

The manuscripts had lain gathering dust in the Conservatoire Library for countless years: a suite of ancient ayres and dances; mystical songs of an antique and piquante melancholy...

The name of the composer, inscribed in an ornate, old-fashioned hand, was unfamiliar.

Rueil Serafin.

Yet when I sat down to analyse the music, it defied my skills. I could describe the harmonic progressions, the form, the architectural proportions according to the differing theories of several eminent musicologists. The closer I penetrated to the heart of the mystery, the more elusive it became. It was almost as if Serafin had opened a casement into another dimension.

Cilia and I gave the first performance of my transcriptions at court that summer... the songs suited my Cilia's glowing voice as if they had been written for her.

Prince Ilsevir summoned me to his privy chambers after the concert. His eyes were red-rimmed and when he spoke, his voice trembled with emotion. "You have unearthed a rare talent, Professor Capelian. A unique voice, speaking straight to the heart from the dusty shadows of the past." A keen amateur player, he begged me to transcribe more of Serafin's work. He opened the Royal Libraries to me. I searched and searched... but to no avail. No portraits. No documents. Not even a record of the man's decease.

I set Marles, my secretary-valet, to sift through the court annals whilst I attended on the Prince.

"I've been thinking, Capelian." The Prince looked up at me from the frets of his theorbo. "Next summer I shall be twenty-one. I want to commission an Ode to celebrate my birthday: drums, trumpets, double choir, you know the kind of thing..."

My hand stilled as I reached to turn a page of the score; my fingers trembled slightly. Such a commission would establish the fortunate composer as the most eminent in Bel'Esstar - "By rights the commission should go to old Talfiere at the Conservatoire but I don't like his style. Indigestible, dry counterpoints." He made a moue of displeasure. "So I've decided to award the commission to you."

My brain was ablaze with grandiose themes and soaring fanfares as I hurried home to my apartments. At last - the recognition I had been waiting for so long.

In Bel'Esstar if one lacks 'connections', one might as well abandon all hopes of a musical career. My slow rise from obscurity had been hampered by setbacks and disappointments; I had no illustrious patron to protect me. I watched in frustration as fellow student after student - significantly less talented than myself - rose to positions of esteem within the Prince's household, whilst I was forced to eke out some kind of a living tutoring the spoiled children of the petty nobility and laboriously transcribing the scores in the Conservatoire Library. Maybe it was thought that, as a foundling child, I must in some way make reparation for my dead mother's shame... whoever she had been...

When I emerged from the Prince's apartments next day, Marles was waiting for me.

He had copied out an obscure entry from the court annals. The first clue in a long, frustrating search:

‘Most eminent and revered Potentate,

‘In answer to your enquiry as to the health of your court musician Rueil Serafin I enclose the report from the Head Physician at the Sanatorium.

”‘Could find no physical reason to explain this devastating collapse

though much struck by the unique irises of the man’s eyes. He is a

native of the distant city of Sulien; I have read that children are

sometimes born there with these richly-variegated irises but never

before have I seen proof positive. Such children are said to possess

phenomenal musical gifts...”’

“Come, Marles.” Sweat was trickling down my forehead although it was a chilly autumn day; I tugged off my heavy court perruque, thrusting it into his hands. “The Sanatorium!”

As the fiacre jogged over the cobbles, the name of the place whispered again and again through the chambers of my brain. Sulien.

Resonance of another mystery. A mystery that intimately concerned me. To the gallants of the court, Sulien was nothing more than a faded watering place, once fashionable as a royal spa... but now a resort for the aged, the gout-ridden and the poxed...

All I had from the Foundling Hospital was a scrap of a tavern bill found tucked in my swaddling clothes. The writing on the back begged the finder to take care of the child; the name of the tavern was ‘Capelian’s Astrolabe’ after the explorer. On enquiry, the tavern-keeper swore and said that the cursed Sulien whore had died of the puerperal fever. He had employed her as a ballad singer, not realising that she was already with child, some courtier’s unwanted bastard.

She had been known under the name of Epinette Celestin. All further enquiries, I was told, had proved fruitless. The woman who may have been my mother had gone to her grave, taking her secrets with her.

I sat agitatedly tapping a staccato tattoo on the Physician’s lacquered desk. Why would he not permit me to look in the records for myself? What had he to conceal?

“I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting, Professor Capelian.” The Physician

re-appeared, a dusty ledger in his arms. “My librarian’s filing system is

somewhat eccentric.”

“You have found something?” I could not conceal the eagerness in my voice.

Even Marles’s countenance betrayed a certain uncharacteristic animation. “Very little, I’m afraid. A century ago the records were not so scrupulously kept as they are now. There are lacunae, lamentable lacunae...”

The entry was stark in its brevity: ‘Serafin raving. Transferred to Asylum in Sulien.’

“Mad?” I said in disbelief.

“Apparently so. He had twice attempted his own life.” “And the reference to the unusual colouration of his eyes - ““Take a look at this old monograph, ‘A Discourse on the Auncient Citie of Sulien and its Healing Springs’. It’s discredited now from a medical point of view, you understand, and no-one else seems to have bothered to investigate the subject.”

‘Legend relates that the citie was founded by invaders from far across the seas. The strangers called themselves ‘Lifhendil’ which approximately translates into our modern tongue as Songspinnners. The legend tells that their gift for music was so great, they could charm the birds from the trees with their singing. ‘I have heard it saide hereabouts that once in a generation or so, a child is born with Songspinner gifts. Apparently these unique throwbacks can be identified by their eyes which display multi-coloured irises of great beauty. I attempted to seek one such out, curious to see for myeself and was tolde there was a poore girl, greatly afflicted, in the Asylum. I made haste to see her, onlye to arrive to the sad news that, in her confusion and despair, she had thrown herself from the uppermost room the day before and had dashed out her brains on the cobbles below. ‘The gift is not a gift. It carries the curse of madness with it. Like the rare and graceful dragonflies which haunt the water meadows here, the Songspinnners live a short intense life, gladdening all with their unique gifts before their genius is brutally extinguished in a cruel and devastating loss of reason.’

I removed my pebble-lensed spectacles and peered tentatively at my reflection in the candle-lit mirror. My eyesight had always been weak and the years spent painstakingly transcribing others’ works had not improved its acuity. With age, the irises had faded... and so few people commented on - or even noticed - the faint veins of colour, amber, pink and violet, marbling the blue.

If I was truly of Sulien descent, was it possible that dilute Lifhendil blood ran in my veins through the Sulien courtesan who had called herself Epinette Celestin, singer?

It was well past midnight when I entered Cilia’s bedchamber. One bare shoulder gleamed, pale as a lily, in the darkened room; the air was heavy with the scent of tuberose. When I bent to kiss the smooth flesh, she turned over and groaned, still half-asleep. “Oh nooo... not tonight, Tarquin... I need my rest, I’m singing tomorrow...”

I sighed and straightened up. There had been a time when she had been only too willing, my little Cilia. Now...

Alone in my brocade-curtained bed, I stared at the close-clustering shadows.

Jaded. I was so jaded, I had even lost my appetite for Cilia. Nothing aroused me, nothing inspired me.

In the shadows, a face glimmered. Eyes stared at me, rainbow eyes, pale irises glittering like opalfire. Alien eyes. “Rueil?” My voice was a whisper, the scratch of a nib across vellum. Dizzy and sick, I staggered out of bed, tugging at the smothering curtains, throwing them wide.

There was no-one there.

Now I knew no peace. A spectre stalked me as I walked the colonnaded streets of Bel’Esstar. A shadow darkened the manuscript paper when I settled down to composition.

Serafin the Songspinner.

I stared at the scraps of material I had composed, the sketches that I intended to develop into the Birthday Ode for Prince Ilsevir, the work that would confirm my reputation as a composer. They seemed facile. Banal. Empty. Compared with Serafin's antique gems, they were dross, paste stones that would expose me as a musical fake, a charlatan. My fingers strayed over the clavier keys, searching... I stopped. I was not playing my music... but his. I could not rid my brain of it. Such simplicity. Yet such profundity. It spoke directly to the heart. Heart-wound.

I rose from the keyboard and seizing my paltry sketches, ripped them to shreds and cast them onto the fire.

"You've been looking a bit off-colour of late, Capelian. By all means go take the waters in Sulien. I'm told they taste abominable!" "Your Royal Highness is too generous." I bowed low before Prince Ilsevir.

"A rest in Sulien will afford me the quiet I need to finish the Ode." 'Finish' implied it was nearing completion; the Prince was of course unaware I had burned the most recent draft that very morning. "I'm expecting a masterwork. Something to rival Rueil Serafin's compositions - nothing less!"

I winced.

The Mayor of Sulien welcomed my little entourage with a formal ceremony at the Pump Rooms where we were obliged to partake of a cloying dessert wine and dry sponge cakes. Cilia's extravagant hat was admired by all the ladies of Sulien; her ill-humour began to lift when she realised that she was to be feted as the doyenne of fashion. I stared impatiently around the assembled company; many eyes glanced coyly back, hazel, blue, brown, grey... but nowhere could I see the dazzlingly iridescent eyes of my dream.

A dream. Maybe the Sulien Songspellers were only some eccentric fancy of the writer of the monograph. All I could see here was an ill-assorted group of faded provincials trying to ape Bel'Esstar society... and failing grotesquely.

"Are you all right, Professor?" Marles at my elbow, whispering discreetly in my ear.

Eyes. Grey eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, staring at me - "The heat from the mineral springs," I muttered, grateful for his intervention.

Eyes staring -

"Shall I call a physician, Professor?"

"Just... fatigued after the journey. Not been sleeping too well of late, Marles. A good night's rest will restore me."

I gazed down at the myriad black dots scuttling across the stave paper.

'Hail, bright roseate Day, O hail ...'

I was gripped by a kind of musical paralysis. All night I had sensed his shadow, gazing over my shoulder, his silent presence belittling my efforts. And a horrible presentiment gripped me, a voice, fusty as mouldering cerecloths, whispered that I should never complete the Ode until I had discovered his fate.

Yet why had I not gone directly to the Asylum? Was it because I feared what I might learn there? That our fates were somehow inextricably intertwined?

At the lowest ebb of the night, a sudden current of music began to flow through my sluggish brain, a shimmering, translucent quicksilver that burnt away the dross, creating intricate new links, opening up new pathways.

It was unlike anything I had ever composed. It was unlike anything I had ever heard. I seemed to be merely a channel through which this alien emanation was flowing, I seemed to have lost all will of my own - "What do you want of me, Serafin?" I cried. "Why can't you leave me in peace!"

The door creaked open.

A figure stood in the open doorway, swathed in the cold brumelight of the Sulien dawn.

I started up in terror, the loose manuscript sheets spilling onto the floor.

"You called, Professor?"

It was Marles with my morning cup of hot mocha, its bitter steam wreathing like mist about his head.

"Don't tell me, Professor. You've read that confounded monograph." The City Archivist looked wearily up at me over a mound of precariously-stacked documents.

"You mean I'm not the first - "

"To come to search for the rainbow-eyed Songspinnners of Sulien? Correct."

A wisping thread of sound, faint at first, then more insistent... "But the legend, the music - " The dingy office seemed suddenly oppressive, airless. I was having difficulty concentrating on what the Archivist was saying, even though it was of the utmost importance to me. That distant soundthread was weaving an obsessive canon in my brain. "Is a legend, Professor. A fairy tale told to amuse children." A derisive glint illuminated the pale eyes behind the pebble lenses of his pince-nez. "Tut tut, sir! A man of reason, a man of science, come chasing moonbeams!"

Fragments of melody, all jumbled together, colliding in absurd and meaningless dissonance, sucked into a whirling soundspiral... "And Rueil Serafin - " I fumbled for my kerchief, wiping the sweat from my throbbing temples. Had he noticed my distress? I could barely hear his words for the musical tumult yammering in my head. "No official records exist of a Rueil Serafin."

Marles caught me as I slipped on the narrow wooden stair. "Can't you hear it?" I clutched at his shoulders. "Tell me I'm not going crazy, Marles. Listen! Can't you hear the music?" Marles looked at me blankly. "You need to rest, Professor. You were up all night composing. We'll take a barouche back to the hostelry - " "No! We must go to the Asylum. And we must go now."

The Sulien Asylum stood on the edge of the river marsh, a rambling, ramshackle bastion, its dismal gardens rank with strangling creepers and seeding willowherb.

"Are you sure you want to continue, Professor? You look so pale - " I squinted at Marles from out of the confused cacophony. "We can't go back. We have to finish this!" I snapped, turning to gaze out of the carriage window. The sudden certainty that Rueil had ended his days here amidst these mouldering

weeds depressed me so profoundly that the gloom seemed to weigh like a boulder upon my chest. The Asylum Director looked as dishevelled as his Asylum, his stained white coat unbuttoned, his hair ruffled, ill-combed. He frowned when I mentioned the name. Then his eyes lit with a wild gleam of recognition. "Ah yes. Serafin!"

"You recognise the name?" I could not believe it.

Jagged silverblades of sound scissored the air.

"Come this way!"

Marles and I followed the glimmer of his shabby white coat down interminable gloomy corridors until he stopped and ushered us into an ill-lit chamber lined with shelves.

The sour stink of the room was overpowering; some vile stale chymical miasma that seemed to have pickled the dusty interior and yellowed the window panes.

So loud I could see the jagged vibrations fracturing the dim light.

I backed into the corridor to take in a gulp of air.

"There! A fine specimen. A unique specimen, gentlemen."

I saw the Director carefully carrying a glass jar towards us.

"What in God's name - "

It was a brain. A human brain, floating in a hideous discoloured liquid.

"I - I don't understand - "

The pungent stench of the cloudy chymical vinegar was making my stomach heave.

"The only one of its kind. Look at the right hemisphere - overdeveloped, hm? If I lift the top section so that you can see better - " "I beg you, sieur - " I tried to quell the rising surge of nausea. "You can clearly see these extraordinary neural pathways - " "You cut him up!"

"Not I, you understand. My predecessor's predecessor. He was trying to understand the underlying causes of the madness, the Accidie we call it here, that afflicts these poor wretches."

"But he dissected him - "

"Serafin was dead, Professor, he felt nothing. He died of natural causes."

"What are you saying?" I struggled to make sense of the information. "That his extraordinary musical gift was nothing but the result of some - physical defect in the brain? This - malformation?" The suffocating stink was sickening me, filling my nostrils with its pungent odour of decay.

"And he left nothing behind? No writings? No... compositions?"

The Director let out a bark of derisive laughter. "If you were to read the entries in the Register, you

would not have asked such a question. Look. ‘Serafin in an extreme manic state. He cannot abide a note of music to be sung or whistled within earshot. It sends him crazy. He claims he can hear the music in others’ minds. All the time.’” “A kind of musical telepathy?”

“A cacophony. A din. A chaos. Caused no doubt by this rapid degeneration of the neural pathways.”

“And his family?”

“We have no record of any surviving relatives. His only visitor is named in the register as one Epinette Celestin, daughter... and she never returned after her first visit.”

A single boulder on the edge of the marsh marked the communal grave-pit where Rueil Serafin lay.

So brief a flowering, his intense Elysian vision - so swiftly obscured by the rolling thunderclouds of Chaos. Had Serafin’s vision been clarified by the shadow of impending madness? Or was the borderline between genius and madness so frail, the Gods’ gift so volatile that it sent mortals mad? I stood under the windswept skies, under a wild turbulence of clouds that mirrored the confusion in my mind.

Epinette Celestin. The name my Sulien-born mother had given on her deathbed.

Was I too a distant descendent of those Lifthendil invaders from far shores, even further, maybe... their sole legacy that mishapen, overdeveloped cerebrum? Or had they transmitted some memory in the blood of those far shores, those distant skies, that alien air so different from our own?

Dear Gods, was I succumbing to the madness? What had the Director called

it? The Accidie? What did that mean? What - The grave-pit seemed to yawn

open at my feet, I was teetering on the rim of a bottomless gulf... the

ground crumbled and I found myself tumbling down, down into the dark -

I came to myself again much later. It was near to dusk.

The recital at the Concert Rooms was due to start after dinner.

“Marles?” I called muzzily. “Marles!”

Marles did not answer my call.

I looked around and saw that I was not in my rooms at the hostelry. I was in a bleak, grey chamber - no-one had come to light the lamps or the fire in the grate.

“Marles!”

“Ah! Professor Capelian.” It was the Asylum Director. “You feel a little better? Your manservant has returned to the city to postpone your recital.”

“What - what happened?”

Someone somewhere was whistling a tune. It was indistinct yet piercing. I wished they would stop.

“You fainted. Maybe you’ve been working a little too hard of late? Your pulse is somewhat irregular.”

“Mm? I’m sorry. That whistling is distracting me - “ He was staring at me. “Whistling?”

“I can’t hear myself think!” I snapped.

“Professor. Would you mind if I examined your eyes?” “My eyes!” Why not my ears - they were ringing with that confoundedly incessant whistling?

“I see you wear spectacles. Let me bring this lamp close...”

I blinked in the warm pool of light that bathed my face.

“Ah,” he said after a long while.

“Please. Please.” I grabbed hold of him by the lapels of his stained white coat. “You’ve got to make him stop.”

“Professor,” he said, gently disengaging my fingers, backing away from me, “there is no-one whistling.”

All night I lay in the darkness of the locked Asylum cell watching the splash of moonlight on the grubby walls. All night the music - his music - dinned in my brain.

I knew where it was coming from now. I had located the source.

“The legacy stops here, Serafin,” I said aloud.

I could visualise it as I lay in the dark on the hard wooden bed:

Serafin’s brain. And now it glittered like a translucent crystal, intricate patterns of tiny lights flashed along a tracery of neural pathways, the discoloured liquid in which it was suspended, now luminescent, like the moon glimpsed through clouds. It pulsed with light. It pulsed with sound. Crystalline multiple helix of interweaving soundstrands, locked into an eternal loop. ‘Break the sound-helix...’ The dustdry voice whispered in my head.

‘Disperse the fragments... let them float free...’ There was only one way out of the Asylum and back to sanity. If only they had not locked the cell door!

Maybe I dozed a little. Voices woke me, voices murmuring outside the cell.

“Never thought to see a case in my lifetime... unique opportunity for scientific study...”

“But can you be sure?”

“The servant says his master has been acting in an uncharacteristic way for some while.”

“What does that prove? Dementia takes many forms.” “I’m certain he’s one of them. He has the eyes. Faded with age... but unmistakably iridescent - “ “Trick of the light.”

“Of course the only way to be absolutely certain is to dissect the cranium...”

I ran to the cell door and began to beat against it with my fists. "Let me out! By what rights do you keep me confined?" "Professor, please do not shout, you will distress my other patients." I could hear the clank of the Director's keys as he bent to unlock the door. The instant the door creaked open, I darted through the gap and began to run.

"Come back, Professor!"

Down the dingy corridor and out into a weed-overgrown courtyard. Voices began to clamour about me, sudden nightmare glimpse of faces staring at me from behind barred windows, wan, wild faces, their mouths gaping open, distorted - Mad.

Yes, maybe I was mad too. Mad with this incessant tintinnabulation.

"Stop him for God's sake before he does someone harm!" I darted down another corridor, nose suddenly assailed by the stink of burning porridge.

The kitchens. A woman toiling over an iron pot on a greasy range. A porridge ladle left on the scarred worksurface - I grabbed it, hearing her scream as she cowered away from the escaped lunatic. "That way! He went that way!"

I flung open the door of the laboratory.

The sour stench assailed my nostrils, rank with the odour of preserved human tissue that should long ago have been buried, left to rot into the wholesome soil.

There it was.

Silver-spiralling helix, spinning out a canonic web of songthreads... In a glass jar in a row of other yellowing glass jars, it alone emanated this deafening, infuriating, maddening din.

Serafin's brain.

For a moment I hesitated.

Then I raised the ladle high and brought it smashing down upon the jar. The preserving fluid gushed out as the glass fragments splintered the air, spattering my clothes, my face with the rank-tasting fluid. The brain slithered onto the floor with a dull splash. It seemed to move under its own volition, sliding across the flagstones almost as if it were - alive.

In a frenzy, I struck again and again at the horrid thing. I had assumed it would be pliant, its decomposing tissue as soft as a lightly-boiled egg. But the preserving fluid had hardened the dead lobes, giving them the consistency of rubber, they would not break up under my blows - "Professor! Professor!"

They had hold of me by the arms, they twisted my wrists back until the ladle dropped with a clang to the floor where it lay, with the ruin of brain-tissue in the oleaginous puddles of yellow liquid. In the shocked silence, I could hear only the rasp of my own ragged breathing.

Nothing else.

I sagged in the grip of my captors, suddenly spent.

“Thank God,” I whispered. “Thank God. It has stopped.”

Blessed silence. Emptiness. Void.

“Professor Capelian.” The Director’s voice, mildly chiding, as though addressing a recalcitrant child. “Whatever can have possessed you? To ransack my laboratory, destroying all these valuable specimens?” I saw now the smashed jars, tasted the sour air; in my rage, I had dashed the whole shelf to the ground.

“I shall pay, of course.” I heard my own voice as if from a great distance, echoing in the emptiness as if we stood in the vaults of a cathedral.

“Some of these specimens were priceless. Unique.” I looked up and saw that he was regarding me in a way that made me feel distinctly uneasy.

“Was this the action of a sane man, Professor?” “I shall pay to cover all your expenses.” I felt very weary. I wanted to sleep. To sleep whilst the blessed silence still balmed my brain. “And now, please call me a fiacre. I should like to return to my lodgings.” “In the circumstances, I am afraid I must advise against that.”

I continued to stare at him, not understanding. “The good doctor here from the Sanatorium has witnessed your outburst too.”

Behind him, a bespectacled, bewigged figure was nodding his head. “We cannot permit you to leave the Asylum, Professor. Not until we are sure that you will not endanger yourself - or others.”

“But my recitals - my royal commission - “

“All will be taken care of.”

To his Highness, Prince Ilsevir:

‘Illustre,

‘I am confined here against my will. I beg you - for the love you bore your faithful servant and musician - to do all in your power to have me released from this terrible place. The Director of the Asylum insists that I am a danger to myself and to others - but the truth of the matter is he has trumped up these allegations for reasons of a morbid and sinister nature. I am certain sure that he intends to open me up, to dissect my brain for his obscure scientific researches.

‘Why have you, Illustre, asked Talfiere to complete my sketches for the

Birthday Ode? What does Talfiere know about my style, my philosophy, my

sublime inspiration? He composes by the text-book. I have long suspected

Talfiere of conspiring with the Donna Cilia to have me confined so that

the lecherous old goat can - ‘

As you can see, serene Highness, my patient is in such a state of distress that he is incapable of finishing a simple letter. He still has intermittent periods of lucidity. But when the paranoid fit is upon him he covers page after page of manuscript paper with music of such a weird and unintelligible complexity that no musician hereabouts can make sense of it.

Is it merely the chaotic rambling of a fractured mind? Or is it, as he insists, an emanation from a world far beyond our own, the music of the spheres?

Airs from another planet?

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks®Publisher 2.0, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information about ReaderWorks, please visit us on the Web at www.overdrive.com/readerworks