

Bach's Last Composition: A Fantasy

A Short Story

by

Lenny Cavallaro

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Table of Contents

A Message from the Author

Other Books by Lenny Cavallaro

Musical Compositions by Lenny Cavallaro

Preface

Chapter One: A Memorable Recital

Chapter Two: Wilhelm Geyersbach's Testament (28 July 1790)

Chapter Three: Sold?

Bonus: An Excerpt from *Paganini Agitato*

A Message from the Author

Lenny Cavallaro, a concert pianist and composer, has written about music and musicians for over forty years. One of his most recent efforts involves the revision and addition of new scenes to *Agitato*, an historical novel by Ann Abelson, based on the life of Niccolò Paganini. That work will be released by Fomite Press—<https://fomitepress.com/>—in August 2023.

The author also invites people to sign up for his email list, in order to be among the first to know when other literary works have been released. He can be reached at: <https://www.lennycavallaro.com/contact>

Other Books by Lenny Cavallaro

The Ibbur's Tale

The Chess Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes

Two Oedipal Plays: (Hamlet, Revisited and a conjectural "completion" of Sophocles' Odysseus Acanthoplex)

Trojan Dialogues: The Memoirs of Diomedes

The Greatest Champion Who Never Was

Superstition and Sabotage: Viktor Korchnoi's Quest for Immortality

The Passion of Elena Bianchi – a series:

Cursed Love: (Free prequel; story of how Beethoven encountered the curse; UBL:
<https://books2read.com/u/mg7z2K>)

If Music Be the Food of Love (Volume One)

Paradise Regained and Lost Again (Volume Two,

Love and Pain in Four Voices (Volume Three)

Passion's Curse: (Volume Four)

Musical Compositions by Lenny Cavallaro

All compositions for woodwinds are available at Forton Music:
<https://fortonmusic.co.uk/music-composer/lenny-cavallaro/>

The compositions for violin and piano are available at Broadbent and Dunn:
<https://broadbent-dunn.com/biographies/cavallaro-lenny/>

Cavallaro's reconstruction of Josef Haydn's *Clavier Concertino in C Major* (Hob. XVIII: 5) is available at Ayotte Music: <https://www.ayottemusic.com/products/4166-haydn-clavier-concertino-in-c-major-hob-xviii-5-arr-cavallaro/>

The conjectural "Completion" of Bach's *The Art of the Fugue* is available as a free download: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LwQiM7IgXCrHdgcyXQ6HULnR4LqzwvDG/view>

PREFACE

The following historical anecdote is attributed to a musicologist named Weissgerber, whose 1904 essay, "Johann Sebastian Bach in Arnstadt," appears in *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, edited by Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (Norton, 1966):

* * *

On Aug 5, 1705, Bach appeared before the Consistory to complain about the student, Geyersbach. The latter—as Bach was crossing the market place on his way home from the Castle with his cousin Barbara Catharina, daughter of Johann Christoph Bach, Court and Town Musician in Arnstadt—had been sitting on the "Long Stone" with five other students, and had suddenly set upon him with a stick, calling him to account for having made abusive remarks about him.

Bach had answered that he had not made abusive remarks about him, and no one could prove that he had, seeing that he had been going his way perfectly quietly. But Geyersbach had replied that if Bach had not abused him, he had once abused his bassoon, and whoever abused his things abused him; that Bach was a dirty dog (Hundsfott); and with this he had at once struck out at him. Bach, for his part, had thereupon drawn his sword, whereupon Geyersbach had fallen into his arms, and the two of them had tumbled about until the other students had thrown themselves between them.

On Aug 29, at a further hearing, it developed that Bach had indeed called Geyersbach a nanny-goat bassoonist (Zippelfagottist), and it was indicated to him that he might well have refrained from this—especially as he already had the reputation of not getting along with the students and of claiming that he was engaged only for the simple chorale music, and not for concerted pieces, which was wrong, for he must help out in all music-making.

Bach answered that he would not refuse if only there were a Director musices, whereupon he was told that man must live among imperfecta, that he must get along with the students, and that they must not make each other's lives miserable.

* * *

We know little more about the incident. Geyersbach was apparently 23, while Bach was but 20, younger than a number of the students. Moreover, he had already graduated from a more prestigious Latin school. Thus, resentments were bound to surface.

There are some other, more elaborate accounts of this same story, though all reach a similar conclusion. Bach and Geyersbach may have wrestled on the ground exchanging blows; in his musical invective Bach may have compared the sound of the bassoon to that of passed gas; etc. However, nothing substantive is written thereafter. Bach would go on to immortal heights, while Geyersbach became a lost footnote in music history.

Obviously, the narrative that follows is fictitious, although not entirely so. Bach's last student was indeed Johann Gottfried Mützel, who moved into the Bach household on May 4, 1750.

Bach's health had deteriorated after the two eye surgeries that spring, yet he appears to have recovered somewhat—at least enough to teach and dictate music. Moreover, Mützel would actually serve for nine weeks as interim replacement for the deceased *Kantor* before proceeding to a reasonably successful career in other capacities, most notably as a keyboard performer.

That the original Geyersbach might have had a son in 1826 is not altogether implausible. He would have been no more than 44; Johann Christian Bach was born when Sebastian was 50. However, there is no record of any “Wilhelm Geyersbach,” and certainly no indication such an individual ever played in the orchestra of Frederick II (aka “Frederick the Great”).

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Sebastian's second son, served as chamber musician in Frederick II's court. As for that sovereign, we know he was an avid musician, and Sebastian Bach was invited to visit him in 1747. The outcome of that audience was one of the composer's greatest works, *The Musical Offering*.

The rest of the story is, of course, pure fantasy. It is in fact highly implausible that such a theft ever occurred. Either Bach was unable to finish *The Art of the Fugue*, or perhaps he deliberately chose not to complete it. Had he written even the sketches for the final page, that outline would almost surely never have separated from the remainder! However, we shall never know, and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we must conclude that *The Art of the Fugue* is indeed an unfinished masterpiece. — Lenny Cavallaro

Chapter One: A Memorable Recital

In this country, pianists, are currently valued at little more than “a dime a dozen.” Each year, graduate schools turn out their “finished products”; each year any number win various national and even international competitions; each year many young musicians enjoy their triumphant debuts in major recital halls...and each year ever so many find themselves consigned to anonymity.

My own story is no different. At one time, I dreamed of appearances with major orchestras—the Boston Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago, and other top ensembles. My fantasies included laurels at the International Tchaikovsky Competition, the Van Cliburn, and the Chopin, and my “fall back” was a tenured chair at Eastman, Juilliard, Peabody, or Yale.

Reality proved an ugly slap in the face. My prizes in minor competitions got me the occasional date with so-called “community” orchestras, along with a few solo recitals in church basements, local libraries, and other such venues, all for fees that barely covered expenses. My graduate degrees left me impoverished, and while arguably qualified to teach at the college level, I seemed better qualified to become a Ward of the State. By age 35, the Promised Land for me (as for so many others) took the form of the introductory courses I taught at a nearby community college (I called these “music depreciation”) and a handful of students I picked up courtesy of a neighborhood “school of music” that exploited all of us and paid us poorly.

Nevertheless, there were some bright spots amidst the bleak landscape. Through a friend I got onto the roster of Emily Kleinberg, a young artists’ representative who had courageously branched off and offered concerts in the home—something akin to the great series that flourished in the aristocratic salons of the 19th century. She was audacious enough to dub her company “One Percent Concerts,” and indeed, many of her clients fell into that demographic.

I was asked to do a recital on March 21st (the birthday of Johann Sebastian Bach) at the home of Lisa and Maurice Hamilton (pseudonyms, I assure you!) in New Canaan, Connecticut. The fee was a cold \$2,000, less my travel expenses (mileage; I would drive, of course) and my agent’s commission, and my host didn’t care what I performed, as long as the program began and concluded with something “significant” by Bach. Normally I don’t keep terribly much of that giant’s work under my fingers, but I had actually been wrestling with his unfinished masterpiece, *The Art of the Fugue*. I decided to open the program with the first contrapunctus followed by the ninth, and conclude with the last. The rest of the recital included my favorite warhorses—Beethoven’s *Sonata in F Minor*, Op. 2, #1, the 4th *Ballade* of Chopin in the same key, some short pieces of Mendelssohn, and Schubert’s “*Wanderer*.”

The driveway was a long one; the mansion, scarcely visible from the gate. I pulled up quite early to try out the piano, which would be tuned as soon as I had finished with it and well before the guests arrived. Maurice owned a Bösendorfer 214 (the seven-foot model), certainly an unusual piece for one’s home, but Maurice also had his own concert hall, which he claimed could seat 180-

plus. “Moreover,” he explained, “they used to say that Steinway is to Bösendorfer as Cadillac is to Rolls Royce—and I wouldn’t be caught dead in a mere Caddy!” In fairness, the instrument really *was* magnificent. Although it may have been just a little too powerful for the room and too strong for Bach, I truly enjoyed the sound and touch.

In fact, I felt relatively comfortable in the multi-million-dollar mansion, even though I realized I was little more than “entertainment,” and for one night only. One of the staff discreetly “hid” my 13-year-old Chevy behind one of the smaller cottages elsewhere on the grounds, two hundred yards away from the main building. After all, it would stick out like a sore thumb amidst all the late-model Mercedes, Porsches, Rolls Royces, and other luxury vehicles.

I was delighted to socialize at the dinner party, graciously kissing the hands of Lisa and other women who wore more in jewelry than I would ever be worth. Many of the guests were surprisingly knowledgeable about music and asked interesting questions, which I did my best to answer. After the recital, two promised they would contact Emily about playing in their homes, and Maurice assured me that he wanted me back the following year. All told, I was very gratified with the results; the concert had clearly gone well.

At length the evening drew to a close, and the audience withdrew. When the last guest and the kitchen staff had departed, and his wife and sister had retired for the evening, Maurice asked me to join him in his library. Although I had a long ride ahead of me, I was only too happy to oblige. Moreover, I could tell that he wanted to talk about the Bach.

“Of course, I really believe *Die Kunst der Fuge* was intended for organ, since I don’t think the piano can sustain the long notes adequately. Still, I think you did a commendable job, Bill. But tell me, why did the music simply come to a halt like that, so abruptly?”

I was a little taken aback by the question. Surely my host knew that Bach had died before he could complete the work. “Well,” I began tentatively, “Bach simply stopped writing at measure 239. The old story that he died at that point has been discredited, but he either abandoned it, forgot about it, or simply put it on a back burner.”

Maurice smiled. “You leave out at least one possibility, don’t you?”

I hesitated, reluctant to disagree with him, but absolutely unsure what he was trying to convey. “I am afraid you’re a step ahead of me, Sir. I cannot think of any other explanation.”

Maurice stood up and began walking toward a staircase, beckoning me silently to follow. We descended and emerged in a small room with some rather shabby artwork on the walls. He removed one painting, which he handed to me, and uncovered a keypad. Standing in front of this (and thereby obscuring my view), he punched in a code. He then relieved me of the painting, placed it back on the wall, and walked through a doorway into a second room. Here he removed a large clock from the wall, and while I held that item, he punched another code into the keypad he had exposed. We proceeded thence to a third room, where he pushed a rather cheap and empty bookcase aside and once again entered a password. Then he looked up at me.

“Finally, we are ready. I have exactly two more questions for you. First, can you read German, *Herr Apfelbaum*?”

“*Jawohl!* In fact, I studied at the *Hochschule für Musik* in Munich for a semester.”

“Good. This is handwritten and rather ancient, but it shouldn’t be much more difficult than something like our *Declaration of Independence*. Next—”

He paused, and looked me straight in the eyes. “I want you to promise that you will not breathe a word about what you are about to see to anyone for three years.”

Curiosity, which once caught a feline, had me ensnared by this point. What could he have that required my secrecy? Could it be something of Bach’s? I didn’t waste much time assuring him that my lips were sealed. I am also bright enough to know that people like that have a way of striking back at anyone who crosses them.

Maurice walked to the rear of the room, where he opened a door. “Look!” he commanded.

I peered into the dark chamber. It was an empty closet. The walls along the side seemed to be of stone, and I saw nothing more than a dowel with a few metal coat hangers on it. The rear wall appeared metallic. “But there is nothing here,” I cried.

Brushing me aside, Maurice went to the back wall. Then, with a sudden gesture, he pushed it up. Behind it was a smaller chamber, which instantly lit up to display a large vault. This he carefully opened and withdrew something therefrom.

As he emerged, I could see he had a small box of some sort—obviously of a hard wood and perhaps ten inches by fifteen in dimension, and maybe five inches in height. He led me back, all the way to the staircase, which we ascended. We entered the library without a word, and he motioned me to sit at a desk.

“What you are about to see will solve the riddle. It is the testimony of an 18th century musician of whom you have never heard, Wilhelm Geyersbach.”

I smiled. “Actually, I am indeed familiar with that name. He was the bassoonist who—”

Maurice cut me short. “No, Wilhelm was the son of that same fellow with whom Sebastian Bach came to blows in 1705. Moreover, that’s not where the story ends.”

He opened the box and withdrew a set of carefully preserved pages of parchment. Each was protected by a clear plastic cover so strong that it would have required some exertion to bend it. “They’re pretty secure, but please try to handle each page carefully,” Maurice advised, turning on another lamp for extra illumination.

I pounced on the first page, anxious to devour the treasure in front of me. At a glance I could tell that what I held in my hands was actually rather poorly written and littered with numerous misspellings and grammatical errors. However...

I have not seen the original text in over three years, but I took copious notes after I departed that evening. I present below a reasonably close English rendition of the Geyersbach manuscript. I implore the reader to remember that however much I may have improved the use of language, I have conveyed the content as exactly as I can remember it. Moreover, I wince painfully at the vindictive bile that spewed from that author’s pen, including his low opinion of Bach’s music. That said, here is what I read:

Chapter Two: Wilhelm Geysersbach's Testament (28 July 1790)

If the *Bible* is correct—if the Children of Israel indeed spent forty years in the desert—I believe it is time to pen this confession. It is with great pride that I, Wilhelm Geysersbach, hereby acknowledge a petty theft, committed not for personal gain, but rather to avenge a far larger theft. Indeed, I took a one-page sketch from a dying musician's incomplete manuscript—a monstrous work of absolutely no musical value whatsoever. Yet that same pretentious composer had stolen my father's good name and destroyed his love of music.

So why today? Why am I writing this story now, after all these years? A curious coincidence recently arose. A good friend died some days ago, and left behind a few volumes of music. All had been given away by the time I arrived, save one. "It's a bizarre and unfinished work by some old *Kantor* who once taught in Leipzig," his widow explained. "My husband told me it was written in the old style, and is not very good at that. He actually played some of it for me on the *fortepiano*, but it's certainly not to my taste. Anyway, I'd like you to take it. Otto was very fond of you, and I know he would have wanted to leave you something."

I'm sure I paled as I looked at the title page. The composer's name stared me right in the face: Johann Sebastian Bach. However, once I saw what it was, I could not suppress a smile. I thanked the widow and graciously accepted the music. I shall place this testament and two other pages within the volume and keep it with me until the day of my death.

But where shall I begin? I was the last of nine children sired by my father, of whom six died before I was born and one shortly thereafter. Only my oldest sister and I survived, and we lost touch with her after she eloped with an Austrian trader when I was four. Presumably I have nieces and nephews somewhere, but I have no way to know.

From my father I inherited my musical talent. He was a bassoonist, although by the time I was born he had long ago stopped playing in ensembles. The story he shared with me is that he had studied with a *Professor* and hoped to become a court musician. Unfortunately, when he was 23, he had agreed to play in the orchestra of the church school in Arnstadt. There, he was viciously insulted by the self-proclaimed "leader," who was, in reality, little more than an organist.

Now, to some extent, the school itself was somewhat to blame. Had this been a true *Professor* of some learning, a graduate from a university, and someone perhaps a little older and more mature, the incident would never have arisen. Instead, they gave the post to a mere boy with delusions of grandeur quite inappropriate for one of his tender years. He was, in fact, all of 20, and three years younger than my father!

The story I heard varied from time to time, depending on how much *Schnapps* my father had consumed. What is certain, however, is that *Herr* Bach took to insulting my father, whom he called a "nanny-goat bassoonist" on one occasion; on another, he said that the tones coming out of the instrument sounded more like farts than music, and he hurled other invective as well.

At length my father had had enough, and he accosted *Herr* Bach in order to express his resentment. It was fortunate that he had quick reflexes, because his antagonist drew his sword and would doubtless have skewered an unarmed victim had he not been wrestled to the ground. The combatants were separated before either could suffer any injury, but the school ultimately did nothing about the situation, leaving my father the butt of jokes for the rest of his life.

The poor man left Arnstadt in disgrace, but his reputation as a “nanny-goat bassoonist” whose instrument “farted” accompanied him. He soon forgot his dreams about becoming a court musician; he was afraid that even the municipal bands of the tiniest towns in Germany had heard about him, so he stopped playing (except at home). However, he took great pains to teach me that instrument, and I excelled at it. Indeed, he said I played even better than he once did. Moreover, he had acquired a clavichord, and I showed considerable skill at the keyboard as well. I could soon harmonize and take dictation admirably.

For some reason, by the time I began to perform in ensembles, no one ever raised an eyebrow when I announced my name. Thus, I suspect my father’s fears must surely have been exaggerated. But what did it matter? Real or imaginary, the damage had been done. Sebastian Bach was an organist and apparently a remarkably good one, but did that give him the right to destroy another musician and steal from that man his passion for the bassoon?

My father was prone to melancholy, which got worse when he drank to excess. He and my mother buried seven children, and when she died—I had just turned 16—it probably drove him over the edge. He jumped off a bridge and killed himself a few weeks later.

I had but one skill with which to make my way in the world, but it soon sufficed to open some doors for me. Frederick II held court in Potsdam, where I was living at the time. He kept two bassoonists “on call” for his orchestra, and when one of them suffered a stroke, he needed another. I was the best available bassoonist, and soon had employment of sorts at the palace, fulfilling what would have been my father’s dream!

By curious coincidence, the Court Chamber Musician and harpsichordist at the time was Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, second son of the man who had ruined my father. Of course, the younger *Herr* Bach seemed completely unaware of the conflict, and I must concede that he was always very courteous in his limited dealings with me. In fact, several times during rehearsals he asked me to take over for him at the *fortepiano*, and I played the *continuo* part for a few movements on those occasions.

So, it was now 1747, and somehow Carl got his father, Sebastian, an invitation to appear in court. This rather surprised me, since aside from his admitted skill on the organ, I could think of nothing Bach senior had done to warrant an audience with an Emperor. However, I said nothing, as it was certainly not my place to criticize.

We musicians were invited to stand off to the side while our sovereign entertained the half-blind, overweight boor with great ceremony. At one point Frederick sat down at the *fortepiano*, played a long theme, and asked Bach to improvise on it. To our amazement, he proceeded to play this rather strange music, working the theme in the old, contrapuntal style. I suppose it was pretty

clever, though I didn't think much of it. It was just dry, cerebral stuff, like much of what Bach was said to have written.

Well, some weeks passed, and then a package arrived from Leipzig. Not content with boring us once, the *Kantor* had decided to compose an entire volume of this outmoded music—if we can call it that—and dedicate it to his sovereign. To my surprise (and disappointment), Frederick actually opened it up and summoned Carl to read through parts of it with him. I had just finished rehearsing with *Herr* Quantz, the flautist, who was also asked to join the King. Thus, I got to hear as much as they played of it.

It was called *A Musical Offering*, and Frederick truly seemed to like it. “The old Bach is a genius, gentlemen! Some day the world will take note of him. Who knows? Perhaps they will remember his name even more than they'll remember mine!” he declared, to polite laughter. Even Carl, who used to call his father, “the old wig,” could not suppress a chuckle.

Our king had far more pressing business, however, and he tossed the music aside and left the room, as did everyone else. I lingered, and a thought entered my mind—one that was to return many times over the years: “He stole my father's good name. Now I shall steal something of his!”

I looked right and left, behind doors, everywhere. I was alone; I was certain of it. I crept over to the table, snatched the text, and stuffed it inside my coat. Now I had only to leave, unnoticed, and I would have avenged my father.

Alas, it was not to be. Somehow I was apprehended before I got five paces out of the room. I begged for forgiveness, explaining that I simply wanted to study the magnificent music. I was fortunate to escape a brutal flogging, but found myself banished from court. I was ruined, and now my own reputation had been destroyed.

The next two years are a faded memory. If I inherited my father's talent for music, I also inherited his taste for alcohol. I drank to excess, and soon lost everything. I vowed vengeance, but I wandered steadily northwest, even though Leipzig, where Bach still served as *Kantor* at the *Thomasschule*, lay to the southwest. By 1749, I was reduced to beggary and had pretty much hit the proverbial “end of the road.”

And then, a miracle! It is a story almost too implausible to fathom, and yet this is exactly what happened.

It had rained a lot that spring, and the roads were muddy in places. I was out walking—somewhere; I knew not where—when I noticed a commotion up ahead. A small coach had become stuck, and somehow I found myself running to lend my strength to the effort to push it free. I was a fairly powerful fellow in those days; after all, I was only 23.

I put my arms, chest, and shoulder to the back of the coach, and joined the others, who had thus far been thwarted by the same task. Perhaps my added weight did the trick, for suddenly the wheel came free, and the carriage rested once again on reasonably solid ground.

The others maintained their balance, but alas! I tumbled face-first into the muck and stood up quite the spectacle, drenched in filth from head to toe. Someone threw me a rag with which I

attempted to wipe off my face and hands. As I was doing so, a tolerably well-dressed man approached me.

“My poor fellow! I am truly in your debt. Can I offer you something by way of compensation for your troubles?” he asked.

“Indeed, Sir,” I replied, “though should truth be known, what I could really use is a job. Do you know of anyone who would hire an honest man?”

The young fellow—he could not even have been my age—studied me carefully. “My name is Johann Gottfried Mützel, and I am court organist and harpsichordist for Duke Christian Ludwig II. I don’t suppose you’ve had any musical training, have you?”

I hesitated. “Some, Sir. Though not educated at a university, I took lessons on the clavier, and also studied some harmony.” Since I had long ago sold my bassoon, I thought it best not to mention that instrument.

“Amazing! You’re also a musician of sorts. Can you copy parts from a score?”

I swallowed nervously. “I think so.”

“Take dictation?”

“It has been a while, but if you’re patient with me, I should be able to do that, also.”

“What good fortune has brought you to me!” he declared. “I am absolutely certain you can be of some help. The Duke’s court can’t offer you much, of course, but if you would like to work for me in Schwerin, I could use an assistant at least temporarily.”

I was in no position to decline. The young man promptly invited me to ride on the carriage beside the driver, and thus I was spared the fate of a beggar. Soon I had decent clothes, regular meals, a roof over my head, and plenty of work to keep me busy.

Although we certainly did not look at all alike, there was one striking similarity between me and my new employer. Our voices were almost identical. Of course, neither of us was aware of this fact, since we all hear the sounds of our own voices somewhat differently than the way the rest of the world hears us. However, everyone remarked on how closely our timbres matched. “Indeed, Wilhelm,” a violinist told me, “from your voices, you could pass for twins!”

Now this young man, this Mützel, was truly a fine organist, but I soon learned something a little more unsettling. His hero—the man with whom he wished to study composition—was none other than the same Sebastian Bach who had caused all this trouble for me. Of course, I said nothing. That winter, I also learned that he had petitioned the Duke to grant him leave to study with the old *Kantor*. However, Christian Ludwig could not spare the services of his organist, who was thus obliged to stay at court.

Then, in early April, the Duke changed his mind. He granted permission, and my master made ready to depart. This saddened me, as I assumed I would be left to fend for myself once again. The Duke wanted an organist, and that was an instrument on which I had had no training whatsoever. I was understandably dejected when *Herr* Mützel, for whom I had provided exemplary service, now asked to speak with me.

To my amazement, he offered to take me along with him to Leipzig, with the understanding that I would effectively have to work for Bach's household, and would earn nothing more than room and board during our stay in Leipzig. Still, this was better than unemployment in Schwerin, and perhaps exactly where I wanted to be. Thus, while Müthel dreamed of all he could learn from *Herr* Bach, I rekindled my own dreams of revenge.

We arrived in Leipzig and moved into the Bach home on May 4. The place was a mess, to be perfectly honest. There were far too many claviers for one family, and manuscripts lay heaped in large piles. I soon learned that the "great" man was in ill health and virtually blind. Nevertheless, Müthel was absolutely overjoyed to study with the old master, for whom he also took dictation.

Other people were always present, notably Bach's wife, their imbecile son (Gottfried), and their youngest son (Christian), all of whom lived there. In addition, one of their daughters (Elisabeth) and her husband (Christoph Altnikol) dropped by from time to time. These took no notice of me, of course, while for my purposes they were simply "in the way." Whatever I might eventually do, I knew it could not be witnessed.

And what, exactly, could I hope to do? Murder? It hardly seemed worth risking the gallows, given that the old man did not seem long for the world, anyway, and was also in some pain from a couple of recent operations on his eyes. Good! Let him suffer, I thought.

Theft? Now that was far more appealing, since he had stolen something from my father. It would be justice as much as vengeance. But what, and how?

And then, on Monday, 27 July, my prayers were answered. No one was coming to the Bach household, and everyone—including his wife, Anna Magdalena—would depart to make a condolence call. *Frau* Bach even took the idiot, Gottfried, with her. *Herr* Müthel, as Bach's last student, considered himself one of the "family," so he went as well, asking me to watch over Sebastian, who was actually sleeping when they departed. "We should be back before sunset," he advised me.

As I closed the door behind them, I wondered how I could use this precious time. Even before I could contrive some mischief, Bach cried out for assistance. I dashed into the bedroom.

"They have all left to express their condolences to someone, *Herr Kantor*," I began.

There was a puzzled look on his face. "Everyone but you, Müthel?" he asked, mistaking my voice for that of the man I served. "And who has died?"

"I am sorry, *Herr Kantor*, but I did not catch the name."

"Well, no matter! With everyone away, we can work more efficiently. First, empty my chamber pot. Then, you will help me finish my greatest masterpiece."

Oh, yes. I lugged that pot of urine outside and dumped it, before returning to the bedroom, where Bach now sat in a large chair. As soon as he heard my footsteps, he asked me to locate *Die Kunst der Fuge*.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Why, is it not on the clavier we used yesterday in the next room?"

“I shall go check,” I replied. Of course, there were several claviers, each of which had manuscripts upon it, but I soon located the set of some 40 pages or so on which the old man had apparently been working for some while. These I brought back to the room.

“Now, go to the end,” Bach instructed. “Contrapunctus XIV—the one I told you about. You see it on the last four finished pages, and it stops on the second system of a mis-lined fifth page. On the next page, you will find my sketches for the remainder and after that a blank page, already lined. Are you ready?”

I hesitated. “Yes—”

“Good! Now you see where we left off on the fifth page. I have brought the three themes together.”

“A triple fugue!” I noted.

“Yes, we were in D minor, you see? And if you go to the very end, my last measure, you can tell we are going where?”

To be perfectly honest, I had no idea, but as I squinted at the score, I remembered some of the harmony lessons my father had given me. “Why, A, right?”

“Of course!” he cried. “So, we’re in A minor—just look at the sketch on the next page. I want you to plot the second subject, starting right after the first beat, soprano voice. Enter the first subject in bass the next measure, and then on the third beat—”

“Please, *Herr Kantor*,” I pleaded. “You go too quickly, but I see from your sketch. You want that third subject in alto.” I paused, scribbling away hastily. At length I had several measures filled in along three parts. “But what goes in tenor?” I asked.

Well, he now began to sing, and I filled in the notes as he did so. My father’s ear training had not been wasted on me!

Soon we were back in D minor, and Bach’s voice grew more agitated. “Now, we need the fourth subject, the main theme of the entire work, which we bring back in soprano. Do you see what I’ve sketched?”

I squinted at the rather sloppy scrawl, and sure enough, there it was. “Yes, *Herr Kantor*. And you have the third theme in alto again, and then—oh, I see it—a tonal answer in bass?”

“Of course.” And, growing steadily more agitated, he sang the missing parts.

I must reluctantly concede that I was surprised by what followed. Bach set all four themes against one another, then brought them back inverted, and finally he worked them together again as they had originally appeared. With so much sketched out, it was merely a question of copying what he had already written and then taking dictation to fill in the counterpoint. This I easily accomplished.

“Now!” he gasped. “Sit down at the clavichord here in the bedroom and play it for me slowly and carefully! I *must* hear it, to make sure you got everything correctly!”

My skills were adequate, and somehow I read through everything from the last measure on the fifth page to the conclusion some forty-odd measures later.

“Not the best sightreading, but you see? I have completed my greatest masterpiece, *Die Kunst der Fuge!*” he roared, beaming despite his blindness. “That last page, for which you have taken dictation, solves the mystery of the final contrapunctus. I have brought back the theme I had worked so thoroughly through all those fugues and canons, combined it with the other three, *rectus* and *inversus*, and then *rectus* one last time. Tell my son-in-law to add it to the rest of the manuscript and send it to the printer.” He seemed very excited, but also a little short of breath. “My greatest masterpiece! My legacy! What do you think, Müthel?” he gasped.

I looked out the window. There was still no sign of the others, so it would be now or never for me. “I think it would be most unfortunate if someone were to steal it, and I must explain to you that my name is not Müthel.”

Herr Bach clearly did not understand. “What? You just took my dictation and played the work back for me, note-for-note. Who are you?”

“The son of one you ruined: Geyersbach is my name!”

First there was disbelief, but then a look of recognition on his face. I could tell that he remembered. “The nanny-goat bassoonist? I should have run my blade through his bowels!”

“My father should have beaten your brains out, but you escaped him to compose and teach, after robbing him of his passion for music, his reputation, and his dignity!

I could sense the fear rising in Bach’s chest. “What violence do you intend here?” he demanded.

“Violence? None. Merely justice. You robbed my father. Now I shall rob you of something—the last page of your ‘greatest masterpiece,’ *Herr Kantor!*” And with that, I snatched up both Bach’s sketch and the completion he had dictated to me.

The old man grasped the arms of the chair and tried to rise as he began to shout. Alas for him, he was just as suddenly silenced, this time for good. He collapsed backward into the chair, and we would later learn he had suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

I had seen enough to know when death leaves a calling card. With my bitter enemy almost surely at death’s door, I paused to consider my options. I possessed a small trunk wherein lay all my worldly possessions. If I fled, I would arouse suspicion, but if I could conceal my theft...

I carefully returned *Die Kunst der Fuge*—minus the last page of Bach’s sketches and the formerly blank page now filled with my own completion—to its place in the pile. Glancing around, I spotted a large but thin notebook, buried beneath other pages. It was almost empty and the perfect size; my two pages fit inside it neatly. This same I placed on the bottom of my trunk, covered by a winter cloak I would surely not need for months. For a while, at least, I could maintain my ruse.

I might bore you with the particulars. Like the good servant who had emptied the chamber pot, I summoned a physician, who arrived just moments before the extended family converged upon us. Grave concern showed on all faces, although *Herr* Altnikol took me aside to thank me for calling the doctor and commending me for my devotion to the Bach family. I bowed silently.

Johann Sebastian Bach died the next day—exactly forty years ago! *Herr* Müthel was offered an appointment as his interim replacement at the *Thomasschule* until someone else could

be found. Alas, as soon as I stepped onto the school grounds, I became dreadfully uncomfortable. Bach had worked there for twenty-seven years, and I felt almost haunted by his lingering presence. I humbly requested my leave, which was granted. *Herr Müthel* also wrote me a strong letter of recommendation, through which I was soon able to gain employment elsewhere.

Of course, the rest of my story is of no real interest, any more than my father's was. However, I can take some solace in the fact that the music I hear today is of a very different sort than Sebastian Bach ever imagined. He, too, is of no interest, and his music is almost completely forgotten. It is with great pleasure that I slide these last pages of the story—his sketches, the dictation I took, and my own testament—into this volume of his so-called “greatest masterpiece.”

By the way, I read through some of the fugues. They're clever but overworked, and soon become rather boring. If that was truly his “greatest masterpiece,” I guess it's for the best that old, tedious Bach is forgotten. And now, perhaps, it's time for me to “forget” his vile attack on my poor father, some four score and five years ago. May both of these forgotten musicians rest in peace!

Wilhelm Geyersbach

Quedlinburg

28 July 1790

Chapter Three: Sold?

When I had finished the Geyersbach manuscript, I turned to the last two pages. I recognized the first at once. It was in Bach's hand, somewhat unsteady to be sure, but clearly his own. I quickly spotted the four subjects I had performed just a few hours earlier. The second page was in a different handwriting but worked the same material.

I looked up at Maurice and began firing off questions. "Could these possibly be real, and could the story be true? May I read through the music? When will it be published?"

"Oh, they *are* real, and it *is* true," he assured me. "But they're not for public consumption—not for *them*!" And before I could even register my surprise, he had snatched all the pages away from me. "These will be much safer in my little box," he added, returning them whence they had come.

"But this treasure should be shared with the world!" I gasped.

"There are no buts here, my friend. We have an agreement, you and I. You will not breathe a word about this to anyone for three years. By then, this box will be in someone else's possession, or at least somewhere else. Rest assured, I have other places it can be hidden for safekeeping. If you say anything whatsoever, I shall deny the whole story, and claim it is a fiction you contrived! Moreover, you will never perform a recital on Emily's circuit again. On the other hand, I think you have considerable talent, and I would like to help you. If you play ball with me, you may find your career gets a jumpstart. A phone call from one of us to the president of some small college might even land you a tenure-track position. Do we have an understanding?"

I may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I am not stupid. I know when someone has made me an offer I cannot refuse. I swore on everything I held holy that I would say nothing for three years.

I am now an assistant professor of music at — College, and I recently applied for tenure. Three years have passed quickly.

I gave a house recital last night. Of course, I no longer need to go through my former agent, and I never ask for any fee whatsoever when I perform on this circuit. Maurice assured me I'll get tenured, and the concerts are the least I can do to thank him and the others. And he, for his part, refers to me as his "court musician."

Maurice dropped a veiled hint that I might some day get to read through the music Bach dictated to Wilhelm Geyersbach. He also told me that I could now report the story—which I am delighted to do—as long as I do not use his real name or those of any of his friends. Meanwhile, I continue to wonder how he acquired those pages...and whether he ever actually sold them.

* * *

If you enjoyed "Bach's Last Composition," by all means get the free download of *Cursed Love* at <https://www.lennycavallaro.com/freeworks>.

To let me know how to reach you via email when this novel and other works are released, please go to <https://www.lennycavallaro.com/contact>.

Bonus: An Excerpt from *Paganini Agitato*

[Niccolò Paganini was perhaps the most influential violinist of all time. A great celebrity, he earned a fortune but also became the subject of a dark rumor: that to play as he did and compose the music he had written, he must have sold his soul to the Devil.

[*Paganini Agitato* explores the Paganini legend, including his Satanic ties. In the excerpt below, Niccolò has been struggling with “composer’s block.” He desperately needs a new composition for his forthcoming concert, but the creative juices are *not* flowing. Then, with time running out, he receives guidance from his Satanic mistress. The Devil, who appears in the form of a young girl he had once known, leads him to the opera house, where the production of a ballet by Franz Süssmayr provides all the inspiration Paganini requires.]

* * *

It quickly became apparent why she had brought him to this place. Scarcely had he seated himself when his problem vanished. Hope and promise literally confronted him in the form of a trite little tune that opened “*Il Noce di Benevento*”—an innocuous, so-called witches’ dance. Witches, of course: hoarse, leering hags dancing about their sinister cauldrons. Murky clouds, flashes of lightning, feline yelps and yowls issuing from under their very footprints: the net of evil, vague and invisible.

He saw nothing; he heard no more. Before the act had ended, he dashed like one stricken to his room and began to rule paper. The set of brilliant variations superimposed upon the modest tune poured out of pen, brain, and fingers, without a backward glance or searching or constraint. It must have been lurking there, in the recesses of consciousness, waiting.

His dark mistress had delivered it to him.

Variation on variation, the work would present excruciating technical difficulties to shock and astonish. Imitations, yes, fantastic imitations: charlatanism elevated to high art. He, Paganini, would be outrageous and wicked and macabre, telling what none are meant to hear, yet he would defy them to withhold adulation and homage.

He would project sounds never before emanating from violin and bow—a keening nasal oboe tone, dry reediness, shrill supernatural voices, high and low, raucous and feeble voices, voices of aged crones, errant spurts of laughter, the grotesque swish of broomsticks, guttural sounds, weird, slithering, angular sounds. It was here; it was all here in these notes that poured from pen onto the lined paper almost more rapidly than he could think. The scintillating *staccati* were here, the bizarre distortions, the galloping roulades, the explosions of arpeggios—all the “fireworks” so decried by Luigi Geremi—and harmonics more eerie and dazzling than any yet heard.

To scoop out their inner organs, he thought fiercely.

Niccolò called the composition “*Le Streghe*”—“The Witches”—and on his knees gave thanks to his succubus queen.