

Sample Translation (Pages 9 - 13)

# AUS DEN FUGEN

by Alain Claude Sulzer

novel

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## **Marek**

Olsberg wasn't a particularly orderly person, but he had kept a record of his performances for thirty years. He knew precisely why. All that he wrote down in the old-fashioned, oilcloth-covered notebooks he'd bought in London decades ago was a part of the life he shared with no one. It belonged to him alone. This bookkeeping would have been unnecessary, were its only purpose to record the stages in his long and prestigious career. The staff at Heinrich & Brutus, the concert agency that had looked after him for twenty years, kept a faithful account of where and when he had appeared, what he had been scheduled to play, and what he had actually played. His encores were all they were uninformed about, because Olsberg always decided on them at short notice, often after the official programme ended, and seldom notified them of his decisions after the event. Agency representatives generally attended his concerts when they took place at Carnegie Hall or Vienna's Musikvereinssaal. A phone call or an email would have sufficed to keep them informed of every concert he'd given in recent years and, if necessary, to work out which sonata, étude or cycle he had already played in this town or that. No, it wasn't a question of avoiding repetitions. He enjoyed making his way through these numbers and letters like a man walking through a wood in which he knew every tree; numbers and letters that seemed far from as bald to his eyes as they would have to someone uninitiated or uninvolved. He was not uninvolved. It mattered to him whether he had played Mozart's KV No. 333 or Schubert's G major Sonata on 12 June 1979, or Beethoven's Diabelli Variations or Schumann's Carnival on 3 October 1998, or whether he had given Bach's Jesu meine Freude, a Chopin nocturne or one of Liszt's Mephisto Waltzes as an encore. It was one of his favourite morning occupations to leaf through his oilcloth notebooks and hum to himself in private, usually in a large, soundless hotel room. All that was defined by these numerals and opus numbers flowed through his blood and aroused it just as the proximity of another person would have intoxicated him had anyone been there. But no one was.

Olsberg had lived alone for years now. He had long ago ceased to wonder whether the partners who had changed so often in his youth, becoming steadily rarer in the course of time, had suffered from his character or his way of life. Was there any difference? Had his lifestyle rubbed off on his character or his character shaped his lifestyle? He was a traveller on his own account. He was the thing on which his travels depended. It didn't trouble him to live out of a suitcase; he appreciated the fact that Astrid Maurer, the secretary who accompanied

him everywhere, made all his arrangements. She was a selfless calendar. Marek Olsberg had been travelling the world unceasingly, every continent of it, since he was eight years old.

He was far more dependent on the quality of the various Steinways and the qualifications of the piano tuners with whom he almost daily came into contact than he was on the favour of any lovers, some of whom had very soon turned out to be moody and insufferable individuals. He would have been lost without his pianos; without lovers he could live perfectly well. Concert grands and piano tuners were more to be relied on than any jealous and unpredictable lover. No concert organiser could afford to offer him a dubious Steinway — he rejected other pianos — or send along an incompetent tuner, whereas the lovers he'd had presented problems incapable of being solved by means of a few adjustments, whether minor or more radical. He knew this only too well, so it hadn't been detrimental when they became steadily rarer and eventually dried up altogether.

It had been up to them, not him, to rack their brains over why living with him had proved impossible in the long run. They were the ones who had wanted to share his life. He had often, with scant conviction, gone along with the idea, but it had always turned out the same way in the end. He tolerated a lot of things until it was all over. Then he sat down at the piano and played. That, as everyone knew, was the only place where no one was allowed to bother him.

It was down to his fame, of course. Olsberg's eminence had initially dispelled the problems which he knew would sooner or later return via the back door. Nothing was more attractive than his renown and nothing more seductive than the affection and applause of the public, who cherished him. They loved him. They loved Olsberg. But would they have loved him without his public? Could they go on loving a man from whom they would sooner or later demand back the love he could really only give his piano?

Olsberg was a man who, although he did not necessarily attract attention outside the concert hall, did so all the more as the moment for his appearances approached. He became a magnet whenever he emerged on to the platform. As soon as he started playing, he was the focal point of his listeners' world. All who had ever heard him in a concert hall agreed that hearing him live was quite different from merely listening to him on a CD. There was something unpredictable about his playing that defied precise definition. It was as if he had to conquer the piano like a mountain that offered not the slightest technical resistance. He had to win and he always did; the harder the pieces, the more confident his mastery of them.

Anyone confronted by Olsberg could tell that he looked taller on the platform. Beneath the expensive materials in which he clothed himself, his figure seemed to suggest

that he exercised regularly and maintained a healthy diet. Yet he exposed little of his body: his hands, nothing more. He had long remained extremely youthful in appearance; now his age seemed to have frozen and he made a provocatively ageless impression. One would never have thought him fifty. Few people knew that he was unmarried; apart from genuine groupies, no one in the classical concert world was interested in such details. His marital status could easily be looked up on the Internet. What he regretted was his inability to limit his appearances to the minimum that other pianists found sufficient.

Olsberg dashed from one engagement to the next. He had been a child prodigy; everything had always fallen into his lap. In a few weeks' time he would turn fifty, and he didn't want to cross that threshold without making a decision. But he had no idea what form it would take or what its purpose could be. It was just an idea. Making a decision might mean continuing to press on.

On the flight from Tokyo to Frankfurt he took his notebook from the breast pocket of his jacket to remind himself of the programme he would be playing at Berlin's Philharmonie in three days' time. Two Scarlattis, the Samuel Barber, Beethoven's No. 29, and Schumann's *Davidsbündler*. The Federal President and the Mayor of Berlin would be there — as, no doubt, would be a few of his former lovers.

## **Esther and Thomas**

'What's he playing?' he asked Esther, who was just applying some unobtrusive eyeshadow. The mauvy lilac shade would bring out the green of her eyes, which were already, or so she imagined, slightly obscured by sagging eyelids, with the result that they exerted less and less of their full effect. Grounds for despair, but not for suddenly giving up. She owed it to herself and those around her. Kohl and mascara. How was she to prevent herself from sooner or later getting hooded eyelids like her mother and her mother's sisters? In her younger sister they were already more pronounced today than they had ever been in the case of her mother and her mother's sisters. Would the genes skip a generation and spare her, or would they someday strike all the more mercilessly?

'Chopin, I think. And Beethoven. No idea. And something unknown. One can't know everything.'

'No need to shout, I can hear you.' He was sitting downstairs in front of the television, so she'd thought she needed to speak particularly loudly.

The lighting tonight would suit her, that was for sure. Subdued lighting prevailed in the Philharmonie. No glaring spotlights, not even near the platform, where she certainly wouldn't be sitting. Her friend Solveig had a season ticket for one of the side rows, hopefully with a view of Olsberg, tonight's soloist. Music without images tended to bore her a trifle, not that she would ever have said so out loud.

It was pointless thinking about it. What more could she have done to make herself look younger without going under the knife? That was the only way, everyone knew, but it was a road she would never take. Her fear of surrendering herself to the skill of a surgeon, someone of whom she was just as scared as she would have been of a tipsy knife-thrower, was greater than that of someday being unable to look in a mirror without groaning and running a mile. What a disaster! What could be done about it? Like most women, she too had considered a hyaluronic acid injection after massages and thalassotherapy had proved not only expensive but ineffective. Thomas had long been pounding the treadmill in the basement, but not she. The effect of all these remedial measures was limited to the financial or physical effort you put into them, to expense or exhaustion, and they were considerable, even those that guaranteed to lose weight in your sleep, which they actually robbed you of. The rest was all wishful thinking, auto-suggestion and self-delusion. She had also considered botox, but believed that she could, from a long way off, recognize any woman who'd had herself mistreated with the stuff by her frozen youthfulness. So why run the risk of a partial paralysis for which the doctor took neither liability nor responsibility, only to have to hide yourself away for days and end up bearing only a distant resemblance to yourself? And in her case the treatment would be bound to have even more disastrous results.

Esther wasn't fashionably chic; she was a normal, well-organised married woman whose children had just left home, yet she agonised about her outward appearance. She was no different from the women she despised, but she didn't despise herself. This had something to do with the fact that she and Thomas had a good marriage. A good marriage was one for which others envied you.

At fifty-four, she reflected at least once a day that she was heading for sixty. If not when getting out of bed, then certainly when standing unmade-up in front of the mirror while Thomas was already on his way to the hospital. There were countless opportunities to be confronted by her appearance during the day as well. Shop windows, elevators, escalators that glided past mirrored walls as they descended to the grocery department or ascended to the clothing department: places where she was tempted, respectively, by perfectly fattening foods and the perfectly fitting clothes she had long been unable to wear. She wasn't fat, but

she was overly plump. She wasn't plain, but nobody turned to look at her save an occasional dark-skinned immigrant who was, she told herself, less intent on the satisfaction of his sexual desires than on marriage. She wouldn't return to 36, her original standard size, until she'd reached the end of the line and was lying in a hospital ward on the threshold of death.

She was flirtatious without meaning to be and felt old without being so. That preyed on her nerves. Thomas didn't have these problems. He might have others of which he never spoke because he couldn't do so without losing face, but vanity wasn't one of his character defects, as vices were called today. Or was it? At least she'd never had to badger him into showering once a day. He actually used the expensive deodorants she bought him, and the aftershaves and colognes in his bathroom emptied almost as fast — but only almost — as the twenty-year-old Aberlour malt in their USM sideboard, which she guessed was far more expensive than Calvin Klein's 'One'. She took as little interest in his drinks bills as he did in those for her shopping trips to Douglas or KaDeWe.

## **Sophie and Klara**

Who was playing, what was being played, what sort of instrument was it, was it a box? Coming from far away, the music surged and ebbed, faded, came and went, grew faint, ever fainter. Sophie lost her grip, slipped and slid off, sat up with a start, once, twice, slid off once more and drifted away. It was no use, her relationship to her surroundings had come adrift. Only half of her was sitting in her seat. The other half was escaping, and the part that had still been in the concert hall would follow. She had let herself go, had closed her eyes and admitted defeat. 'Sleep is winning' — since when did she think in English? That she was asleep was not a deliberate act, not a decision or intention. Far from it, but sleep refused to be outwitted or bought off, even by the great Olsberg, who was plying the keys down there, flailing his arms, pecking at the keyboard from above like a bird, leaning far back, straightening up, crouching, striking a pose, merging with the black piano like a bat spreading its wings over its quarry, a whirring nocturnal insect in the innards of the instrument. For a few seconds she was awake, wide awake. The next moment she thought: Where am I? Was she awake or already in limbo? Was it a box?

During the second piece, a strange piece, the Barber sonata she'd never heard before, she had at first been all ears, perhaps because it was new to her. At least for the first two movements. In the third movement — *Adagio mesto* — she had briefly nodded off, then sat

up with a start when Klara's bony elbow dug her in the ribs. She very nearly uttered a startled cry. Had she been snoring? Had she cried out? She didn't dare look around. How embarrassing. After the furiously escalating fourth movement, a virtuosic, pounding, jazzy fugue whose wildly galloping leaps and audacious contortions she had followed with her senses alert, the concertgoers had risen from their seats en masse to vent their frenetic appreciation. She did so too, but Klara didn't. Klara didn't jump to her feet, just clapped a bit.

Olsberg was recalled to the platform five times, and Sophie had hoped that the commotion in the hall and the clapping would exert a lasting hold on her attention. She mustn't fall asleep at any price. She mustn't expose a weakness, especially as it would set Klara a bad example and give her another weapon she could use against her, possibly just for fun.

The first movement of the Hammerklavier Sonata blew her fatigue away, as it were, although the *Allegro*, as a surreptitious glance at her watch disclosed, was taking all of twelve minutes. Twelve long minutes during which she had no need to fight off her fatigue. This may also have been because of the heartburn to which she was particularly prone after drinking white wine, cognac or coffee, a condition that clearly occurred more often than was beneficial to her stomach. In short, she coped with the first movement — how many had he written? — brilliantly, without nodding off or dozing. But that was just the start. She dreaded to think of what was still to come: an endless multiplicity of notes and reprises, crotchets, quavers, semiquavers, demisemiquavers, minims, semibreves, triplets, dotted notes, pauses. She felt quite dizzy at the thought, felt weaker and weaker.

Then, after the second movement had flitted past almost unnoticed, came the third: *Adagio sostenuto*. Sophie's eyes suddenly snapped shut, and she'd been wide awake a moment ago! She wrenched her eyes open. A few seconds later the process recurred. Eyes shut, eyes open. Eyes shut.

For a while she managed to delude herself and anyone who might be watching her that she'd shut her eyes in order to concentrate on the music, as if that were the most appropriate way of absorbing the notes. Other people did this too, after all, and they quite often fell asleep, or fell asleep without making the slightest effort to prevent it. It wasn't long before this happened. She was exhausted by the whole thing. She was tired of the internal and external battles against opponents who mustn't know that she was a victim and suffered from the fact — who didn't know this because she was a matter of total indifference to them. She was insignificant. Unimportant. Dismissed. She was uniquely uninteresting, in fact the word 'uninteresting' seemed to have been coined especially to describe her. She was too old. She

had been too pretty. That had stupidly given her ideas: the mistake made by all pretty women who fail to seize their opportunities by the scruff of the neck, not at the last moment. How long ago it all was. She had passed up all her opportunities. Back and forth, back and forth went her head, further and further downwards, not just sagging but dragged down, used by gravity as a guinea pig imprisoned in a diving bell and sinking ever deeper — now of all times, at a never-to-be-forgotten moment during a recital by Olsberg, whom many people compared to Horowitz although his touch was unmistakably different. Who knows when you'll get another chance to hear him! All these things were going through her mind, through the convoluted white corridors and channels of her brain. She became lighter and lighter while Olsberg played and played and seemed to rock her in her sleep, going from left to right and right to left like a weaver's shuttle in deft hands.

What was he playing on his box? The question that arose before she finally fell asleep and her chin sank slowly on to her chest had some minutes ago prompted her to cast another glance at the programme, in which she could read what Olsberg had already played that evening and what he was going to play, but above all what he was playing at this moment, as she strove to decipher the letters in the gloom. First the lively Scarlatti — the very name was programmatic — whose pieces had led her to attract looks from Klara, not that Klara had responded. There could be no talk of reciprocation; she had tried and her attempt had failed. She mustn't think of Alma, mustn't draw comparisons or commit injustices. No animosities, slights, insults, sillinesses, hurts, resentments, hatred, contempt — she found it very easy to devise a thousand other words for the ten thousand feelings she experienced at the sight of the niece who was so like her sister. As revoltingly alike as a twin that had waited for years to hatch from its egg. A snake. Kill her if you dare, whispered a voice — her sister's voice — and Sophie wasn't surprised that Alma should urge her to murder her own daughter. Typical of her, she thought. Or had she thought that before? You wouldn't dare, whispered Alma.

It was all the same to Klara, of course. Why not, she had nothing to do with it apart from being Alma's daughter, and that she couldn't help. So Sophie had no choice but to be grateful because the girl had refrained from fiddling around with her mobile phone, which would doubtless have caused a minor uproar in their immediate vicinity. Actually, Klara had turned it off before the recital began without Sophie having to ask her to. So she was behaving remarkably well, appropriately and *comme il faut*, even though the music visibly failed to interest her. Mind you, 'visibly' wasn't perhaps the right word; it was more something Klara gave off, something that remained unsaid: I don't care, you carry on down there, okay, but leave me in peace, leave me out of it. And she herself? Didn't the music

bounce off her too like a wall, a lonely, looming stretch of wall like those that still stood here and there in this city, where she had lived for so long, as a forlorn-looking visual aid for tourists?

They were sitting in Block B, high up on the right. The auditorium was bathed in warm, luminous gloom. She mustn't fall asleep, because the music was bright and beautiful and she had a good view of Olsberg's face.

They were seated side by side like two close friends, but Sophie knew that Klara had long ago become her mother's reluctant proxy or doppelgänger, a clone, an alias. She was doing the girl an injustice, of course, because she definitely wasn't to blame. But hadn't twice as much of an injustice been done to her, Sophie? The evil was deep-rooted in her sister's family. Why couldn't she change her spots? Why couldn't she admit that Alma had done her the worst turn anyone had ever done by luring her husband away and stealing him within a few short days: Klaus, who had since become a sort of stepfather to Klara after her real father had fled to the States from Alma's whims and demands. Perhaps she would tell Klara the truth about her mother and Klaus, thought Sophie, for she was almost sure that Klara didn't know a thing. How handsome and strong, vigorous and sensitive Klaus had been. The best man in her life, but what was that to the girl?

Had she thought this while dreaming, while half asleep, half awake?

And then peace descended. She slept. She slept through the last movement of the Hammerklavier Sonata, the *Largo*, which was immediately succeeded by the *Allegro rissoluto*. The fugue movement. The second fugue of the evening.

Silence. Absolute silence. Unexpected silence. Startling silence.

She would have to get Klara to tell her later what had happened, because she'd missed the unforgettable moment. What had happened?

Some three minutes before the end of the last movement of the Hammerklavier Sonata, that milestone in piano music, after around nine minutes' playing and shortly before he reached the end, Marek Olsberg abruptly stopped playing and slowly raised his hands. That the piece was unfinished and that he had prematurely cut it short — that something out of the ordinary was happening — at once became clear even to those who had never heard this sonata before and were not, or not yet, acquainted with the conventions of solo performances: Marek Olsberg shut the piano lid in a way that left no doubt of the finality of his decision. And he said, in an expressionless but clearly audible voice, though not perhaps audible in every last corner of the huge building: 'That's that.'

As soon as Olsberg stood up and left the platform without a bow, without a word,

utterly self-absorbed, indeed, detached from everyone, not hurriedly but not slowly either, all who knew him realised that he would not come back. There weren't many of them, but they were supplemented by those who were more than usually sensitive to exceptional situations. Another few seconds went by, in the course of which Olsberg opened the side door himself and closed it behind him, and every last concertgoer in the Philharmonie became aware of the significance of what they had just witnessed. The ensuing commotion, which naturally remained within civilised bounds, began piano but soon swelled to a fortissimo. No mass panic, of course — the place wasn't on fire, after all, nor did everyone make at once for the doors, one or two of which had already been opened. Instead, people milled around, accompanying this spreading disorder with a vehement exchange of views. They were surprised, shocked, upset, appalled, angered, speechless, all in their own different ways.