

The Wax Confession

By Keith Evers

The Philadelphia concert hall was almost empty. The darkest recesses of the high ceiling echoed the sound of Kalyna and her father Oreck preparing their instruments in the ghostly gaslight illuminating the stage. Kalyna ran through violin scales to exercise her fingers. Her father, lean and energetic for his years, tested the keys of his piano in introduction to “Gypsy Airs.” It was a song that had always made her mother cry, and now it coaxed tears from her as well, almost as a command. He knew this, knew the way to play the emotions of his daughter like another instrument. It was his way of sharing his own sadness.

A yellowing newspaper folded out over the piano sheet music was dated January 30th, 1905 – six weeks ago. Its headline read, “Russian Czar’s Forces Slaughter Unarmed Protestors in Saint Petersburg.” It was an American paper, bought on an American street, and so they trusted it to tell the truth about the day now being called “Bloody Sunday.” Kalyna wanted the paper gone, shredded or burned, to keep it from her father’s eyes. He’d memorized it by now, the account of that horrible event, the day his cousin and hundreds of others were shot dead at a boulevard before the Kremlin, a place where Kalyna herself had played for coins as a child. Again and again she watched him turn to it, run his fingers over the illustration, asking for her help with the difficult English words. Sometimes he was bitter, but often just sad.

He caught her looking at his face and forced a smile as his fingers made an effortless musical transition to “Camptown Ladies.” She laughed. “Papa, these people aren’t paying money to hear us play folk tunes they could get on the corner.”

“Kalyna, my dear, in Russia it is folk tunes we dance to at weddings,” he said. “The classical works are reserved for funerals.” Of course he understood why they were

there, performing at the Philadelphia exhibit hall before the governor and the fur-lined citizens of the city. Their music had paid their way to this country and their performances had placed them in venues of increasing size and sophistication. There were newspaper reviews of the enchanting father and daughter musicians from far away Russia, but he hadn't saved any of those. He winked at her, his eyes now bright, his eyebrows wild and untrimmed, and began the slow, mournful introduction to Chopin's nocturne. She joined him.

At the back of the hall they saw a door open. Two men entered and approached the stage. The man in front was tall, with a finely-trimmed beard. He walked with intention, as if he was in a hurry, but the swing of his arms indicated he would not be hurried by anyone but himself; his was the unnatural assurance of a man with a gun somewhere on his person. When he was close enough, she saw embroidered on the lapel of his expensive Russian jacket the crest of Romanov.

Kalyna shared a horrified look with her father who covered up the newspaper. *Okhrana!* What would the Czar's secret police be doing here? And why was he walking straight toward them? When the man reached the stage, he greeted them in English. "Mr. Stetsenko. Ms. Stetsenko. I am Martov, an emissary of our Czar. He is pleased to hear of your success, the honor you bring to Russia, and to the Stetsenkos of Troitsk village, along the River Desan.

Her father nodded, cautious. The mention of their family was of course laden with threat -- a familiar Okhrana technique of intimidation through information.

"Of course our leader regrets he cannot be here himself, but he would like to hear your performance, nonetheless."

Kalyna and her father blinked at one another, afraid to smile, in case this had not been a joke. Would they suddenly find themselves shipped home?

Martov continued: “This man beside me is from Edison Records. He will make a recording now of your rehearsal, which will be excellent, I’m sure. When my ship leaves in one hour, I will personally take the playing device back to the Czar so that he can hear you. The song is your choice, but the Czar loves the work of Balakirev.” He consulted his pocket watch, turned to the man who had followed him in and said. “I will meet you at the dock in 45 minutes. Have the cylinder and the machine ready to travel.” He lifted a hat to his well-groomed head and walked away.

The second man was short, with a bow tie hanging loosely from his collar. In his teeth burned a rank cigar. He had pulled behind him a case on wheels, and now he had it open, manipulating the contents. He glanced up momentarily and returned to work, pulling out a heavy machine with both hands and setting it gently on top of the box. As he screwed on a large metal horn, he spoke: “This here is a phonograph. I’m sure you’ve seen these. You play as close to this horn as you can. I’ll be turning this handle and this cylinder will rotate, like a lathe. The sound will be scratched onto the wax. He pulled out a pencil and held it to the box from which he’d taken the cylinder. “We should get this done now. I can record up to four minutes, so nothing longer than that. What will you play?”

What? So soon? Kalyna felt confused, hurried. Her fingers were not ready. Her bow was a fraction too slack. Her stomach was still turning in fear. What if they were not good enough? And what would they play? “I don’t think we can just--”

“Yes,” said her father, turning to face his daughter with a fierce but playful look on his face she had never seen before. “We will play a concerto... by Rimsky-Korsakov.”

Rimsky-Korsakov! Of course she knew it. Since the composer had publicly criticized the Czar, all his works were banned in Russia. In small revenge, Oreck had arranged a Rimsky-Korsakov concerto that they had practiced only in private. But now?

“Spell that for me,” said the man. “This is for the king, right?” After Kalyna had spelled it for him, the man gently removed the cylinder from the box and set it on a horizontal spindle on the machine. “Ok, I’ll speak an introduction. Five seconds. Then you play – stay close to the horn!—and when you see me do this...” He spun his finger like a man hand-fishing from a boat, “You wrap it up. That’s another five seconds, and when I stop, we’re done. The cylinder is full and I’m on my way to the ship. Got that?”

Kalyna felt herself nodding, even as her knees wobbled. Her father motioned for her to share the piano bench, and she did.

“Ready?” The man began turning a handle on the machine, and as he did so, he leaned in to the horn and said loudly, “Rimsky-Korsakov concerto played by... father and daughter Stetsenko. Recorded by Edison Records.”

The man nodded and Oreck began to play, his head bobbing to set the time – faster than they’d ever played this before -- a pounding insistent proclamation, firm, and then soft. Kalyna’s violin joined in, and soon they were tearing through the piece. Kalyna was barely in control, clumsy at first, but carried along by her father’s immense passion, his fingers dancing over the keys. As always, it made her smile.

And then, just as she saw the technician begin to signal, Kalyna’s finger was planted on the final note and a sustained chord slowly faded from the piano.

“Maybe I’ll live to hear *that* played at the Czar’s funeral!” said Oreck, slipping momentarily into Russian.

And only then did the man stop turning the handle.

Kalyna’s father looked at her, his face triumphant, smiling. But when he saw the look of horror on his daughter face, it was like hearing an echo in a very large cave. It came back to him, the seconds just passed, the turning of the handle, recording everything... *what had he just said?*

“That was just fine,” said the man with the machine. He lit a fresh cigar, puffed heavily, and began removing the wax cylinder from the machine.

Oreck said, “Wait!”

The man looked up, but didn’t pause.

“Wait. Please. Can we.... Can we hear it?” Oreck asked.

“No, I’m sorry. There isn’t time,” said the man, lifting the 4 –inch cylinder up to his eyes for a visual inspection. “Normally, I’d listen once, but each listen degrades the sound. And anyway, there isn’t time.”

Kalyna felt sick to her stomach, desperate. She approached the short pudgy man. “Would it slow you down if I just *looked* at it?” she asked. Although she was not a coquette, and much too shy to flirt, she tried to find the right tone in speaking to him. “It just seems so *complicated* and difficult to do what you do. I would never understand the technology, but perhaps you could explain it just a bit?”

The man stopped. He looked at Kalyna, and then up at her father, who, understanding his daughter's game, turned his back on them both and pretended to shuffle his sheet music.

"Well," said the technician, his teeth suddenly forming an oval smile around his cigar. "You see the little lines on this wax tube?" He held it up, with his fingers inside the tube to leave the outside untouched. "That's your concert, Miss. Very fragile. A fingernail could ruin the whole thing."

"And where is the part with your voice on it?" she asked, stepping even closer to him.

"Oh, the intro is at this end here," he said.

"How interesting!" So now Kalyna knew the beginning of the recording from the end. She said, "My eyes are so poor. May I try to hold it myself to get a better look?"

The man looked at his watch again. She smiled and shook a curl over her eyes. She felt ridiculous, shameful, and urgent.

Then he was holding her hand in his short fat fingers, skin-to-skin, and she felt herself blush deeply. He pushed her two fingers together, and then slid the tube slowly over them. When he spoke, rank tobacco smoke filled her nose.

"Hold it gently, sweetie. You'll be fine." He pointed out the tiny lines carved in the fine wax surface and said, "We use a firm dark wax these days -- soft, but not as soft at the older ones." His eyes shifted to Oreck, whose head was buried under the piano lid, and then back to her and whispered. "Say, how would you like a little drink later, you and me?"

Kalyna pretended to marvel at what she was being shown, but in her mind she was calculating length and time. At what portion of the tube did her father's words... but the man was right—there just wasn't time! So she held her breath and pretended to stumble into the man. She screamed, "Oh!" as if she'd just tripped. At the same time, she grabbed one of his hands for support. With her other, she swung the end of the tube at his face, the end of it knocking the cigar from his lips, sending bright embers and flecks of spittle flying.

"Oh what have I done?" she wailed, dropping the tube on the floor and retreating, as if in a panic, to the piano where her father stood.

The technician looked at the recording on the floor for some time before picking it up like it was a wounded bird. He gently brushed ashes from the end, assessing the damage, and mumbled, "Oh boy... I'm gonna catch hell for this!" He looked at the two musicians on the stage. Then he looked at the tube again and shrugged. "Well, they'll either hear something or they won't. Russia's a long ways away, right?" He quickly packed up the machine, and then he was sprinting up the aisle and out the door, on his way to a boat bound for the Atlantic.

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