

Jens Johler

TUNING THE WORLD

Novel

Based on an idea by
Johler & Burow



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Excerpt

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Map on front end-sheet and back end-sheet: *Nova totius Germaniae Descriptio geographica*, Henricus Scherer, around 1700, copper engraving. Map Department of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

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»Had circumstances led him to a great Catholic court or to an independent bourgeois position, and he certainly would have welcomed such an outcome, he would have become absolutely the greatest opera composer of his time.«

Nikolaus Harnoncourt

»What Newton was as natural philosopher, Sebastian Bach was as a musician.«

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart

March 1722

½E OPENED HIS EYES AND STARED AT THE BEAMS OF THE CEILING. PALE BLUE MOONLIGHT CAME THROUGH THE WINDOW.

He wanted to rise, get out of bed, get into his study, the composer's chamber, make a little music, play something, anything to drive away the ghosts that had haunted him in his dream. But he couldn't move. His legs would not obey him, nor his arms, not even a single finger.

What's the matter with me?

He could still feel the pressure on his chest. Someone had put his boot down on it and pressed. He felt as though the boot were still pressing him down; his chest was constricted; he had a hard time breathing.

I can't get any air.

He listened to her breathing, even and steady beside him. When she exhaled, she made a soft whistling sound, a high G sharp. He wanted to wake her and ask her to help him with getting up. He opened his mouth to say: please help me, I can't move, I can't get any air but couldn't make a sound.

He couldn't do anything, not a thing. All he could do was lie there and stare at the beams.

Dear God, don't let me be paralyzed.

He closed his eyes and tried to think back on the dream. Who was it placing his boot on his chest? And how did it all come about? His feelings told him that something had happened in the dream, something that led to his paralysis. He had the curious notion that he had to return and ensure that the dream took a different course. With a different outcome.

Only of this world.

That's not how Erdmann had said it but that's how he meant it.

Your music is only of this world.

He had to go back.

Images from his dream arose within him. The carriage. The street. The canal. Now he remembered the shock that had seized him when the carriage started to sink, further and further down, deeper and deeper, until the water washed over them. But the water did not enter the carriage; the carriage continued unchecked on its way below the water surface. It was as though he were sitting in a fish as Jonas had in the belly of the whale.

I went in the wrong direction, he thought. No revelation of Heaven on Earth. No Jacob's ladder reaching upward. Only earthly music—that's all it is. I have failed. No, worse than that.

The pressure on his chest grew. A dark figure suddenly stood in front of the bed, straight as a pole, his right hand raised heavenward. A prophet. A messiah. A ruler over the tuning of the world. The others who surrounded him looked up at him fearfully, at his fiery eyes and his arm pointing heavenward.

Only she didn't look up.

Bach followed her gaze; his eyes moved from the prophet's black cloak to the black trousers and leather boots. But no. There was only one boot. Only the right foot was shod.

Incredulously, filled with horror, Bach's eyes were transfixed by the left foot.

I. Departure

ON THE FIFTEENTH OF MARCH 1700, SHORTLY BEFORE SUNRISE, BACH SET OFF. Johann Christoph accompanied him to the town gate and, since the morning light still refused to break, part of the way beyond it. When they stopped on top of the mountain, they saw the sun sending its first rays across the edge of the forest.

Will you be all right alone?

Bach didn't answer. Robbers and gypsies had their homes in the woodlands, waiting to grab his knapsack and violin. As soon as Johann Christoph would leave him, they'd pounce on him.

You're shivering. Are you cold?

He wasn't cold, he was just shivering. He would immediately break into a run after his brother was gone.

Well, then, young 'un, God bless you. Bach returned his brother's embrace and went off at a gallop.

Wait!

Johann Christoph pulled a rolled-up bundle of paper from his waistcoat. I almost forgot, he said. Here, it's yours now. Take it.

Bach took a step back, staring at the bundle.

You want me to put it in your knapsack?

While Johann Christoph untied his brother's knapsack and stowed away the roll of paper, Bach furtively wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

And work hard, always work hard, hear?

He nodded.

Why don't you say something? – And then, before finally going on his way back to Ohrdruf, Johann Christoph said in passing, more in a murmur than out loud: Beware of pride, young 'un. There will come a time where you'll surpass us all.

Astonished, Bach watched his brother walk away. Five long years had Johann Christoph been his teacher, a strict teacher who uttered nary a word of praise for him. And now this? And what was it that his brother had said? Was it a prophecy, a wish, a mission, an order?

Just as Johann Christoph disappeared between the trees, the incandescent ball of fire rose on the horizon. Inwardly, a radiantly pure C major chord resounded, soon dissolving in individual notes like for a harp. As he started walking again, Bach whistled the arpeggio softly to himself. All of a sudden, his fear was gone. He thought of Lüneburg, the Latin school, of the renowned Georg Böhm who played the organ there; he thought about the musical manuscript in his knapsack and about the words of his brother. And while it brought tears to his eyes once more, he hurried along so as to arrive in Gotha on time, where Georg Erdmann, his fellow pupil, eagerly awaited him.

ERDMANN WAS SITTING ON A STONE in front of the town hall and jumped up when he saw Bach. He was two years older than Bach, thinner and taller by a head. He, too, carried a knapsack on his back and instead of a violin, he had a lute hanging around his neck.

As they left the town wall behind them, Erdmann was saying that he had read a great deal over the last few weeks and had found his destiny. He would become a philosopher, the greatest one who ever lived. He would acquire all the knowledge of his time. Natural philosophy, moral philosophy, philosophy of law, everything! He had just read about an Englishman named Neuton.

Bach pricked up his ears. He liked the name.

This Neuton or Newton, Erdmann continued to explain, is quite an eminent philosopher; some say even more eminent than Leibniz, but that was for posterity to decide. Anyway, one day this Englishman was lying under an apple tree and fell asleep. And while he was peacefully dreaming away, he was rudely awakened all of a sudden, namely by an apple, which fell right on his head. He was angry and annoyed and naturally, he wanted

to vent his anger at someone. But at whom? There wasn't a soul in sight. After reflecting upon this for some time, the Englishman had a sudden inspiration on how all this was connected: the falling of the apple to the ground, the movement of the Earth around the sun, the movement of the moon around the Earth and indeed all other movements that are not the result of an external impact. So there is a force inherent to all physical bodies and at work in mysterious ways between them, without the bodies directly touching. And Newton called this magical force gravity.

Bach was fascinated. Softly, he said the word to himself: grav-i-ty. The word fascinated him. The thought fascinated him that everything, the near and the far, the heavens and the Earth, the moon and the apple were connected by a mysterious force. Grav-i-ty – he tested various intonations of the word to get nearer to its meaning; he elongated single syllables, stretching them; he varied melody and rhythm; and the more extensively he did so, the more he got caught up in the word; he stamped his feet, clapped his hands, snapped his fingers, until he noticed that Erdmann was looking at him with irritation.

Gravity, he said one final time in an austere voice, with a gesture of apology.

Erdmann interpreted this as encouragement and started to talk about Johannes Kepler, an astronomer who had postulated certain laws about the movement of the planets.

While listening to his friend with one ear, Bach heard the distant call of a cuckoo, asking himself what it meant that it first sang a flat third and then a major third. It sounded like farewell and loss.

A SHORT TIME BEFORE DARKNESS DESCENDED, they arrived in Langensalza. A little boy, barefoot, in ragged clothes, followed on their heels. He showed them the high tower of the market church and proudly explained to them that the stagecoaches, which had only recently started to stop here, went from Moscow clear to Amsterdam. When they got to the house of Erdmann's uncle, they gave the boy a pfennig, and he

immediately scampered away from them, as though he wanted to get the money to safety.

The uncle's house looked gray and bleak. It was built of wooden beams and clay bricks, had small crooked windows and a roof made of gray shingles. Through a high archway next to the house, one could see a cobbled courtyard and beyond it the smithy.

Erdmann's uncle was the town's blacksmith. He was a strong man with a powerful head and sad eyes. Reluctantly, he showed Bach and Erdmann a place for them to sleep and summoned them into the kitchen for the evening meal.

They ate the bread soup, cabbage meal with millet gruel in silence. The house seemed to be ruled by some form of black magic that made mute all words, all sounds, all thoughts. Bach could only feel a tormenting numbness in his head. Obviously, Erdmann felt the same. The uncle however thawed a little after he drank a glass of brandy, without offering them any. Who is your father, the uncle asked Bach.

Ambrosius Bach, the town musician in Eisenach, he replied. But his father was not alive anymore. He died five years ago. First his mother, then his father.

His wife died too, the uncle said. Half a year ago.

Bach nodded. He knew this already from Erdmann. The uncle did not have any children. He was all alone now.

When hitting the red-hot iron with his hammer in the morning, the uncle said, he sometimes didn't know whom he was hitting ... may God forgive him.

Bach remembered how his mother died. He stood next to the bed where she was laid out and imagined she was moving slightly, that she was breathing. Wake up, he whispered, wake up. He couldn't believe it wasn't in her power to do so. He was nine years old then. His father died a couple of months later. Still, he had had the good fortune not to be placed in an orphanage. His brother, who was the organist in Ohrdruf even then, took him in.

Why didn't they continue at school in Ohrdruf, the uncle asked.

They stopped the free meals for us, Erdmann explained. In Lüneburg, they would get everything for free. Accommodations, meals, classes. For that, they had to sing in the matins choir.

What nonsense all this is, said the uncle, and it wasn't clear whether he meant the cancelation of the subsidized meals in Ohrdruf or singing in the matins choir in Lüneburg.

They slept on straw sacks in a room adjoining the kitchen. As he was falling asleep, Bach thought back on the time in Eisenach. What joy it had been to accompany father when he went to play the little tower pieces on the trumpet from the balcony of the town hall or played at St. George's Church under the direction of the cantor. What joy it was to walk up with him to the Wartburg, where Luther had once found asylum, and listen to his father talking about all the creatures having their own melody, human beings, animals, even the plants. What joy it was to play music together with apprentices and journeymen, who were always willing to show him what they could do on the violin, the lute, the trumpet, the clavichord. And what joy it was to hear Uncle Christoph on the great organ, who had mastered the laws of harmony so perfectly that he could have five voice parts playing beside one another concurrently without difficulty. To be able one day to play as his uncle could—that had been his greatest wish from the very beginning.

IN THE MORNING, powerful hammer blows shook the house. Half asleep, Bach imagined his own head lying on the anvil and the next blow would split his head open. He leaped from the straw sack, slipped into his pants and waistcoat, buckled on the knapsack, threw the violin over his shoulder and hurried outside.

Erdmann was ready to depart, waiting for him in front of the house. Pythagoras, he said.

Bach gave him a questioning look.

Forging hammers, Erdmann said. That's how Pythagoras hit upon the

secret of harmony.

Ah, yes, Bach said. I've heard about it.

The farther they walked into the countryside, the more people they met on the road. Farmers riding to their fields on donkeys or pulling sluggish farm horses by the reins. Children in ragged clothes, of whom it was hard to tell whether they were tramping to work in the fields or whether they were orphans seeking their fortune in the world before they would be picked up and shut inside the workhouse. Journeymen on the road wearing the traditional clothing of their professions. And time and again beggars and thieves, who had one of their hands chopped off or even a hand and a foot. Once they overtook a lame man and a blind man. The blind man supported the lame man, and the lame man led the blind man. Bach would have liked to give them alms but he hardly had anything himself. Every once in a while, grand carriages passed them by, and they had to take care that the coachman didn't snap his whip on their backs just for fun. Individual riders also tore by them at full gallop, expecting that they would jump aside in time. Sometimes, dubious characters crossed their way, who covetously looked at their instruments, Bach's violin and Erdmann's lute. When asked for directions, and that happened more than once, they had to confess they didn't know their way around there either. At least Erdmann had written a list of the places they had to pass through on their way to Lüneburg. It was a pretty long list for a pretty long journey.

2. Final court hearing

ON SATURDAY AROUND NOON, they arrived at the border of the Duchy of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. They showed their passports and accompanying letters from Cantor Elias Herda and the invitation from St. Michael's Monastery in Lüneburg. They were allowed to pass. Carriages stood idle on both sides of the barrier and couldn't go on. The track width of the roads, only consisting of two cobbled ribbons running parallel to each other, was different in the two countries. So the coachmen had their hands full, replacing axles and reducing or expanding the track width. The latter depended on where they came from and where they wanted to go. Meanwhile, the passengers stood by the wayside, offering unsolicited advice.

Erdmann and Bach joined them, and Erdmann commenced to reflect upon the fact that Germany was fragmented into so many tiny principalities. Each of them with a little Sun King! Each with its very own track width! But wait and see! Toward the end of this *saeculum*, Germany will be just as unified as England and France! Then this nonsense will stop. Then new roads will be built that are uniform for the entire country, in straight lines, at right angles to one another, constructed according to the Laws of Reason. He would bet his life on it!

The passengers around them turned, looking at both wayfarers suspiciously. Who were *they*? What were they doing here? How dare they hold inflammatory speeches here?

Bach seized Erdmann by the sleeve of his rust-colored jacket and pulled him vigorously away.

THE NEXT NIGHT, just a week after they had hiked off, Bach suggested going into an inn and eating as much as they could for a change to mark the occasion, at his expense. He would treat his friend.

It's your birthday? Erdmann asked.

March twenty-first, said Bach. I'm fifteen now. Although ...

He wasn't completely certain whether he was really fifteen now. To be exact, he was eleven days short. The calendar had been converted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which had been in use in Catholic countries for a hundred years at this point. The adjustment had made it necessary to drop eleven days from the year. The eighteenth of February was not followed by the nineteenth but by the first of March. Eleven days rubbed out, just like that, perdu! One could really start speculating, he said, whether I'm fifteen today or only on the first of April.

Then what we ought to do is celebrate it twice, said Erdmann.

You would like that, wouldn't you, said Bach.

Tables were free at the inn called "Zur Linde." They picked a table in the rear of the room that was lit by candles and oil lamps. Bach ordered roast rabbit and wine.

After the second glass, he told his friend about the musical manuscript his brother had stuck into his knapsack. They were copies of musical pieces that his brother had kept in a locked cabinet. Scores by Pachelbel, Böhm, Buxtehude and even by some Italian composers. Bach had secretly copied out the pieces by the light of the moon; and when his brother had found this out, he took the scores away and locked them again in the cabinet.

Why's that? Erdmann asked.

Why's what?

Why did he take them away from you?

Because he had not permitted it, Bach said.

And why did he forbid it? Because they are precious. He paid a lot of money for such copies. And the more there are of them, the lower their price is.

Got you, said Erdmann. But after all, you're his brother.

Sure thing, said Bach. That's why he gave them back to me.

In the meantime, the innkeeper had stepped up to their table and put two more glasses of wine down.

With all respect, Mr. Innkeeper, said Erdmann, we didn't order this.

They come from the cloth merchant over there, the innkeeper said, nodding his head in the direction of a well-dressed patron. He asks whether you gentlemen would play a little music. A song on the lute. Accompanied by the fiddle. Maybe also a little singing?

A song? Well, why not? They had had a good meal and drunken some. But not so much that they wouldn't be able to play music anymore. And who knows, maybe the innkeeper would let them stay overnight for free if their music made the patrons consume more wine. They unpacked their instruments and set themselves up in the center of the room.

The fancy took me, Erdmann sang, *to ride to the woods, where the air is filled with the song of birds*. Bach sang the second voice part and fiddled melodious figures around it.

The patrons applauded with some restraint.

Erdmann didn't wait too long to play the second song:

You are the goldsmith's young daughter

And I am the farmer's son, yes, his son

The applause grew stronger. Some of the patrons had sung a couple of lines along with them. The mood lifted perceptibly, it got cheerier and soon

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