

## CHAPTER 28

Unfortunately, none of the concerts they were going to attend included any music by one of Maria's favorite composers, Anton Bruckner. To remedy that situation, she suggested to Joe when they were planning their honeymoon that they stop at Ansfelden, Bruckner's birthplace, and St. Florian, his resting place, before proceeding to Salzburg. He, of course, had readily agreed and now they found themselves on a highway looking at a sign and silhouette of Bruckner, indicating they were close to Ansfelden. They arrived at his Geburtshaus (birth house), a yellowish house with a red roof and paid a visit inside. She did not say much as she moved around the house, but it was evident Maria was awestruck at being at the site where he was born.

As they left, she stared at the memorial plaque placed above the home's entrance. "Could you please translate that?" she politely asked.

"Sure Maria." He looked admiringly at the devotion on her face and read the plaque aloud:

"The inscription reads:

To their honorary member, the famous composer  
Dr. Anton Bruckner,  
Knight of the Franz Josef Order,  
Imperial Court organist, lecturer at the Imperial  
University of Vienna, honorary citizen of Linz, born in  
this house, on September fourth, eighteen twenty-four.

The choral society Frohsinn of Linz dedicates this plaque. May, eighteen eighty-five."

"Thanks a lot Joe."

He did not ask her anything, seeing that she had experienced a quiet, reflective moment that did not need to be interrupted. She wheeled herself toward the van and entered. Dmitri turned on the ignition and they were off to St. Florian, where Bruckner's grave was, in the oldest Augustinian monastery in Austria. When they arrived, Maria asked Joe if he could place a few towels they had in the van in the back of her wheelchair.

"Why do you want the towels?" he asked.

"You'll see in a few minutes," she answered cryptically.

They entered the monastery where they encountered a few people paying their respects to Bruckner's grave. When they moved away, Maria moved closer. She wheeled herself right next to the grave, looking at the slab with a cross in the upper part, followed by his name, Anton Bruckner. Underneath it were his dates, 1824-1896. In the background were thousands of human skulls. To Maria it seemed that those thousands of Yoricks, even in death, were gazing in amazement at Bruckner's grave and all the magnificent music he had given to the world. She closed her eyes and sat silently for several minutes. Joe didn't know if she were praying, meditating, or something else, but whatever it was, she was completely absorbed in it. After she finished, she asked Joe if he could place the towels on the floor.

"OK, Maria, but what do you want them for?"

"Joe, would you please take me off the wheelchair and place me on the towels? I can't do him justice while I'm sitting in this wheelchair."

He was surprised with her request, but complied with it and Dmitri also lent a hand. A monk curiously approached them and asked Joe in German what was going on. Joe explained to him that she wanted to pay her respects to the composer and didn't feel it was appropriate to do so in a wheelchair. It was her way of genuflecting. The monk smiled, looked at Maria, almost reverentially, and walked away. Again she closed her eyes, and remained in reverent silence.

After a few minutes, she said to Joe, "I'm ready."

They helped her back on to the wheelchair and returned to the van.

"I didn't want to say anything before because you were so wrapped up in the moment, but you obviously like him a lot."

"I like many, many, many composers, but there are two that are especially dear to me—Vaughan Williams, for his *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* and *Fourth Symphony*, and Bruckner for his *Ninth Symphony*. Now, I love their other works as well. As you know, I loved the performance of Vaughan Williams' *Sixth Symphony* along with the *Fourth*, and I love all of Bruckner's eleven symphonies, but his last symphony, the *Ninth* and Vaughan William's *Fourth Symphony* are extra, extra, extra special for me."

"You just said Bruckner's *Ninth Symphony* was his last; but earlier you said that you liked all of his eleven symphonies."

"Yes, but he also wrote his *Symphony Number Zero* and his *Student Symphony*, but number nine was his last. He never completed the last movement though."

"So tell me, Maria, why do you like this symphony so much?"

"Remember what I told you about great, great music in Vienna?"

"Yes."

"That's why. For me the ending of the first movement is overwhelming. It defies death; it's so powerful and defiant that for a moment I feel that death has been overcome. The scherzo is malevolently sarcastic. It begins lightheartedly as though everything will be a big joke but then turns into crushing violent music. It's as though it were saying, Ha! Ha! Ha! You didn't think you'd succumb to my clutches but you will; everyone will. I am Death who was just toying with you for the first few notes. Now I'm here and nobody can escape my presence. Then you have the magnificent last movement's 'farewell to life' where...well, I've already said enough, you should listen to the whole symphony and see what you get out of it."

"After what you've said I definitely will. I was left in suspense."

They got into the van and were on their way to Salzburg. It was about two in the afternoon when they entered the Mozartplatz, admiring Mozart's statue.

"Salzburg, Mozart's birthplace, another great composer who

left this earth too early. I'm so glad we got a chance to see his house this morning, even though it was only from the outside."

"Look at it this way, Maria; there haven't been too many places we've been unable to visit because of your wheelchair, but some of these places are old and cramped and difficult to move around in."

"I am in no way complaining, I'm just making an observation. Looking at his house from outside was sufficient for me."

They explored a few stores and bought a few items before returning to the hotel. They ate in the hotel restaurant, and then prepared themselves for the concert.

Joe looked quite dapper and Maria looked ravishing in her evening dress that draped two-thirds down her wheelchair. The weather was overcast and he brought along a couple of umbrellas, just in case. Dmitri, punctual as usual, was waiting for them in the hotel lobby and drove them over to the Grossesfestspielhaus.

"Ah, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*," he said. "What a great work. I've heard it on the radio a couple of times, but never really paid it the attention it deserves. Now that I'm seeing it live, I'll do just that."

"I've heard it so many times on the radio and CD, but this is my first live performance for me as well."

The first notes seemingly arising from the misty, primeval dawn of creation surfaced from the orchestra quickly building up to a powerful moment that gave Maria the impression that the music was rejoicing in the successful creation of life. It continued, alternating between serene, contemplative moments of beauty along with more aggressive, even martial music, no doubt she thought exploring the various joys and travails of life. It was evident they were both enjoying this musical journey. There was an epic urgency in this great music, an impetus that felt like everyone was being carried along on a communal journey. She was anxiously anticipating the ending of the movement, her favorite section of the work. For some reason, she could never pinpoint she felt, at times, the end was a repudiation of the entire movement, discarding everything good or bad that had gone on previously. At other times, she felt it was an encapsulation of the entire movement. Either way, the last minute and a half or