

Prussia and the Poodle

One of the exercises in music historiography for the New College first-year musicians is to consider the following conundrum, which sets out to prove by transitive reasoning that a dog ruled Prussia:

It is said that Prussia was ruled by Madame Quantz's poodle, for the poodle ruled Madame Quantz, who ruled Herr Quantz, who ruled Frederick the Great, who ruled Prussia.

The bon mot was circulated by the uncharitable at the Prussian Court, where the flautist and theorist, Johann Joachim Quantz, was teacher of flute and adviser to Frederick the Great, a gifted musician and composer; the dog was reputed to be bad-tempered. The aim is to develop a critical approach to (that is, distrust of !) the results of such reasoning, and the undergraduates are given an open brief to develop their response in whatever way they wish, providing that it is well researched. Imaginative results over the years have included interweaving political and canine concerns to produce a detailed view of the Prussian court in first person of the poodle. 2012 produced the following tale in verse, by Emily Bootle ...

Prussia rose and Prussia fell,
Bringing with it in the swell
A token pick of some great Kings,
Here's a tale of one who brings
Something different to the throne,
In defining the history of Prussia, his home.
While the eighteenth century may not quite have been Zen,
The Enlightenment certainly inspired most men
To begin to use a mind more broad,
But his own success the King could not ignore.

"Mirror mirror, on the wall,
Who is the ruler of them all?"
Frederick II had asked of late,
Expecting to hear "you, the Great!"
"Dearest Frederick," the mirror replied,
"How can I say when your kingdom's astride
The art and the culture you love so much,
The music and dancing in which you trust?"

The King considered and to him came a thought
As he listened to music whilst sitting in court,
Perhaps it's the music that rules over me,
And that's how my success has come to be.
Frederick had called upon an old friend,
In the hope that he would be able to lend
A hand in the music around the court,
And so he did, and they consorted, of sorts –
Of course! The name of the beloved man
Who played, and wrote, and taught, and sang,

Johann Quantz was his name, and so he did write
The music that gave our dear Frederick his might.

Or so Frederick assumed;
Hence the question loomed:
“So mirror mirror, on the wall,
Quantz is the ruler of them all?”
“Your Highness, I see what you’re trying to do,
But forgive me: it seems that you’re getting confused,
The music of course does have its own worth,
But before you assume, remember, first –
That Quantz himself might not be his own man,
We must take from his music what we can,
But while you listen, remember this:
You should give that young lady he married a kiss.”

Frederick the Great got up and sighed,
He had done his best; he had tried and tried,
To discover the secret, before too late,
Of the great and grand and noble state.
The mirror, he felt, spoke in too many riddles,
So he took a moment to relax and fiddle
With his new flute, acquired for free
From Johann Quantz, with a brand new key.
Suddenly, in playing, it came to him
(And Frederick was one for pursuing a whim):
The mirror spoke of a lady, of whom some had told
Several stories concerning the power she holds.
Not just that of a lady with gentle grace,
Or a charming dress trimmed with beautiful lace,
No – this woman was one that others did fear,
The very same woman Herr Quantz held dear.
[I suppose people now might say Quantz was “whipped” -
Rest assured: Madame was quite well equipped.]
But our poor hero Frederick could not understand
How a woman could possibly conquer a man.
“Women are pleasant and some possess grace
But such grace simply comes from knowing their place.
How can a man writing music for Kings
Be so trivial and get so caught up in such things?”
(At the time we must note our treasured ruler of Prussia
Was panicking over the invasion of Russia.)
Frederick, again, began playing his flute
And in his love for the music found something quite cute
In the passion Herr Quantz clearly felt for his wife
Despite the notion suggesting she might be causing him strife.

Now when he went to the mirror he said “look here, I’ve got it!
The ruler of Prussia’s that woman – oh sod it –
It can’t be a woman, I can’t let this be!”

(The Enlightenment didn't relinquish misogyny.)
"Frederick, dear Frederick," the wise mirror said,
"There's a use for a woman outside of your bed,
So don't let your morals shield your eyes
Just look a little closer and you might be surprised."
Curious, King Frederick peered in the mirror,
And noticed at once that his eyes appeared dimmer
Than usual: last night he had been on the wine,
To try and make the Austrian war seem fine.
Said the mirror, "oh Frederick, my dear, you look tired –
Last night's antics were what I call inspired.
But here's a suggestion for a nap like a log:
Can't go wrong with a little hair of the dog."
King Frederick, relieved, went at once for the schnapps,
Sure enough, soon, he completely collapsed,
And began at once the most peculiar dream
Whilst the moon on the mirror gave an eerie gleam.

Frederick dreamt first of a fox, but also a hound,
Then a young labrador running around,
Then spaniels, boxers, dalmatians, Jack Russells,
But then – amongst all the hustle and bustle
Through the centre of the swarm of dogs
Came a poodle, and, as if clearing the fog,
Frederick woke from his sleep, cried "Eureka! I've done it –
Madame Quantz has a poodle and the poodle's the culprit!"
He'd forgotten Madame's inhabited lap,
With the insufferable poodle, and its perpetual yap.
If it's said that Madame herself was demanding,
It's nothing on that which the animal's asking.
It whined and barked and shrieked and cried,
Much like women, he thought, except with less pride.
He remembered a time when Johann had been playing
A new piece for flute of his own arranging,
The ghastly animal shook and moaned and hissed,
Then worst – ran off into the corner and pissed
All over the new Turkish rug that he'd bought –
Such beauty, Madame should have been quite distraught,
Instead she chuckled and picked it straight up,
Cooing as if it were still a pup.

"Mirror mirror, on the wall,
I think the poodle rules them all!"
Instead of looking as though he were mad,
The mirror replied in a tone that seemed glad:
"Your Highness, I think you might be right
Though I must confirm with the power of sight –
To be fully sure, and so you are clear,
You must bring the poodle here."
While all the King's horses and all the King's men

Couldn't put Humpty together again
They most certainly could hunt down a pooch
And brought it to Frederick with the promise of truth.
This is the moment, thought Frederick, it's here –
Let's find out what people have wondered for years.
Why is Prussia so great, and will it fall?
Is there any sense in it all at all?

Anticipation building, he held the poodle high
So the mirror could look straight into its eyes.
“Now my dearest dog, how do you do it?”
He was expecting “there's nothing to it”,
Or, at least, some sparks to fly,
Sparks of wisdom, straight into his eye,
But alas, the King was deprived of sparks –
For all the poodle could do was bark.

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