

Dramma per Musica

or The Frenzy of Alexander

ALEX JEFFERS



Selected Letters:
letter the fourth



photograph

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

From the man I trust may God defend me.
From the man I trust not I will defend myself.
—graffito,
dungeons of the Palazzo Ducale, Venice

1



Saturday, 13 March 1993

Dearest Heart, life yourself,

I could phone you easily enough – speed-dial button A, one touch – although I’d probably wake you up. Or I could take my life, and my key to your apartment, into my hands and venture out into the blizzard. I timed myself once: it takes twelve minutes to walk from here to there. Even in this storm it wouldn’t be much longer. But then again I’d wake you, and you said you’d had a tough week. And you said – these were your words: “It hasn’t snowed properly for three winters – you’re out of practice.” Just a moment ago I saw the clouds light up for an instant and heard thunder: never before, in a snowstorm.

So instead I’ll sit in front of the computer. I’ve set it to remind me to save my documents every ten minutes because the radio warned to worry about power outages. Somehow I still think of snowfall as quiet, a gentle event: I’m a Californian. Around noon the printer ran out of paper, so I girded my

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

loins and donned my boots for a visit to the office-supply store around the block. First the wind nearly knocked me down, then the snow in my eyes blinded me and froze most uncomfortably in mustache and nostrils. Management's snow blower had recently passed by, but even as I followed its path the drifts on the sidewalk were over my ankles – over the tops of the boots. I couldn't see across the street. Cars at the curb wore ten-inch-thick helmets of snow, sat in drifts to their axles, shouldered driver-side doors up against three-foot berms where a plough had passed, blocking them in. And then, when I got to the store, it was closed. As was the 24-hour convenience shop next door – that's when I knew this was serious business. Still, I'm certain I could make it over to your place. But the blizzard will have blown over before I'm ready to print this out, doubtless.

2

In Elizabeth Bowen's novels and stories she takes for granted a letter mailed in the morning will reach its destination across London in the afternoon delivery. This even during the Blitz. This letter, if I were to take it down to the mailbox on the curb, wouldn't reach you for two, three days, even in clear weather – I suppose it goes first to Worcester or Springfield to be sorted. If you want rapid delivery you use the fax or call a messenger. No wonder nobody writes letters. Faster to drop it off myself. But in fact in this instance I count on the delay, and count on our being snowed-in tomorrow – is your larder stocked, Ethan? – on your going to work Monday morning.

You see, the printer ran out of paper because it was spitting out the new manuscript, 500+ pages;

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

I was at loose ends all morning, listening to the printer's annoying thip-thip (tedious continuo for the Handel *Orlando* I listened to with the other ear), watching each sheet squeeze through the aperture into the tray. I drank a great deal of coffee. For some reason I didn't want to call you – or anyone else, for that matter – and the cats, insensitive as only they can be, were asleep. I thought of baking bread or making cookies but couldn't find the energy or the ingredients. As usual, on finishing something, I sat on that knife-edge between exhilaration and despair when you can't comprehend eighteen months' labor and passion are done, and you can't imagine what you'll do next. It's at these times and few others I feel I ought to have a proper job. I was no fit company – for myself, for Element or Enkidu, for you. The countertenor taking the contralto role of Orlando went mad for love, his unrealistically high voice dodging from secco to arioso recitative and back. I read Jack's book. You told me not to.

3

I shouldn't even remember who he is. How long is it since I last saw him – since he broke my heart? The summer before I moved east: 1984, nine years. I shouldn't even remember who he is. The photo on the jacket flap reveals how he's changed – or I've changed; he could be anybody, any man in his middle thirties, hardly even handsome, let alone the beauty I remember. His forehead, always high, reaches nearly to the crown of his skull. I don't remember his face being so round. New beard and unflattering new glasses make it rounder. I remember his profile, his splendid nose as big as Gibraltar.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

I fear I would be less distraught, less unhappy, less disoriented if I *were* in Jack's novel, however distorted the caricature, if there were some evidence he hadn't plucked me off his skin, crushed me, as easily as if I were a flea, as easily forgotten. But then, I never wrote about him, except obsessively, for a short period, for him alone – with the sure certainty he would never read it.

4

This is a lie. You know: I wrote to you. What a ghastly archive must be your file of my letters. And still there are tricks of him all over my work: his height (you're tall, but he was taller); his habitual white leather sneakers and a particular deep blue flannel shirt I often longed to wear, his little round tortoiseshell spectacles; his big eloquent hands and elegant big nose. Tricks, traces. I don't remember the color of his eyes. I cannot recall his voice, low, ostentatiously quiet so that one had to lean in, as though to hear a confidence. Was it baritone or tenor, chest or head? I've written characters into his apartment any number of times, although it's usually me living in that spartan studio, not him; I never (hardly ever) write in the direct historical present about San Francisco because – see here – there is San Francisco *before* Jack, anticipating, and *after* Jack, regretting, but I cannot get a handle on *during* Jack. I've written him over so many times, so many times reinvented him, I wouldn't recognize the man if I met him (I don't recognize the author of this dreadful book) (which I almost believe I could admire, while continuing to dislike, if his name weren't on the cover) and yet I

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

remain convinced – vain fear! – he will recognize himself, and me.

You see how (why) I couldn't phone you. All (almost all) of these damaged, fragmented portraits of Jack are simultaneous faulty pictures of you.

5

There is a particular variety of irrationalism derided as operatic. I revile that variety of opera even as I revel (wallow) in the unreal, the overstated case. I never loved Jack (there: it's said – are you relieved?): I went mad for love. *Handel's achievement throughout this scene, as elsewhere in the opera, is to convey a sense of disorder and chaos in music which by its very nature has to be highly organised; this he does by juxtaposing ideas often disparate in tempo and rhythm but held together by an unerring control of the underlying harmonic progressions.* This, from the booklet accompanying my 3-CD box, reads more musically in Italian – *Il merito di Händel in tutta questa scena come pure nel resto dell'opera, è quello di comunicare un senso di disordine e caos tramite una musica che per sua stessa natura deve essere altamente organizzata,* etc – just as the libretto does. Oh, if – if only! – I could take it for my manifesto. I aspire to the eighteenth century but only ever hit the nineteenth and then, ashamed, revolted, slather over it a twentieth-century varnish such that even my editor, I think, even my agent believe I'm writing, as it were, real life. In English.

As, no doubt, Jack believes he does.

And you, when you want legitimate vocal music, prefer the austere unaccompanied sonorities of medieval Latin, the massed, monophonic tenor thunder of monks. This I adore about you, caro, did

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

you know? The choirs and cloisters where Gregorian chant echoes in my mind are not, dare I say, chaste, Christian spaces though they are, yes, holy, dedicated. Your thoughtful scowl as you listen, immersed. Your distance, your sweet concentration, your slowness to rouse. Baroque counterpoint and ornament, I've heard you say, are all very well instrumentally, but add voice – single, duple, ensemble, choral – it goes all to hell, you can't keep track.

6

About Jack I don't know. Nine years ago he said he liked the same rock I did – or was it that I liked what he did? – but of what one must call Classical Music we never spoke. We spoke about everything, I thought. We talked, for instance, far more about sex than we ever did it.

You know all this. I talked to him – I wrote to you. You know all this. You, I imagine, have already read the book you advised me not to read, and if you found me in it you will either tell me or you won't.



*N*ow, for in fact I never stop working, there's never not something else to work on, I will open a new window on the screen. That last paragraph admits of no development. There are other projects. With scarcely any evidence of my competence to fill the brief, an editor in Manhattan has invited me to contribute a story to an anthology of new erotica. He suggests he would prefer a first-person narrative. Shall I write about you, Ethan – our

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

deepest, most sordid secrets? (Do we have any?) Or about Jack? Or make something up completely?



7

*J*rumpled the cats' heads where they lay snoozing on the bed – Element snarled at me, Enkidu purred and drooled and asked if it were dinner time ... at 3.30 in the AM. He followed me into the kitchen, still begging, when I went to make another espresso. Outside the window a blowing, glowing curtain of snow brushed against the glass, scraped with an arid, hissy noise against the screen. Out there it must be quite cold. In here, radiators clank and spit and radiate and I stalk about (or sit at my desk) stark naked, sweating, sweltering. While the espresso pot built up its little head of steam, I turned on the radio, listened – aghast – to five or ten minutes of furious alternative rock. It's Sunday now, I'm not in the mood. It's Sunday: I don't know the Catholic ecclesiastical calendar, but I believe it's Lent. That is, not Carnival. Carnival, historically, is the season for opera.

George Frideric Handel (or Georg Friedrich Händel), though German and presumably Lutheran by birth, living in Protestant London and patronized by a German Protestant king, wrote opera seria to Italian libretti for the voices of Italian (presumably Catholic) singers. Germany interests me scarcely at all, Britain hardly more. *Orlando*, of course, is based (very freely) on Ariosto, an enduring passion. In the 1730s Handel's greatest rival for the allegiance of opera-going London society was the Neapolitan

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

Nicola Porpora. I have no proper Italian eighteenth-century opera on CD. (There exist, I understand, several Vivaldi *dramme per musica* on Ariostovian themes, but I've never encountered one recorded.) When, demitasse in hand, I returned to my desk and purring computer, I put on a selection of Vivaldi concerti. Any day of the week I'll choose Venice over Naples.

8



Zanni!" Domenico bellowed my name across the crowded parterre. In case I had failed to hear, he climbed up on his chair and waved his hands over his head, grinning his lackwit grin. "Over here, Zanni!"

I waved back, for everyone already knew we were friends, and began to work my way toward him. His grin widening – many another of his acquaintance would ignore him – he remained perched on his chair, in plain sight. Ever ready to play the fool, he pulled three bright oranges from a pocket and started to juggle. They flew magically between his hands, someone laughed for sheer pleasure, and by the time I reached my friend a circle of admirers surrounded him. In the boxes, I imagined, jaded patricians placed bets as to when Domenico would fumble, hiding behind painted fans as they peered down from a gilded height, making petty, hissy remarks out of the corners of their mouths. For a fact,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

a number of those applauding Domenico wore garments of noble quality, although they were, of course, masked. I shouldered one such handsome specimen aside with an apology he had to accept, it being Carnival. Domenico ended his show by tossing two of the oranges to me – I caught them, one in either hand – and collapsing onto his seat in a move that appeared clumsy but was not.

9

“I knew you’d come,” he said when I sat down beside him. Ignoring jocular pleas for an encore, he busied himself peeling the last orange. Little scraps of golden rind fell to the floor; a breath of sharp fragrance wafted up from his ugly, blunt-fingered, clever hands, from the moist red flesh of the fruit.

“Of course I came. How could I not?”

“He won’t be as good as they say, you know.” Domenico peered at me sidelong, up from under his eyebrows. He was so ugly people assumed he was insensitive and imbecile as well, ugly of soul. My friend took a kind of bitter satisfaction in confirming their expectations, a tactic I appreciated but which appalled me. In affected, swooning tones, he crooned, “*Il evirato divino! Il Peccatino! ...*The sin will be his subjecting us to his voice.”

“He’ll squawk like a goose,” I agreed.

“And the music,” Domenico muttered. “I dread to imagine it. These Neapolitan hacks, their scores aren’t fit to wipe Maestro Vivaldi’s behind.”

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

Contrary, I said, "This one's said to have studied under the elder Scarlatti. Perhaps he was teachable."

"Dreamer." Domenico pressed a sour-sweet segment of orange between my lips. Because he expected it, because he was my only real friend, because I loved him even as, often enough, he disgusted or mortified me, I kissed his sticky fingertips. The second bit of orange was followed by Domenico's index finger, the nail scraping my tongue, tickling it. He laughed in my ear, a breathy *beb-beb*, pressed his knee against mine, with his free hand tugged proprietarily at my pigtail. Then, satisfied he'd made a scandal of us both, he sucked a piece of orange into his own mouth and, chewing, said, "It's a Roman cast."

10

Only in his own temporal state is the Pope able to enforce the Church's ban against women's appearing on stage. Pronounced with the deepest disdain, Domenico's remark was meant to annoy me. I was spared having to reply by the appearance of the composer, taking his seat at the continuo harpsichord. There were jeers. From a balcony above the orchestra, a patrician lady tossed a gnawed chicken bone, her *cicisbeo* snickering at the fun. No-one likes a Neapolitan. Least of all a youthful Neapolitan who has scored a triumph in Rome and dares to bring the identical show, a year later, to Venice, mother of the opera. Naturally the house was full. I

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

had had to pay to enter, as, in respect of my profession, I seldom did. But no-one much was here for the music – Domenico and I, perhaps, excepted.

11

In their boxes, patricians bickered and railed, played at cards, sipped chocolate and coffee and wine, nibbled at pastries and little roast partridges, planned assignations or, indeed, in shadowed recesses, made love. On the parterre the commons grumbled and fidgeted. Some of us, if we could read, leafed through the libretto – the poet, too, was a rank upstart, though a Florentine; others, still more accomplished, scanned broadsheet scores of arias that were already notorious, although unheard in Venice – tracing the complex staves and humming, perhaps, under the breath. Urchins selling spiced nuts, confits, greasy lukewarm sausage, wandered through the mob, crying their wares in high, desolate trebles, while others watched for ready purses or promised, for the most minimal of considerations, to run speedy errands. “Two sweet coffees, signori? It is done already!” The boy flashed me a grin of startling beauty as he pocketed my coins, and dashed away. One’s ears had to be wide open, inured to the din, to catch the orchestra beginning.

The overture commenced pleasantly enough, what one could hear of it. Certain of the musicians, though, themselves were lackadaisical, careless. No Neapolitan par-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

venu could expect to have the respect of Venetian players. I thought the score nicely constructed, if too pretty, and it annoyed me how poorly they performed the little required of them. Domenico grumbled voicelessly beside me. At his keyboard, the composer doggedly kept time. I could clearly see the malevolent glares he cast at first violin, who, keeping a shamelessly straight face, persisted shamelessly in dropping or misreading notes, throwing the rest of the strings into turmoil. The composer's cheeks went from flush to pallor to flush. Domenico's grumbles grew louder. At length, as the violinist made hash of a fragile cadenza, my friend uttered a belch of outrage and hauled himself gracelessly up onto the seat of his chair.

12

"Are you a musician, Stefano Manin, or a clown?" he bellowed, his voice cracking with scorn. The violinist's bow scraped across the strings with a spiteful shriek and his cheeks blushed the crimson of the velvet curtains across the stage. Second violin, behind him, a more conscientious musician, took the opportunity to smack his crown with his bow. "In paradise your sainted mamma is weeping for shame," Domenico continued, his tone at once mournful and hectoring, echoing across the suddenly hushed theatre. One was not to be surprised he knew the violinist's name and family. A single startled guffaw rang out from a high box, and the composer, white as

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

bleached linen, covered his eyes with both hands. Glancing up at my friend, his ugly face contorted in fury, I felt as mortified as the composer. “You will apologize at once to the maestro, Stefano,” Domenico ordered, “and then you will play the notes he has written for you to the best of your competence, or you will step down and allow a proper musician your place. You hear?”

13

I watched the composer’s livid features as he accepted the violinist’s apology – so servile as to be graceful – and when Domenico, satisfied, clambered down from his pulpit, I murmured, “You’ve made an enemy there.”

“Stefano? He’ll be boasting of this night for weeks.”

The urchin chose that moment to return with our coffees. Trembling with awe, he offered the cups to Domenico, though I had bought them. When I took mine from the tray, he started, nearly upsetting it. Downing his in one swallow, Domenico scowled at the boy, who smiled with beatific terror and ran away.

“The maestro,” I said.

“That one?” Domenico grunted. “That milksop? If he’s not a eunuch he might as well be.” He patted my hand. “Now, sit back and listen, Zanni. I have braved the risk of his hired stilettos solely for your pleasure.”

Played over from the beginning, the overture received more respectful attention than,

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

no doubt, the composer had known since hot-house days in the conservatory. Mostly it wasn't deserved. A pointlessly virtuoso passage in the highest register of the strings, which Stefano led with perfect aplomb, inspired a few cries of "Bravo!" I held my coffee to my lips, tasting its sweet-bitter heat on my tongue, awaiting the voices.

14

A flourish, a fanfare. The curtains swept wide, revealing an exquisite pasteboard set, the formal gardens of a fine Palladian villa on terraferma, although it meant to represent the palace of antique King Minos in Crete. A mossy grotto to the side did for the entrance of the labyrinth: in its shadowy mouth stood a figure intended to be terrifying: a stocky person, in rags, wearing a bull's head mask with tall gilded horns. His jaw and mouth were left exposed for him to sing. From the wings entered the Teseo, a tall, elegant, martial figure, and he, a fine contralto, and baritone Minotaur exchanged recitative threats.

Then, with such subtlety one noticed the sudden presence, not the arrival, entered the Arianna. This primo uomo, of whom we had heard so much – his like had not been heard since Farinelli's début, they said – wore a great gown of crimson velvet, gold tissue, white linen and lace. Surmounted by a towering elaboration of powder-white wig, face and neck and breast were painted lead white, glistening. Bruised with caustic black cosmetic,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

the eyes glowed hugely, dark, liquid – dosed with belladonna, doubtless. Parting scarlet lips, he voiced a brief recitative aside on the manly charms of Teseo, expressing regret he must be devoured by the cruel monster. He sang, the Arianna, this passage at what must be the bottom of his register – he was said to be a high, brilliant soprano – astonishing in its control, very simple and nearly ugly, and then was silent, still as a figure in German porcelain.

15

With rare subtlety or insane bravado, the young Neapolitan had composed his first aria not for either of the castrati – given more established singers, he would not have dared slight them so – but the baritone monster. It was competent, unexceptionable; the beast sang adequately, accepted with bovine dignity his lackluster applause, and retreated within his cave.

Over tedious continuo, primo and secondo uomini bantered back and forth for a bit, lame verse unredeemed by the trick of one's rhyming the other's lines, the second exercising his clear, promising contralto, the first maintaining his chilling, constrained attack, as affected as a basso's burlesque falsetto. Growing bored, Domenico began to caress my knee. I kept my eyes on the Arianna, willing him actually to sing, to possess the voice that was promised. The technique he had, clearly, to spare.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

I was not for an instant convinced he was a woman, but the illusion was flawless: he was lovely, inhumanly perfect, lacquered, brilliant, brittle. Myself, who had never – to my friends’ amusement and disgust – bedded nor wished to bed a woman, I was entranced. The proportions of his face were odd, overstated – the black eyes set far apart and as large in the pointed face as a cat’s, the brows rising strangely high in perfect painted bows. The nose was long, with deep flaring nostrils. Settled in a complacent half-smile, crimson lips nevertheless stretched wider across the narrow jaw than seemed possible. A black patch – *assassina* – lengthened the line of the mouth on the right, giving it an eccentric, lascivious little quirk; another – *passionata* – was applied at the corner of the left eye, a glittering black gem on the crown of the cheekbone.

16

They moved about, the Arianna and the Teseo, in a grand slow ballet like the movements of stars in the firmament, singing at while never physically acknowledging one another, pacing slow measures among potted shrubs on the stage, the one a donna nobile in red and gold, the other a cavaliere eroico in blue and silver, neither either woman or man. I stared up at the grand figures on the stage, while the composer struck manfully at the keys of his harpsichord, continuo cellist and bassist sawed at their strings, and Domenico kept up under his breath a hummed accom-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

paniment that never faltered, so predictable was the music, despite the cunning forays his left hand made on my thigh.

Arrived both at the front of the stage, on opposite sides, the actors halted. Viols throbbed a little in the pit, and the Arianna sang a question – a query of the other castrato it was, but the singer gazed into the audience. Giving his superbly controlled voice a little rein, he allowed it to move up into the lower range of what must be his proper tessitura, a long, sustained note without the slightest vibrato, and I thought he was staring directly at me. Slow, heavy eyelids lowered, brushed black lashes at the tops of his cheeks, then rose.

“Ah, dio!” softly exclaimed Domenico, removing his inquiring hand from my lap, for strings and winds had come swelling up over the tinkling harpsichord, and the Teseo launched into his first aria. “The voice of the capon!” murmured my friend, who felt more for music than any other man of my acquaintance.

It is nothing to say the conservatories of Naples train up the most spectacular voices – everyone knows. Our own four ospedali instruct little nightingale orphans as rigorously, to similarly brilliant effect – my own dead mother had studied under and sung for Vivaldi in the Pietà – but those pious young women are enjoined never to perform on the

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

public stage. A Neapolitan castrato's voice, the exercise of it, is his life, and that city is mad for eunuchs. Of a Sunday morning, they say, when files of gelded orphans wend from conservatory to cathedral, piping in sweet treble all the way, old ladies hang from windows high overhead, lovesick as young girls, tossing flowers and crying, "Angels! Precious angels!" I, who had scarcely ever set foot on terraferma, citizen of the ancient, enduring, misty and watery and most serene Republic of Venice, felt I might have been happy had I been born a cast-off orphan of that arid, grandiloquent, chaotic southern kingdom with its tyrannical aristocracy that was Spanish, French, Austrian, never Italian. For all that the Neapolitan conservatories raise up instrumentalists, composers, and whole male singers as well, the castrato is king.

18

This Teseo was neither the best nor the worst. His tessitura was low for a contralto; the composer might have exploited it better. He strained for his top notes, going strident in the ornaments, where he was perfectly comfortable in a range not much higher than a natural tenor's. Here and in his middle register he justified a place as secondo uomo, exhibiting perfect clarity and control, ornamenting the melody with admirable tact. If not great, it was a good voice, in the exercise of which his training was evident but did not insist. This was merely the first of his six

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

arias and the least of them; he did not put himself out unduly, was awarded with warm if not ecstatic applause, which he acknowledged handsomely. There were a few cries of “Bravo!” – including one from the seat beside mine. Domenico said quietly, confidently, “Signor Capon hasn’t shown us nearly all he’s got.” Then – my friend had no manners and precious little subtlety – he began again to feed me bits of orange, touching fingertips to lips and jaw in the manner of a caress.

19

I had listened with appreciation but never taken my eyes off the primo uomo in his extraordinary gown, who had turned half-away when the contralto stood forward to deliver his aria – had lowered the lids over those magnificent eyes and slightly, judgmentally compressed his smile. Now – Teseo having exited – the Arianna turned again; once again, so I thought, gazed into my eyes. To the accompaniment of high oboes, breathy recorders, subdued strings, he essayed a plain, simple, andante cavatina. His voice was allowed to open up slightly, promising if not delivering a potent, intoxicating sweetness.

Singing in this pure, artless, old-fashioned manner, he drifted to center stage. Winds dropped out, archlute in bass doubled harpsichord, massed strings commenced a repetitive up-and-down pattern. There was nothing in the world but the castrato’s voice.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“Oh!” I believe I said – I moaned in my own lame, famished voice, “oh, sant’ angelo!” There are words to describe beauty, to describe perfection, every one of them halt, imperfect, unbeautiful unless they were to be scored for the castrato’s voice. There was his voice, there was nothing more, nothing gross or trivial, and I wept. I wept, and the cords in my own throat vibrated and swelled, my lungs ached to contain the volume of burning air that could not be let free, my eyes stared though I wished to close them, in my breeches my sex, idiot child, grossly sensitive to my passion, stiffened. And all the while he sang, the castrato gazed gravely down into my eyes, his own imperturbable.

20

There was his singing, and there were times when he did not sing. When he left the stage after the third encore of his first aria, I lost my breath, and then caught it again in a solid jagged block that tore at the tender flesh of my throat. I will die now, I thought, fulfilled; but lived on in dreadful anticipation of his return. Besides the three principals, the cast included a basso-profondo King Minos, bluster and majesty; a foppish Cretan prince, tenor, affianced to Arianna and spurned by her; and a boy Cupid who may have been gelded or simply young – his treble was tremulous and, in itself, lovely. I could not bear to hear them, any of them.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

During the first intermezzo, when a troupe of gay dancers pranced on stage to sprightly airs and jigs, Domenico led me outside to the waterstairs above the chilly canal. Moved himself, my friend tried to comfort me, to cajole me out of my exaltation. When sly words failed, and acute critiques of the music, the players, the singers – even Domenico’s bitter tongue despaired of anything disparaging to say of the soprano – he fell to other, wordless methods.

21

I wished to push him off but had not the strength, felt defiled by the slobbery pressure of his lips on mine. Distantly, I was revolted by these attentions I had been happy to allow him at other times; when he opened my shirt and scraped the nails of his fingers through the hair on my chest, it seemed his cold hands were exhalations, coagulations of the stagnant sewage scent off the canal near our feet. Nevertheless, my sex rose up again when he fondled it through the fabric of my breeches, when he kissed my nipples and kneaded them with his teeth. When he opened the breeches to let the thing out, it wilted in the dank winter air, but then he knelt to the clammy step and took it into his mouth. His beard stubble scraped on my thighs.

I remembered the duet between soprano Arianna and contralto Teseo, more duel than duet though they sang of their passion for each other. They sang, contralto forced to the

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

edge of his ability and beyond into brilliances of pitch and ornament by soprano's sure attack. One heard that the lesser singer would be mediocre, next to nothing, without the greater's goading. One heard him aspire to his very height, straining, reach it, and hang there pinned to the empyrean while the other soared effortlessly above. Nor was it simply the one's having the higher voice, for the contralto's part was written low, well within his range; nor did it require less vocal agility, less virtuoso ornamentation, so it wasn't that he was made to sound petty.

22

And yet, despite the failings of the Teseo and the overarching ambition and reach of the Arianna, their voices played exquisitely together, cello against violin or bassoon against oboe, alternating, or mingling, doubling, or running in counterpoint. At times, veiling his eyes, soprano held back, scarcely grazing the melody, singing at low volume but with such penetrating sweetness the hairs on my arms stood up and sweat burst forth on my brow, while contralto at full pitch ran a single phrase into extravagant confusions of fioritura, tremolo, appoggiatura, vibrato. Then, raising his pointed chin, opening wide his burning eyes that cut into my soul as knives into flesh, soprano would ride over contralto's continuo line, ascending in flame like the phoenix. His top notes lay inhumanly high, yet he reached for them with ease, grappling them like blaz-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

ing stars, setting them off like pyrotechnics and grand illuminations.

He was staring at me, the great eyes harsh, the voice teetering on an extended trill at unnatural height that went on and on, gradually swelling in fulness and volume, until I was breathless and my skull pounded with the echo of those two notes, and then without warning, on a little catch of his throat, the voice dropped a full octave, as if it were a sob. It ought to have been gratuitous and clumsy: it was devastating. I seemed to see an explosion of vast white light as all the tension in my breast was released at once, but what I saw was the glistening liquid collected on the lower lids of his staring eyes, collected, swelling to overflow but not flowing, as his voice began again the terrible, irresistible ascent.

23

Spent, horrified and exultant, I pushed Domenico gently away. He had his own member in his hand. A vagrant gleam of light from a torch guttering in the breeze showed a dribble of slime on his chin, caused a puddle of slime near my feet to glow spectrally. The canal lapped against the waterstairs and the foundations of the theatre. Moored gondolas, my own among them, scraped their flanks together or struck one against another with hollow thumps. Above us at the entrance where pitch-soaked torches crackled and flared, a small party of masked patricians conversed in brittle tones. One took a pinch of snuff,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

sneezed, and proclaimed he had seldom seen a woman as handsome as that castrato. "She'd unman you in an instant," replied another. "Why, she's a foot taller than you, man! Your family jewels would shrivel up to nothing in a hand that size."

24

"Zanni." Tentative, fumbling at the front of his breeches, Domenico sidled nearer.

"No, Domenico. Not now, carissimo. I cannot." I was still hearing the castrato's voice in my head, seeing his eyes. I spat into the noisome waters of the canal. My breeches were still open, my prick still hard. I took it in my hand and it disgusted me. Stepping closer to the water, I held the thing, its gross turgid heft, and pissed into the canal. Over the sound of my own water, I heard one of the patricians saying in lewd tones that it was well known castrati might play some form of the man for a besotted woman, yet they far preferred to play the woman to a proper man.

I continued to hear the Arianna's voice in my mind, singing arioso to a simple accompaniment in the low strings, and it was something I had not heard him sing, something new, something I had never heard before. He was not singing in my head, a disembodied phantom voice vital and necessary as the air I breathed, echoing in the bones of my skull, in the cavities of my lungs, in the stretched, bruised cords of my throat. He was singing within the hall, the least thread of his voice

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

fraying out through open doors, over the jocular laughter of the drunken patricians, the lapping of the canal against the step, and the hiss of my urine hitting the water. The second act had begun. I hadn't heard it.

25

All the muscles in my body clenched hard on this devastating realization. My pissing stuttered to a painful halt. Stuffing my dribbling prick into my breeches, fumbling at the fastenings like the burlesque buffoon in a street comedy, I stumbled up the slippery stairs, colliding as I passed with one of the patricians. He shouted, but saw, I suppose, that I was not an aristocrat, was a roughneck gondolier bigger than he, appeared not to be in my full senses – he did not follow. Nor did Domenico, my friend, whom I must have hurt. I couldn't care, for I had passed through the *ridotto*, pressed through a clot of indistinguishable persons at the inner door.

What I had heard from outside was recitativo *stromentato* – the second act had begun, but no arias yet sung. But full orchestral accompaniment and lyrical rather than declamatory recitative meant to introduce an especially brilliant aria. Arianna and her father were on stage, he gloating over the fate of Teseo lost in the labyrinth, she decrying it and apostrophizing the reel of thread that was to lead him out of the maze should he manage to slay the Minotaur.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

Trembling, wiping my fouled hands on my thighs, I found my seat and sank into it. It seemed to me the castrato acknowledged my return with a slight narrowing of the eyes that might be approval, might be disdain. I took in a great, silent, sobbing breath, my first, it almost seemed, since catching up that thread of his voice by the canal. With a last basso chuckle, the Cretan king left the stage. The orchestra commenced a brittle, fast, violent attack. Arianna looked from side to side, turned about in a circle, the velvet skirts of the gown billowing, and sang. I was lost, again, consumed in glory.

26



I had nothing to give him, no sensible praise to offer, merely a fearful worship of his voice, as of the divine attributes of a god, an offering that might be had from men and women of quality. Here was I, a poor gondolier with horny hands and grotesquely broad shoulders, who knew scarcely more of music than my *ut-re-mi*, who could barely puzzle out the printed lines of the libretto, let alone the staves of the score, and I wished to throw myself at his feet. He might tread on me as on a worm; he might – insane hope – courteously raise me up; he might speak no more than to bid me leave. I would not be satisfied, but nothing could now satisfy me,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

having heard him sing. Il evirato divino, they called him – *the divine eunuch*. Divine or not, his voice was a god's. They called him, or he called himself, or an impresario had named him Peccatino – *little sin*. It was a great, a terrible sin, his voice, for it permitted me to envision perfection, to imagine perfect happiness. I wished to possess him, as his voice had possessed me.

27

Backstage was a pandemonium of stage hands, musicians, dancers, the singers of the chorus; ill lit, smelling of smoke and the tallow of cheap candles, varnish, rosin, paint; of sweat and the mingled, stifling perfumes of the patricians who had preceded me, the spices of their pomanders and the fragrances of the hot-house flowers they bore. I had never gone backstage before. I was frightened, my throat dry, confused by the bustle, but a handsome violinist caught me staring about, my hands knotted. "Eh, signor gondoliere," he said in the rich accents of Rome, "eh, friend. You are lost? You wish to congratulate our Arianna, no?" Slapping me heartily on the shoulder, he pointed out my way.

In his dressing room, the castrato stood surrounded by connoisseurs and toadies. So serene his expression and so tall he stood above them, he might have been alone. He had not yet removed the great white wig. It leaned awry on his skull as if he had bent to accept a kiss of congratulation and the brim

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

of a woman's hat had knocked the thing skewif. At his temple I saw a little feather of his own black hair, lank with sweat. Paint still covered his face, smudged black around the eyes where the glittering passionata patch resembled a black tear, smeared scarlet about the mouth. I stared, for despite the calm of his features he was a horrific sight, and he caught my stare, caught my eye.

28

"You."

I was quite certain he spoke to someone else, some aristocrat who had come in behind me, but his black eyes remained fixed on mine as he shouldered through the crowd, murmuring courteous apologies but never glancing to see which scion of the Libro d'Oro he had shoved aside. "You," he said again when he was clear of them. His speaking voice was low, husky – a cultivated affect I could not fail to recognize, for I practiced it myself. "I saw you watching me. You enjoyed my singing?"

"It was –" My throat closed around my shamefully thin voice. I had to lift my chin to look into his eyes. I could not do otherwise, although my heart pounded painfully in my chest and my palms prickled with bursting sweat. "Maestro, it was ... there are no words."

As he stared into my face, my throat worked and I hunted for words, words no-one had ever spoken to him, but I could find none, no words whether new or old. He saw me, saw

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

through me, saw my abjection, and I knew I would weep, but he smiled ever so simply, no more than a softening of his painted lips. “Yes,” he said, so quietly none but I could hear, then, “But you must not be frightened, my friend. It’s the Minotaur devours heroes, not poor Arianna. Come.”

29

He offered me his hand, and I wished to kiss it, as though he were a great lady and I a gentleman. So close we were I could see the sweat beaded on his greasy face paint, the tracks of it runnelling the powder on bared shoulders and on his breast where it was compressed into the semblance of a woman’s bosom by the stays and lacings of his gown. The skin under death-white powder was a flushed olive color. I could smell him, a scent of exertion that was clean, not rank. When I did not take his hand, he smiled a little more broadly, revealing the tips of his teeth, and placed it on my shoulder, said again, “Come.” The hand was heavy. Releasing my gaze from his own, he turned a little away and called in a penetrating, lovely contralto hardly higher than my own natural voice, “Claudia!”

A plain little woman, plainly dressed, dodged through the crowd to us. “Claudia,” the castrato said, “this gentleman feels faint. Please, will you show him a chair and give him a glass of something. There’s Champagne about.... Signore,” he murmured to me, “I

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

must speak with these people, but Claudia will take care of you. Wait for me, please.”

“Maestro, no, please –”

On my shoulder his hand tightened its grasp, firm and demanding. “Yes. I won’t be long.”

30

And then he released me – he was going to walk away. “Maestro, forgive me,” I stammered. “Your wig – it’s crooked.”

“Is it?” Beaming down at me as if I had said something clever, as if I were a child of whom he was proud, he raised both hands, felt that it was. “Ah, well.” He lifted the wig straight off his head, placed it in my hands. I held the heavy, bulky thing against my chest, crushing the curls, and watched dumbfounded as he gracefully turned and paced away into the crush of his admirers, already acknowledging some fatuous pleasantry with a low contralto chuckle.

He ought to have appeared ridiculous, grotesque, taller than all but a few of the elegantly dressed noblemen who pressed up around him, in his great gown that could be seen, close up, to be tawdry, theatrical. The heavy velvet skirts ruched over hoops and panniers, the ruffles of lace and myriad tiny bows of gilt ribbon, all of it swaying slowly from side to side like a bird cage hanging from a chain in a breath of breeze; and then the cruelly stayed velvet bodice rising from the tiny waist, each little hook down the

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

back picked out with a paste gem; and then stretched across broad shoulders the ruffled arc of white linen blouse, sheer with the damp of his sweat and stained with his paint; and then his long neck climbing to meet a skull plastered with his own wet black hair, a tiny, inelegant head to top that statuesque height, that grave dignity of posture and movement neither masculine nor feminine but his own. He ought to have looked grotesque. He did not. Laughing pleasantly, he turned slightly, revealing a profile that could never be mistaken for a woman's though it was neither man's nor boy's. I caught my breath, clutched the wig tighter. He – this creature, this eunuch – was beautiful. I felt myself, heard myself, make a little noise, a low moan.

31

“Steals your breath away,” the woman Claudia agreed in a murmur, removing the crushed wig from my grasp. It was so large she could scarcely peer over the top, her eyes glittering. “Come, signore.”

I followed her. I sat where she bade. With a moist cloth she cleaned my hands and face before offering Champagne, a wine I had never drunk. Its astringency fought with the memory in my mouth of the sweet wine I had guzzled during the second intermezzo, staring grimly at the frivolous ballet on stage. I had not dared leave the theatre again lest, again, I lose a single note of his voice.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

When he came back to me at last he was dressed in a gentleman's clothing. He crouched before me, the brocade skirts of his coat flaring over pale knee breeches, above striped stockings that molded legs as elegant as those of a French table. "So," he said, taking one of my hands in both of his. Although he did not smile, I sensed his amusement. His face had been cleansed of its paint except for the black that still matted his eyelashes. His hair was his own, short, still damp, brushed flat against his scalp, ready to be covered by a gentleman's peruke. "So, signore, little Claudia took adequate care of you? You enjoyed the Champagne? You are a little drunk, perhaps?"

32

I could not reply. I felt a hot flush on my cheeks as my voice struggled in my throat, and I stared at his big hands holding mine on my knee, then – I could not help myself – I glanced down at the bunched fabric between my own legs, and along his long thigh to where fawn satin bunched similarly. I saw no difference, for all that he wore an aristocrat's satin, I rough, dark wool. My throat worked, my eyes stung. If he noticed, he made no motion. I was more than a little drunk. The fizz of the wine I'd gulped like water bubbled in my skull.

"Signore, come, tell me your name."

"Giambattista," I stammered. "I'm called Giambattista, Maestro Peccatino."

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“Ah.” His grip on my hand shifted and I looked up to find him smiling, shaking his head. Crouched as he was, his face was nearly level with mine. “But you must not use my silly stage name if we’re to be friends, Zanni.” He was not Venetian – how did he know the name my familiars used? “Call me Renzo.”

33

“I –” I cannot, I meant to say, please, maestro, I must go.

“Renzo.” His husky voice was stern.

I choked it out, stammering the trilled *r*. “Please,” I said. “I must go.”

“No, no, you must not. You see –” Pausing, he pressed his lips together, then plucked at my sleeve. “This is true?” he asked. “Not fancy dress for Carnival? You are a gondolier – you have a boat?”

Dumb, I nodded.

“Then, you see, Zanni, I have hired you. I have need of conveyance about your city, and I feel –” here he grinned widely, transforming the severe contours of his face – “I feel, even on such short acquaintance, I can trust you not to cheat me. Eh?” Releasing my hand at last, though I nearly reached after, he rose to his full height, towering above me as campanile towers over San Marco and the Piazza. As he placed his hands on his hips, smiling genially, I noticed the slender rapier at his side, the little stiletto in its sheath at his calf. And he was so very tall, his chest so broad, his arms so long and hands so large: this was

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

a dangerous person, not simply for the steel-sharp weapon of his voice that had pierced my soul. “I trust you’re not so drunk you’ll spill me in the canal?” he said.

34

“No, signore – no, Renzo.”

He extended a hand for mine, bowing as if he were a gentleman and, as if I were a great lady, kissing the hand before raising me to my feet. “Now.... Claudia, I am going. My wig, and the rest.”

The dressing room was deserted. I had never noticed the crowd’s departure. Only Claudia remained, perched on a stool in a dark corner, gazing at her master. She rushed over, bearing a wooden head adorned with an understated steel-grey peruke, its pigtail bound with black ribbon. He placed it on his scalp, covering his own hair, and, using Claudia’s changing expression as mirror, adjusted it until it met her standards. Then she handed him his Venetian carnival ensemble, black tricorne hat, domino, and the hideous, traditional white mask, the bauta.

“But you too must go masked, Zanni,” he said cheerfully, all shrouded in black wool and the eyes of the bauta glaring, and pulled a velvet half-mask from a pocket. He did not simply offer it but placed it over my eyes and tied the ribbons in back. Playful, charming, he tugged on my pigtail. “Come now, where is the little craft? You’re to carry me to the Ca’ Venier – you know it?”

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

It was my profession to know. I nodded.

"I'm expected. It's a bore. There's a foreign guest, a duke or count or graf, Austrian I believe, who dabbles in music. I'll be expected to listen politely as he tinkles some little exercise for ten fingers on the harpsichord, to sing a pretty song he's probably scored for tenor. The words German, too, doubtless, a language that simply cannot be sung. We won't stay long."

35

"We?" I asked.

"Of course!" His laughter leapt from contralto to high soprano as if it were a passage of wordless song, a little solfeggio on the syllables *eb-ab*, intensely melodic. "Are you not my dear well-to-do friend from, let's see, Bologna, who has chosen to amuse himself at Carnival by dressing up as a gondolier?"

I shook my head, stubborn, frightened both that he should believe me capable of the masquerade and believe I should wish to carry it off, to go with him – this person I would worship if allowed – as companion. "They will never believe it, the Venieri and their guests."

He laughed again and, coming to my side, draped a long, heavy arm across my shoulders. "They needn't. Why should they? They'll take it as a whim, castrati are known to be whimsical creatures, and indulge me. The fiction of your being a wealthy foreigner simply allows them to save face. Come, Giambattista, Zanni." He drew me toward the door. "Have

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

you not wished to see the inside of one of your patricians' houses? The Venieri are not so distinguished a family as some, but they're wealthier than the Doge himself. Perhaps there will be fine things to eat. And –"Turning me under his arm, he gazed into my eyes. I had been seen through. "It will be a chance for you to hear me sing again."

36



*O*n the waterstairs outside the theatre I was recognized, despite the mask, but he, in cloak and bauta, was not. Employees of the patricians' syndicate that owned the hall and of the impresario who put on the season knew me because I was so often there, either on my own account or to deliver or pick up fares; fellow gondoliers waiting for final passengers knew me as a matter of course. But already I felt I would recognize Peccatino – Renzo – whatever his disguise. If I should find the upturned legs alone of a malefactor planted headfirst and incognito in the paving of the Piazzetta, as used to be done, I should know them for his, dead or alive.

I supported him at the elbow down the stairs, slopped with water turning icy though not yet ice, aided him into my gondola, where he took his seat under the felze. The craft unmoored, I stepped to the stern and used the long oar to push off into the narrow canal.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

My acquaintances on the stairs yelled jovial good-byes.

We had gone only a little way when he said, "Truly, you liked my singing, Zanni?"

37

Leaning against my oar, I could not see him under the shadow of the felze. Astonishing myself, I blurted, "It is not to be liked, your voice, your singing. It *is*. It is itself." He did not reply and I was frightened. "It is *you*," I said, "... Renzo."

He was silent still another moment, then a rich, voluptuous contralto voice I hardly recognized said, "That's good. Ah, that's very good." And then, with no warning, as I turned my gondola sharply onto the Grand Canal, south toward the Rialto Bridge, velvety contralto became in an instant glassy soprano as he – Lorenzo Roncalli called Peccatino, castrato – began to sing. It was an aria I did not recognize, hero taking heroine to task for some petty slight, frivolous, yet his pure, bright tone was not frivolous. Before reaching the end of the verse, though, he broke off in mid-cadenza and abruptly was speaking again – my heart stopped for an instant in pain – the same lush, corrupt contralto saying, "But I forget myself. It's the gondolier sings for his passengers. Sing for me, Zanni."

"Renzo, please –" I bit my tongue. The bridge loomed before us, lamps flickering in a few of its windows.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“Please? What is this *please*? Did I request?”

“You ... you bade, maestro.”

“Precisely.”

38

There were no songs in my head, I could find none of those tunes I might sing for any passenger who requested, and I did something I knew to be foolish, dangerous. In my high tenorino, true but thin, nearly alto, nearly as high as contralto Teseo in the opera but with no resonance to it, as we approached the Rialto Bridge, I sang the first line of Teseo’s first aria – the aria of secondo uomo I remembered, because I had heard it before hearing Renzo.

No lightnings struck me down. The castrato did not mockingly laugh. Hurrying through the verse, I began the first repeat as I brought the boat under the stone arch. My voice echoed hollowly. I attempted no more than to sing the melody, but then I need do no more, for a voice that was mine exactly though an octave higher rose up from beneath the *felze*, and if I only held a note he ornamented it, trill, mordent, *appoggiatura*, with perfect tact, perfect timing, following my lead.

It was intoxicating. It was beautiful – my own lame voice was nearly beautiful. By the time we reached the full *da capo* repeat and emerged onto the open canal, I was essaying simple ornaments myself. Here again he anticipated me, improvising a brilliant

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

contrapuntal soprano continuo while never losing the sense or shape of the words we sang nor forcing me out of the lead. But we were singing together, my heart was singing, I was weeping.

39

A voice from the high balcony of a dark palazzo, a woman's voice, called, "Bravi, signori! Bravissimi!"

The castrato said, quite calmly, "You should be trained." He was not out of breath at all.

"Oh!" Gasping, I clutched my oar to my chest, letting us drift. "You are cruel, maestro."

"Cruel?" His voice was kindly, concerned. "How cruel? You have a pure, true voice and an astonishing memory. If you were only to have a little schooling –"

"Pure?" I was shuddering now with outrage. "True? Freakish – neither tenor nor alto, man's nor –"

"Capon's?" he suggested.

"You do not know. You cannot know!"

"Are you weeping, Giambattista?"

Pushing the blade of the oar into the water, I steered us away from the canal wall, back toward the center. Most of the palazzi now, on either bank, were festively lit at windows, balconies, waterstairs, and I heard the confused counterpoints of little chamber bands competing across the water. "I wept for joy as we sang."

"But are you weeping now?"

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“I am weeping now,” I said quietly. “Please, allow me to weep.”

“Zanni, what –”

“Maestro.” I waved ahead. “There, you see, the Ca’ Venier. Your destination. We have almost arrived.”

40

“No.” He pushed out from under the felze, rising to his feet with a lurch so that I was pressed to prevent the gondola from turning turtle, and I could not understand how a person so tall could emerge from that low canopy. “I’ve changed my mind. I feel a whim. Take me down to the Bacino, Giambattista.” With a flourish, he removed tricorne, bauta, domino, all of a piece, tossed them under the felze. The gondola swayed alarmingly but he seemed not to notice. I steadied it. “Out onto the lagoon, Giambattista.”

“But your admirers? The Austrian count?”

“I am a whimsical creature. They will forgive me.”

For an instant I was ready to rebel. He was a whimsical creature, dangerous – his whims cut too close, sharp and secretive as a Neapolitan assassin’s stiletto. But if he might sing again, sing for me, sing – this thought caused me nearly to lose the oar – *with* me.... I said, “As you wish.” I might have said, Whatever you wish. Pushing back on the oar, I watched him balance on the toes of his polished slippers, rocking as we accelerated. Sure-footed as a dancer, he stepped into the bow, and

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

watching him I wished again to assert myself in some little way. I said, "But please, if you would. The gondola's balance is delicate. It would be better if you sat down, signore."

41

"Signore!" he muttered as if irritated. "*Signore* and *signore* and *maestro* and *signore*! Am I a man that you should call me *signore*? Use my name, signore."

Shocked, I was ready to laugh. "Renzo, then, will you please sit?"

"Of course, capitano." Graceful, he knelt on the cushion in the bow, facing forward. "Or should I say, *ammiraglio*?"

"*Zanni* will do."

I kept by the south bank of the canal. Kneeling in the bow, Renzo silently watched the city go by, only murmuring a little in appreciation when we came on the Salute. Then we were floating into the Bacino, with San Giorgio Maggiore on its island to one side, the Molo and Palazzo Ducale to the other. "North?" I asked. "Murano, Burano, Torcello? East to Lido and the sea? West to terraferma?"

"What lies south?"

"Nothing – the lagoon. Pellestrina and Chioggia southeast, on the littorale."

"East, then. The Adriatic – I have not seen this sea."

"You understand, I cannot take my gondola through the Porto, onto the open sea."

"Not all the way. But away from the city." Waving languidly with one long arm, he in-

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

licated its floating bulk and blaze, all around us. "Just into the open, under the stars, for a little while."

I rowed steadily for some time, until the lamps of the Lido forts were nearer than the lamps in the city. "Here," he said at length. "Here. We'll drift a bit. Come, sit with me, Zanni. Rest. We'll drift. I happen to have carried away with me a flask of French brandy."

42

I shipped the oar. Uneasy, I went to my knees to creep under the felze, into the waist of the gondola, and further. He had turned, facing back toward the stern. I sat by his knees. Digging into one of the capacious pockets of his coat, he produced the little bottle, pulled the cork with his teeth, took a short swallow, and handed it to me. I sipped, gave it back. His warm hand clasped mine for an instant as he accepted the bottle.

We remained silent for a time I could not measure. There had never been a night like this. The air was chill, damp, with rain in the distance, but the sky over our heads lay clear, brilliant with stars. The gondola rocked lazily on the slow motion of the lagoon's waters. Far behind us, the city glittered like a diamond tiara missing many of its gems, for it was late, most citizens abed, even on a night of carnival. When I looked up at Renzo, I could not properly see him in the dark, only his white shirt and the pale oval of his face, but I felt him near me, a kind of warmth, a banked

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

furnace. I smelled him, too, the brandy on his breath and a sharp, clean, hot smell like sweat, and the scent he wore, lavender and lemons. I felt that I might lean on his knee, so near my shoulder, that he wouldn't mind, but I did not.

43

"Giambattista," he said at last in his low, intimate voice, "you are no longer weeping?"

"No."

"Let me see."

And then his hands were lifting off the black velvet half-mask I had forgotten I wore. The ribbons caught in my pigtail; gentle, he untangled them, stroked my hair, while the tip of one finger of his other hand caressed the cheek below my eye. "Will you tell me why? What it is I *do not* and *cannot* know?"

I had never told anyone, anyone at all, not even the priest at confession. But my father was dead. Himself, Renzo, this person who would not be called a man – if I could not tell him, there was no-one else. "When I was a small boy," I said simply, "I begged my father to have me gelded and trained as a singer. He refused, and beat me."

When I pronounced the word *gelded*, Renzo's hand on my head twitched and clenched, the nails scraped my scalp. "Giambattista!" He was forgetting to keep his voice to its artfully low register. "How old – how old were you?"

"Six. And seven. And eight and nine and ten. Always he refused. Always he beat me."

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“You understood what it meant, to be gelded?”

“I understood what it would mean if it were not done.” There were no tears left in me. I felt only an ancient, hard, cold anger and hurt that I had never before allowed myself to feel. “What it has meant. What it has made of me. It was all I wanted.” I turned in the little space, facing him, touching him for the first time, grasping his hand hard in one of mine, gripping his knee with the other. “Renzo, it is torture, sweet, unendurable torture to hear a castrato sing. I cannot bear it. I cannot bear not to hear it. I go whenever I can, the opera, the Basilica choir – oh, and I wish to die. I wish to die! But you –” Releasing his hand, I reached to brush my fingertips over his lips. “I heard you, and at first I hated you, but I did not want to die, not so long as you sang.” Spent, I sank back, lowering my head, removing my hand from his knee. “Hell. It is hell, each night in the theatre, hearing them sing, intoxicating, lovely hell, and cold, squalid hell when I return to my rooms, and numbing, deafening hell on the canals all day. They have me sing for them, my passengers, simple pretty songs, and that is the worst hell of all. I do not know how I endure but I endure. I would rip the things out at the roots – it’s too late.... Then you –” The sound I made then, the harsh, desolate noise as if the cords in my throat were tearing, recollected me to myself,

44

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

and I turned away. He would despise me now, if he had not before. "Forgive me, maestro."

"Forgive?" His whisper was thick. "Giambattista, it is not so much to sing in a high voice. It's nothing, less than nothing."

45

"Nothing? You can say that?" I demanded, outraged.

"I am less than a man because of it."

Coldly, I said, "You do not believe that."

After a moment, still in that strange, thick whisper, he replied, "No. It's true. I do not."

"You are other than a man. And the ways that you are not a man—" Choking, I caught my breath. "I spit on my manhood, and on my father's manhood that sired me and condemned to this life."

I had begun to shake, to tremble and shudder in a paroxysm of fury and hopeless anguish. His hands fell on my shoulders, stilling me. "Oh, maestro," I cried, "Renzo, if you would be my friend, sing for me. Please."

"Caro." His hands were turning me. "I cannot now. See." Taking up one of my hands, he lifted it to his cheek, where hot tears wet my fingers. "My throat is thick. I cannot sing for you now, caro, fratello. Forgive me."

"Fratello." Though shudders still racked my shoulders, my passion had passed through fury to inhabit a frigid calm. I said, "I have no brother. That was why, you see. When he was a little boy, I a babe, my brother died. There was no other. That was why." I bit my

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

tongue. I could not remember my brother, but remembering he had once lived caused me to hate him.

“Ah, no. Hush now, Zanni.” Renzo’s voice was ugly with weeping. Holding me around the shoulders, he drew me against his breast where I heard his strong heart pounding, the air emptying out of his great lungs. “Hush. There is nothing to be done.” He might have tried vainly to comfort me but he did not, not with useless, false words, only the depth of his understanding and the peculiar strength of his arms. I loved him for it.

46

We lay silent, breathing, for how long. The gondola drifted on the slow, shallow currents of the lagoon, rocking. For my part, we might as well have run out the ebb through the Porto di Lido to the Adriatic, have consummated a proper marriage to the sea in advance of the Doge’s annual vow, but Renzo was blameless and I had taken care to stay clear of the deep channel. My innocent brother, whose name I had required myself to forget, had drowned in the lagoon, his body never recovered. For a time, after I understood my father’s reasons, I had allowed myself the childish dream that, truly, my brother had not died. A foreign sailor had rescued him from the waters, carried him away to France or England. But one day he would return to his rightful home, and merciful God would ensure it was not too late for me. Any youthful stranger I saw in

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

calle, on campo, might be my brother come home. Then merciless God had made of me this mockery, a man, and I swore that if ever I discovered my living brother, one of us would not live.

47

We lay silent, and where I was not touching him my body was cold. Not all my trembling was anger or sorrow. His breathing and the beating of his heart against my ear were like the lapping of wavelets against the flanks of the gondola, like the breathing of the night air and the slow pulse of the sea as it sent its beneficent waters through the porti into the lagoon. Wordless, I protested when he moved, but he said, "No, you're chilled." Sitting up, he removed his rich frock coat and laid it over me.

"Your father wished you to sire sons to carry on his name?" His voice rang clear in its high natural register, unclouded by tears or his accustomed effort to counterfeit a man. "Listen. My father had four sons. If not to the knife, I was bound for the monastery, but to get me into the habit would cost whereas the conservatory would pay to have me, to have me cut. Do you understand, Zanni? My father sold me." Warm gentle hands smoothed the hair off my brow. The voice was not bitter, and I felt it to be a voice that could express bitterness while remaining sweet. "He sold me, and still realizes a profit on the sale. One quarter of my fees remains due to him for an-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

other five years. It's a not-inconsiderable sum. I have dowered one of my sisters already, who would have gone for a nun. There are two others. I don't begrudge it. But for my father I should not have been born; but for him, I'd be a monk or, at best, a journeyman cabinet maker in Messina. One's father is owed, you see."

48

Under his touch I moved in protest, made a noise. He stilled me with those hands that were not strong for all their size, were soft as if he had never used them for anything more rigorous than playing at a keyboard.

"Nor do I begrudge the conservatory's receiving half what remains, for the same five years. That journeyman cabinetmaker must pay a comparable proportion of his paltry earnings to his master. The conservatory made of a voice a singer."

His long fingers were caressing my face, learning its contours, proving it. I didn't understand how it had happened that my head lay in his lap – my eyes were closed – how it was that he could bend so easily to kiss my brow, light and warm as a breath.

"You are not comforted," he murmured. "Listen. Within a year of my going to Naples, my father in Messina was given another son. I did not know this at the time. I had indeed forgotten my family very quickly. But some years later, when my teachers understood... Need I be modest? I have the re in altissimo,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

and three octaves below it. When they were certain of the voice they had in me, they sent again to Messina. The brother I did not know was now a bit older than I had been. His little treble seemed somewhat promising. They bought him as well – my father eager enough to sell. They brought him to Naples. He had never properly known of me but they told him along the way, then brought him to hear me sing. He was frightened of me. They had him sing. Yes, I agreed – already they deferred to me, though they didn't tell me who he was, only his name, Enrico. Yes, I said, it's a pretty little voice. They would have had him cut regardless.”

49

He fell silent, though his one hand continued to stroke my hair, the other to trace the line of my jaw. I could not decide whether he wished to comfort or to distract me with this recitation. It was his fingers distracted, comforted me. The voice I could scarcely bear to listen to, its simple crystalline loveliness; the words simply pained me.

“Have you given your father his grandsons?” he asked abruptly, but before I could reply, if I had been able to reply, he went on. “Enrico was gelded. His training began. Once I had been told who he was, I made myself his protector, his tutor. We did not become brotherly or properly friends, he was too in awe of me, but I grew fond of him. He was a sweet, ras-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

cally imp. I would have to say, I believe, that I loved him.”

“*Loved?*” I believed I knew what he would say: that his brother had contracted a slow infection of the knife and lingeringly died. But when I attempted to sit up, annoyed before he gave me cause, Renzo spread both palms flat across my chest and held me down, the pressure gentle but inexorable.

50

“It is difficult,” he said, “to continue to love a person whose envy of you has made him hateful. My brother kept his voice, he had that much, but it had never done more than promise. No amount of training could make it better than satisfactory. He expected more. He expected, being my brother, to be brilliant, to be extraordinary. Not to misunderstand: Enrico’s is a good voice, but there are any number of adequate mezzis to be found. He will be granted a position in some court’s chapel choir; from time to time he may play *secondo uomo* in minor houses. Eventually he may be able to content himself with this. For now....” Renzo’s voice dropped into its falsely manly register. “For now, he resents me terribly. His life, his career ought to be splendid, extravagant, ecstatic, he believes, and refuses to believe mine is not either. He says – this is not true – he does poorly at the only act he is capable of performing, and says, but for me, he should be a whole man able to do anything he set his hands to.”

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“And his balls,” I muttered, angry, restless, “if he had them. It requires such balls to row a gondola about Venice, for example.”

“Ah, Zanni,” Renzo sighed. “You are bitter.”

51

“I am.”

Through the fabric of my shirt I felt distinctly the pads of his fingertips as he massaged my chest. Leaning over me, he breathed on my closed eyelids, then kissed them. “It cannot be helped. Nothing is to be done.” After a moment, musing as his hands continued their labor, he said, “I ought to return to the city, I imagine. I’d prefer not to.” Those steady, provoking fingers had reached farther, now palpating the flesh of my belly. Heedless – or too heedful – my prick stirred in my breeches, my balls, which I could not imagine not possessing even as I despised them for the man they made me, crawled and ached.

I had made no sons to perpetuate my father’s name, carry on his profession. Let it not be thought I failed in my filial duty solely to spite my father or dishonor his memory. Nor yet solely to honor my own dreams that he had destroyed. I was still dreaming, still a beardless youth hopeful of never sprouting a beard, yet to ask for the last time he sacrifice his pride and the future of his name, when I understood completely that his name had no future regardless. I would not marry unless he required it – I would not, as he did, patronize

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

the gilded, glorious whores of my city whenever a passenger dropped an overly handsome gratuity in my palm.

I was thirteen the last time I asked. Doubtless it was already too late, though my voice had not broken. I had not asked for three years, and now it was not that he sponsor, as it were, my gelding and training I requested. There was a sum of ducats I had earned and set aside that, in my innocence, I believed more than sufficient. I came to him respectfully, asked merely that he disown me, allow me to make my own way in the world.

52

“As a capering capon on the stage,” he demanded, his ugly voice hoarse, “whorish, bedizened, flagrant?” Our rooms were close, stinking of the stagnant canal below the windows, of his unhealthy sweat and the sour wine he drank. I had not understood how drunk he was until he stood up and nearly fell. Nevertheless, he was bigger than I, my father, his shoulders very broad and arms very strong and hands horny, hard, and heavy. “I’ll see you dead first, puppy,” he shouted as he thrashed me. “Before you shame me so.”

I lay weeping on the floor. He had hurt me – he was my father – I had not made a noise. On my shoulders and back the stripes of his leather belt burned. More than one, I was sure, bled. He had continued to shout, incoherent. On his tongue, the word *castrato* was made abominable. He called me effeminate;

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

he called me whore and bitch and puling girl. When his arm and his tongue grew weary, he said, "I'll show you what a eunuch's good for," and, ripping off first my breeches, then his own, he raped me. He was not so drunk he couldn't perform. After, still mumbling angrily, he crawled to his bed and passed out.

53

Myself, beaten, humiliated, abused, I crept down to the gondola moored on the canal and spent the night huddled under the felze, shuddering now and again, weeping, sleeping for short stretches between fury and despair. My father had hurt me, but I knew already that what he had done to me, the act he had performed, I wished repeated – not in the way of a weapon, not as humiliation, and by a different man. I knew already; I had already known. He died before he could require me to marry a woman I could not have borne to view naked, let alone to touch, to fuck, but not before he heard of my dalliances with Domenico, and others.

"We needn't return if you don't wish," I told Renzo. "There will be no weather on the lagoon tonight. It will be quite safe. Only let me find a bricola to tie the gondola up."

I felt his warmth all around me, under my head the warmth of his thighs; on my belly his hands, still now, flat; on my face his breath with its sharp trace of hot brandy. "But you...." he said. "Surely you must return?"

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

“What do I have awaiting me in that place?”

Lifting my hands from my sides, I covered his where they lay. “Besides, I believed you had hired me for an indefinite period?” When his hands stirred I held them still. “May I have another swallow of brandy, Renzo?”

54

“Very well, Zanni.”

His arms were somehow still around me as I sat up – I held them to me. Taking the bottle, I drank. Brandy on my tongue and warming my throat, I turned just enough – he did not withdraw – and pressed my lips to his. I meant it to be abrupt, singular – a kiss like the forte attack of solo cello in the andante movement of a concerto of Vivaldi – but somehow he was ready for me, anticipated me. Our mouths met with the precise violence, tutti, of the entire orchestra in crescendo, allegro vivace. His chin was tilted at just the angle. His lips were at once hard and soft. They parted at the particular instant and his tongue, a virtuoso of arpeggio and tremolo, tasting of brandy, slipped into my mouth with the tricky insinuations and finesse of a quick passage for the high horns.

My arms were around him as though I intended to crush him. In our jostling his peruke had fallen off. I pushed one hand roughly through his short, soft hair. I thought his hands grasped my shoulders – we had not paused to take breath – but then one of them

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

found its way between my thighs and gripped.
Gasping, I drew back.

“How fragile a man is, after all,” crooned Renzo, his tone nearly cruel and very lovely, then, changing clench to caress, leaned forward to kiss me on his own terms. I touched his jaw and chin, as smooth of skin, innocent of beard, as a young woman’s must be, hard and angular as a man’s. His big hand held my balls through the fabric of my breeches, his wrist pressed the growing length of my prick against the thigh. “Is that it?” he asked, whispering into my gaping mouth, I inhaling his breath, his words, as if they were my own. “That’s it.... But perhaps your boat should be moored first.” Releasing the pressure of his hands on my sex, my shoulder, he leaned back, away from me. In starlight and moonlight I saw his face. He was smiling, a faint smile that did not expose his teeth, that seemed to combine amiability and pleasure with passion and hunger. The black paint crusted in his lashes made a kind of mask around his eyes, distorting the expression. When he had wept before, some of the stain had seeped down his cheeks, leaving streaks I wished to wipe away – or to lick away with my tongue. He seemed to see some such wish in my face, for his smile widened and he murmured, “And so...?”

55

With the harsh breath I took in to fill starved lungs, I felt the flush that rose in my cheeks, warm, unsettling, and I pulled

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

back. In the dark he wouldn't be able to see it, unless his eyes were as keen as the cat's eyes they resembled. Glancing down, away, I pushed his lovely coat off my shoulders and, without a word, clambered the length of the gondola, ungainly in the clumsiness of my desire, setting the craft to rocking, lurching. In the stern, I unshipped the long oar, wrestled it and myself upright, dipped the blade into the water. For a few moments the task of steadying the gondola's balance, righting it, took all my attention. I had a good idea of our position, and scanned the dark waters to the north for the drunken file of stakes that would mark the deep-water channel to Vignole and Sant' Erasmo. There they were, spindly, crazed, in black silhouette against the faintly glowing surface of the lagoon, only a few degrees off my mark – we had hardly drifted at all. I leaned into the oar, bringing us about, and only then glanced forward.

56

A pale, slender figurehead, Renzo stood in the bow of my gondola, one arm crooked easily around the tall steel ferro although he did not lean against it. His stance was forthright yet graceful, hip-cocked, and as I stood to starboard at my oar in the stern, he stood to port, balancing me. He swayed gently with the motion of the craft. It was some few minutes before I properly understood he was naked, his nakedness seemed so apt. Moonlight and starlight gleamed on his flesh as if it were

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

cool, white marble, though his complexion was darker than mine. Slim but rounded, arms and legs reached very far off from a curiously short torso, narrower at waist than hips and broadest at the shoulders, above the deep rib cage. The buttocks were full, ripe as melons, with a dimple in one where his weight rested on his hip.

57

He moved slightly, lifting his free hand as if to brush a shadow away from his face or a tear from his eye, turned so that I saw his profile, gazing toward the city across the waters where lights still burned. He inhaled deeply – I saw his great chest swell, saw his chin rise and throat tremble, saw his mouth open. I rowed. He sang.

Standing at the prow of my gondola in the wastes of the lagoon, nude as a pagan in the depths of a chill winter night, Renzo sang. The phrases of the aria were perfectly intelligible, for all that a single word might be wrung out through fifteen syllables on several notes or one vowel held for so long, at such pitch and volume, that my own lungs ached, but I couldn't make sense of them. I thought they must be a grand hero's words – Alessandro il Magnifico, Ercole, Orlando, driven mad for love; but it might be a brave warrior maid or Saracen knight or splendid, tragic queen. I could only take them in, as I continued to propel the gondola toward the spindly line of bricole and our mooring, drink

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

them in as if they were – his supernal voice was – the intoxication of wine or the stimulation of sweet, strong coffee, both at once.

The voice faded on a diminishing cadenza that continued below the threshold of hearing, and he paused, allowing me to imagine the orchestral ritornello; and then, almost simply, almost harshly, he sang through the second stanza of the aria, once only, repeating only one phrase, the last. That last he rode to a height painful to the ear, Astolfo on the hippogriff climbing the heavens, then plummeted like a stone. His chin dropped. The low note swelled, and went on, and suddenly ceased.

58

Once again the imaginary orchestra came up, taking the ritornello through two or three variations to the rubato rhythm of my rowing. Renzo now was leaning against the tall ferro, its six steel teeth biting into the flesh of his back below the shoulder, his tilted head on a level with the curved axe-head that crowned it. Turning his face toward me, he lifted one clenched fist to his chest and began again, da capo.

With a flurry and flutter of the oar, I brought the stern around to the nearest bricola and drew the mooring line around the rotting post, fastened it securely, shipped the oar. These were actions I could perform without thinking, habitual, all my attention on the voice and the slender figure at the far

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

end of the craft, the same distance separating us as when he, accoutered in the splendor of a Cretan princess, stood on the stage and I sat among the common rabble on the parterre. Working my clumsy way to the waist of the gondola, I sat on the padded bench and simply took him in, his voice, his face and figure, with my ears and eyes.

59

How he could be aware of an audience I didn't understand, so thoroughly inhabited by the glories of his voice was he, but he glanced away, a coyness at poignant odds with the passion of his singing, then gazed fully, knowingly, into my eyes. He need issue no instruction, make no gesture. I understood him completely. I had already begun to shiver before my jacket was completely removed, before my shirt was unfastened and pushed off my shoulders. I was as aware of, as removed from and unconcerned with, the stiff aching of my prick as I was of the sight of his. The real pain, the true sensation and apprehension lay in my swollen throat. Pulling the turgid member from my breeches, grasping it close in my fist half, unconscious, to conceal it, half to make it bigger, gave no relief, for he was still singing. The notes purred from his throat, as little to be resisted as the tides, now low and intimate, now strident and high, throbbing in tremolo or clear, sustained.

He was still gazing at me where, fully naked, trembling, I stood, ready. One syllable – the *a*

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

of *amore*, for he sang of love – broke into a brilliant, staggered arpeggio that dipped as often as it rose, but constantly rose, to the glassy, extended *mor*, then faltered, catastrophically dropped on the shatteringly low, resonant, short *re*. Slowly he blinked, breathed. “In fact I generally prefer the travesty roles,” he said in tones of devastating matter-of-factness, indicating with a negligible gesture the stiff little bludgeon of flesh below his belly, “because this so often happens when I’m singing well. A woman’s skirts conceal. This evening, Giambattista, as I watched you watching me with your hungry eyes, hearing me, as I sang to you rather than my sweet, foolish Teseo, I fouled my petticoats. Did you know? How could you? He knew. He is jealous – he hates you now, not even knowing you.”

60

“Renzo –” My voice broke, ugly, as I took a step toward him in the rocking boat.

Reaching me, he pushed it into my hand with a cock of the hip, thick and fat and hot. “It’s not as big as a man’s,” he said, touching mine with the delicate tips of fingers and thumb. “Still, in breeches it makes a noticeable lump.” I grasped it hard, protruding arrogantly from the scant, silky hair of his groin, half the length of mine, if that, but thicker, the foreskin tight, thin, clinging, but slipping when my grip shifted. “For many of us, you understand, it’s hardly urgent, hardly a need,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

to spill this fluid that, for us, bears no seed.
But for me, I am never satisfied.”

He was taller than I. This I knew, of course,
but when he drew me to him it made a dif-
ference. My prick nestled between his thighs,
slipping against sweaty skin; he squeezed.
His, tight in my fist, was pressed to my belly.
He dug the fingers of one hand cruelly into
the muscle of my buttock, ran the back of the
other across my chest, said, “I have made love
with other castrati, with women, with boys
and men. Overall, I prefer men.” With this,
his hand turned, pinched a clump of the hair
on my chest so that I felt each individual root
straining; and then it fastened on the ugly
knot of gristle in my throat and moved it back
and forth; and then the soft palm scraped the
stubble on my chin.

“And if I were not a man?”

“Then, I think, you would be very different,
and no less lovely. Hush, now. Don’t speak.”
Lowering his head, he kissed me, slow, gentle,
consoling and consuming.

The gondola swayed at its mooring as we
lay down in its belly, cushioned by carpets
and rugs, cradled. Our feet entered the felze’s
shelter; for the rest, we lay under the cool
stars and the bright moon. Renzo caressed me
cleverly. He would not permit me to act, say-
ing repeatedly, “No, lie back,” or “Stay quiet,”
or “Let me,” as he explored me from head to
toe. His hands were everywhere, his tongue

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

and lips. Especially he seemed delighted by the evidences of my manhood: beard and Adam's apple, the heavy muscles of shoulders, arms, chest. He crowed with pleasure on finding the hair at my crown to be thinning, but equally, voluptuously, he liked the coarser hair on belly and chest. Biting and nuzzling my nipples – the sensations I could scarcely endure – he murmured, “So hard, so sweet and responsive,” and nipped again. Asking me to hold my belly rigid, he examined the bands of muscle, trailing fingertips against the growth of hair, dipping tongue into navel. He fondled and manipulated my legs from thigh to ankle and pronounced happily on the masculine ugliness of my feet.

62

All of this was unfair, from a person – the only person – who had been told my story, and ought to have been hurtful. Too, whatever the breadth of Renzo's experience, I had made love only ever with men – if it could be called love, hurried and sordid; if it were to be called love, solely with Domenico, as ugly and craven in his own eyes as I in mine. Never, certainly, with a castrato. I had not dared to dare – to dare even contemplate a castrato as a person, as other than a voice, the vessel of a voice. Now Renzo, who demanded I treat him as a person, who was possessed of the most sublime voice I had ever heard, who knew my secrets and refused to pity me, now he had me in his hands, he went on about

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

my manhood, my being a man, and he would not allow me physically to discover him. He pushed my hands away, not unkindly, when they ventured to reach.

63

I was in a fever of desire, both to have and to be had – he had not yet deliberately touched my genitals – desire for him and of him. Light headed, I longed to learn his every span and reach, to learn from without what I ought to have known from within. I would have sliced him open, crawled into his silken skin to know him, and he scarcely allowed me to touch him. I wanted, and the wanting made me feel giddy and ill, closely to examine the scars of the knife, what had been taken and what remained. Surely, I thought insanely, bucking as he touched a nerve in my thigh that seemed to run direct to the spine, surely it wasn't enough. There was something else, a secret only the castrati themselves, their teachers, the surgeons who made them knew. If you cut off a boy's hands, still he would grow to be a man, his entire arm or leg or his ears; if you severed his head he would be dead, no more. What caused those two insignificant stones between my legs, a paltry handful, to be so potent that retaining them wrecked my life, losing them created this splendid creature, preserved and refined his miraculous voice; what caused the word *castrate* to make strong men blanch, shift uncomfortably in their seats, grope uneasily, surreptitiously, to

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

be sure they were still whole. What was it about the hateful things that made my father, who despised and detested and degraded his son, to prefer me dead to gelded? I longed to touch the scar, to kiss it.

64

Too, to discover how he differed from me in other ways, how I might have differed from myself. He was very tall. His limbs were peculiarly long in proportion to his torso. He had no beard and scant hair on his body; the hair on his head was as fine and abundant as a child's. These were commonplaces: everyone knew. Everyone knew, as well, that castrati were clumsy in their gigantism – that they could only with difficulty pronounce the sound of *r*; that they had breasts like a woman's. True, Renzo's breadth of chest was immense, containing lungs of such magnitude, but bared it appeared to boast less flesh than my own, the nipples small and flat. His great breast was a sign of his profession as surely as my shoulders and callused hands of mine. My arms were dense with muscle because I rowed a gondola for my living. Had I not, whether I were eunuch or not, they might easily have been as slender as his.

A patrician – a Procurator of San Marco, no less – renowned for his virility and appetites, once had me. Stripped, he was a grotesque creature, far more a caricature of a eunuch than the castrato was caricature of a man, being spindly in the limbs, knock-kneed and splay-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

footed, with drooping breasts and saggy belly that showed red welts from the strict corset he wore under his fine linens and velvets. I am thankful never to have heard him sing, but his speaking voice was high, thin, nasal, and certain sounds he could not pronounce without spitting. All of this redeemed however by the two huge eggs in their basket of warty, hairy skin that hung between his bandy legs, by a member rumored to be as long as his forearm. This it was not, though significantly too large for comfort, either his lovers' or, I believe, his own. He was clumsy with it, too, hasty; he hurt me a good deal and made no pretense of attempting to grant me any pleasure. He had his balls, though, with them had sired eleven legitimate sons on three successive wives, as well as uncounted bastards, betweentimes debauching any youth who caught his fancy and could be had for coin or the promise of favors, as well as some, it's said, who could not.

65

Renzo had still not touched me between the legs where my own balls were tight with frustration, my prick rigid, upstanding, sore, and copiously dribbling. He was a genius of passion, of pleasure withheld or unexpectedly evoked. Though his own stubby member remained, so far as I could tell, as stiff as my own, he never touched it either; though his breath became rapid, ragged, he handled me as meticulously as if I were a violin whose purchase he considered, whose tone he must

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

prove. When he hoisted my legs apart and spread my buttocks with his hands I thought I knew what he wanted, what he planned to do. My asshole contracted in anticipation; the flow of slime from my prick bubbled up when he touched the ring of muscle with an inquiring finger. "Have you been buggered, Zanni?" he asked mildly.

66

Angered somehow, I added two inches to the Procurator's gross tool and held up both hands, scowling.

"They never expect it of me," he remarked, "men." He settled my legs again, genially patting one knee. Then, for all the world as if preparing for sleep, he simply lay down close beside me in the belly of the boat. One arm was insinuated under my neck as a pillow, the other laid idly athwart my chest. Nuzzling against me, he coyly licked my shoulder. One of his legs tangled itself with one of mine. I felt the uncompromising, unredeemed pressure of his sex against the flesh of my thigh. Balked and annoyed and, in ways I did not wish to understand, severely happy, I said, "What do they expect?"

He laughed low in his throat. "A glorious, obliging counterfeit of a woman, or an outsize boy. Some, very few, a kind of man. They're the most disappointed. And you?"

I would have sat up, but his arm was heavy, his chin on my shoulder. "You have managed this affair and me from the beginning,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

Renzo. What do you expect? What do you plan, maestro?" My breath came raw and fast, and he did not reply, only dug his sharp chin deeper and tweaked the hair in my armpit. "What do you want of me?" I demanded, querulous. "To bugger me? Oh, please do! I am in a ferment of desire, Renzo – it hurts! Is this how we differ, whole man and castrato? My balls ache for release."

67

"And I," murmured my tormentor, "have no balls."

"Is that it?" I cried, writhing.

He pressed his hips, the demanding prod of his sex, harder into my thigh. "No. No, I think not. I do not desire to have back what I never really knew I had. I'm pleased with what I am without them, and don't understand what I should be with." He had dropped all pretense of a low, masculine voice. Rising, pulling his arm from under my head, he knelt at my side. I twisted to look up at him. Where long thighs met at the base of his slightly rounded, full belly, the fat knob of his prick stood out. Delicately, between finger and thumb, he grasped and drew back the tight foreskin, revealing a head that was bulbous and, even in poor light, crimson, heart-shaped from below. Eyes downcast, he regarded it. If there was anything left of the scrotum it was hidden in the juncture of his legs. "A monk, they say," he said quietly, "is a kind of castrato, only he hasn't been cut – a castrato by force

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

of will and faith. If I had been made a monk I should be expected to deny even this." The member disappeared into his closing fist, very large, so that my own organ might have been hidden in its grasp. "As a monk, of course, I might not sire children either. I am content to lack the capacity. But, you see, I am curious." He laughed a little, throaty, almost painful. "A curiosity that can't be satisfied. Yet if you were not so bitter, Zanni, would you not be curious? This torment you speak of, for an example, I do not understand it. This –" he opened his hand to show how hard he still was – "is no torment but sustained pleasure, like the longest note my lungs could sustain but more lasting. Not that climax isn't a joy of its kind, as intense and satisfying and short-lived as my re in altissimo, but I might go about all day with this –" now he shook it, bounced it against his fingers – "and remain very content. Is it these, Zanni, that cause your torment?"

68

Very suddenly he had leaned over me and his hand was on my balls, under them, cupping them, lifting them up as if they were precious pearls of grotesque and stupendous size. Sensation as sharp and violent as the abrupt slicing of a knife blade into flesh ripped through me. My limbs flailed and I cried out, very loud, very high. A kind of delirious agony consumed me, centered in the despicable organs he handled but igniting

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

every nerve, inspiring every muscle to twitch. He tugged. He twisted. He crushed them gently between his fingers.

Nearly I pulled out of his grasp, the pain so intense it overmastered any sense it was pain merely because the vast shock of it could not be interpreted as pleasure, bliss that became torture or torture inspiring bliss. In my head my eyes went blind, for I could make no sense of the colors I saw. The stars bloomed, the moon shattered. It seemed to me I sang. Since the age of fifteen I had not sung soprano but a kind of tinny, high tenor or pallid alto that often disgusted me, a head voice that hit its pitches precisely but failed to attack them, lacked resonance and brilliance. But I was singing and my voice stretched effortlessly above my capabilities as if the part were transposed up two octaves to a pristine, angelic register that was, in fact, my natural tessitura. Moreover, I had the lungs of an Æolus, immense bellows and soundboxes. The cords in my throat were the strings of an entire orchestra of violins and viols; or my lungs and throat together comprised the soprano ranks of the great organ in the basilica. Further, I had easy command of the most complex ornamentation – an arpeggio capped by Renzo's vaunted re in altissimo was child's play, laughably easy, and yet its extravagant beauty, ringing from my own poor throat, brought me to tears.

69

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

And yet I knew it was not so. I reached without trying for the *re*, the *mi*, *fa*, *sol*, *la*, and a *si* no voice had ever attained nor ear heard, and all along I was aware completely that my limbs thrashed like a madman's in a fit, my flailing prick spurted white streamers of bitter slime that slapped across pounding belly and heaving chest and contorting face, polluted the clean interior of my gondola. I knew very well my crippled throat uttered notes of no beauty, hideous guttural sounds, the strangled cries of a beast in pain.

70

"Oh, yes," breathed Renzo. It seemed his features bore an expression of fierce concentration, almost of wonder or joy, but I was blind. Releasing me from his grasp, he dipped two fingers into the turbid, glowing puddle that overflowed my navel, lifted them to his lips. His long tongue licked out, drew back. His smile grew feline, cruel. "Bitter," he murmured, "and sweet."

I lay helpless, powerless, impotent. My prick was still jerking, spewing its last drops. Roughly, he grabbed it, milked. The sudden sensation was more like pain than pleasure and I moaned, but then, worse, his other hand grabbed the balls and pulled them down against the upward thrust of the first. That cry most resembled a scream.

"But, Zanni," he whispered, leaning forward, "now I am going to bugger you. You should be pleased. It's what you wanted."

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

He was kneeling between my legs. My ankles were hoisted to his shoulders. He was smearing my semen onto his rigid sex. There was pain – there is always pain in that instant; Renzo’s member was not long but it was thick. Then it was inside me. “Caro,” he said.

71

Where before had been a brilliant, shocking aria di bravura, at least in my mind, this began as a long, adagio interval of recitative – with its arioso passages to be sure, interpolated cavatina and cantilena, even a few measures that were purely instrumental, little stage-business ritornelli or sinfonie. He wrapped my legs around his hips and rocked me upright into his lap. From this vantage I found I could kiss him without any strain, and discovered I wished to. His lips moist, he murmured into my mouth, along my jaw, into my ear, a calm, wordless vocalise. The thick pressure of his prick in my gut felt as comforting, indeed gentle and necessary, as the supportive pressure of his arms across my back. For a long time we hardly moved except as, rocking on the waves, the gondola moved us. The air was chill but his skin very warm, the flesh within it hot. My delirium had subsided, my sex with it, pressed between our bellies, nuzzling softly into his navel. We did not speak, save for a “caro” or a “Zanni” now and then emerging intelligible from his low croon. My sweat and the gobs of my semen caught in chest and

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

belly hair cooled, chilled. At length I began to shiver against a cold he seemed not to feel.

Then, never breaking the bond that joined us, Renzo laid us both down, drew rough, warm rugs over us, held me closer. “Hush now, Zanni, caro,” he whispered breathily. “I’m here.” He began to sing, almost in a whisper, his lungs constrained by my embrace. I thought the song a lullaby – I couldn’t make out the words in some barbaric southern dialect – and for a time I believed it was my mother’s voice, my mother whom I barely remembered, singing quietly to a fretful babe, quietly lest she wake my father and my brother asleep across the room. I think, for a time, I must have slept.

72



*I*t seemed he did not sleep, for when next I became aware it was to find him rocking me, rocking within me, the warm, solid presence of his sex withdrawing a little from my flesh and then advancing. Or perhaps this had been going on all along. We lay both in such tangled, awkward positions that not much movement was possible on either side. The arm and leg on which I lay were numb, prickling. His limbs all around me under the rugs felt hot, fevered. Uncomfortable as I was, I felt content, content to feel this repletion, the organ filling more of me than, for its length,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

seemed possible, and yet I felt – for I could not know how he felt, his urges, his desires – he deserved more, or that I did. “Renzo,” I mumbled. My nose, when I turned my head, collided with his, then our lips met and, suddenly awake within my body, I kissed him as I had never kissed another person, ravenous, as if I could consume his soul or suck his voice into my own throat and lungs. His tongue still tasted of French brandy. His spittle was sweet. His lips were firm, demanding, if not so demanding as mine as I sucked them in between my teeth and bit, sucked at the soft skin around them, thrust in my tongue and withdrew it. My free hand on the back of his skull, I held him so he could not turn away, although he showed no inclination to do so, matched my endeavors in a response similarly rapacious that seemed, also, to be amused.

73

With his great lungs, Renzo might have kept up longer, but I grew breathless, light headed.

“So that’s it – it becomes tedious. You grow bored.” Giving me a little close-lipped peck, he shifted his hips, pushing in a bit further. “But you understand, Zanni, tedium and I are fond acquaintances. The practice of singing is largely a matter of tedium and endless repetition.”

“You must want more,” I protested.

“Always.” As if to demonstrate he knew our kissing had roused my slumbering sex, he filled

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

his lungs, compressing the hard span of it between us, then released his breath in a laugh. “Always. But *more* as a matter of duration or of consequence? You feel I ought to bugger you properly, Zanni, as if I were a man, as if I meant it?” With a little jolt, he nudged himself further in. “Oh, I mean it, caro, I mean it most thoroughly and sincerely.” He kissed me again and allowed me, contrite, confused, to kiss him. In my gut, although it did not thrust or stab, his prick seemed to swell, contract, swell again on a slow, even meter, a sensation so subtle it was as though I were aware of it, in my mind, more than feeling it in my flesh. After a time, abstracted, he mumbled, “As well, you know, I cannot get the leverage in this position.”

74

“There are other positions,” I told him.

“Like dogs in the street, shameless!” Laughing, he kissed me soundly, his laughter bubbling into my mouth like Champagne, and abruptly pulled free. The gross sucking and plopping noise inspired in me a similar hilarity; we rolled apart, giggling and grunting in concert, knocking elbows and knees against the flanks of the gondola with hollow thunks, muffled by the rugs, that were similarly amusing. The left side of my body was numb, useless. Hunched on knees and elbows, head hanging, Renzo imitated the noise with his mouth, a sound still more disgusting because advertent. “I cannot be a man, Zanni,” he

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

groaned, having tumbled across to lie flat on his back beside me. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"I haven't the balls for it."

75

His prick jiggled, upstanding and stiff. Fouled though it was by my semen and excrement, a little blood, I liked the look of it. Straddling him carefully, I let him take my weight, let it find its place. "Not like dogs," I said, "though shameless certainly, nor yet like men." It found its place and entered. There was no pain. I gazed down into his eyes. He smiled, gentle, satisfied, held up his hands for me to kiss. I did better.

A slow, easy fuck, it was nevertheless definitely a fuck. I felt I had never before been fucked so knowledgeably, for all that impetus and most of the action were mine. I felt, for a wonder, I was not second-best to a woman, that there was no-one else he wanted or, for this moment, cared for. Truly, the opportunity of a piece had simply presented itself to him, he could have had me regardless if it were what he wanted, but he made sure first that I was a person, and he made love *to* me, not *on* me – a convenient hole to jiggle his key. I noticed that, besides being big, his hands were very handsome with their long, tapering fingers and sugared-almond nails, the blue veins that did not bulge up through the skin but were inlaid within the flesh, skeins of lapis-lazuli in a Florentine pietra dura. I no-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

ticed that, in the dark, the whites of his eyes gleamed, glowed; I noticed that his pale lips were the same hue as the tiny nipples on his chest, which appeared to be insensitive – at least, not so sensitive as my own. I noticed that if I placed my hand for a moment over his heart, gave it a little weight, the white print on his flesh lasted longer than the pressure that made it. Everything about him that was peculiar or foreign recommended him to me; everything that was familiar endeared. I was feeling – or believed myself to be discovering – that the voice it seemed I could not now subsist without emanated from a person as crucial. *A person*: this too was crucial. Not a man. A man could not comprehend me. A man could not appreciate those qualities in me that were not manly, those wounds, nor would a man acknowledge my manly qualities in such a manner that he wouldn't disgust or unman me. As I gently rode his fine, filling prick, Renzo toyed with my chest hair. When I bent to kiss him, he ran his hands appreciatively across the span of my shoulders, raising gooseflesh, or proved the bulk of the muscles in my arms. His lips and the skin around were chafed from my beard stubble. He played with my rigid prick, pressing it against his belly or mine, then allowing it to spring away; he tickled it with the tips of his fingers and, with the whole hand, jerked it roughly. Tactful, he never touched my balls.

76

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

But there is not much to say of the fuck. I rode him pleasantly, pleasurably, patiently. I did not lose myself in the sensations, but they became me, enveloping and filling me on slow even waves, and he, though flushed and sweating, remained precise in his moves and countermoves, even in his breathing. There was no measuring how long it went on, ever swelling, the swells never toppling but always rising, until a gentle flinch, inconsequential as a belch, thrummed throughout me. Wondering, I watched a tiny pearl of semen emerge from the distended slit in the distended head of my own prick, pulse sluggishly forth into his palm. As slowly as it purled forth, my emission, flooding his hand, just as slowly he smiled. “Now,” he said.

77

The sensations, indefinite and potent, arose throughout my body – it wasn’t my member ejaculating but all of me, sweat springing hotly forth from my skin, spittle flooding my mouth, tears bursting from my eyes. All the muscles in my body contracted, released, contracted. With the greatest intensity I was aware of those in my gut, enfolding, enclosing a hard, living intrusion that was no intrusion but fully part of me, swelling and slightly shrinking and swelling again, heated. “Yes,” he said, “now,” and I saw the tears draining from his own eyes, hot and vital as my own fluids in his cupped hand, as the fluid, vital warmth filling me, filling me to repletion,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

completion, filtering up and out from my bowels as far as fingertips and toes like liquid fire or molten gold or the pearls dissolved in hot wine that prove specific against the most potent poisons. “Oh, yes.” His smile, Renzo’s smile, as sweet and open as sugared confits stuffed hungrily into my mouth.

78



*A*fter, when we woke in each other’s arms to the chill, pearly dawn, he dipped his handkerchief into the cold waters of the lagoon and cleaned us. As he washed gently between my legs, he found the scar in the tender flesh of my thigh. His finger traced its length through the hair that grew thickly there, coming to its end under my balls, and I flinched. In his low, studied voice, he said, “What is this?”

I sat up, drawing away, but his long arm followed my retreat with no effort at all, his big hand touched the scar again, then spread, gathering everything that was contracting toward my belly, shrivelling, into the warm, protective grasp of his palm. I seemed to feel a hot pulse there, as if he held my heart, or my life.

“What is it?”

“When I was ten –” My voice broke. He squeezed, tender. “When I was ten, I stole a flask of wine and a razor, and I tried to do to

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

myself what was done to you. But the blade slipped, and it hurt so very much....”

Stern, beautiful, kind, he was gazing at me when I raised my eyes. He moved his head a little, looked away. “Brave child,” he murmured.

79

“*Brave?*” Outraged, I lifted my foot to his chest and pushed him away. “Brave! I didn’t finish the job! It hurt, and I cried out, and I dropped the razor and was sick all over myself.” There was a bitter taste in my throat, as if I were about to be sick again. “My father found me. He thrashed me.”

He righted himself easily from where I’d pushed him. His voice was grave. “But to try. That’s what I meant – to go against your father’s wishes, that takes courage, deliberately to hurt yourself....” Pausing, he gazed across the flat, metallic lagoon toward the profile of the city, where the first sun glittered on the wings and golden head of the angel atop the campanile. A pennant of wings suddenly flew up into the dawn, pigeons or gulls, and one knew the first, still drunken troupe of carnival revellers had stumbled into the Piazza. “For me it was so easy – I don’t remember it.” He paused again, turned away from my city, toward me. Smudged paint around his eyes made him look young in the half-light, a dirty urchin. “It changed me, made me what I am. But I do not remember it.”

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER



*C*ounterfeiting with perfect insolence a foreign gentleman come to Venice for the season and his hired gondolier, we returned to the city. Bells pealed from the five hundred campanili, ringing out over the dawn-bright waters of the Bacino. Gondolas and sandolos, barges, barques and brigantines and schooners Venetian or foreign rocked on the glassy water, pennants flying. Along the Riva degli Schiavoni and the Molo gaily masked and costumed revellers took the morning air. We sang duets, Renzo and I, and the people cheered, “Bravi! Bravi!” – an applause that drowned us out so only we two could hear. “Bravissimi!” My voice did not disgust me.

80



Sunday afternoon (the snow has stopped)

*O*h, my dear, really, you know, I think it won't serve. It's far too long, for starters. Although, in my head, focussed on distinctly other problems and questions than whether, when, how countertenor and soprano will get it on, I can't quite see it any shorter. Unless I cut the sex – hot enough in its peculiar way (I beat off four times, writing it) – and then to whom should I offer the thing? Typi-

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

cal. Give me the simplest assignment and I'll twist it out of all recognition.

Too, it's no story at all for romantics and, being absolutely a soppy romantic myself, I have qualms. I want to see Renzo taking Zanni into his entourage, giving him singing lessons, taking him away from Venice. Devoted to each other, they would travel throughout Italy and Europe, Renzo a triumph in Vienna, Prague, Dresden, Paris, London, Madrid ... finally, in crotchety (though fond, and very definitely prosperous) old age, would settle in a fabulous Palladian villa on the Brenta. History intervenes, necessarily. Napoléon will have been an Attila to the Venetian State, the thousand-year republic will have guttered out like a candle, leaving a singed, unpleasant taste in the air and rather destroying the point: the Veneto will be Austrian. Horrid little pouter-pigeon grafts goosestepping about the Piazza and ancient families of the Libro d'Oro conspiring to be made Habsburg counts. One shudders to think. Zanni will never get over not being a soprano.

81

This is the real problem, naturally (or unnaturally). Now, I don't myself much relish the thought of being unmanned, but my boy's soprano wasn't ever anything to write home about. Even then I couldn't carry a tune. I confess to being fond of my testicles – yours too, dearest – but we're adults, long used to masculinity. Nor had we ever any other model. Still, Zanni convinced me very easily. I'm always ready to be convinced.

Vivaldi again. The cello moaning deep in its throat, pallid strings wavering behind – andante

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

e spirituosissimo, three and a half minutes between the two allegro movements, which are charming. And *no voices*.

82



*I*n the not-to-be-completed San Francisco novel – an apprentice exercise cum therapeutic two-hundred-page wail of anguish (aria cantabile in a decidedly minor key) that got me from one coast to the other relatively intact, into your arms – my stand-in met Jack's at the scuzzy laundromat around the corner, where Jack admired my handwoven Guatemalan shirt and I his socks. But we are speaking of what really happened. I had already known about him for some time. A mutual friend (more his than mine, damn her), whose every effort to introduce us fell apart on the flimsiest of pretexts, told me we were soulmates, psychic twins. A different friend, somebody who knew me but not him, told me to invite Jack to his birthday party. We talked on the phone, the first time, when I called, before either knew what the other looked like, for two and a half hours. When I took Muni across town to collect him I brought flowers – heavily scented greeny-white stocks that made me think of my mother's garden. He did not own a vase to put them in.

Was I bowled over by his beauty? I recognized his voice over the intercom when he buzzed me into the huge apartment building. On the fifth floor (I walked up, not to appear eager), I saw a man standing in the open door of his tiny apartment watching

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

the elevator who was a foot taller than I, whose nose was too big, whose eyes behind little tortoiseshell spectacles were shifty and skitty and fearful. Hearing my footsteps down the hall, he turned and for a moment didn't see me because I was too short. "Hello, Jack," I said.

83

These things we already knew about each other: we were both writers, although I had published (I derided the work) and he had not. We had each, for significant childhood periods, lived abroad, I in Ireland, he in Italy. He disliked his full name but signed his stories with it; I disliked the name on my birth certificate and wouldn't answer to it. (But I told him what it was the instant he asked.) We were the same age (he was a few months younger), had only ever properly been involved with older men. We had both been chaste, since the unravelling of significant entanglements, "a year or so" – in my case this meant two; in his ten months.

At my friend's party, we were very rude. To begin with, my friend the host misunderstood the white stocks as being his birthday present. Then, both of us being shy in company, Jack knowing nobody, I not many more, we propped up a wall and ignored everybody else. What I mean to say is, we necked. Well, you know how I am. It was a non-smoking apartment. (Jack didn't smoke, couldn't tolerate caffeine. The whole affair was doomed from the start.)

You know how I am. I had resolved to get to know him first. He had a very nice mouth. Our mustaches brushed together with little bristly noises. I liked the way his nose kept bumping mine. At one

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

especially indecorous moment he scratched my brow with the hinge where stem met frame on his spectacles. I suppose he may have found it inconvenient to have to bend so far to reach me (do you?), but I quickly decided I could get very used to turning my chin up and standing on tippy-toes. Standing in the line of traffic between living room and kitchen, we were in the way. Someone going for a drink or fresh platter of canapés, or out onto the back stoop for a smoke, pushed by, and I lurched into Jack. He was, proportionately, as skinny as I: I felt his ribs through that fetching blue flannel shirt. I felt his pleasantly unmuscular tummy. I felt (felt of: groped) an enticing lump in his jeans. He pushed his hips forward, pressed the thing into my hand, blushing.

84

A friend said, "You two are being extremely impolite."

I had left Jack to fetch him a new beer, me a g&t. I glanced back over my shoulder. He would have looked lost if his gaze weren't fastened on me. Resigned, he nodded and offered me a sad little smile. My heart leapt.

"It's past time," she said. "But you ought to introduce him around. And you oughtn't rub our faces in it. When did you meet him, anyway?"

About an hour and a half ago, I didn't say. I made the attempt. I led her over, introduced them: Jack, my friend Ellen – Ellen, my ... Jack. He was inarticulate at first, embarrassing us all, then (she wrote software manuals for a living, he edited tomes of legal reference) embarrassingly specific about the horrors of professional prose. Except I'm making

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

him sound like an idiot. (I'm still bitter.) One of us rescued the other, I don't remember who or what the excuse, what we were excusing transparent.

We walked – can you appreciate this? – six or eight blocks down 18th to Castro, late evening or early night of a Saturday, holding hands, two of my quick steps to one of his. We paused under street lamps to neck a bit more.

85

Here's the thing: I want to remember it all, remember every moment with such intensity as to burn it out of my mind. I want it to be *over*. It's over. There was never properly anything to be over. Within one year, Ethan, I had been in love with you four times as long as I believed myself in love with Jack. Here it's seven, almost eight years later. You're the one I love, you're the one fills my thoughts and my heart, you're the one makes me hard like a pile-driver, you're the one I go bandy-legged with lust over. You're the one I write these horrifying letters for.

Good-bye, Jack, good-bye – good-bye, fare well. There is nothing to forgive: I'm forgiven.

I handled him badly. But I have handled you badly as well, from time to time. I'm looking for connections. I can't get them untangled. Damn you for being soft-spoken and tall. You know I love you.

I would like to be able to admire his book.



Okay, here we go.
(Of course [you already know this]
we went back to his place. This in despite of both

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

our best intentions. We walked. Held hands. It was May, it was warm, it was Saturday evening, it was San Francisco – more, the Castro: we made a spectacle of ourselves. I mean, really. There was nothing salacious or predatory about us, adorable as little gambolling lambs or fawns. In his apartment, the stocks were laid to wilt and odorously expire on the kitchen counter. I need to say this: he was beautiful unclothed. On both hips, where the blades of the pelvis rubbed against thin flesh, bloomed pale bruises like the velvet petals of pansies. They were, he said, chronic and permanent. His skin had the chilly blue-whiteness of refrigerated skim milk, just poured, no fat. The long taut tendons on the backs of hands and tops of feet formed staves across which twisting veins superscribed plangent, unreadable clefs and signatures. He was pallid, cool, unnourishing, as if one expected heavy custard but got icy white melon – but, too, he was like that unexpected sweet Turkish pudding that consists of milk-poached chicken breast and sugar, perfumed with rosewater or violets. There was a great deal of heat and blood within that skin dry and white as talc – within all those complex and very apparent bones – he smelled hot, acrid. You are to imagine that all this time I was feeling him up, adrift in dark patterned sheets atop a very high platform bed. The chapping around his lips – we continued to kiss excessively – was darker, redder than the lips themselves, as bleached or drained [rose petals that suggest all at once cream, pink, lavender, tawny] as the aureoles of his upstanding, responsive nipples. It's essential to emphasize that he

86

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

was hairy, all over, though not in the way of any man I had known before. Not like you with your satyr's thighs and welcoming hearth rug across the chest. Glossy hair, each filament transparent, soft, fine and fragile as the down on an adolescent's plump and sunburned cheek, but thick everywhere, everywhere I touched, and not blond. I couldn't get over it. I touched him everywhere, forearms as often as chest, calves and shoulder blades as often as ass or cock – or didn't touch, simply grazed my palms against the hair like a sci-fi force field guarding against contamination, electric and exciting, making him flinch and wince. His balls were a good size, a good weight; the wrinkled skin of the scrotum smelled and tasted rich, ripe, unctuous, salt – triple crème: he wore [not at this instant, of course] cotton-knit fly-front briefs in dark colors under his black stove-pipe jeans, making for a significant basket. Gratifyingly sluggish, his big two-handsful of a cock took its time turning to hot, blue-veined rose marble, so I had a chance to get to know it as it filled out, plumped up. Two hands full: we were shy, overexcited, out of practice – we knew the theories and necessities, were wary, but had never, at this point, either of us, walked into Walgreens to purchase a box of condoms. We were scandalously inept, like children working it out for the first time. He came too quickly, copious and embarrassed; I, rapt, enchanted – the simple smell of the semen puddled on his belly – couldn't bring myself to come at all. This was the pattern.)

87

If any day of the year in San Francisco will provide lovely weather, it's Pride. Clean watercolor-blue

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

sky and brilliant sun but nevertheless cool. Waiting in the shadows of downtown high rises, I became chilled, and he draped his charcoal melton bomber jacket over my shoulders. This was weeks later. The evening before, in the heat of one instant or another (he invited me to stay the night, spur of the moment), I had told him either that I loved him, or was in love with him, or was quite certain I must be falling in love with him. One would think (*I would think*) I could remember precisely which – whatever, it was a first: I had always waited for the other to convince me. He was difficult to sleep with: bony, nervous, taking up a great deal of space; in the morning I felt unrefreshed. He had no coffee in his apartment. The soap in his shower was Ivory, which makes my skin feel like fax paper, and I felt too scrupulous to ask to borrow his toothbrush or razor. Naturally, too, I did not have clean clothes to put on and had not smoked a single cigarette since early the previous evening.

88

But I was with him, in his apartment, it was Pride, and I largely succeeded in disregarding my own testiness, which I understood, and his, which I did not. We went out, and, yes, it was a lovely morning. All up and down Market Street lampposts displayed brilliant rainbow gonfalons, snapping and crackling in the breeze. At that time, the parade started downtown among the skyscrapers, proceeding out Market to City Hall (whereas now, so I understand, the route runs along upper Market to end in an explosion of brilliance squarely within the Castro, a kind of city-blocks-wide shrine), so Jack's neighborhood was not yet grotesquely crazed. Nonetheless, hundreds

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

of happy hunks in cut-off blue jeans and flagrant t-shirts or tank tops and baseball caps, with studded leather bands about their biceps and dangerous boots on their feet, preening, strode down from hills and side streets, enormously sure of themselves. I felt sure of nothing except that I walked in company with a handsome man who gave satisfactory evidence of desiring me, keeping safe hold of my hand; of being solicitous of my well being, for he asked whether I needed to buy cigarettes or why wasn't I smoking yet, and steered me into a coffee shop where he insisted on purchasing the largest dark roast they could provide. But then, perhaps he simply wished to forestall my crankiness. For himself he got a little container of orange juice, which he drank in two gulps, scowling at its sourness.

89

There had been some thought of meeting up with friends of his or of mine but nothing came of that and we rode the underground Metro downtown, thighs pressed warmly against each other on the plastic seats, his arm about my shoulders, my shoulder pressed into his chest, his chin resting hard on my skull, my hand clasping his in his lap. You see, there were no signs yet. I dragged the back of his hand up and down his long inseam, knee to crotch, scraping my fingernails on the denim. Which of us grew harder sooner was not to be determined. He nibbled at the helix of my ear, catching his teeth on the silver hoops with little clicks I heard and felt, his mustache bristling the nervy cartilage and exciting the tympanum and tiny stirrup bones within.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

And then we were on the sidewalk beneath a banner-waving lamppost, in the steep shadow of the very skyscraper where, for the moment, weekdays, I was employed – on the thirty-sixth floor! glaring from the window by my typewriter out across the bay to Oakland. You would have hated it, my darling. So reassuring to understand you, too, are subject to irrational terrors.

90

We stood on the sidewalk. Arrived early, we had the curb, for a while, to ourselves. Because I was short, I stood in front, teetering on the edge; because he was tall, he stood behind, right behind. I clutched my big Styrofoam cup of lousy coffee. He clutched me. His long arms clamped my rib cage, his big hands knotted together on my belly. I felt his lungs inflating, deflating against my shoulder blades. In the small of my back, I felt his hard-on. It was still there, still hard. Cramped into his pine-green undershorts, a tight fit, hidden, secretive, sly, but I knew it was there. I knew whom he was hard for, and snuggled back against it. Overhead, his breath came quicker, hissing from his nostrils. My jeans fit tightly enough that, when Dykes on Bikes roared past, grinning, waving, whooping, they need only have glanced over to see how hard and big I got. People crowded in around and behind us. Jack's grip on my chest grew harder, as though he were about to perform the Heimlich maneuver. We had already confessed to each other how much crowds distressed us.

A marching band came up past, winds and horns tweedling and blating, drums thumping, cheerily fascistic and overbearing but sabotaged by

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

a band uniform consisting of white shorts, lavender polo shirts, and heavy construction boots. Several of the men wore their shirts in the back pockets of their shorts. Lavender balloons strained at their tethers. Expertly twirling silver batons, the majorettes were a trio in snug lavender wrestler's singlets, the woman butch and handsome, the two men crowning their supple gym bodies with silver moptop wigs and vivid drag-theatre makeup. The band was accompanied by monitors in pink t-shirts who followed along the edges of the crowds, exhorting us to stay on the curb. One as he passed by, a slight youth who would have been lovely had he not been blond, said quite clearly, "Get a grip on yourself, babe," and, with a grin and a lewd wink, momentarily got a friendly grip on me.

91

Startled, delighted, I shied back deeper into Jack's arms, to the accompaniment of healthy laughter from a few of our neighbors, and spilled a little coffee on my hands. Overhead, Jack grumbled, "We're a scandal," but his embrace did not slacken and he pressed his hard-on harder into my back, writhing a little.

You know Pride, Ethan. San Francisco's is bigger, more spectacular than Boston's or Philadelphia's, but you've experienced New York's as well, though I refused to accompany you that time. There might have been somewhat less exposed skin, only because June in San Francisco is scarcely warmer than March, but there was sufficient. I don't have to describe it for you. A spectacular drag queen teetering past on her spikes, tossing foil-wrapped condoms like chocolates from a gilded pail into the crowd, thrust a handful at

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

me, squealing, "Looks like you could really use these, big boy! Play safe, now!" One of the grandiose floats – I don't recall the sponsor, can't imagine who it might have been – blasted high-power Italian opera from huge speakers but it wasn't Baroque, nothing I'd listen to by choice: the supernumeraries on the flatbed were bronzed, bare-chested Egyptians in sheer, abbreviated kilts and a splendid drag Aïda with enamelled eyes stood between the huge paws of the papier-mâché Sphinx, manfully lip-synching Callas or Moffo or whichever diva it was. Jack kept his grip on me, every so often ground his pelvis into my back although his cock was not consistently hard. Mine was, pretty much, and every now and then I would lean back against his chest, lift my head and my eyes, and simply gaze up at the stubbled promontory of his chin projected against chalk-blue sky, hollowed within the horseshoe of jawbone, thrust out above the knob of his Adam's apple and below the splendid sculpting of the nose with its deep nostrils, rose-colored within. I am unfaithful to thee, dear, in my fashion. Pastel balloons and balloons more vivid – plum, cobalt, emerald, lemon, gold, scarlet – floated, drifted up and away into the canyon of the city avenue, dodged and curvetted when updraft or squall caught them, dwindled away into the empyrean. I felt light and buoyant as helium, flammable as hydrogen.

92

Later ... there are two *later's* to this episode. In the first we are sitting, Jack and I, in the grass at the City Hall rally, post-parade. A braided arch of multi-colored balloons waves and dips above the speakers'

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

platform. Amplification is tinny, distorted, but we don't seem to care – we're all involved in one another, coiled together like Laocoön's serpents, necking and – well, not too indiscreetly, he's fondling me. Fondling my cock, I mean to say, through the worn denim at crotch and thigh: spanking my monkey, that is to say, granting me intimate audience with Mr Hand and his five clever sons, beating my meat. Thousands of happy queers all around. Who's to say how many of them...? With a treble cry I stifled by biting his tongue, I shot in my britches, then knocked his spectacles skewif as I nibbled frantically all over his face (he was still stroking me, resolute and pitiless as a torturer), knocked them off completely into the grass to get at his crêpe-paper eyelids with my tongue. Sadly, characteristically, it was the only time Jack was able to bring me off. I think he did not come on that occasion.

93

Later (it was time to leave: to private or public party, to dance till you dropped at any club you could name, to rest up for a proper night of it, to take your fabulous new acquaintance home for an exultant, celebratory fuck), he shook his head diffidently and said he really wanted to get in some time at the typewriter before work on Monday: I would understand ... I who hadn't written a line since the first night.

Later still (the next afternoon), he called and said firmly (his voice trembled a little) that, really, he thought it would be best if we didn't see each other again.



ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

J went mad for love. Cf Handel's *Orlando*, Atto
secondo, scena II.

94

Già latra Cerbero
E già dell'Ebero
Ogni terribili
Squallida furia
Sen viene a me.

It is not a period of my life (*The Frenzy of Alessandro*) or aspect of my character I care to dwell on. I haven't the balls for it.



*T*he chamber band at Florian's is playing, for unknown reasons, not the typical if inappropriate Strauss waltzes but Vivaldi: *L'Estro Armonico* yet, complete, in sequence – not, say, *The Four Seasons*. Appears a waiter in black velvet half-mask, bearing some kind of flaky, airy, inedibly sweet Viennese pastry mit Schlag (for you, sweetie baby) and a pair of toxic espressi in tiny white demitasses. The flared upper lip and empty, scowling eyes of your bauta leer amiably at me when you push it up off your forehead, and there's your real face: your face. Your eyes, your nose, your mouth and chin – not to be mistaken – your noble brow and flirtatious moustache. You. That is to say, nobody else. The bone-white bauta, lewd and complicit in the shadow of its tricorne, sits on the table between us.

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

Indulgent, I lean back, lift my demitasse to my lips, regard you through the bitter, fragrant steam, as you dig into your goodie, scattering papery fragments of pastry like pigeons on the Piazza San Marco across the tablecloth, as you scarf it up. White blobs of whipped cream ornament your mustache. Outside, on the actual, life-size (outsized) Piazza, far too many costumed tourists mill about for any pigeon to gain a foothold on the pavement: it's Carnevale. Inside – inside Caffè Florian, an historic establishment founded early in the eighteenth century (Renzo might have dragged Zanni in for a coffee or aperitivo) – the atmosphere is humid, warm, raucous, smoky, odorous. The windows are steamed over: you can't see out. Conversations in Italian – local dialect and canonical; French; German; several varieties of English (is that *Turkish*?). Faces masked and bare and painted. Costumes of all descriptions (a few too many Arlecchini and hook-nosed Pulcinelli, perhaps, of several genders). (Dear God, there, just entering, a charming muscular pair: Batman and Robin.) And the band plays on, just over your shoulder, allegro – largo – allegro. In eighteenth-century brocade frock coats and waistcoats, violinists and cellists – three of them women – wear curled and pigtailed perukes tinted the acid colors of punk, fuchsia, tangerine, chartreuse. The leader, marking time at an exquisite harpsichord, a fine strong man with heavy 5.00-o'clock shadow, wears a stupendous confection of a gown, all kickshaws and furbelows, velvet and lace, scandalously décolleté about abundantly hairy chest. His equally spectacular wig, an

95

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

ice-cream sundae with far too many maraschino cherries, stands tall on the bench beside him.

Ah, yes, you're done. Lick your lips (delectable pink tongue tip foraging amid the hairs of your mustache, but of course it misses a few creamy white flecks – may I? I'll lick them off one by one, *largo molto espressivo*.) Shall we go? (Batman and Robin would be happy of our table.) The denominations of these banknotes are astonishing. Deposit a handsome tip – is that enough? too much? – in the hideous and no doubt priceless Murano goblet atop the harpsichord; press through the crowd, out – still more pressing, wilder crowds. Caffè Quadri, in the arcades of the Procuratie Vecchie across the square, is playing Strauss waltzes, piping them out through loudspeakers most unwelcomely. During the Austrian occupation, Quadri was the overlords' hangout.

96

Too many people – too many tourists. I would never choose to visit Venice during Carnevale. (I would go any chance I was offered. Would you accompany me?) Vast tides of revelry and hilarity catch us up, sweep us up, tear us away. You're ahead – I lunge, capture your trailing hand, you draw me after and into the shelter of your great black cloak. Under which (sabotaged by fierce white bauta) you're an erect and proper Victorian gentleman, era of Ruskin, in sober evening dress. While I, under your arm (at your insistence, because you like the look of my legs), as if I'd stepped out of a fifteenth-century canvas of Carpaccio, wear vivid parti-colored hose, a luxurious velvet doublet, and rather-too-insistent codpiece (no,

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

it's not padded). My little velvet cap with its white plume falls off, disappears, trodden underfoot.

Ahead, floodlights emblazon the gilt-bronze horses on the Basilica's pediment, the gilt winged lion and angular white saints above, the lead domes behind surmounted by Tinker-Toy weathervanes, the tall flag staffs before, flying the Republic of Italy's tricolor and the Republic of San Marco's winged lion. The Campanile climbs massively into the misty night. Off to the right (that's where the crowd's heading) on the Piazzetta before the Palazzo Ducale, tumblers will be tumbling on wooden platforms, wire-walkers walking wires between the columns on the Molo – between San Marco's winged pussycat and San Teodoro and his crocodile. Acrobats of the *forze d'Ercole* will erect staggering pyramids and towers of lithe, sinewy human flesh. Grand illuminations and pyrotechnics will explode above the Bacino with thunderous bangs and booms, brilliantly painting the sky.

97

But you (and I, perforce) catch a vagrant eddy in the flood and slip somehow through a little door in the base of the Campanile. Elevator to the bell chamber where, inexplicably, we find ourselves alone with the bells and the vistas. (But you're petrified of heights...? No matter.)

We're standing in the embrasure, leaning out, gazing east over Bacino and lagoon toward the festive lamps of the Lido and the grim Adriatic. Your arm about my waist. The salt wind in our hair. Harpsichord, double-bass, and bassoons play continuo, violins and oboes float airily, eerily above, and I (who

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

can't get within striking distance of a tune, whose singing voice – we're being kind now – wobbles between baritone and screechy falsetto, who reads music with even less success than Italian and smokes too much to have any staying power) ... I'm singing. A brilliant, true, expressive soprano, yes, with three octaves and perfect pitch, exhaustively trained since childhood in the strictest disciplines of Baroque vocal pedagogy: I'm singing. For you.

98

*Tu la mia stella sei,
Amabile speranza,
E porgi ai desir miei
Un grato bel piacer.*

*Qual sia di questo core
La stabile costanza,
E quanto possa amore,
S'ha in breve da veder.*

GF Handel, on a libretto by NF Haym, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (Cleopatra sings).

*You are my star,
my sweet hope,
and bring to my desires
sweet pleasure.*

*What unchanging faithfulness
is in my heart.
You will soon see
what love can do.*

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

Some time later. A sleek black gondola knifes through the inky, 4.00-AM waters of the Grand Canal, bearing a pair of weary revellers home. (Home being a charming little Gothic palazzo – Ruskin devoted several pages of his finest descriptive prose to it.) Our gondolier sings for us, as is customary, naïve little dialect tunes in a charming, forced countertenor. A slender, abnormally tall, balding fellow with weak eyes and a nose like the Rock of Gibraltar, he’s tricked out in the costume of a diffident San Francisco faggot, circa 1984 (late clone), but we’re not fooled.

99

Meantime (really, he sings very nicely), we recline in padded seats in the waist of the boat, you and I, and you – you’re shameless, you’re a scandal – have unlaced my codpiece (“So convenient!” you muttered) and, after pumping the silly thing into a frenzy of expectation with your clever hand, you lean over me and suck it into your clever mouth, slobbering and grunting. (Signor Gondoliere falters a bit, but hits his note almost immediately, regains his rhythm.) Sensitive, knowing fingers caress the essential, life-giving scar.

Oh, you’re a wonder, you and your mouth and your tongue and your throat, an artiste. How you can keep it up so long I can’t imagine, hold me off precisely until the instant our waterstairs and barber-pole mooring posts come into view. But then, well, I come with a piercing cry (the gondolier trips over his melody again, head tones plunging into chest with a raucous squawk) and you (sweetheart) swallow it down and amiably pat my knee. A quick grope

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

for the little snack (a healthy mouthful) tangled up in your serge trousers is all I have time for as you deftly fasten me up again and, with negligent, athletic expertise, he maneuvers his gondola in against the stairs; glares, impatient, hostile, while we debark. Accepts fare and overly generous tip (I'm in a happy mood, I'll forgive anything) with a scowl and, as he pushes off, spits grossly into the canal at our feet. "Froci!" he grunts.

100

Well! – well, we'll show him, won't we, my dear?

True soprano and contralto in harmony, in counterpoint – my, however many times we sing together it brings shivers to my spine, the duple splendor of the voices, the rapture of the singing, the inevitable glory of having you at my side. The duet, a virtuoso composition, I cannot quote for you, for the libretto is lost, the score forgotten: just another Baroque *Arianna e Teseo*.



Ethan, I will remind you of your grotesquely early call this morning (only you would have the gall, at 6.15 AM Sunday!, so of course I answered). "What's up?" you asked.

"My big cock." The right hand slimy with lube and precome, I held the phone in my left.

"Oh – you're writing porn again."

"The precise term is *erotica*."

"I was going to say it's a day for coffee and cigarettes and toaster-waffles, watching bad TV in our

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

pyjamas, and you should come over here, but I guess you've got your hands full."

My handful had diminished considerably. "Have you looked outside, babe? A drift the size of Alaska nearly got me yesterday – I'm not going out there again till spring."

101

"You're such a wuss sometimes, Alex." I heard you rooting around in the nightstand by your appallingly big bed. "You want some phone nookie, then, to tide you over? Since you've already started the job."

"There are days I simply adore you, lover."

You snorted. "That's the way it is, hey?"

"No, what I mean is, I'm sorry I'm such a mess. Been such a mess for such a long time. I hit the big one yesterday, Ethan. It's finished."

A whoop in C-sharp. "*Alex!* Alessandro mio, and you didn't call me – ? Well, fuck you, dearest."

"That's what I'm hoping ... when the slush melts."

"The hell you say. Did you print it out? Your sordid passions are just gonna have to wait, babes. I've got some reading to do – I'm on my way. I'll bring the waffles. You have coffee?"

"Ethan," I said deliberately. "What are you wearing?"

... Dinner tonight at your place. (I'm listening to Gregorian chant now. Blessèd relief.) I'll bring the manuscript. Speedy reader that you are, you'll have finished it (before my agent gets his copy or my editor hers) before you receive this one in the mail. And how many more times before that day will I have said

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

this very line to you, face to face: I love you. Repeat
it. Repeat it again.

OXOXOX

Alessandro

102

ALEX JEFFERS

DRAMMA PER MUSICA;
OR, THE FRENZY OF ALEXANDER

(Selected Letters: letter the fourth)

Copyright © 1996, 2009 Alex Jeffers.

Composed 1995 in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts,
and revised at occasional intervals thereafter.

Excerpts from an earlier version first published in *Best Gay Erotica 1996*,
selected & introduced by Scott Heim, edited by Michael Ford.

Pittsburgh & San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1996.

This edition e-published in 2009 by sentence and paragraph.
www.sentenceandparagraph.com



Set in Adobe Jenson, Adobe Caslon, Zapfino, and Lucida Calligraphy.

Cover art by Alex Jeffers using found and purpose-made images.

All rights reserved. As a courtesy to the author, please do not duplicate,
distribute, or alter this file.