THOMAS MANN

Doctor Faustus

The Life of the German Composer
Adrian Leverkühn As Told by a Friend

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
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than he, and so two grades ahead of him, we usually spent recess in the walled-in schoolyard together, away from our respective classmates, and saw each other most afternoons, too—whether he would come over to my study above Blessed Messengers pharmacy or I would visit him at his uncle’s house, 15 Parochial Strasse, where the mezzanine was occupied by musical instruments, the famed inventory of the Leverkühn firm.

This was a quiet spot, near the cathedral and away from Kaisersaschen’s business district along Markt Strasse and Grieskrämer Zeile, a crooked narrow way with no sidewalk, and among its houses Nikolaus Leverkühn’s was the most imposing. Three stories tall, not counting rooms in an attic that was set back behind a projecting bay, it was a merchant’s house that dated from the sixteenth century, having once belonged to the grandfather of its present owner, and had five windows across the façade of the second story, but only four shuttered ones on the third, where the actual living quarters were located and the exterior ornamental woodcarving first began, whereas everything below, including the entrance, was left plain and unpainted. Even the stairway inside grew wider only above the landing on the mezzanine, which stood rather high above the stone-paved entry hall, so that visitors and customers (many of whom came from out of town, from Halle, even Leipzig) had no easy climb to reach their desired goal, the stock of instruments—which, as I intend to show shortly, was well worth a steep set of stairs.

Until Adrian’s arrival, Nikolaus, a widower—his wife had died young—had lived in the house alone with an old, long-time housekeeper, Frau Butze; a maid; and a young Italian from Brescia named Luca Cimabue (he did indeed carry the family name of that thirteenth-century painter of Madonnas), an apprentice who assisted in making violins—for Uncle Leverkühn was also a violin-maker. He was a man with straight-hanging, unkempt, ash-blond hair and a beardless face with agreeable features: very prominent cheekbones; a hooked, slightly
Drooping nose; a large, expressive mouth; and brown eyes whose gaze betrayed earnest kindness, and cleverness as well. At home he always wore an artisan's shirt of pleated cloth buttoned to the collar. I can well believe this childless man, with a house far too large for him, was delighted to take in a young relative. And I have also heard that although he let his brother in Bach pay for the boy's tuition, he accepted nothing for room and board. He treated Adrian, on whom he had cast a vaguely expectant eye, very much like his own son and enjoyed having a family member round out his table, which had so long consisted of only the aforementioned Frau Butze and, by a patriarchal gesture, his apprentice Luca.

It might have seemed surprising that this young Italian lad, who spoke only pleasantly broken German and who surely could have found an excellent opportunity at home to train in his specialty, had found his way to Adrian's uncle in Kaisersaschern; but that was an indication of the commercial ties Nikolaus Leverkühn maintained in all directions, not just with German centers of instrument-making like Mainz, Braunschweig, Leipzig, or Barmen, but also with foreign firms in London, Lyons, Bologna, even New York. He had sources everywhere for the symphonic merchandise on which his reputation was built—because he not only sold wares of first-class quality, but also kept a dependably complete stock of items usually not found on demand anywhere else. And so no sooner would a Bach festival be planned somewhere in the German Reich—one that, for stylistic authenticity would require an oboe d'amore, a deeper-voice instrument that had long since vanished from orchestras—than the old house on Parochial Strasse would be visited by a customer, a musician who had made the long trip because he wanted things done right and could try out the elegiac instrument on the spot.

The warehouse occupying the rooms of the mezzanine, which often resounded with the most diverse tone-colors making practice runs through the octaves, offered a splendid, enticing, and—if I may put it that way—culturally bewitching sight that caused one's private acoustic fantasy to surge and roar. With the exception of pianos, which Adrian's foster-father left to the industry specializing in them, there lay spread out before one everything that chimes and sings, that twangs, brays, rumbles, rattles, and booms—even the keyboard instruments were always represented, too, by a celesta with its charming bell-like tones. The enchanting violins were hung behind glass or lay bedded in cases that, like mummy-coffins, took the shape of their occupants; some were lacquered more yellowish, some more brownish, and their slender bows fitted securely into the lid, with silver wire entwining the nut—Italian violins, whose purity of form would have told the expert that their origin was Cremona, but also violins from Tyrol, Holland, Saxony, Mittenwald, plus those from Leverkühn's own workshop. The cello, which owes its ultimate form and rich song to Antonio Stradivari, was present in row after row; but its predecessor, the six-stringed viola da gamba, which in older works is still given equal honor, was always to be found there, too, along with the viola and the violin's elder cousin, the viola d'amore, on whose seven strings I have held forth my whole life long, comes from Parochial Strasse. It was a gift from my parents at my confirmation.

Leaning there were several specimens of the violone, the giant violin, the cumbersome double-bass, capable of majestic recitatives, whose pizzicato is more sonorous than the roll of a tuned kettledrum, and from which one would never expect the veiled magic of its flageolet-like tones. And likewise present in quantity was its counterpart among the woodwinds, the contrabassoon, its sixteen feet of tubing robustly augmenting the basses in tones an octave lower than the notes as written, in every dimension double the size of its little brother, the jostling bassoon—and I call it that, because it is a bass instrument without the power of a real bass, strangely weak in tone, a bleating caricature. What a pretty thing it was, nonetheless, with its crook of a mouthpiece, its flashing mechanism of keys and levers. What a charming sight in general, this army of reeds at such a highly developed stage of technology, a challenge to the virtuoso's instincts in each of its variations: a bucolic oboe; an English horn, adept at mournful airs; as a multi-keyed clarinet, which can sound so spookily gloomy in its deep chalumeau register, but can sparkle at higher ranges in a blossoming sheen of silver sound; as bassoon horn and bass clarinet.

All of them, reposing in velvet, were included in Uncle Leverkühn's inventory, plus flutes of various styles and materials—beechwood, passionfruit wood, ebony—with head pieces of ivory or sterling silver, along with their shrill relatives, the piccolos, whose tones can pierce an orchestral tutti to hold the heights and dance like whirling will-o'-thetwips in magic incandescence. And only now came the shimmering chorus of brass instruments—from the dapper trumpet, whose bright alarms, jaunty tunes, and melting cantabiles can be seen in its very form, via that darling of the Romantic period, the convoluted French horn; via the slender, powerful slide trombone and the valve cornet; to the fundamental gravity of the great bass tuba. Even rare museum
pieces, such as bronze lurs turned deftly to the right and left like steer horns, were usually in stock. But when seen with a boy's eyes, as I do today in recalling it, the most splendid part was the extensive display of percussion instruments—because things that one has met early on as toys under the Christmas tree, that have been the fragile stuff of childhood dreams, were exhibited here in a dignified and very genuine form for adult use. The snare drum—how different this one here looked from that quickly broken trinket of painted wood, parchment, and twine that we banged on as six-year-olds. This one was not made for hanging around the neck. The bottom head was stretched tight with catgut and made suitable for orchestral use by having been screwed to a metal tripod at a functional slant, while the wooden drumsticks, likewise more elegant than ours had been, were stuck invitingly into rings at the sides. There was a glockenspiel, on a childish version of which we both had probably practiced tapping out "Twinkle twinkle little star"; here, however, the meticulously tuned metal plates, arranged to vibrate freely on pairs of crossbars, lay in neat rows in their elegant lockable case, waiting to have melody struck from them by dainty steel hammers kept inside the padded lid. The xylophone, constructed apparently so that the ear could imagine the graveyard dance of skeletons enjoying the midnight hour, was here with its full complement of chromatically scaled bars. The tarnished giant cylinder of the bass drum was here, whose head was set booming by a felt-covered mallet; and the copper kettledrum, sixteen of which Berlioz still required for his orchestra—he had not known them in the form Nikolaus Leverkühn stockcd, with a tuning mechanism that allows the drummer to adjust for a change in key with a twist of the hand. How well I remember the boyish tricks we would try out on it, with either Adrian or me—no, it was more likely only me—keeping up a steady roll on the head with the mallets, while Luca modulated the key up and down, yielding the strangest rumbling glissando. And one must also add those remarkable cymbals that only the Chinese and Turks know how to make—for they guard their secret of how to hammer glowing bronze—and that when once they are struck are held high in triumph, their insides turned toward the auditorium; the booming gong, the Gypsy's tambourine, the triangle that has one open corner and chimes brightly at the touch of a steel rod; little hollow castanets, the modern version of cymbals, that clack in the hand. And one must picture, towering over all these serious amusements, the golden architectural splendor of the Érard pedal harp, and then one will comprehend the magic fascination that Adrian's uncle's commercial rooms had for us boys—it was a paradise of silence, but in a hundred forms that all heralded harmony.

For us? No, I'd do better to speak only of myself, of my enchantment, my delight—I scarcely dare include my friend when speaking of such reactions, for I don't know if he was trying to play the son of the house for whom this was all just everyday routine or wanted to show his general coolness of character, but he maintained an almost shrugging indifference before all that splendor and usually responded to my admiring exclamations with a curt laugh or a "yes, pretty" or "funny stuff" or "the ideas people get" or "better than selling sugar loaves." As I sat there in his garret with its charming view across the jumbled roofs of the town, the castle pond, the old water tower, I might express a wish—and I stress, it was always I—to go downstairs together for a not exactly authorized visit to the stockroom; and young Cimabue would sometimes join us, partly I presume to keep an eye on us, partly to play cicerone, our guide and interpreter, in his pleasant fashion. From him we learned the history of the trumpet: how at one time it had had to be made of several straight pieces of metal tubing joined by little spheres—that was before the art of bending brass tubes without splitting them had been mastered, which was first done, you see, by casting them in pitch and resin, later on, however, in lead, which would then melt away in the fire. He also liked to discuss some sage authorities' claim that no matter what material an instrument was made of, be it metal or wood, it would sound the way its specific form, its instrumental voice, sounded, and so it was of no consequence if a flute was made of wood or ivory, a trumpet of brass or silver. His master, he said, Adrian's zio, who as a violin-maker knew something about the importance of materials, of woods and varnishes, disputed all that and swore that he most definitely could hear what a flute was made of—he, Luca, volunteered to do likewise. Then he was sure to take a flute in his well-formed Italian hands and show us the mechanism (which had undergone such great changes and improvements over the last hundred and fifty years—since Quantz, the famous virtuoso) of both the more powerful Bohemian cylinder flute and the older conical version, which sounds sweeter. He demonstrated for us the fingering on a clarinet and on a seven-holed bassoon, whose sound, with its twelve closed and four open keys, blends so nicely with that of the horns; he taught us about the range of the instruments, how they are played, and much more.

In retrospect, there can be no doubt that, back then, whether consciously or not, Adrian followed those demonstrations at least as attentively as I—and to greater advantage than I was ever meant to gain from them. But he did not let anyone notice, and no gesture carried any intimation that all this had, or would ever have, anything to do
with him. He left it to me to put questions to Luca; indeed, he usually stepped away to look at something other than what was being discussed, leaving me alone with the apprentice. I do not wish to say that he was shamming, nor do I forget that for us at that point music had hardly any reality other than the purely physical form it took in Nikolaus Leverkuhn's armory. True, we had passing acquaintance with chamber music—which was played every week or two at Adrian's uncle's house, sometimes in my presence, and certainly not always in Adrian's. The group consisted of our cathedral organist, Herr Wendell Kretzschmar, a stutterer who would become Adrian's teacher only a little later; the choral director of Boniface Gymnasium; and Uncle Nikolaus, who joined them for selected quartets by Haydn and Mozart, for which he played first violin, Luca Cimbauce second, Herr Kretzschmar cello, and the choral director viola. These were manly amusements, for which a glass of beer stood on the floor beside each player, who probably had a cigar in his mouth as well, and which were frequently interrupted by comments—breaking into the language of tones with an especially dry and odd sound—or by the tapping of bows and the counting back of bars whenever things got out of sync, which was almost always the choral director's fault. We had never heard a real concert, a symphony orchestra; and whoever wishes to, may find that sufficient explanation for Adrian's patent indifference to the world of instruments. In any case, he was of the opinion that one should find it sufficient and saw it as such himself. What I am trying to say is: He hid himself behind it, hid himself from music. For a long time, with intuitive perseverance, the man hid himself from his own destiny.

For a long time, by the way, no one ever thought of making any sort of connection between the young Adrian and music. The idea that he was meant to be a scholar was fixed firmly in every head and was constantly confirmed by his brilliant accomplishments in high school, by his status as head of his class, which began to waver slightly only in the upper grades, from about his sophomore year, at age fifteen, and primarily because of his migraine, which had begun to develop and kept him from what little homework he needed to do. All the same, he mastered the demands of school with ease—though the word "mastered" is not well chosen, for it cost him nothing to satisfy them; and if his excellence as a student did not carry with it the tender affection of his teachers (and it did not, as I often observed; instead there was evidence of a certain irritability, indeed of a desire to arrange minor defeats), that was not so much because he might have been considered arrogant—or wait, he was considered that, but not because one had the impression he took excessive pride in his achievements; on the contrary, he was not proud enough of them, and that was the source of his condescension, for it was palpably directed at everything he accomplished with such effortlessness, at the curriculum itself, at its various branches of study, the transmittal of which constituted the dignity and livelihood of the faculty, who therefore did not wish to see them polished off with over-talented indolence.

As for me, I stood on much more cordial terms with those gentlemen—no wonder, since I was soon to join them professionally and had already seriously declared my intention to do so. I, too, might call myself a good student, but was one and could be one solely because of my reverent love for study itself, especially for ancient languages and their classical poets and writers; I called upon and stretched what talents I had, whereas he let it be made evident at every opportunity—which is to say, he made no secret of it to me, and I justifiably feared it was not hidden from his teachers, either—just how immaterial and secondary, so to speak, the whole educational enterprise was to him. This often alarmed me—not on account of his future career, which given his aptitude was never in peril, but because I asked myself what, then, was not immaterial, not secondary to him. I did not see the "main thing," and it was truly indiscernible. In those years, school life is life itself; it embodies life; its interests form the horizon that every life needs in order to develop values, however relative those may be, by which character and abilities prove themselves. But they can serve that humane purpose only if their relativity remains unrecognized. A belief in absolute values, however illusionary, remains for me a prerequisite of life. My friend's talents were measured against values whose relativity seemed clear to him, yet with no visible point of possible reference that could have impaired them as values. There are poor students enough. Adrian, however, presented the singular phenomenon of a poor student as head of the class. I say that it alarmed me; and yet how impressive, how attractive it seemed to me as well, how it intensified my devotion to him, which, of course, was mixed with—will one ever know why?—something like pain, like hopelessness.

I wish to make room for one exception to the rule of ironic disarray with which he regarded the rewards and requirements of school. It was his obvious interest in a discipline in which I shone less brightly, in mathematics. My own weakness in the subject, for which I could more or less compensate with exuberant diligence in philology, made me first realize that superior achievement in any field is, as is
only natural, conditioned by sympathy with the object of study, and so it truly did me good to see my friend likewise find fulfillment here at least. Mathematics, as applied logic, which nevertheless stays within pure and lofty abstraction, holds a curious intermediate position between the humanistic and the realistic sciences; and from the descriptions Adrian shared in conversation of the delight it gave him, it became evident that at the same time he experienced this intermediateness as something elevated, dominating, universal, or as he put it, "the true." It was a great joy to hear him call something "true"; it was an anchor, a stay—one no longer asked oneself quite in vain about the "main thing."

"You're a slouch not to like it," he said to me one day. "Studying ordered relationships is ultimately the best there is. Order is everything. Romans thirteen: 'For what is of God is ordered.'" He blushed, and I stared at him with wide eyes. It turned out that he was religious.

With him, everything had to "turn out"; you first had to spot, surprise, catch him at it all, to see his cards, as it were—and then he would blush, while you could have kicked yourself for not having seen it long before. That he was doing algebra problems beyond what was expected or demanded, that he enjoyed working with logarithms, that he was sitting over quadratic equations before ever being required to identify exponential unknowns—I discovered all that only by accident, and in each instance cited, he first gave mockery a try before owning up. Yet another disclosure, if not to say exposure, had preceded the rest—I have made reference to it already: that he had made his own autodidactic, secret explorations of the keyboard, of chord structures, the compass card of musical keys, the circle of fifths, and that without any knowledge of notation or fingering, he had used these harmonic discoveries for all sorts of exercises in modulation and to build vaguely rhythmic structures of melody. He was in his fifteenth year when I discovered it. One afternoon, after looking in vain for him in his room, I found him sitting at a little harmonium that stood in a neglected corner of a hallway in the living quarters. I stood at the door listening to him for perhaps a minute, but, reproaching myself for that, I entered and asked him what he was up to. He eased off the bellows, pulled his hands from the manuals, and laughed with a blush.

"Idleness," he said, "is the root of all vice. I’m bored. When I’m bored, I putter and diddle around in here sometimes. This old treadle box stands so forlorn, but humble as it is, it can do it all. Look, this is curious—I mean, naturally there’s nothing curious about it, but when you figure it out for yourself the first time, it seems curious how it all hangs together and goes in circles."

And he struck a chord, all black keys—F-sharp-A-sharp-C-sharp—then added an E and with that, the chord, which had looked lik F-sharp major, was unmasked as belonging to B major, that is, as its fifth or dominant. "A chord like this," he proposed, "has no key as such. It all relationship, and the relations form a circle." The A, which demands a resolution to G-sharp, yielding the modulation from B major to A major, led him on until he came by way of A, D, and G major, to C major, and from there into the flatted keys, thus demonstrating to me that one can build a major or minor scale by using any of the twelve tones of the chromatic scale.

"That’s old hat, by the way," he said. "I noticed it some time ago. Just watch how it can be done more subtly!" And he began to show me modulations between more distant keys, exploiting so-called tertian harmony, the Neapolitan sixth.

Not that he could have given names to these things; but he repeated "It’s all relationship. And if you want to give it a more exact name, then call it ‘ambiguity.’" To illustrate his point he had me listen to a chord progression in no particular key, showed me how such a progression hovers between C and G major if you leave out the F, which would become an F-sharp in G major; how, if you avoid the B, the ear is kept in uncertainty whether it should hear the chord as C or F major, but adding a diminished B makes it the latter.

"Do you know what I think?" he asked. "That music is ambiguity as a system. Take this note or this one. You can understand it like this or again, like this, can perceive it as augmented from below or as diminished from above, and, being the sly fellow you are, you can make use of its duplicity just as you like." In short, he proved that in principle he was skilled at enharmonic transpositions and not unskilled at certain tricks for using them to evade a key and recasting them as modulation.

Why was I more than surprised, indeed moved and not a little shocked? His cheeks had taken on a flush they never had for schoolwork, not even algebra.

To be sure, I asked him to fantasize a little more for me, but I felt something like relief when he turned me down with a "Nonsense! Nonsense!" What sort of relief was that? It might have served as a lesson to me how proud I had been of his universal indifference and how clearly I sensed that his "curious" was indifference merely set on as a mask. I surmised a budding passion—Adrian had a passion! Should I have been glad? Instead it was somehow embarrassing and scary.

And so I now knew that he was working at music whenever he thought himself alone, given the exposed location of his instrument, however, it could not long remain a secret.
One evening his foster-father said to him, "Well, nephew, from what I heard you playing today, that wasn't the first time you've practiced."
"What do you mean, Uncle Niko?"
"Don't act the innocent. You were in fact making music."
"What a way to put it!"
"It's been applied to more foolish things. The way you got from F to A major was very ingenious. Do you enjoy it?"
"Oh, Uncle."
"Well, apparently you do. I want to tell you something. We'll have that old crate—no one bothers with it in any case—brought up to your room. Then you'll have it handy whenever you get the urge."
"That's dreadfully kind, Uncle, but it's certainly not worth the trouble."
"It's so little trouble that perhaps the pleasure will be all the greater. One more thing, nephew. You ought to take piano lessons."
"Do you think so, Uncle Niko? Piano lessons? I don't know, it sounds so 'hifalutin' and girlish."
"It could be even 'higher' and have nothing girlish about it. And if you study with Kretzschmar, it will be. As an old friend, he won't charge us an arm and a leg, and you'll get a foundation under your castles in the air. I'll speak to him."

Adrian repeated this conversation verbatim for me in the schoolyard. From then on he had lessons twice a week with Wendell Kretzschmar.

STILL YOUNG AT THE TIME, at most in his late twenties, Wendell Kretzschmar was born in Pennsylvania of German-American parents and had received his musical education in the country of his birth. But he had early felt the pull back to the Old World, from where his grandparents had once emigrated and where both his own roots and those of his art were to be found; and in the course of a nomadic life, whose stations and stopovers seldom lasted longer than one or two years, he had come to Kaisersaschern as our organist—it was only one episode that had been preceded by others (for he had previously been employed as a conductor at small municipal theaters in the German Reich and Switzerland) and would be followed by others. He also enjoyed some prominence as a composer of orchestral pieces and saw his opera, The Marble Statue, produced and warmly received on several stages.

Unprepossessing in appearance, a squat man with a round skull, short-clipped moustache, and brown eyes whose gaze was now musing, now frisky, but always given to smiling, he could truly have benefited the intellectual and cultural life of Kaisersaschern—had there been, that is, any life of that sort. His organ playing was accomplished and powerful, but you could count on the fingers of one hand those parishioners capable of appreciating it. Nonetheless his free afternoon concerts at the church attracted a good crowd, for whom he played the organ music of Schütz, Buxtehude, Froberger, and of course Sebastian Bach, plus all sorts of curious compositions typical of the epoch between Handel's and Haydn's flourishing; and Adrian and I attended