farcical; it was positively grotesque! Where, one might wonder, was the slightest intimation of genuine music among all this confusion of notes, this outbreak of diabolical cacophony? And why was it that a man who, only a short time ago, had given one the impression of being reasonably intelligent, should suddenly seem an imbecile - worse, a lunatic - as his fingers performed the most unbelievably strange antics on the keys? And not only his fingers but, to judge by this performance, his elbows and arms as well! For he had got to a section of the sonata which apparently necessitated the simultaneous application of elbows and fingers! Keating almost bit his tongue.

"Oh, damn it!" groaned an irate composer as the technical demands of the 'complex' work suddenly got the better of him. "I've gone and messed it up again!" he complained, frowning down at his fingers with a look which might have suggested, to an impartial observer, that they alone were to blame for the mistake.

Despite efforts to retain a respectful silence, Keating was unable to prevent himself from sniggering slightly. Frankly, he would have been incapable of discerning a mistake at *any* stage of the performance simply because, to his mind, the whole damn thing was a mistake! It had been a mistake from the very first note!

"You see, I'm utilizing a technique here which requires the utmost concentration and is extremely difficult to perfect," revealed Mr Tonks, once he had recovered his aplomb to a degree which made it possible for him to articulate an explanation. "The chord clusters in this bar are dependent upon the elbows of both arms *as well as* the fingers of both hands, so the successful co-ordination of each is of the utmost importance in achieving the desired effect. Unfortunately, my left elbow struck a note adjacent to the ones specified in the score, while the middle finger of my right hand connected with a note reserved for the index finger," he confessed, leaning on the keys with elbows outstretched and fingers contorted in accordance with the exacting demands of the inner part of this particular chord cluster. He raised himself a little from the keyboard and slumped forwards, causing the Steinway to emit a violent discord. "There!" he cried, with an expression of unequivocal triumph on his bony face. "That's how it *should* have been played. After which one proceeds to another chord cluster formed in a similar way ..." He raised himself anew and slumped forwards to the dictates of the next cluster of chords, which somehow sounded even more violently discordant than the previous one.

Keating put a hand over his mouth, but the mirth he was attempting to stifle somehow succeeded in relieving itself through his nostrils instead.

This being the case, he took a paper tissue from one of his front pockets and pretended to be blowing his nose. And when Mr Tonks produced yet another violent discord, he availed himself of the cover it afforded him to give vent to his repressed amusement in the form of a series of low-key sniggers, which were successfully drowned by the noise coming from the piano.

"Fortissimo!" bellowed the composer, as he repeated the third elbow-finger chord with triumphant glee and lent on the keys for the duration of a minim. "Undoubtedly the most difficult bar of the entire movement!"

Keating wiped his eyes with a corner of the small paper tissue and mumbled something about hay fever before inquiring, in a less than respectful tone-of-voice, why it was necessary to utilize both fingers and elbows simultaneously, since he had always been under the impression that, with piano music, fingers were quite sufficient.

At this, Howard Tonks stared across at him with a decidedly reproachful air, an air which seemed to imply that it should be perfectly obvious why it was necessary, and then replied, with ill-disguised impatience, that it permitted one to explore further afield, to push back the boundaries of musical experience and embrace chord structures which lay beyond the range of the fingers alone. "And besides," he added, on the heels of a brief reflective pause, "it makes life more interesting to have such unprecedented technical complexities to master. That, amongst other things, is what contemporary serious music is all about." Having said which, he turned back to the score and continued his performance from approximately where it had so discordantly left off.

Once more a sequence of atonal motifs plunged Anthony Keating into making a renewed attempt to stifle the amusement that assailed him with the onslaught of Mr Tonks' piano music, as he plied the tissue afresh and blew his nose even more emphatically than before. And this time it wasn't just the music which was to blame; it wasn't just the profusion of notes without melody or chords without harmony, of phrases abruptly terminated before they could develop into anything intelligible, or of cadences modulating to keys with which they had no connection whatsoever and from which they acquired scarcely any musical support - no, it wasn't just these and so many other aspects of the music which excited his disrespect. It was also the blatant incongruity between the composer's serious and seemingly gratified approach to his work and the patently ludicrous nature of the work itself! If one of the most garishly painted and bizarrely dressed circus clowns had sat down at this very piano and performed Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata without a technical blemish, the incongruity between

performance and performer wouldn't have been any greater. In fact, it would probably have been somewhat less marked, because the music would have spoken for itself and in some degree redeemed the ludicrous appearance of its performer. As, however, for this sonata, more pathetic by far than anything by Beethoven, the sedate and slightly pompous appearance of its performer in no way redeemed the ludicrous nature of the music but, on the contrary, served rather to intensify it, making it sound more ridiculous than it probably would have done had a clown been seated at the same piano.

Yes, there was undeniably something grossly incongruous about the stark contrast between appearance and reality as manifested in the person and music of Mr Howard Tonks! Could it really be true, as informative opinion had led Keating to believe, that this man was world famous; that his works were known and performed in every country which knew or cared anything about serious Western music? And, if so, how did a man like him get to be world famous anyway? Surely not on the strength of compositions like the one he was now playing? The contrary thought seemed too absurd to entertain, though Keating had to admit to himself that he wasn't familiar with more than a handful of the composer's works altogether.

He tried to recall the first occasion his ears had witnessed the disturbing vibrations of one such work - a couple of years ago, it might have been, when he was listening to a radio concert featuring avant-garde music, and had heard mention of a sextet for flute, cello, acoustic guitar, organ, french horn, and vibraphone by the 'Eminent British composer, Howard Tonks,' prior to being condemned to twenty-five minutes of the most unequivocal cacophony for small ensembles ever inflicted upon him. How he had managed to persevere with it, throughout that time, he could neither remember nor understand. But it seemed not improbable, in retrospect, that he must have been pretty hard-up for anything better to do on the evening in question!

There was a sudden loud discord for two hands alone, followed by an even louder one for both elbows and hands together, which startled Keating out of his morose reflections and brought him back to the problematic present. "There!" exclaimed Mr Tonks in apparent triumph, as the sustained notes of the final dissonance simultaneously died away. "Did you like it?"

"Quite thought-provoking," replied Keating, wiping his tear-drenched eyes with the remaining dry corner of his by-now sodden tissue. But something about the composer's reaction to this comment suggested that his

manner of answering the question hadn't been exactly what was expected, so he quickly added: "I'm sure it would grow on one with repeated listenings."

"Indeed!" confirmed Mr Tonks, and, evidently mollified, he turned the page of his score to the second movement. "Would you like to hear some more?"

"Well, quite frankly, I don't think I've got the time to listen to that and interview you as well," replied Keating nervously. "You see, I really ought to be asking *you* questions, in accordance with the agreed terms of our interview." He hesitated, as though undecided what to say next, and, fearing that his negative response might not suffice to deter the composer from pressing ahead, he reached out his hand for the attaché case, extracted a slender battery-operated cassette recorder from its felt-lined interior and, pushing the tea tray to one side, placed the cassette recorder on the coffee table prior to turning it on. Then, by way of introducing Mr Tonks to the interview via a question designed to flatter his ego, he asked the composer when and where he was likely to be giving a public recital of his new work once it had been completed, only to receive the curt reply: "I haven't a frigging clue." Unfortunately, Howard Tonks' ego wasn't to be flattered by questions relating to such relatively trivial events as public recitals! It was only in private that he took any pleasure in performing. And, as though to confirm this fact, his hands began to respond to the score of the sonata's second movement. "In point of fact, I haven't written all that many works for piano," he added, after a thoughtful pause which gave Keating time to take out his notebook and scan the first few questions again, "so I rarely give recitals. I did give one at the Festival Hall last year, but that could only have been my ninth or tenth in all. A piano concerto incidentally."

"Yes, I know the one," lied Keating impulsively. "Quite a success apparently."

"The thing is, I'm not a concert pianist," revealed Mr Tonks, momentarily turning towards his young interviewer, "so I don't make a point of performing in public. There was a time, however, when I had more interest in becoming a concert pianist than a composer - indeed, I was actually trained to become one. But I subsequently lost interest in the idea and dedicated myself almost exclusively to composition instead. I didn't want to end-up playing Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, and other such hackneyed composers year after year in the same old germ-ridden halls to the same old stuck-up audiences with the same old prejudices against anything modern. That would have proved too demoralizing by half! Particularly as one would have been partly, if not largely, responsible for

their prejudices in the first place!" His fingers depressed the keys specified in the score, and another painful discord, painlessly registered by the cassette recorder, sent its belligerent waves crashing against Keating's sensitive eardrums. "It's more pleasurable to play historical composers at one's leisure," he added, once the dissonance, having been dutifully dispatched, had begun to fade away.

"Do you play such composers these days?" the young correspondent tentatively ventured, in an effort to maintain the dialogue.

"Indeed I do, Mr Keating, and with considerable pleasure." Having smiled which, Howard Tonks nodded, as though in confirmation of his feelings towards such composers, before asking: "Would you like to hear an example?"

This offer struck Anthony Keating as well-worth accepting, since he had his doubts that the man who had just demonstrated what seemed to him a lunatic composition would also be capable of rendering a credible interpretation of one of the representative composers of, say, the previous century. He smiled inwardly and bade the composer go ahead.

Turning to a pile of scores stacked together in a slender cupboard to the left of the Steinway, Mr Tonks began to sort through it for something to play. "Do you like Schumann?" he asked. "Or would you prefer Chopin or Liszt?"

"Schumann would do fine," responded Keating, addressing himself to a stooped back and plump backside. He realized, with some dismay, that the intended interview, his real reason for being there, would now have to wait a while longer.

"How about *Kriesleriana*, then?" suggested Mr Tonks, and, without giving Keating time to respond, he opened the score at page one of the first variation and, carefully placing it on the piano stand, reseated himself at the keyboard. "A wonderfully brisk tempo to begin with!" he remarked in a cheerful tone, before his delicate-looking fingers set the requisite keys in fast motion, in deference to Schumann's markings. And there suddenly, to Anthony Keating's manifest surprise, came an explosion of melody and harmony - indeed, a succession of melodies and harmonies that filled the air with their beauty and quickly transformed the room's atmosphere from sterile intellectuality into potent spirituality; from cacophonous hell into euphonious heaven.

At first, he could hardly believe his ears; it seemed too incredible. Yet, as the music progressed, he had no option but to acknowledge the fact that the seemingly imbecile composer of the previous performance had become, as though by magical transformation, the well-nigh brilliant performer of

the composition he was now playing with such evident relish. And as the quick first variation gave way to the long, slow second one, and that, in turn, was eclipsed by another quick one, the conviction that Howard Tonks was, after all, highly intelligent grew increasingly more difficult to suppress, and served, moreover, to throw the subject of contemporary composition into a new light - one whereby the cacophonous creations of such composers appeared not, invariably, as the work of charlatans, imbeciles, lunatics, or demons, but, more usually, as the work of dedicated, intelligent, refined men who were compelled, by the *Zeitgeist*, to turn their back on the past and produce music as different from Schumann's as his was from Bach's, and perhaps even more so, whether or not that meant progress or regress.

Yes, there could be little doubt, on the strength of this performance, that Mr Tonks was a child of his time, a composer whose music, no matter how cacophonous or seemingly anarchic, was liable to make him appear less absurd, to the ears of his contemporaries, than any number of futile attempts one might make to reverse time and compose in the style of, say, Schumann or Mendelssohn or Weber. The past was dead and what had died could not, as a rule, be resurrected. Howard Tonks was definitely a composer - arguably one with a small 'c' compared with Prokofiev, an even smaller 'c' compared with Liszt, a still smaller 'c' compared with Beethoven, a tiny 'c' compared with Mozart, and a virtually minuscule 'c' compared with Bach. Even so, he was still a composer of sorts, and that, after all, was better than nothing!

A slender shadow falling across the carpet between the coffee table and the piano suddenly distracted Keating's attention from the music and, glancing towards the French windows, he beheld one of the young women from the garden staring fixedly at the composer's back. The pale-blue bikini she was sporting belonged, he remembered, to the sunbather nearest the rose bushes, the one he had seen without her top on for an instant, and whom Mr Tonks had subsequently referred to as his daughter. It was evident that the piano had attracted her attention in passing and induced her to spy on her father. Perhaps she was unaccustomed to hearing him perform tonal music? He didn't know. But he was beginning to realize, as he sat perfectly still in the relatively inconspicuous position afforded him by the dark-blue armchair, that she was extremely attractive, and that her shapely figure possessed all the feminine attributes one could ever hope to encounter. To spy on someone so attractive who was simultaneously, and for quite unrelated reasons, spying on someone else - what felicity! Keating hardly dared breathe.

All of a sudden young Rebecca Tonks cast a glance in his direction and, noticing him for the first time, began to blush. Instinctively, Keating smiled across at her, since he didn't want to give her the wrong impression. But the young beauty, caught psychologically off-guard, immediately turned away from the windows and disappeared from view, leaving his ingratiating smile hanging embarrassingly in the lurch. He encountered, in her place, a weaker sun and, swiftly averting his gaze from it, became newly conscious of Mr Tonks' presence at the Steinway and of Schumann's music. The notes of variation five penetrated his eardrums and entered his consciousness, and so, too, in due tonal course did those of the last three variations as well. They were all so very pleasant.

Having dispatched the final bar, the 'pianist' smiled triumphantly across at him as the silence reasserted itself. He smiled his appreciation of the performance back at the 'pianist', thus eclipsing the composer. But the latter had no intention of allowing himself to be eclipsed for long, and duly informed Keating that there were aspects of his playing which an Ashkenazy, a Richter, a Lill, or a Brendel would have been severely critical of, albeit, from a composer's point of view, he hadn't done too badly all the same. Still, even if he had done far worse, even if he had been obliged to stop from time to time to correct a wrong note or had played each variation at the wrong tempo, Anthony Keating would have preferred that performance to the previous one, and he hastened to assure Mr Tonks that, so far as *he* was concerned, the playing had sounded virtually flawless. In fact, almost divine. But he was conscious, as he said this, that his appreciation hadn't been entirely confined to the music, since his opinion now embraced more experiences than the composer could possibly have suspected! So he endeavoured to modify it, and thus save face in his host's eyes, with words to the effect that, given a little more practice, the Schumann would soon be up to recital standard.

"Quite possibly," Mr Tonks agreed with some reluctance. "But I don't think that I would want to run the risk of improving on it. As I remarked earlier, I've other and more important commitments to consider." And here he turned his attention upon the small portrait of Ives which hung from the wall directly in front of him. "But to think that Schumann should have composed this great work in merely a few days, and at a time, moreover, when the refusal of old man Wieck to part with his daughter was causing him such acute unhappiness! Quite remarkable, don't you think?"

Keating blushed faintly and nodded. Then, realizing the composer's attention was still focused on the portrait of Ives, he said "Yes," and blushed some more.



There was a momentary silence in the room before a sharp click emerged from the vicinity of the coffee table. To his considerable dismay the young correspondent realized that he had forgotten to press his cassette recorder off at the commencement of the *Kriesleriana*. For the tape had run its course and come to an abrupt end.

"So you've recorded my performance!" exclaimed Mr Tonks enthusiastically, as his gaze in turn fell upon the cassette recorder. "I hadn't in the least realized."

'Neither had I' was what Keating felt like replying, but, instead, he merely smiled and said: "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all!" Mr Tonks assured him. "But it isn't something you'll be able to publish in your magazine, is it?"

"Unfortunately not," conceded Keating, remembering anew the real reason for his presence there, and realizing, with mounting dismay, that the interview had still not got properly under way. But perhaps they could now get on with it? After all, there was another side to the tape and a couple of fresh tapes in his attaché case. And he still had his notebook to hand.

"Dear me," murmured Mr Tonks, glancing down at his watch. "I do believe we've run out of time. You see, I'm expected out to dinner this evening, and I have to wash, dress, pick up a couple of friends in my car, and then drive the remaining seven or eight miles to my host's house. Since it's now half-past five, I really can't afford to lose any more valuable time."

Keating's expectations sank drastically. He hadn't anticipated any such prior engagement on Howard Tonks' part, and was wondering how he would explain to Webb when he arrived back at the offices of 'Arts Monthly', the following morning, without the interview, which had been scheduled to go into print in four day's time. "But what about our arrangement?" he objected, almost desperately. "It had been specifically arranged for today."

"Well, I'm afraid it'll have to be postponed for a few days, Mr Keating," the composer replied in a mildly apologetic tone. "Tomorrow and the following day I shall be in Birmingham at the request of the City Orchestral Society, supervising arrangements for the forthcoming performance of my Second Symphony. But if Thursday afternoon would suit you, then I can arrange to be available from two o'clock."

"Thursday afternoon?" Keating repeated on a distinctly dubious note. But that would be too late! The September edition of 'Arts Monthly' was due out the following week, on August 26th, and the final contributions were to be in by Tuesday. A Thursday appointment meant the interview would have to go into the October edition instead.... Not that that was the

end of the world. Fortunately, there were plenty of other interviews or articles Webb could put into the magazine in its place, since he hoarded them up for months on-end sometimes. All the same, it would certainly be inconvenient for him to have to change his plans at the last moment, particularly in view of the fact that he had been so determined to secure an interview with Howard Tonks in order to tie-up with the latter's sixtieth birthday on September 6th. Not surprisingly, his professional reputation wouldn't be greatly enhanced by the public or other criticisms attendant upon its October publication instead!

But why-the-devil had they left the interview so late anyway? Surely it would have been more sensible ... but then, all of a sudden, Keating recalled Webb telling him that Howard Tonks had been away when they first wanted the interview to take place, and had absolutely refused to have anything to do with the matter until he returned home. Such, apparently, was what the housekeeper, a Mrs Marchbanks, had told Webb's sub-editor, Martin Osbourne, when he had optimistically rung the composer's number at the end of July. And Mr Tonks wouldn't be back, she had informed him in a rather nervous tone-of-voice, until August 14th, which was a Friday. So, all things considered, they hadn't done too badly to get him to accept the interview, as soon as he returned home, for the following Monday. But even then the composer had shown himself oblivious to the urgency (one of Webb's favourite words) of the situation so far as 'Arts Monthly' were concerned. With the unfortunate consequence that Keating now found himself in the unenviable position of having to accept the Thursday afternoon appointment against his will and without the prior permission of Nicholas Webb, who would probably have left the office by now. Oh, if only Wilder hadn't gone down with the flu at such a critical time! Being considerably more experienced in interviewing people of eccentric disposition, he would probably have gone out into the back garden as soon as he arrived and begun to conduct proceedings in front of the rose bushes. And he certainly wouldn't have allowed himself to get dragged into listening to Howard Tonks' latest piano composition, or his performance of the Schumann piece either! No, in all probability, he would have been heading back to the office with over an hour's steady and relevant conversation in his attaché case by 4.30pm. And by the following afternoon it would have been transcribed to paper, edited, and made ready for the printers. Well, they only had themselves to blame for putting someone as inexperienced as Anthony Keating on the job! After all, it wasn't entirely his fault that things had not gone according to plan. There was also Mr Tonks to blame. And not only him but ...

Packing his cassette recorder away in the large black attaché case which he personally loathed the sight of, and loathed even more at present, the young correspondent nervously shook hands with the composer, thanked him - God knows why! - for his co-operation, cast a farewell glance through the French windows at the now-deserted garden, and, turning on his heels, briskly strode out of the room. There was muffled growling from behind a door to the left as he headed back along the hallway towards the front door, but, mercifully, no sign of its canine instigator!

Standing outside on the pavement, he stared-up at the front windows and thought he could detect the outlines of a young woman's face watching him from behind a mesh-darkened window on the first floor. But the face or apparition or whatever it was quickly drew back from its clandestine vantage-point, and he was left staring up at an empty window. He smiled to himself in ironic response to this gentle comedy and, with attaché case firmly in hand, ambled off back along Ravensthorpe Drive. Perhaps it was a good thing, after all, that the interview still had to take place?

## CHAPTER TWO

Nicholas Webb raised the pale-green china teacup to his parched lips and stoically sipped the hot black tea which he was in the habit of drinking at about 10.30 every morning. Leaning back in his comfortably-padded swivel chair, with ankles crossed on top of his desk, he appeared to be staring fixedly at his expensive new shoes when, in reality, he was thinking about the new art exhibition which was due to open at the Merlin Gallery on Friday afternoon. Why-on-earth, he wondered, couldn't it have opened a week earlier, so that he could have sent someone along to review it for the forthcoming edition of 'Arts Monthly'. As things stood, all he could hope for was a largely retrospective review in the October edition, by which time the exhibition would be in its last week! And, if rumour counted for anything, it was quite an important exhibition this time too - one whose controversial paintings were bound to attract considerable publicity. Really, it was a wonder to him that he didn't revert to editing a weekly magazine sometimes, the number of times circumstances had obliged him to ignore or forego important events in the world of contemporary art.

He sipped a little too stoically at his hot tea and burnt his tongue. "Damn it!" he gasped, returning the offending cup to its saucer and placing them on a relatively uncluttered part of his desk. Frowning, he wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand and then trained an aggrieved expression on the head of his senior sub-editor, who was bent over the manuscript of a collection of poems which some young scribbler had had the audacity to offer for publication. From where he sat, all Webb could see of his colleague's face was part of a hooked nose protruding from beneath a thatch of curly-brown hair. Alas, the nose remained - and in the nature of such things could only remain - impervious to his negative expression. But the spectacle nonetheless gave him the analogy of some kind of inverted bird's nest with a chick hanging out of it - an analogy which partly served to dispel his irritation and return him to a less-aggrieved frame of mind. A titter of laughter from the 'inverted bird's nest' prompted him to snigger back. "I thought they'd amuse you," he averred, with ironic detachment. "Nothing like a fledgling surrealist for arousing one's sense of humour, is there?"

The 'inverted bird's nest' momentarily became the smiling face of

Martin Osbourne. "Possibly not," he admitted, before turning back into Webb's analogical chimera again. And, reading aloud from the poem in his hand, he quoted three of the lines which he found particularly amusing.

"Yes, the 'persistent malaise of strawberry clits' makes the mind boggle rather, doesn't it?" commented Webb, chuckling gently. He crossed his fingers behind his head and stared meditatively at the opposite wall. "What about the 'diaphanous horizon on the legs of bloated peas'?" he asked, quoting from memory. "Can you make any sense of that?"

"Not the slightest!" came the inevitable reply from Martin Osbourne, after a short pause. "But, then again, I don't think one is supposed to make any sense of it." And, returning the manuscript to Nicholas Webb's desk, the sub-editor inquired of his superior whether he was intending to publish any of it in the forthcoming edition of their magazine.

"Certainly not!" replied Webb sternly, casting his colleague an incredulous look. "I can't afford to lose any more subscriptions. As soon as you publish one imbecile, there are a million others who imagine they've just as much entitlement to be published, too. And from there it's simply a matter of time before you end-up in the workhouse."

"The unemployment exchange these days," corrected Osbourne humorously and with a dash of anachronistic sentimentality. "Our century is really quite the reverse of the previous one. Before the rise of the proletariat, it was a punishment to be made to work. Now, on the contrary, not having any work ..."

"Yes, well, whatever the case," Webb rejoined with an air of impatience, "we can't afford to publish trash like that ..." he frowned down at the manuscript on the right-hand corner of his desk ... "and have intelligent, industrious, self-respecting citizens poisoning their minds with the 'tears of age on rumps of sin', or whatever the damn nonsense was! They'd think we're running a kindergarten here."

"We sometimes are," said Osbourne facetiously. "Only a kindergarten in which the youngest members are the only real adults," he added, more for his own benefit than Nicholas Webb's.

There was a short, sharp buzz from the internal telephone. Still frowning, Webb grabbed the receiver and heard the nervous voice of young Anthony Keating requesting to see him. "Unfortunately I'm in the middle of an important meeting at present," he lyingly pretended. "But you can do so in about half an hour. By the way, how did that interview with Mr Tonks go yesterday?"

"Er, not too badly," replied the strangled voice on the other end of the line. "In fact, that's what I wanted to see you about actually."

"Indeed?" Nicholas Webb raised his furrowed brows in feigned surprise. It was a long-standing habit of his to indulge in amateur theatricals when speaking to junior members of staff, and this habit persisted even when he was on the telephone and the person to whom he was speaking had no chance of seeing him act. But he would be accessible in thirty minutes and, with a curt "Alright?", he slammed the receiver down and returned to the 'important meeting'.

"Not too serious, I trust?" Osbourne ventured to speculate, as an expression of annoyance suddenly suffused his senior colleague's stern face.

"Probably not," the latter responded, picking up his by-now lukewarm cup of black tea and drinking what remained of it down in one thirsty gulp. "With young Keating, however, one can never take anything for granted. As long as he didn't insult Tonks and get himself thrown out of his bloody house, I needn't worry too much.... You can't imagine what a devil-of-a-job I had finding anyone to accept that assignment yesterday! What with Wilder catching a cold or something at the last moment, probably on purpose."

"Perhaps it was just as well that I happened to be out of town at the time," remarked Osbourne, who chuckled drily. "Otherwise you might have picked on me instead."

"As it happened, I was almost contemplating a return to the old days and conducting the bloody interview myself!" Webb exclaimed in a tone of voice not far short of desperation. "Fortunately for me, however, young Keating didn't have all that much on his plate, so I kind of threw him in at the deep-end. Naturally, he wasn't particularly keen on the idea. He had his misgivings about interviewing someone whom he knew next-to-nothing about and whose music, apparently, doesn't appeal to him. But I got round him in the end! After all, his is not to reason why, his is but to do or die!"

"Not quite," objected the sub-editor good-humouredly. "His is but to do or lie. The necessity of death shouldn't enter into it these days."

"Don't be too sure about that!" countered the editor, guffawing loudly. "But seriously, one has to remember that Keating is a relatively inexperienced interviewer. It takes a lot of practice to make a Neil Wilder, you know."

Returning the empty cup to its saucer, Nicholas James Webb got up from his chair and strolled over to the single window his office possessed. At forty-two he was a tall, well-built man of resolute character and, apart from the few streaks of grey which were slowly tarnishing his black hair, relatively youthful appearance. Coming from what would be considered a

well-educated background, he had served under Sir Cecil Thomas as sub-editor of the 'Literary Review' before going on, following the retirement of his knowledgeable predecessor, to become its editor. It was during his five-year spell of editorship of this prestigious monthly that another periodical, the 'Music World', ran into serious financial difficulties and was managed by a succession of editors who only succeeded in making matters worse. The last of these was Martin Osbourne, an acquaintance of Webb's from undergraduate days, who implored the latter, in conjunction with his directors, to offer capital to save the periodical from liquidation. At first, the leading lights of the 'Literary Review' would have nothing to do with the idea. But, before long, the prospect of taking over the 'Music World' altogether and amalgamating it with their own periodical began to appeal to them, since it had a more impressive building and, being in the vicinity of London's West End, was better situated. So the eventual outcome of the music magazine's financial plight was the establishment of 'Arts Monthly', for which, once art and sculpture had been added to its brief, there had been a steady demand, much to the surprise and delight of everyone concerned.

This synthesizing process had taken place a few years previously and, since then, Nicholas Webb had retained the responsibilities of editor with even greater success than before. And in tandem with Andrew Hunt, a former sub-editor with the 'Literary Review', Osbourne had proved his worth as a competent assistant. Indeed, so much so that Webb had evolved a private joke having its basis in a certain incredulity for the fact that some fool had previously denied Osbourne his rightful place in life by appointing him editor instead of keeping him sub-editor, where he evidently belonged! At the moment, however, the thirty-nine-year-old assistant in question was proving his competence in nothing more than sitting still in his chair whilst he drank the remains of a mild cup of sugared tea and, in-between whiles, puffed complacently on a slender cigar.

Standing in front of the large window that gave-on to a quite wide expanse of what he sometimes liked to think of as Bedlam Square but was in fact Bedford Square, Nicholas Webb had caught sight of a young woman passing on foot below and, with his usual enthusiasm for the enticing curvatures of seductive females, was now following her along the pavement with lascivious gaze. The graceful swaying of her flounced knee-length skirt to the gentle rhythms of her gait were almost hypnotizing him, as he followed the progress of her exquisitely-shaped calf muscles along to that point in the near distance where the physical limitations of the window frame inevitably got in the way, and one was accordingly obliged to turn one's attention back to someone within easier range. As luck would

have it, on this occasion, the only person to whom one could turn one's attention back was a bowler-hatted gentleman in purposeful stride and so, with an air of disappointment, he directed it across at the greenery in the middle of the square instead. Together with the expanse of sky the view permitted, this provided him with the next best thing to watching attractive young women passing below, and constituted, moreover, a significant part of his allegiance to the philosophy of Elementalism, to which he had been moderately converted by several of the more tragic writings of John Cowper Powys. By regularly 'plunging into', in Powys' phrase, whatever vegetation could be found amidst so much glass, steel, concrete, and other artificial materials, he believed he was gathering a sort of quasi-occult strength from it which would endow him with a psycho-physical advantage over those less enlightened than himself. The buildings of the square became, at such plunging moments, evil powers from which one sought deliverance in the trees. One's salvation from urban life was guaranteed not by any otherworldly allegiance or aspiration, but by a daily fidelity to Nature, to those benign manifestations of Nature, more specifically, which sprouted from the soil in the middle of the square.

And so it was with the consciousness of one who realizes he is taking part in some esoteric and essentially anti-existential rite that Nicholas Webb now stared across at a couple of old oak trees standing close together, and reverently acknowledged the powers of good. How strong they appeared! And how eternal when contrasted with the stylistic transience of the surrounding architecture which, despite an appearance of solidity, was destined to perish with the birth of new styles, to grow progressively more antiquated with the passing of time, until there was no longer any place for it in a rapidly changing world and it was accordingly demolished without a trace of regret! But the oak trees belonged not to time and society but to Nature and Eternity. They had existed as a species for thousands of years and, providing man didn't hack them all down in the name of some hypothetical future progress, some as yet unrealized technological millennium, they would doubtless continue to exist in the recognizable form of their species for thousands of years to come. And what applied to the oaks applied no less, in Webb's deferential estimation, to the other representatives of almighty Nature which could also be seen and plunged into from his office window, and which were just as important a source of psycho-physical strength to their humble devotee.

Yet, if the truth were known, Webb wasn't quite the humble devotee, these days, that he had once imagined himself to be. For he was obliged to admit that one could gather more strength from the larger and more



powerful forces of good than from the smaller and less powerful ones - albeit there was always the possibility, he pedantically reflected, that a sufficient number of smaller ones plunged into together might, between them, add-up to something just as psychically stimulating and invigorating as one or two of the larger ones plunged into separately, in noble isolation from the rest. Yes, that was always possible, he thought. But, for the time being, it was enough to plunge into the couple of large trees he had singled out from their lesser fellows, and to do so, moreover, with all the determination of a famished suckling bent on drawing sustenance from its mother's copious breasts. For there were so many yards between himself and the garden that one just had to pick on the largest representatives of almighty Nature if one hoped to draw anything substantially elemental from it, to establish a subtle reciprocity of psychic emanations between their deeper selves, bearing in mind that such a reciprocity also had the intervening window to contend with - an obstacle which could only weaken it and thereby reduce its therapeutic effect. Such, at any rate, was how the moderate convert to Elementalism had first reasoned, when he began to adopt the habit of exploiting the public garden in the interests of his psycho-physical well-being, several months before. True, he had brought a few of his own theories to bear on those of John Cowper Powys in the course of elemental time, and thus created a slight variation or two on the original pantheistic theme. But, by and large, the great man's elemental theology was still the cornerstone of his own theological edifice, and the great man himself still the quasi-druidic high priest, as it were, of his elemental devotions. Variations on the original theme, he mused, were virtually inevitable!

A pretty nurse passing along the pavement below suddenly distracted him from his psychic tête-à-tête with the tallest of the old oaks and brought him back to the more sentient world of human beings. A vague excitement in the loins accompanied the explicit excitement in his mind as, with freshly charged vision, he proudly followed the graceful progress of her dark-stockinged legs for a number of exciting yards. How they delighted one! And how, when he embraced a more comprehensive perspective of her person, she reminded him of that young nurse he had seduced the previous year! The same dark hair, the same slender build, the same shapely calf muscles ... and what an extraordinary creature! One woman with her nurse's uniform on, a completely different one with it off. And a virgin, to boot! At least she had been when he accosted her in the square, one summer's evening, and summarily invited her to have dinner with him. A hapless virgin, if ever there was one. Quite desperate for male company.

But completely transformed once she'd got it, completely the slave of the master she elected to make him! Yes, indeed! An attractive young nurse every once in a while wasn't at all a bad idea, providing one didn't get carried away by it. After all, he wasn't quite the democratic Don Juan, these days, that he had aspired to being in his undergraduate days, some two decades ago. The dark-stockinged legs disappeared from view at the far side of the window. He couldn't crane his neck around any farther.

"Was there anything for me this morning?" Osbourne's suave voice was heard to inquire out of the blue.

"Only a couple of things," came the reply in a high-pitched female voice.

Startled out of his sexist preoccupations at the window, Webb swiftly turned round, to encounter the slender fair-haired figure of his secretary standing in front of his desk with a pile of letters in her hands. He almost blushed with the luxury of undergraduate shame.

"You don't appear to have any room for these on your desk," she remarked, referring to the typed but unsigned letters to which the editor was obliged to put his signature in due course.

He frowned responsively and, snatching them from her, plumped them down on top of a London street-atlas. Then, catching sight of the poetry manuscript again, he smiled faintly and picked it up. There were, in all, some sixty large pages of quasi-surrealistic hogwash held together by a couple of treasury tags - hogwash which he had been expected to wade through. And not only in his capacity as editor but, more importantly in the view of its perpetrator, as 'Champion of the arts'! Yes, it was only, apparently, as something more than an editor, a mere bureaucratic cogwheel, that he could be expected to do adequate justice to the poet by publishing his contributions in the name of the almighty 'champion' he was elected to be!

Well, even if by some special ordinance he *was* such a man, he still had the right to differentiate between hogwash and poetry and to reject the former in his hard-pressed endeavour to champion the latter! If he had his own way, if he could really be the 'champion' such people seemingly required, he would do better than simply to reject the prosy hogwash. He would tear it up into tiny pieces, throw the pieces into the largest metal wastepaper bin he could lay hands on, and set fire to them with the aid of some liquid paraffin. And he would do so, moreover, without the slightest qualm or moral doubt as to the validity of his actions. He would proceed, in short, with all the fanatical conviction and unflappable self-righteousness of one who habitually burns witches at the stake! Unfortunately for the

arts, however, his powers were limited. He could only champion them to the extent of rejecting the hogwash. Admittedly, that was better than nothing, since it enabled him to avenge himself on the philistines and sham artists and/or anti-artists to some extent, though not, alas, to the extent he would have preferred! The complete destruction of the hogwash would at least have compensated him for the inconvenience of having had to wade through it all in the first place! Better, it would have encouraged him to do so. For he had now got to the point where, cognizant of the limitations imposed upon his championship, he would only partly and, as it were, superficially wade through it. The rest he would leave unread.

Turning to the fifth poem of the manuscript, his smile deepened somewhat. He quoted a line which had conspicuously come to his attention earlier and, still smiling, inquired of his secretary, who probably knew as much about poetry as a horse about philosophy, whether she could enlighten them to any extent.

"The 'persistent malaise of strawberry clits'?" Judith Pegg repeated doubtfully, an emotional upheaval instantaneously transforming her bureaucratically impassive expression into one of baffled incredulity. And, just as instantaneously, her emotions changed course and she began to laugh. "It sounds rather 'risqué' to me," she confessed, as soon as her amusement would allow her to speak again.

"Risqué?" queried the editor, casting an ironically conspiratorial glance in Osbourne's deferential direction. "Yes, I suppose one could say that, depending what sort of a mind one has!" He chuckled both secretary and sub-editor into chuckling along with him for a moment.

"I trust I needn't enlighten you any further," said Mrs Pegg from a strawberry-coloured face which momentarily accentuated her bright-blue eyes. At thirty-four, she was still quite an attractive woman, but one from whom neither man present had been able to profit in other than purely professional terms in over two years. For, apart from a night spent in the editor's bed shortly after she joined the firm, and a couple of nights spent in the sub-editor's bed shortly after the editor had joined with her, she had resolutely kept her body for her husband and given herself almost exclusively to him - the only notable interruption of her conjugal fidelity having occurred whilst a dashing correspondent by name of Glen Walters was working at the office. But he had resigned and gone abroad in search of greater temptations over six months ago, leaving her sadly to her marital probity.

"No, I don't think we'll be requiring any further enlightenment on that line," murmured a disdainfully smiling Nicholas Webb. "Though you

might be able to throw some light on the 'tears of age on rumps of sin'?" He focused a mildly inquisitorial gaze on his blond secretary, which she duly acknowledged with an appropriately ironic chuckle.

"I don't think I could possibly permit myself to comment on that!" she protested in a tone of mock reproach. "For it doesn't even *begin* to make sense to me. But it has a faintly Baudelairean ring to it, don't you think?"

"More a tinkle than a ring," Osbourne chimed-in smilingly. "But, according to our contributor, it's supposed to be closer to André Breton."

"I'm afraid I haven't read him," confessed Mrs Pegg nonchalantly. "So you'll just have to make do with Baudelaire." She smiled benignly at the sub-editor and, taking the manuscript held out to her by an almost-imploring Nicholas Webb, abruptly turned on her high-heeled feet and headed towards the door. The little cross-shaped pencil mark on the top left-hand corner of its first page indicated quite unequivocally what was expected of her. The rejection letters were never, except in rather exceptional cases, dictated on the spot. They were pre-printed in an appropriately terse, non-committal, polite format, and distributed accordingly. No unnecessary time-wasting! The execution was quick, clean, simple, and, above all, impersonal. 'Impersonality', Webb had often asserted, 'is the best mode of concealing one's identity', and, besides, it provided him with a further means of avenging himself on the philistines!

Flicking the burnt-out remains of his cigar into the swan-shaped ashtray which invariably stood, as though on-guard, to the front of Webb's mahogany desk, Martin Osbourne mumbled something about having printers' bills to attend to and, with a see-you nod of his head, followed Mrs Pegg out through the open door.

"Alone at last!" sighed Webb, as soon as the door had closed again. "Free to carry on with my work!" Saying which, he sat down and, with something approaching pleasure, proceeded to apply his signature to the pile of letters his secretary had just brought him. How many times circumstances had obliged him to put signature to paper over the years! It was a wonder to him that he hadn't availed himself of some kind of mechanical means of doing it by now; though where such means could be obtained he had never quite discovered, nor, so far as he knew, had anyone else. Nevertheless he hadn't always found it inconvenient to sign letters. There were times, indeed, when it enabled one to relax one's brain or think of other, more interesting matters. Even times when it enabled one to satisfy a kind of egotistical gluttony for advertising one's name far-and-wide, making it more important-looking with each successive batch of letters. And on the relatively rare occasions when one happened to be

writing to someone who entertained an inflated opinion of one's professional status, who took one for a famous poet or essayist or something, it wasn't altogether far removed from signing an autograph, being a sort of autograph-substitute or equivalent.

He had got to the 'W' of the eighth signature when the external phone rang. Completing the remaining letters of his surname with a flourish, he picked up the receiver and, with moderately suave intonation, advertised his name afresh. A female voice on the other end of the line responded to it with reassuring familiarity. "Oh, hello darling!" Webb ejaculated, dropping his pen. "I'd almost forgotten you were going to ring me. How did the dental appointment go, by the way?"

"Just a tiny filling on a lower-left molar, so nothing to worry about," replied the sensuous voice of Deborah Wilkes. "I got the impression that the dentist was disappointed he couldn't do anything else."

"Why, is he hard-up or something?" suggested Webb facetiously.

"Well, you know ..." She sent a burst of meaningful laughter reverberating along the line. Then, swiftly returning to her usual self, she casually inquired of him whether he was still intending to take her out to dinner that evening.

"Naturally," Webb confirmed. "Six o'clock sharp! But be ready, because I don't want to miss the beginning of the concert afterwards. You know how much I hate turning-up during the performance."

"Of course, Nicky." This reassuring statement was followed by a short pause while Deborah pondered something in her mind a moment. "Would you like me to dress in any specific clothes this evening?" she at length asked, mindful of her lover's sartorial preferences, which had lately developed into a veritable fetishistic convention between them.

"Er, I think I'll leave that decision entirely with you for once," replied Webb evasively. "As long as it's something ... you know, kind of sexy. Anyway, you should know my tastes pretty well by now."

"Oh I do, I do," his girlfriend admitted. "Who knows them better? All the same, you sometimes change your mind at the last moment, don't you?"

Nicholas Webb fidgeted uneasily in his chair at the critical change of tone in Deborah's voice. "Well, as long as you wear your new black seamless stockings, pink suspenders, and matching ..."

The office door suddenly burst open and in walked young Anthony Keating with a determined look on his serious face. The half-hour postponement of his meeting with the editor had run its trying course, and he was now itching to confess what he had to say as quickly as possible. He shut the door and headed with ominously purposeful stride towards

Webb's desk.

"Wouldn't you prefer me to wear the pale-blue undies this evening?" protested the female voice on the other end of the line. "After all, you saw the pink ones on Sunday, didn't you?"

"Er, suit yourself!" the editor curtly responded, as the intrusive presence of the junior correspondent loomed menacingly above him. "Just do what you think best." Waves of blood seemed to be rushing to his face and unbalancing his head.

"You see, the pink undies are in the wash and they're the only ones I've got in that colour at present, Nicky," his girlfriend explained. "But the pale-blues ones ..."

"Yes, alright, alright!" Webb assured her. "If that's the way it is!" He was virtually shouting.

"And they go so well with my dark-blue nylon stockings, don't they?" she purred.

"Perfectly!" he well-nigh rasped. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some urgent business to attend to this morning. Thanks for calling." He slammed the receiver down and sighed in manifest exasperation. His face was almost as dark as a beetroot. This wasn't the first time someone had intruded upon his privacy at an inopportune moment. And, to judge by the way Miss Wilkes kept pestering him, it probably wouldn't be the last! He frowned sullenly and motioned Keating to take a seat. It was unlikely that the young correspondent had overheard more than the outgoing part of the conversation but, even so, a word or two about advertising costs probably wouldn't be inappropriate ... just in case. "Now then," he added, after the advertising industry had been summarily dismissed as extortionate, "you had something appertaining to yesterday's assignment on your mind, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, I'm afraid so," admitted Keating who, with as much articulation as could be mustered, under the difficult circumstances, now proceeded to produce a slightly revised version of what had actually happened. The composer, for all his cheerful spirits, had been suffering from a sore throat which, alas, had prevented him from giving the interview. But to compensate the magazine for such inconvenience as this was bound to cause, he had played some delightful piano music - here Keating tactfully produced the Schumann tape - and had generously agreed to grant the interview at a later date. Unfortunately, circumstances compelled him to go to Birmingham for a couple of days, so, assuming he was well enough on his return, it couldn't be granted before Thursday. Which of course meant ...

"Yes, I get the picture," said a still-frowning Webb, who emitted another sigh, this time more heartfelt. "Too late for the September edition!" He shook his head and mumbled something vaguely obscene under his breath about bloody composers. "Is his throat likely to be better by Thursday?" he asked without thinking.

"Assuming we can take his word, it ought to be," replied Keating, who naturally felt somewhat uncomfortable.

"If we could postpone the printing for a week, all would be well," Webb declared. "Unfortunately, however, the printers have other clients besides us and work to a pretty tight schedule. Printing us later would mean printing someone else earlier, later, or not at all, which would almost certainly be out of the question. So we shall just have to settle for what we can get and publish the interview in the October edition instead. No doubt, we shall look pretty foolish if our chief competitors come-up with something substantial to commemorate Howard Tonks' sixtieth birthday in September. He didn't mention anything about other interviews, by any chance?"

"Not a word," Keating responded with alacrity, telling the truth for once. "Although if he was on holiday earlier this month, it would be highly unlikely that anyone else could have got to him before us, surely?"

"Don't be too sure!" retorted the experienced voice of the editor. "I've heard of people who were interviewed as long as six bloody months before their birthday or the anniversary of a particularly important professional occasion in their life. Some editors won't take any chances, you know. They gather their nuts well in advance and store them up for future use." At which point he broke into a smile for the first time since Keating had entered the office - the smile of a crafty squirrel. "But we're not entirely lacking in that respect, Anthony," he hastened to assure his young employee. "There's a short essay on the composer written by your colleague, Neil Wilder, some weeks ago which will serve as a fill-in, as well as a longish interview with the painter, Miles Coverdale. So, in a sense, your next visit to Howard Tonks' house isn't strictly necessary. But since the public expects an interview from us once a month, and since the composer agreed to grant us one, you had better go back there and gather what information you can. I take it you're still prepared to do that, in the absence of Wilder?"

Keating impulsively nodded his head. He was more than prepared; he was positively itching to go back there and peer out at the garden again!

## CHAPTER THREE

1. Who were the major musical influences of your youth?
2. When did you first begin to compose?
3. Which contemporary composers do you most admire?
4. Which, if any, contemporary composers do you dislike, and why?
5. Which of your own compositions do you particularly like, and why?
6. Do you compose for particular musicians and, if so, who?
7. Does composition come easily to you, or is it generally a struggle?
8. Can you compose in your head, or do you require the aid of a piano?
9. Do you have a specific time-of-day when you prefer to compose and, if so, when?
10. How many compositions have you thus far composed?

Anthony Keating's head was fairly bulging with these and other such questions as he pushed open Mr Tonks' front gate for the second time that week and, gently closing it behind him, stood for a moment staring up at the large detached property. Had he expected to catch someone spying on him from one of its upstairs windows? The question subliminally presented itself to his vain imagination and was hastily dismissed. There were quite enough questions in his head already, and the more he thought about them the more ridiculous and superfluous they seemed to become. If he persisted in thinking much longer he wouldn't be able to conduct an interview at all. He would answer all the damn questions himself in order not to have to drag them up again. Or, better still, he would drop them through the composer's letterbox in the form of a questionnaire, and leave him to answer them in ink. There were times, to be sure, when it was wiser to do that than to appear in person. But such a procedure wasn't, alas, the general policy of 'Arts Monthly'!

He strode up the garden path, climbed the five steps which culminated in the front entrance and, transferring his customary attaché case to his left hand, gently pressed the doorbell. There was a gruff response from Ludwig as before, but this time it came from deeper inside the house, from one of the downstairs back rooms, and was correspondingly quieter. As human steps approached the door, the dog's barking grew no louder but remained mercifully confined to the same distant level. A little of Keating's previous



apprehension returned as the lock was turned, but then, suddenly, it gave way to an extremely pleasant surprise. For there, standing right in front of him, was the composer's daughter, Rebecca!

"Mr Keating?" she smilingly ventured, before he could introduce himself.

"Why, yes!" he admitted, feeling slightly flattered to be expected and perhaps even recognized by this attractive young female. "Sorry to be a bit late, but my taxi was held-up in the traffic."

Rebecca smiled understandingly. "Actually, I should be apologizing to you," she remarked, whilst inviting him into the hall. "I take it my father told you on Monday about his trip to Birmingham?"

"He did."

"Well, he rang home this morning to say that he was being detained there an extra day and wouldn't be able to take part in your interview as arranged," said Rebecca, frowning slightly. "However, he suggested that, if it's convenient for you, you return here tomorrow at the same time. Unfortunately, a Friday afternoon appointment is now the best he can do."

Keating could scarcely believe his ears, though the sinking feeling in his guts was all too real. Really, this was the last thing he had expected! "Oh dear," he sighed. "So I've come all the way up here for nothing!"

There then ensued an uncomfortable silence, which seemed to dovetail all his existential nightmares into one tight focus.

"Would you like a tea or something?" asked Rebecca, feeling something like genuine sympathy for him. "Seeing how grey, wet, and windy it is today, you deserve some kind of refreshment for your trouble."

"Well, if it's no real inconvenience to you, I could certainly use some tea right now," he averred, his throat dry and sore.

"Splendid!" Rebecca closed the front door behind him and then led the way along the hallway into the music room at the rear of the house. "If you'd like to wait in here a moment," she murmured, as he crossed the threshold and encountered depressingly familiar surroundings, "I'll have it ready in a jiffy."

He stood his attaché case on the floor beside the coffee table and, with a sigh of despair, slumped down in the velvet-cushioned armchair which had served him on Monday afternoon. What a bloody nuisance this damn composer was proving to be! If only Mr Tonks had telephoned the offices of 'Arts Monthly' and thereby saved him the trouble of coming all the way up to Hampstead for nothing! What a stupid waste of time! And what a bore it would be, having to repeat the journey tomorrow! He frowned bitterly and swore at the composer beneath his breath. How could he return

on the Friday? He had been given another assignment in the meantime. Really, this sort of thing was more than a trifle annoying, it was downright maddening!

He glanced uneasily round the room. In front of him the large portrait of Bartók appeared even more disagreeable than the first time he had set eyes on it, as also, for similar reasons, did the smaller ones of Ives and Varèse to his right. Behind him, Stravinsky was doubtless staring down at the crown of his head with an equally disagreeable face!

Getting up from his chair, as though to escape their gazes, he ambled over to the French windows and peered out through their misty glass. It was indeed a miserable day, not raining at the moment, but still very damp and, for this time of year, extremely windy. The rain clouds of the morning had given way to an unending sheet of dark cloud which completely obliterated the sky, and in the garden the roses, dahlias, and fuchsias looked distinctly out-of-place as the prevailing wind swept over and around them, severely ruffling their habitual equanimity. One might have supposed it was the middle of November, so different was the scene from the one which had charmed his eyes a few days ago, when the sun had shone down from a flawless sky onto everything below, including the supple bodies of the two young women in eye-catching bikinis. Yet, mysteriously, one of those very same sunbathers was now fetching him a cup of tea. And, as though the clouds of discontent created by the composer's absence were somehow being dispersed by this thought, the sunshine of his gratitude for her presence suddenly pervaded his soul with restoring warmth, and he began to smile. Yes, at least there was something for which to be grateful!

A couple of minutes later the door was nudged open and Rebecca Tonks entered the room bearing the same tea-tray which her mother had brought him on Monday. "*Voilà!*" she exclaimed, placing it on the small coffee table in front of him, and, as she bent forwards to pour the tea, he acquired a brief but engaging view of her shapely breasts, compliments of the décolleté vest she was wearing. "I didn't want to drag you into the kitchen because our dog is there and he would only bark unnecessarily and make a general nuisance of himself, so I hope you don't mind drinking it here."

"Not at all," Keating hastened to assure her. "I find this a most delightful room." It wasn't exactly the truth, but he smiled gratefully as he accepted some milk from her and helped himself to the tea she had just poured him. Was there something about her that was different from when he first arrived? He could almost swear she had applied a little additional eye-shadow and sprayed or brushed her long hair. And the perfume? He couldn't recall having smelt anything so sweet whilst he stood in front of

her in the entrance hall. But perhaps the fact of the open door or the state of his nerves had prevented him from noticing? He shrugged mental shoulders and sipped his tea. "I hope you weren't offended by my curiosity the other day," he at length remarked, fearing that if he didn't say something to start a conversation she would think he didn't like her and preferred to be left alone. "After all, it's not every day that one is blessed by the sight of such an attractive bikini-clad young person peering-in through the windows." He could see plainly enough how this statement embarrassed her in its sudden frankness.

"I wasn't aware that you were looking at me to begin with," she confessed, with an involuntary giggle. "I was too intent on watching my father at the piano. But you did give me rather a surprise, I must say! I hadn't suspected there was anyone else in the room." She turned her gaze in the general direction of the French windows, as though to put herself in his position.

"Well, as long as I didn't give you a particularly unpleasant surprise I needn't be too apologetic," said Keating. "You gave me a pleasant surprise anyway," he boldly added.

With compliments like that, it wasn't long before he had seduced her into talking about herself, her friends, interests, and, above all, her father. She knelt on the carpet in front of him whilst he sipped his way through two cups of tea and nibbled at the occasional sweet biscuit, the provision of which was a tendency she had apparently inherited from her mother.

"Yes, he's quite a good pianist really," she agreed, after Keating had given her an encouraging opinion of her father's impromptu performance. "But he isn't a particularly keen one, in view of the fact that he's far too wrapped-up in his compositions to have much time or inclination to spare on purely ...