



*The Concert,
By Lena Sotskova*

The Three Musicians

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The grand hall echoed with the sound of the musicians, concentrating until the air itself vibrated and came alive with the music. The crowd stood in silent awe around a central stand upon which the three women stood proudly, red dresses sparkling in the light.

Anna, who was the oldest, stood center of the trio. Her long graceful neck was arched backwards and her bold eyes and sweet smile made the hearts of those watching simply melt. Her violin was simply set against her neck, yet she played it aggressively and without mercy.

Amelia, the other violinist, stood to the side of her sister. Her head was firmly placed on the base of the violin; her eyes had a dreamy quality to them as she seemed to literally gaze at the music coming from her instrument.

Annoura was the last. She sat on a chair as she moved the bow across the Cello in a steady rhythm. Her composure never changed a whisker as she played the Cello with the grace of an angel, tempering her siblings into one harmonious whole. The crowd couldn't speak, so spellbound were they, the gray hall and marble pillars seemed to melt away, replaced by formless smoke pulsing with color at each change.

Thus it was that only Amelia noticed the stranger that walked in unannounced, and certainly not welcomed! Her features remained untouched, except, perhaps, a slight widening

of the eyes. Her playing hesitated that tiniest bit, unremarkable to the others save her sisters. Amelia and Annoura looked at her and then turned to look at the stranger. They remained composed, but their eyes flashed lightning at the newcomer. They knew him, oh so very well indeed.

The object of their anger seemed not to care that, had looks been able to kill, there would have been no trace of him left. He gave Amelia a sly, knowing look that made her cheeks redden, though she did not dare turn away. He openly laughed at Anna and Annoura, giving a mocking bow before he reached into the case at his feet and pulling a violin, the color of pitch. And not just any pitch, but a true inky darkness, without shine. A blackness that swallowed the light and devoured all that stood before it. A matching bow came next, shining brilliant silver that seemed to flash like a mirror in the light and polished to an eye-tearing hue.

From the first chord he played on his dark instrument, he dominated the hall. His rapid fingers expertly stroked the strings, while the bow pulled across it in a hard rhythm that overpowered the three sisters'. The crowd turned to this new musician, surprised. One by one each were caught in his spell, surrounding him in waves of adoration as he shot the sisters a smug look.

Anna was just able to keep a snarl from her face. Standing forth proudly, she jumped tunes to a piece that was, if possible, even harder than his. However, where his sought to dominate, hers sought to defend, where his was a call to fight, hers was a call to arms. Her sisters rallied, the music bolstering what that lone instrument could not. Strong, his music clashed with theirs, struggling to be heard.

Grimacing, the man changed tack, becoming dark and sensual. Ladies blushed at the promises hidden in the music while the menfolk grinned knowingly at one another. The musician led them back further from the girls, where they would have to struggle to be heard.

Anna glared daggers at him, though she didn't allow it to touch her face. Drat the man! How dare he come in here and embarrass them like this? There must be some way to beat him at his own game.

To her surprise, it was Amelia who led next. Her music burst upon the hall like light after a storm, flicking shadows aside like they were so many cobwebs. Her Aria praised all that was Good and Green in the world, showing promises of new life and memories of joy. The determined look in Amelia's eyes belied the easy smile and graceful pose she played in, seemingly in her element. Ann could not help but sneak an admiring glance or two at her youngest sister. How mature she seemed, and how innocent! It was as if an angel had descended from on high to stand beside her in a red dress with her Instrument in her hand!

The music had more than the desired effect. The throng laughed and sang snatches of hymns as they crowded around them once more. Here and there a couple too caught up in the music danced in a small circle, flashing teeth and tapping shoes that squeaked on the marble floor, though the sound was lost in the din.

The stranger snarled in frustration, teeth grimacing in the dark. This was not going at all like he had planned! Those fiendish women were outplaying him, but he had one last trick up his sleeve! He had never thought he would need it, of course. Who would have thought they could have rallied so well? But desperate times called for desperate measures, and now was one of them!

Like a cloak of midnight seeking to smother the light, he rallied his final salvo. It devoured their joyous aria, shattering it upon its altar. Now a life of its own, the melody seemed to pulse and leap, seeking to physically cross the boundary into reality and strike down the impudent wenches that dared confront it.

Anna and Amelia quailed at the onslaught. Never in their most horrid nightmares had they imagined darkness like this! It crawled on their skin like bugs; it slid down their backs like a sensual lover and flayed their souls like a lash! Their music nearly stopped in the face of such, but somehow they kept playing. Amelia very nearly had tears in her eyes from the physical pain of the song, and Anna cowered in the shell of her body, wondering if it wouldn't be better to just give in and let the song take her, when a *new* reprieve came.

Annoura faced the black with her head held high, eyes defiant and smile firmly on her face. Her cello thundered in direct offense while the black seemed to falter as if surprised that *anything* could have withstood its blast.

Annoura caught Anna and Amelia's eyes, and filled her gaze with the love and devotion for them. Their spines stiffened and their music came back stronger than ever, led by Annoura's cello. This was a wild, primal sound from the mists of history, when light and good fought their epic battle for control. The song stirred the blood of the listeners, filling them with a righteous passion and anger, filling them with courage and hope. The darkness splintered like a branch hurled on a rock, coming apart in thousands of shards that vanished like smoke in the wind. The figure dropped his bow and violin, eyes wide with shock as the music hit him, *really* hit him. It was as if he had spent his entire life in a deep dark cave and suddenly had come out into the light. Dawn cleansed him and made him feel whole again.

The black violin he hurled down into his case with its silver bow. He yanked it up and turned to go out the door when he paused. The music had changed yet again. Amelia was leading it once more, only now the music was sad, tragic. A dirge mourning the loss of someone dear. So sad the stone itself seemed to weep and the heavens howl in loss. He turned back for just a moment, staring at the three on stage. Staring at *her*, and...remembering. Dampness crept down his cheek, and he raised his hand to brush the tear that had somehow leaked from his eyes. Fortunately, he didn't think anyone else noticed his momentary lapse; they were too busy crying themselves to notice. With a final blast of wind, the figure left.

The three changed one last time, to a triumphant piece that seemed to reach the heavens in its sheer magnificence and style, a celebration of their victory. The audience hooted and stamped, capered about in their frock coats and evening dresses, like they themselves had won. In a way, Anna supposed, they were right. They had chosen the right piece to side on, and had frightened away their enemy. She paused a moment in her moment to...remember what he had once been, full of laughter and mirth. She briefly wondered what had happened, but put it out of her mind. It was time to thank their audience, after all! With that, the trio gave a last blast of music that echoed grandly in the hall. They took their bows amid roaring applause, and Anna couldn't help but beam as she saw her sister's shining faces. They had overcome a great enemy today, and it was clear all of them felt capable of taking on the world. Anna didn't delude herself into thinking that was true in any way, but just now, at that moment, she felt that as long as she had her sisters with her, they could do anything