

## **The Manakin**

We're a happy bunch.

I am standing in the front row. My stature is best described as diminutive, and from a distance I have been told my face expresses the inquisitive, sensitive and appealing characteristics of Mr Mole. This I take as a compliment. Those who see me sit in the auditorium. They listen, their eyes wander, and they pick up those little peculiarities that often go undetected by the performers themselves. I am undeterred by that, because I am, what my husband impolitely calls, a soprano zealot. Of course, I sing like a devoted dove, and ogle the conductor through my two dark button-like eyes. These, though requiring glasses to obtain best effect, are much alive and dart about. The lenses are rather tiny and are set in thin gold frames—which I am told makes me look pinched, and probably a bit of a pedant. None of these I am. I have a generous heart. Of course, I would like to be loved. My husband, who was once a participating tenor, has become a recluse requiring from me only the services of a carer. Thus, I have become inconsiderate towards all tenors, which is the consequence of being let down, and disappointed, by one! It is my experience that the basses, often big and burly and weighted by beards, are more sensitive, cuddly maybe, and can offer a girl what she desires which, simply, is to be made to feel important.

So here I am, standing in the front row, dressed in a long, black dress, as are the rest of ladies of the Choir—but unlike the rest of the ladies I have draped over my shoulders a colourful silk scarf whose ends hang loosely down my front. I am quite close to the conductor who is emphatic that 'bling' is inappropriate in a Choir of our prestige. As yet he has made no comment about my scarf. I have seen him looking at it, and when he does I am expectant of a polite comment about how lovely it looks,

but ... As yet he has said nothing. So, boldly I stand alongside other sopranos—and about us are ranged the polyglot of altos, tenors and basses.

There I am at my happiest.

We are about to indulge the lovers of choral music in the Passion of all Passions: Bach's Saint Matthew Passion. In all its spiritual and choral beauty they will identify the story of Christ's crucifixion from the last supper, through betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and finally burial. I am familiar with this work having sung it many times, and although we are obliged to hold the score in front of us, and at a height above which we can see the conductor, there are parts of the score that I consider myself word and note perfect, and with an intimate understanding of its various shades of meaning. My exoteric gestures, like my singing, follow the conductor's baton, and I like to believe my expressions, both musical and facial, reflect the composer's true intentions. Perhaps I am just a little too eager.

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I am not over-endowed with assets. I have always treated my singing voice, which I inherited at birth, as a separate entity from the rest of my body. Over the decades successive singing teachers have finely tuned it to become my greatest asset. I am not the most beautiful of creatures, a bit spiky and there is not much of me really. From a young age I have worn glasses, which for reasons I have never fathomed seem to turn off young men who need girls of a certain style to amplify their manhood. One young man, whom I have to confess I rather liked as a teenager, abandoned me because of my glasses. But before he walked clean out of my life I said to him, cruelly:

'There are some places where we girls do not wear glasses, in bed for instance. But then young men like you will never get that far to find out!' Of course, I had to eat my words! He married quite well, and fathered a largish family.

Often do I remember that when I look at my reticent ex-tenor and wonder where I went wrong.

The members of the Choir have not arrived like gossamer—that is, they appear gentle, pure and unscarred. We may look sublime, angelic is perhaps stretching it a little, as though each of us has exacted from life the just desserts awarded to the good. But that is not so. That we are beings with beautiful voices cannot conceal the deceits and lies and misjudgements that have peppered our lives

from downright promiscuity (and there is one case that I do know about!) to the self-gratuitous demands common today. But we have shouldered disappointments, and borne success with modesty. Many of the Choir are mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, done their bit for the grand order of things, advanced ancestry up one notch or two. I only mention this because my little person has been a barren little person. I have medical evidence that it is my anchoretic tenor husband who is responsible for this. So I worry sometimes that even though I am passed childbearing age I can still gaze with a certain, and hopefully concealed, longing towards the basses whom seem to have got it right—and who may be aware I am vulnerable to passing flattery.

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Some years ago, and after I had been married for a number of years, one winter our Choir travelled to Bavaria to give concerts. This sounds rather grand, and although it only involved three performances it was all terribly exciting. These were not ‘concert hall’ engagements: they were to be performed in a church with a reputation for arranging musical events that were artistically unmeretricious, perhaps different. My husband, who had already begun his decline into solitude, did not want to travel. It was, as it happens, the first indication his active participation in the Choir was drawing to a close. So, I travelled to Garmisch-PartenKirchen with the Choir, and without him. We were lodged, in friendly pairs, in the homes of the musically addicted and church worshipping fraternity, whose welcome and generosity was as natural as their ability to carve wood, and keep their homes beautifully warm whatever the weather. The concerts were to be performed in the *Neue Kirche* on Marienplatz on three consecutive evenings. This baroque edifice had been built in the mid eighteenth century with stones from the abandoned Werdenfels Castle, now a ruin. It was in this castle that Bavarian women charged with witchcraft were tried and burnt alive. I wish I had not been told about that until after the concerts, but the Kirche curator who showed us around when we first arrived seemed rather keen to emphasise this historical fact. Thus I was driven during the concert, when not singing, to gaze at the stonework and imagine the awful scenes the stones must have witnessed. And then there was this ruggedly built man with the looks of a film star in the third row who kept staring at me.

He was about my age with a weather-worn face, and a sweep of blond hair beneath which lurked a pair of benevolent blue eyes. From where I sat, or stood, I was also aware of the woollen sweater he was wearing. It was of Scandinavian design, richly patterned and seemingly of wool, and perhaps the uniform of the *après-skier*, a sweater not only practical and warm but one that advertised ‘outdoorsman’. Once he had caught my attention I became aware his focus was primarily on me, like I imagine a sport’s scout would be on a possible protégé. I would watch his blue eyes sweep across the Choir before coming back to rest on me. What with the old castle stones, I found this unnerving. Well, the very novelty of it was unnerving! Men never followed me like that. Those of my friends who are attractive were unfazed by the familiarity of being ogled, and being the ones always selected from the pack. At the end of the concert he hastened to find me before the Choir left the Kirche, and plucked me out in full view of the pack! Well, that I confess did a lot for my ego, and made the eyes of the other ladies, most of whom I suggest thought me one of the least worthy of attention from such an obviously handsome man, pop out of their heads. Yet, though I was completely overwhelmed, star-struck in a teenage sense, I do believe I conducted myself rather well—indeed, later congratulated my little and barren and spiky self.

Imagine me leaving the *Neue Kirche* and emerging into a starry evening. There is snow covering the ground and a cascade of hundreds and thousands of twinkling winter lights with which the Germans more than generously decorate their towns. I am struck by a beautiful aura, which is a blend of nature and that blessed peace much in absence these days. Oh! The fragrant smell of fir. I am extra careful where I place my feet because to stumble might make me appear wanting, and less assured in the eyes of the stranger. I am concentrating so much on listening to him I am unaware I am being detached from the choral flock—similar to the prey of a lion being detached from a herd of zebra. I am trying to place his nationality. I never did think him German or Austrian. But I guessed Scandinavian—and I was right. Swedish. I am conscious that my friend, with whom I am sharing lodgings, is keeping an eye on me because we are expected to return together. I like her a lot. I sense she is holding back not wishing to interrupt what she detects could be a moment about which many ladies dream: that is, to be chatted up by a tall, not dark this time,

but blond, and manly handsome man. I am older than she—and not nearly so pretty. Really, I should be looking after her!

‘Quite often I go into a café in the evening for a hot chocolate and a pastry. Would you care to join me? And of course your colleagues too, if you would like. I should be honoured to accompany any number of such wonderful singers.’ The stranger smiled one of those devastating, manly smiles that only the most conceited would not be flattered by. In a rather prim, and much-too-middle-England fashion, I replied:

‘I’m sure my friend would love to. She’s the one over there.’ I pointed,

‘Ah! She is the one keeping an eye on you,’ he said, and laughed. I liked that. My husband had altogether given up on humour.

‘We are lodging together. She’s another soprano.’ And then quite bold for me, and jokey I added: ‘I could find you an alto if you prefer.’ He laughed again.

‘No, two sopranos would be lovely! I have been, how do you say in English, overwhelmed, by the performance this evening and particularly by the sopranos. You carried it, but then it is a piece intended to be carried by the sopranos.’

In the café a lady dressed in Tyrolean style and raised slightly on a platform at one end was playing an accordion. I remember it as being quite dark with decorative table lamps on each table, and the smell of cigar smoke so profoundly German, and socially therapeutic. It was an intimate café, yet with a wholesomely active bustle. The stranger was well acquainted there, and we were shown, preferentially, to a table that although set to one side was by no means out of the orbit of the swirl of activity. Not being well-travelled I sensed it to be typically continental, but for sure it was all cosy and shadowy warm. So there we were, the three of us, tucked in as it were—two sopranos in their long black dresses, and the one stranger suitably dressed for an outdoor pursuit. So courteous and correct was the stranger, and so assured and protective of us, that one might have believed him to be practised in amorous adventures with ladies he did not know. My friend was the first to relay this fear. When he was sorting out the order with the waitress she whispered in my ear:

‘He could be dangerous.’ Then she gave me a big wink, and added mischievously: ‘But it could be fun.’ On his recommendation he had ordered three hot chocolates, and three *Mohrenkopf*, which he assured us were the best chocolate cream buns to be had in the whole of Garmisch-PartenKirchen. Without doubt he

was very knowledgeable about choral music. He gave no indication he sought in either of us attractive possibilities for himself, or we were worthy of any future commitment. He chatted easily about life as a ski instructor, his home in Sweden, his love of the Alps and the genuine hospitality of the Bavarian people. And of course he chatted about music, particularly choral music. Just before we left the café he said to me:

‘Your voice reached out to me. It reached over the score, it reached passed the conductor ... it reached me in the auditorium. Your voice has that rare faculty to stir, to strike a chord of exquisite charm in the ears of the purist. You gave me great pleasure.’

I protested, and the matter rested there.

‘Allow me to escort you ladies safely to your lodgings.’

We declined. We thanked him for his hospitality and the amiable evening he had given us. And that, I thought, was that.

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The next night he came again to the concert—although the programme was unchanged. He had a different seat, further back. He was wearing the same woollen sweater. As the Choir assembled he caught my eye, and smiled. I acknowledged his smile, politely. During the concert I could tell he had knowledge of all parts of the score by the anticipation in his eyes and the slightest inclinations of his head. He knew when to expect a change in the tone, texture and rhythm: and on which notes the four parts entered or exited. He gave me considerable attention too, which may have flattered the caprice of a libertine, but I found distracting, and unwelcome. Nevertheless, I was disappointed he was not outside the *Neue Kirche* when the Choir left at the end of the performance. A bit piqued, maybe. But then, nice though the visit to the café had been the night before, I felt a little tired, and jaded by unaccustomed travel, and would have found it rude to have turned down a similar invitation.

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For our first two performances we had sung to a near capacity audience. The third, and last, was different. Word had got abroad that we were good and well-worth the ticket price, and the performance was a sell-out. As soon as the Choir had settled

down and were waiting for our conductor to make his entrance I found myself searching the auditorium for the stranger in the woollen sweater. To begin with I did not see him, but he was there—camouflaged in a suit and tie! He was at the back, and must have got hold of one of the few remaining tickets. He had a bloom in his buttonhole, which I could not clearly distinguish from where I sat, but it could have been a red carnation. I mentioned this to my friend during the break.

‘A red carnation! He is telling you he admires you! And if he is waiting after the performance ... you could be the lucky one!’ she giggled mischievously.

‘Why me? You are so much more desirable in the eyes of men than I. Look at you! You are so pretty.’

‘It’s your voice he loves ... and your body is not at all bad!’

We laughed at that.

Then she became serious.

‘Do be careful, dear. I do not expect he will want to listen to your singing while he takes “a light refreshment during the interval”.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’

Before she could answer we were called back for the second half.

When we finished we got a standing ovation, and our conductor the traditional bouquet. I was determined to find out what my friend meant by “a light refreshment during the interval” so when we were collecting our coats ready to leave I asked her. She gave me the knowing, experienced smile of the well-informed.

‘Some men have perfectly respectable wives and perfectly respectable mistresses. Between each they are known to dally and find temporary amusement—some light refreshment during the interval that will not cause them later embarrassment.’

‘You mean ...’

‘Yes, that is what I do mean.’

‘Then don’t leave me.’

‘There is no reason why you cannot enjoy yourself without being ensnared, unless of course you want to be ensnared! And he is rather gorgeous.’

‘Don’t leave me alone with him,’ I pleaded.

‘I’m awfully bad at playing gooseberry.’

‘And I’m awfully bad with men. I do not have the confidence. I wouldn’t be able to handle anything like that.’

‘He admires you. That is safety enough.’

He was waiting, and seeing us two together he gathered us in.

‘That was another beautiful rendition of the work. I congratulate you. More than that allow me to take both of you songbirds to dine somewhere special, well different. You are both much too enchanting to slip away and be lost in the night.’

My friend, who was one of those women to whom men are naturally drawn, was quite at ease facing up to invitations wanted or unwanted. She smiled graciously, at the stranger. She seemed the epitome of a paramour—elegant and confident as she declined, politely.

‘I feel you have been kind to attend all our concerts, and been so generous with your praise that I should accept your invitation out of a sincere feeling of gratitude. But you will have to excuse me this once. If you should ever come to England, and the invitation still stands, then here and now I give my acceptance. I cannot speak for my dear friend.’ She held out her hand to me, grasped mine, indulged me in confidence, looked closely at me, and in her eyes I read: You are safe with him.

Then she said to me, pointedly, and easily within the stranger’s hearing:

‘I’ll take your music, and wait up for you.’

And with that, somehow the stranger whisked me off. Took my arm and just whisked me off. I was relieved he was not taking me a car ride away. We walked, and I kept thinking I must remember the way, in case I have to walk back alone. His behaviour towards me was impeccable, the perfect gentleman, the perfect Swedish gentleman. Even before we reached the restaurant he had made me feel important: and by analogy, my husband miserably inadequate. It was wicked of me, I know, but I had to smile to myself at the thought of what my husband would say if he could see me walking gaily along beside this rather handsome man, and with one of his arms through mine! Then I wondered if he would really mind, just so long as I returned to continue the services of his carer. Then the sceptre of “light refreshments” clouded my thoughts. I really could not handle that! I am firmly set in the unwanted zone, not like my friend. I have been pushed there through circumstance, and an established tenet of mine, probably in defence of an inferiority complex, is: I don’t do sex. One or



two of my treble colleagues hint about its joys in a rather flippant manner, just for a bit of a giggle. In that respect I'm a sad, barren little creature. The best I can hope for, if I'm entirely honest, is that my ever so boring husband gets his due worth of satisfaction. To be honest, I really would not know what to do with a stranger! So yes, I hope my friend is right: that there will be no suggestion of light refreshments during the interval.

The restaurant was different. It had a small outdoor skating rink common in the Alpine region, which was subtly lit by lanterns, and lightly sprinkled with repetitive Viennese waltzes from a record player. The stranger was known here, too. We were shown to a table that had a view of the skaters through the leaded window. I kept thinking: Can my singing really entitle me to all this? I had absolutely nothing more to offer this very worldly gentleman—I had never even put on a pair of skis! Ah, but I had put on a pair of skates—and had had a few lessons when I was a teenager. I just knew before the evening was over he was going to ask me to skate with him. And me in my long, black concert dress! I could see couples on the ice, arms around each others' waists, gliding around, comfortably at ease, starry-eyed and elevated by the music of the waltz. At that moment I so wanted to be back in my lodgings and curled up in bed on my own. Simply, I was drowning: I was out of my depth. Then I was passed the menu: and not a word of it in English!

The stranger came immediately to my rescue.

'I could recommend the *fleischkuchen*. It's a meat pancake, which can be complimented by a green salad. You may find the batter used to make the pancake similar to your Yorkshire pudding. A little of *home-from-home* ... as you say in English.' He gave me a wide smile. I said that sounded very nice, and asked him how someone from Sweden could know about Yorkshire pudding?

'We do travel, that is why we are here.'

I thought: You ... maybe, but why me?

Then, for no reason, I came emboldened.

'You must miss your family in Sweden. Surely, you could have been a ski instructor there. I mean, Bavaria is quite a long way to travel for snow when I have always imagined there is plenty in Sweden.'

'One needs to experience all kinds of snow in all kinds of conditions on all kinds of slopes. Skiing is an international sport and one has to be known

internationally and be seen internationally, to become recognised as a sort-after instructor. But yes, I miss my wife. But the flight back is not too long, if I have to return in an emergency. And I expect you miss your husband, even though you will not be away from him for long.'

Frankly, I was not missing him! But that was not an impression I wanted to convey to the stranger.

'He used to be a tenor in the Choir, but he lost the enthusiasm for it,' was my pathetic response. I could tell from the stranger's expression that he thought it pathetic too.

'Well, I am glad you have not lost your enthusiasm to be a soprano! That would be a sad loss. When I first heard you, that first night, I sensed you may have started as a soubrette and matured, as many do, into a light lyric soprano. But what really captivated me was the way you retained that special youthful quality in your voice, and how you were able to match it perfectly to the score ... as interpreted by your conductor. That is rare, you know. Lucia Popp, the fine Slovak soprano, perfected it. There is no soloist to rival, in my opinion, her Queen of the Night in The Magic Flute. You have the quality, the self-same quality ... to indulge the auditorium in a flight of fancy, and deliver a memorable experience. So I came to all three concerts, and enjoyed picking out, isolating your voice from the others ... and to imagine you as Queen of the Night! And now here we are, and I am honoured.'

Queen of the Night! Was I being oversensitive?

I was about to say something, but he interrupted,

'Do not say I am exaggerating. Just honour me with a waltz on the ice.'

Dear, dear! What does a girl do? What should a girl do?

Well, I put on a brave face, and accepted. He took my arm again, and guided me to where the skates were fitted. I found the changing of our footwear together a collaborative, almost a domestic episode, and a natural and consistent act between mutual friends. Although I was wearing my long dress I imagined the stranger eyeing-up my ankles, which I have to say are quite slender because overall I am not much bigger than a children's size.

'You have very tiny feet,' he commented when he selected my skates, and again when he checked that I had laced them properly. I thought: Definitely the touch of a winter sport's instructor overseeing the safety of those for whom he is

responsible. I was pleasantly surprised how quickly I got the hang of skating after so many years had passed since I had last worn skates. Of course, with the supporting arm of an international ski instructor around ones waist does give you a lot of confidence. Before long I was beginning to feel the exhilaration of gliding effortlessly in the cool night air, beneath the strains of Viennese waltzes, beneath the lanterns. My muscles that had been taut through anxiety began to relax, and into the back of my mind went the fears associated with light refreshments. Like others who were skating we became just another couple, not saying much, but just going around with the music, mesmerised. We were differently dressed, of course, from other couples. No other ladies were wearing long, black dresses; and no other men were dressed in suits and ties!

After a while he pulled me gently into the side, looked down at me from what seemed a great height as I am rather small, and took from his pocket the colourful silk scarf that I am wearing tonight.

‘Wear this around your neck. It will keep you warm,’ he said, and before I could say I was really quite warm he proceeded to place the scarf around my neck.

We began to skate again.

Then the stranger became agitated. While we completed a circuit his arm about my waist began to loosen its steadying hold; and I sensed the loss of tranquillity and the effortless forward motion. Noticeable, too, was the rupture of the rhythm, both physical and sensual, that we had developed as a skating couple. It was all rather sudden.

Two uniformed policemen stood on one side of the rink while two other men dressed in sinister-looking clothes, with hats pulled menacingly down over their eyes, moved down the other side. Then, nodding in the direction of the two uniformed policemen, the stranger said to me in a manner I interpreted as a joke:

‘They know I cannot run because I am wearing skates.’

We did continue to skate, but whatever fine-tuning my senses had experienced—faded. The eyes of the police followed us.

‘I hope you have enjoyed our short acquaintance as much as I have. But now there is a matter I am obliged to attend to, and which will not wait ... unfortunately.’

The police were discreet. They hovered as the stranger took off his skates and put on his shoes, but as soon as this had been completed they came forward

determinedly, seized his arms and marched him off—closely followed by the two men in plain clothes.

‘Your scarf,’ I called after him, holding it aloft.

I know he heard: his head bobbed.

Our conductor must have been told about my adventure because I catch him looking at me with that expression—that carefully camouflaged snigger, which reads: You of all my sopranos! I would have never thought it!

Of course, I’m flattered to have at long last gathered a reputation and am no longer assigned by my soprano colleagues to a place on the shelf. And that is why I believe our conductor looks at my colourful silk scarf, and indulges me.

The first chord of Bach’s Saint Matthew Passion is about to be struck.

It is an E minor.

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