

Ludwig by himself

My grandmother had the nicest voice there ever was, silvery and luminous. But an operatic tenor needs a glistening radiant tone. Even when I was very small Granny used to take me to daylight concerts, solid accurate performances of the Westwood Island choral society. Solid tenors and an enlightened audience are the secrets of a performance. If it were not for Granny the shadows would have stolen my sleep when I was little. And Ludwig was a very fine tenor, the glowing heart of the choir.

I slept well as a baby, right through the night from the age of six months. That all changed at the age of three, when I first noticed the dark. Really noticed it: before that I knew that it was harder to see at night, but I hadn't thought about the things I could not see. Sometime around that age I began to think of all the things that might be there. They could be just anything, so I would shout and cry. My parents dug out the baby alarm they had never used, but that just meant that I would scream into the microphone for them to come and tell me what was in this shadow and behind that door. Granny had the solution. She went to bed early every night, right after supper. It was her house and she cooked the supper we all ate together, so my parents were glad to have the evening to themselves, at any rate when their little darling wasn't disturbing them every five minutes. Granny reversed the alarm: put the microphone by her bed in her room and the speaker by mine in mine. It is not easy to explain, but her breathing was like her voice, grounded and reliable, and when I wondered what was in the shadows I just listened to her breathing. It seemed like a bedtime story, bedtime music, filling the dark with the safe and familiar.

Ludwig, now, he was different. About five foot ten, dark hair that hung over his forehead as if it has been washed once too often, and a very reliable voice. Lucky he was a tenor, granny said, as that was the secret of a concert, reliable tenors like Ludwig. And a reliable audience like us, who look at the choir when we know something special is about to happen, so the choir expects it too, and hold themselves ready when something difficult seems near, so the choir remembers. Singers are aware of things like this, even if they do not know they are. They are aware of them from other singers too, though they cannot tell you about the most important cues. And tenors are the most important of them, Granny told me. They almost never sing the

tune on top, nor the bottom bit that you can hear even when it isn't the tune. They're in the middle and without them neither of the ends will sound the same. So the tenors can prod and pull and squeeze without being noticed. The audience will think the sopranos are a bit too swoopy or the bases are thumping too much, but really it is up to the tenors to lead them out of it. Or keep them honest and inspired. Ludwig was a master of this, a tenor among tenors, and the unusual thing was that everyone knew it. Everything will be all right as long as Ludwig's there, they would say.

My parents would read me bedtime stories, but this never got me to sleep because I wouldn't want them to end, and I would keep asking questions about what happened to the people after that part of the story was over. Stories involving grandmothers bothered me particularly. Did Little Red Riding hood continue to visit her grandmother after the wolf had been killed, or was she too afraid it would be another wolf in disguise? Why did Snow White's grandmother not protect her from the wicked stepmother? I had no follow-up questions when my grandmother put me to bed. She wouldn't read me stories but she would sing to me. She sang mostly folk songs and ballads, so there was usually a story of some kind in the song, but I didn't stay awake wondering what happened after the story because I could listen to Granny's musical breathing through the speaker, and this seemed to continue the song, telling me what came next. When I was a little older she would play me arias from operas, and I wondered why the men had such high voices. It's so you can hear their words when they're singing with the others, she said, though this didn't impress me since I couldn't understand the words anyway. But it was clear that these men sang very well, and very loudly, and not very subtly. This puzzled me, since she said they were called tenors.

Everyone told Ludwig what a fine tenor he was, and how he was at the heart of the choir's success. Most of the time the tenors do the tenor thing, pulling strings from deep inside the music. But every now and then they get a moment when their tune is uncovered and speaks for itself. Then Ludwig would glow and his own interesting tone would pop out where we could hear it for itself, separate from the rest of the choir and the other tenors. Afterwards we would tell him how distinguished he had sounded for that moment, and how we wished there were more such moments. Ludwig would look modest. but it was clear that the compliments were important to him. They became more and more what he took his function in the choir to be. He didn't have much else in life.

One afternoon -- I must have been about twelve -- Grannie and I watched a DVD of *Don Giovanni*. I found it rather scary. Not the avenging statue and hell opening up, really, but the purple and brown shadowed minor harmonies of the overture and the last act. By this time I was not going to bed till about ten, but the baby alarm had never been removed and on impulse I turned it on and went quickly to sleep, lulled by Granny humming fragments of the arias and orchestral passages. I was so lucky in my granny. The shadows in my room seemed very deep, but there seemed to be little sparks and flashes in them as I drifted peacefully off. In the morning I began to hum something that had just sidled into my mind. Granny was making the porridge and she looked puzzled. "That's not from the opera, and I wouldn't have thought you had ever heard it. But it was in my mind last night." I told her how I could have heard it, and she told me it was from a cantata "Gottlob er ist gekommen" by a little-known 18th century German, Fregius. "And you know", she said "it isn't so very difficult, and it has a very prominent tenor solo. They could do it."

They liked the idea. Ludwig particularly liked the idea. A chance to break out into solo prominence. They practiced twice a week for two months, until they felt reasonably secure. Then they gave a charity performance in the Westwood Island community centre. It turned out that it was the first performance ever in North America. After a brief overture by our orchestra of two violins, oboe, and piano there was a stirring chorale using all our singers, who were sprightly, sensitive, and colourful. You could hear the inner voices pushing the outer ones into place. Then the second movement, with the famous tenor solo. The choral parts were fine. Ludwig was feeble. He seemed lost. Sometimes he sounded like he was trying to cue or encourage a soloist. But he was the soloist. Sometimes he sounded like he was trying to galvanise the silent choir. He was accurate and in good voice; in fact he sang well. But there was no life to it, no colours hiding in the shadows and no shadows behind the colours. Then there was another movement with a brief soprano and alto duet. Afterwards we told Ludwig how good he had been. But he knew.

Ludwig began to visit my parents on choir nights. Anything but be in the choir. In fact he never sang again. By this time my bedtime was late enough that I could go to the evening concerts myself. My parents wanted to go, too, but they couldn't leave Ludwig to sit miserably alone. Granny solved the problem, as usual. "Come with us" she commanded. "They need you. I'll show you how."

We arrived in time to get seats in the front row. Granny left us for a moment and went to the stage. When she returned she handed Ludwig the speaker of the baby alarm. "The volume is at the lowest. Put it to your ear and you'll hear what's happening right in the middle." She had put the microphone between the tenor and alto sections. The concert began. There was a problem in the very first piece. They were following the conductor but they were somehow not together. Ludwig drew himself up and moved as if he were singing. He tightened his whole body when concentration was needed; he contorted his cheeks when the pitch should rise an imperceptible amount; he stuck out his jaw when it should lower. Suddenly they were all right. They stayed right for the rest of the concert. And the following ones, with Ludwig in the front of the audience willing them into shape.

He kept the baby alarm, though. Granny said I didn't need it any more. When I couldn't sleep I read scores instead.