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## MANHEIM

Keith Meatto

The orchestra was rehearsing *Die Erste Walpurgisnacht* when Manheim bowed his viola and a wet juicy fart slipped out. The tympani masked the sound, but not the smell. Moments later, someone coughed and the music stopped and the stage collapsed into chaos.

Then Masur clapped and everyone fell quiet. We are not schoolchildren on a picnic, the conductor said. Give me fire and pitchforks. Give me *höllenbroden*.

We already have hellish brew, said the first violin and waved her hand in front of her nose. Manheim blushed as the orchestra and even the Westminster chorus kids laughed. Masur frowned and turned to grab the mezzo-soprano's shoulders and scold her for flubbing a pitch. Ashamed, Manheim ducked his head.

After he finished his critique, the conductor cued a few measures before the interruption and the music resumed. Manheim clenched his cheeks and attacked the strings. Yes, the breakfast burrito had been unwise. But such immaturity! When he studied Mendelssohn, half the kids on stage hadn't been born. And every year he re-auditioned to protect his job from a 94-pound girl who memorized Bach as a fetus.

*Kommt! Kommt! Kommt!*

As the chorus sang, Manheim dug harder into the strings. Then he relaxed, and another fart escaped—so toxic that he coughed and the orchestra stopped again.

Such errors, Masur said. Do I need to say this is our final rehearsal?

The orchestra fell silent, chastened. Manheim shut his eyes, as if he could dissipate the smell by willpower. But it lingered. Then the second violin spoke.

It's not our fault, she said. Somebody reeks.

The orchestra gasped. Nobody made excuses, not to the legendary Masur. The conductor turned his back to the musicians and stared at the auditorium and the 2,700 empty seats that in

six hours would all be filled. His bald crown shone and his jacket was rumpled, as if he had conducted all night in bed. For a while he stood still, then turned back to face the orchestra.

Then cover your nose, he said and cued the music again.

Manheim smiled as he played. The maestro was old, too. He knew how the body could fail. As the orchestra swelled and the glorious chorus sang, Manheim's heart swam with Christians and pagans, heaven and hell, darkness and light.

*Dein Licht! Dein Licht!*

They were measures from the finale when Manheim ripped a fart so loud that his legs shook. This time, no tympani came to his rescue. The music stopped. Masur lowered his baton. Everyone stared at Manheim. His face burned. Nobody spoke as he bent over, opened his case and lay his viola down in purple plush. Then he picked up the case and bowed three times: first to the maestro, then to the musicians, and last to the concert hall, his second home.

Goodbye, he said.

Then he farted again, loud and true as a trumpet, on purpose this time, and walked off stage before he could savor the reaction.