

The Boy from Thuringia

by David Booth

@font-face { font-family: "Times"; }p.MsoNormal, li.MsoNormal, div.MsoNormal { margin: 0in 0in 0.0001pt; font-size: 12pt; font-family: "Times New Roman"; }div.Section1 { page: Section1; }My neighbor Wanda Czerwinski is a classical guitarist. Sometimes on a sunny Sunday she sits in her backyard and plays such stunning music as to make me forget the shirt I'm ironing or the egg I'm boiling or the keys I've misplaced—or my own head, throbbing. If in these tender, electric moments I have my nose in a book, I at some point blink my eyes and, gazing at the page, realize I've long since stopped reading. The fence separating our yards is too high for me to watch her perform. This is fitting, in that she is, to my mind, the most beautiful woman in San Francisco. Apropos of profoundest beauty, I can't hold onto her. I can't claim her as mine. She's tangible like a melody is tangible, I must imagine the shapes she makes. Imagine her sitting in the sunshine with her guitar in her lap. I paint her long hair and long legs and nimble fingers in my mind in softest hues, to the accompaniment of her music.

I remember listening to Wanda one day while sitting in my kitchen polishing my shoes. Setting my shoes and rag aside, I looked at my hands, black with shoe wax polish and, losing myself in my hands and in the music, pictured not Wanda the guitarist, but myself, standing outside a church I would later call St. George's.

Placing my hands on the doors of this musical place—my St. George's—I pushed my way inside to the sound of her music growing louder. Only it wasn't her guitar anymore. It wasn't even Wanda. Someone was playing the organ. Like Wanda, he or she was hidden from my sight. Like the rooftops and chimneys beyond Wanda's house, the grand pipes were all I could see of the organ. They climbed the walls of a distant gallery. Save for the organist, the church was empty. When the moment passed the church was gone. Wanda'd stopped playing and, in what I must imagine as one fell swoop, had replaced her guitar in its case, snapped it—the

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case—shut, and disappeared into her house before I could get to the window.

Because Wanda'd been playing Bach's First Violin Sonata, a masterwork in the guitar repertoire, I should pause here. I want to stop for a second before I say what happened next. This sonata is a major piece of music for both the violin and, in transcription, the guitar. I'm pausing to make it clear that I'm not inserting a famous score as the piece a woman plays in her backyard as some romantic effect. I'm not making this up. I'm not presenting Wanda as my muse as I begin to think about maybe hunkering down to one-day possibly write—or at least contemplate the writing of—The History of Adoption. She really is this good at guitar playing. As far as I can tell, my neighbor Wanda Czerwinski is a world-class musician. I'm convinced she's affiliated with some symphony somewhere, maybe the San Francisco Symphony, even if I haven't found her bio on the Internet. She plays in her backyard as if she were performing in some ancient concert hall in Europe.

Similarly, I mentioned the mystery musician playing the organ in the imaginary church almost in passing. An organ in an empty church is not a quiet thing. Organ music is confrontational.

I suspect my neighbor, Wanda Czerwinski, of genius. The man or woman playing the organ in my imaginary St. George's is in fact a man; I'm daydreaming about Johann Sebastian Bach not as a grown man, but as the man he would become, from the perspective of what little I know about his childhood. In the name of accuracy, St. George's is a church in Eisenach, the town in the county of Thuringia, where Sebastian was born, and not one of the churches where as an adult he composed the music the world knows him for. He was baptized in St. George's.

Imagine my surprise when I learned that he was orphaned at age nine and adopted by his eldest brother. I think if I could visit any time, place, or person as a way of inciting myself to write a vast history of orphans, I would sit with Sebastian one morning in Thuringia, soon after the death of his mother, but before his father's passing. In that time span—in the time of his orphaning—Sebastian,

then an average student, was often absent from Lateinschule in Eisenach, where he received his primary education in religion and the humanities. I'd come to him in a moment when he was supposed to be at school but was instead sitting in his bedroom in his home on Fleischgasse. He of course wouldn't recognize me or know how to put me into words. But I would know him, and know what was in store for him.

I would remind him of his musical ancestry, beginning with his great-great-grandfather Viet Bach, trumpeter, lute player, violinist, who in the time of the Great Reformation fled Hungary to avoid religious persecution, and continuing with all the Bach cantors and organists and Town Musicians that Sebastian, after he'd married Magdalena and started a family of his own, would write about in his family history, *The Origin of Musical Bachs*.

I'd somehow resist telling him about his future. I'd keep it to myself that his father, unaware of changes taking place in his body, was about to remarry, and that his stepmother would be so abruptly widowed. I would not let on that his brother Christoph would soon thereafter adopt him and send him to the Lyceum in Ohrdruf, where he would continue his studies in, among other things, reading, singing, history, and natural science. I certainly would not say a word about his turbulent and itinerant career path as an adult. Or his children. Or the premature death of his first wife, and then his beloved Magdalena. And I'd just as soon not reveal to him the date and cause of his own death or the future existence of his First Violin Sonata.

Against my own better judgment, fumbling my words, I would try to ask him something he could not possibly answer. How can I put this? In my moment with nine-year-old Sebastian, I'd somehow want to ask him what he thought was going to happen. Did he have some sense of how his mother's death had set his course? Could he feel his father's life winding down? At nine, did he sense the potential of his life growing inside him? Was he in some sense already writing his sonata? Was this moment a kind of Original Scene out of which all his music would flow? A first nudge in the awaking of his latent

talent? (I ask this in part because his ability to master all aspects of playing and composition as a relatively young man is a great mystery to me. It's not like he went to a music conservatory. I can find no record of a mentor. He learned scoring by copying the scores of the composers he admired. He was a self-taught fugist. I can see no clear path....)

As I was turning over in my mind my imaginary visit with Sebastian, the boy's father, Ambrosius, stopped him in their foyer and said, "Basti, what's that noise you keep making?"

Sebastian's hair was standing on his head like a blonde cabbage untucked in a breeze. He pressed his eyes together as if wringing out excess daylight and opened them again, wide, looking up. He was the spitting image of his father in his countenance and his dress. He gave a worried look. In his ruffled shirt and waistcoat—with his stockings pulled up over his breeches and gartered just below his knees—he was dressed like a miniature adult. He had no idea what his father was talking about. He asked, "What noise?"

But he was in fact making a noise. Since his mother's death he'd gotten into the habit of grunting, if a grunt is what you'd call it. Imagine whispering the word "uh" every twenty seconds without realizing it. This is what it sounded like to Ambrosius: a gentle "uh" emanated from his boy. A pulse at regular intervals. Uh. Like the sound of someone sleeping fitfully through a bad dream.

"There it is again!" his father insisted. "You can't hear it?"

"Hear what?" asked Sebastian.

It occurred to him that his father, a disciplinarian prone to anger, had become much less direct in his demands and his instructions since the funeral. His tempering of his anger in the days, weeks, and months after the death of Elizabeth had turned that anger into a gentle insistence. This so-called noise must be his father's invention, one designed to break him of a new habit that he actually was aware of: he'd taken to talking out loud to his mother. He'd suddenly find himself asking her for advice or reenacting a conversation they'd once had. Clearly, his father had overheard

some of these conversations. Clearly, he'd devised a method to train Sebastian to keep more to himself.

"There it is again, Basti," said Ambrosius. "You're making a noise like a wounded animal. It's simply impossible that you don't hear it."

"I swear, father," said Sebastain, "I didn't say a word. I'm not talking to anyone."

Ambrosius turned from his boy and in a tone that would have been much sterner had Elizabeth been alive, he said, "You're a boy, not a wounded animal. Instead of making that dreadful noise, why don't you study catechism? If you must make a noise make it not with your nose, your throat, and your mucus. Instead, sing like Martin Luther."

Not quite sure where he was going, Sebastian went away with the intention of keeping future conversations with his mother private. When he eventually arrived in his bedroom he had all but told his mother to leave him alone. At least for the time being. A full moon shone through his window; like his mother's complexion when he imagined the things they said to each other, it seemed unusually detailed—close and clear in its luminescence.

He began sorting through his toys. In his hands he held a wooden toy hoop. Tossing the hoop in the moonlight, he made hoop shadows on his walls and on his floor and ceiling in many shapes and sizes. Waving his hand and his hoop all around, he imagined the shadows of bats and other flying things winging around his room. Then he set the hoop spinning like a coin and left it to wobble and wobble and fall over. He went to his desk and opened an iron box painted on the outside with portraits of Roman emperors and filled with inlaid tokens. He flung a toy soldier across the room, sent his comrades flying one after another. No pope would save them, just like no priest had assured his mother. Nothing he could do, not even becoming a monk, would be sufficient to merit his or anybody else's salvation. Only those who were predestined to receive divine grace would be saved. Had his mother been saved? How could he know?

Who can know that he is among the chosen? Who can know if God will adopt him?

Suddenly Ambrosius began muttering hard to God through his trumpet, filling the house on Fleischgasse with brass. The sound sounded dead to Sebastian. Despite the magic of his box and the frontiers once crossed by his toy soldiers and the hoop through which bad things had always passed into good, all life had gone out of his belongings. He turned to the moon in his window. Except there was no moon. It was daytime. It had to be daytime because what I wanted most in this moment—what I wanted more than any insight into what it felt like to live in a collapsing home—was for the other kids of Eisenach to be running noisily by, underneath his window, on their way to school. Children crying out, laughing, racing, reaching, clacking. Slow-stepping fowl bursting into flight, youngsters running full tilt. Why? Because I wanted to see Sebastian running too. I wanted to put his big future on hold.

So I sent him on his way. I had him grab his satchel and hurry downstairs. He kissed his mother. She was fine. He kissed his father. He was fine. I followed Sebastian as he barged onto the street, his heels clapping on stones, wind in his ruddy face, as he raced after his schoolmates. In the shadow of Wartburg Castle, high on a hill—in the shadow of Town hall, with its tower trumpeters; within singing distance of the school choir at the old Dominican monastery—he crossed the market plaza, stopping beside the statue of the famous dragon-slayer. I had him ask, “Wie heißt das Lied, das Sie gespielt haben?”—What is the name of the song I heard you play? “Ich stehe draußen von St. Georg”—I'm standing outside St. George's. “Ich warte in ihrem Schatten”—I'm waiting in its shadow.

The organ music I meant for Sebastian to hear at this moment wasn't organ music at all. It wasn't his own future music either. No mass. No chorale. It was Sunday afternoon and Wanda was playing her guitar again. Only this time she was playing something else from her repertoire, something more contemporary. Something from Spain or Latin America. From Andalusia or Brazil. My time with Sebastian was over. Stopped short in the shadow of St.

George's. St. George's in Eisenach. St. George's in my home, worlds away in San Francisco. I got up from my kitchen table as I'd done a thousand times before when I wanted to have a word with Wanda. I'd only spoken to her once before, before I'd conceived my History. Before I knew anything about Sebastian or her guitar or what she looked like. Drawn by the scraping sound of a trowel, I'd spotted her between the slats in our fence. She'd been gardening. Japanese boxwood, rosemary, privet blooms. When I asked what she was doing, she said something in her thick Polish accent, something about a graft, something about a taproot, something about how gardening was how she liked to spend her day off.

When and if she ever finishes playing I will go outside and reintroduce myself. I will tell her that she plays beautifully and leave it at that, when what I most want to say is that music like hers reminds me of sometimes solemn, sometimes joyous, oftentimes ardent, and always tumbling humanity.

