At the Cinema

Luigia Cortesi

The electric bell rang; the music maestro entered the hall, sat down at the piano and began to play a waltz tune.

It had been three months since he had taken the position at the cinema, and every day he repeated the same waltz, the same pieces of music, hour after hour, while the same scenes played out on the screen in front of him.

The feature was very successful, and it hadn’t been changed for a very long time.

During the showing, the hall remained in darkness; a lone electric bulb, covered with a dark purple shade, lit up the sheet music, and illuminated the maestro’s forehead in dark graveyard hues.

No one paid him any heed. The people who came into the hall were focused on the show; only a few individuals, seeing him enter the hall, noticed a tall man, about fifty years of age, with deeply sloping shoulders and a bowed head.

During that brief walk, when he sat down at the piano, when he sounded the first chord, his head would lift suddenly with youthful vigour. It would have been visible as a flash across his eyes, as though they had discerned a shining, dreamlike mirage... then, his head bowed down again immediately and remained there, pale, shrunken, with the dull look in his eyes just visible through the lenses of his glasses.

If they had continued to watch him, from time to time they would have seen, under the purplish glow, his head lifting up again and falling back down on his chest, heavy with dejection ... and the eternal waltz tune repeated hundreds of time, and the eternal pieces of music, always the same, seemed to mutate under his hands and acquire a new sound...

Twenty times a day, the same thing flashed before his eyes: a story about little mousmés, in colour. Every day, he saw the same brightly-coloured pagoda, the same five little women with oblong eyes and purple-tinged hair, laughing and drinking tea. There was one dressed in pink who seemed to look at him every time, opening her little coral mouth with a malicious smile. Then the same plot followed, the same kidnappings, the same difficulties, and the triumph of the mousmé dressed in pink, reunited at last with her lover, who had come to save her after facing unimaginable perils.

The show lasted for 35 minutes, but the maestro was entirely oblivious to it. He played mechanically, but in the purplish glow, as though called
forth by the sounds of the piano, the past and the present were joined together.

In the silence, it was no longer the story about the tiny colourful *mousmés* and their fantastic adventures that passed before his eyes, but the story of his past, in which there was nothing fantastic, nothing happy...

It was these memories that made him lift his head from time to time, bringing a glint to his eyes... and then... the poor *maestro* swept his gaze around him, apparently becoming conscious of reality once more, and his head fell back to his chest.

Every time he thought about the luck that had once smiled upon his life, and that smiled upon it no longer, his soul withered a little more.

Sometimes, after the first waltz, someone in the audience would applaud. It was a joke, and no one noticed the pained look that flared up behind the glasses, what a dismayed expression appeared on the *maestro*’s face... but then the hall went dark, and the show started.

There were the five little *mousmés*, flirting delicately with their gestures and smiles... and his hands ran unconsciously over the keyboard, while he was enveloped in the strange reverie of his memories. That tiny, that pathetic applause, which tasted of irony and mockery, had shocked every fibre of his being... and he remembered...

How many years had gone by! How many... but one day in the distant past, he too had felt such a thrill of glory, of optimism, passing through all his veins...

The past? In the darkness, through the sound of the music, how clearly he recalled everything! And then his head lifted up... Oh! In his day, he too had been a great artist, he too had experienced all the battles and the anguishes of art, and he had written his *magnum opus* wrestling with adversity, with misery, struggling to work in the tiny room he was renting.

He had poured his entire soul into this music. All the exalted feelings he had ever experienced, he had transfused into his art.

Once it was finished, he felt that he had given to his work the most vital part of his life, the full flower of his youth, all the splendour of his ideals... and he dreamt of having it performed.

Penniless and little known, he had few friends and no influential relations. But he tried to make connections, to speak to the right people. He worked for years and years towards the realization of his dream.

How much humiliation he was to suffer! How wretched he was, with his paltry earnings from giving piano lessons! How non-committal were his peers, who had already achieved success, listening to his music with a weak, pitying smile...
In front of him, on screen, two Tartar officials were falling in love with the *mousmé* dressed in pink, and kidnapping her despite her protestations... Unseeing, the musician remembered... The great day had come. The day had come when his music was to be performed—badly, yes, in a tiny theatre, with awful singers—but it was being performed in Rome.

He had sacrificed a small inheritance from his father towards his dream; the miserable sum of five thousand lire, the fruit of a country organist's thankless savings... and the opera was performed.

His hands were flying over the keyboard, the *mousmés* running around the screen, and with his head bent over his chest, the musician remembered... What a night it had been!

He had sacrificed everything for his vision... Everything, even including his love for a young woman! His artistic soul had been comforted by the caress of sweet hope, but it imposed silence on the music in his heart, all for his dream of Art.

And how was his *magnum opus* greeted by the public?

The singers were out of tune, the orchestra terrible... hundreds of people had come only to destroy him, they whistled, they booed, they laughed so much that the curtain went down after the second act... His few friends attempted to applaud, a small and weedy applause that in the midst of that hurricane seemed like laughter, like mockery, like the scattered applause from just a few minutes earlier...

The fantastic travails of the little *mousmé* continued to pass by on screen; after the kidnapping by the Tartar officers, an American officer who had fallen in love with her searched for her everywhere; and the *maestro*, his head still bowed, remembered... and the music seemed to change and vibrate under the touch of his hands.

He escaped into the wings, left by a secret door. Oh! His overnight flight! Alone! All of his hopes had crumbled; his future lay in ruins. Such jeering! It still rang in his ears, and above him the stars seemed to mock him, in the dark skies of that cold, winter's night... They hadn't understood his music, they hadn't perceived the originality of his ideas. And the poor opera, fruit of his labours, blood of his blood, had been trampled into the dirt!

The little *mousmé* had been trapped by the Tartar officers in a little wooden hut, which was being set on fire... How ridiculous the actions of the little Japanese girl were, always the same, whose little mouth was unable to produce a less nasty smile, and the *maestro* remembered...

He remembered his flight from the capital, his dejected spirits, his misery... the feeling of desperation that had almost pushed him to suicide...
The world had failed to understand him, and so he preferred to be forgotten. He became a poor country organist, like his father before him... he married a farmer's daughter, and lived in sadness, disheartened, in silence and in sorrow... and then... the years went by, one of his daughters died while still an child... his wife died, and his desire for the city where he had worked so hard, lived and suffered so much, took hold of him again, and so he returned...

He returned as a poor man, obscure, forgotten, as he had always been, and obtained his position at the cinema, with its unsmiling conditions.

For three months the same waltz, the same pieces of music, the same feature about the little mousmés. Who recognized him now? Nobody! Who cared about him? No one! Who paid any attention to him at all? No one! He played all day in the funereal light of the electric bulb, transformed, unrecognizable from the time when a vision of success had burned in his heart. He played... sometimes it seemed to him that the sounds of the piano were responding, like repressed sobs, to his inner torment. The sounds never elicited so much as a smile, not even a pleasant memory, nothing.

The triumphant American officer saved the mousmé from the flames, and led her back to her exultant companions, kissing her wicked little mouth...

The show was over. Light flooded the hall once more, the audience left bit by bit... and the musician got up, still hunched over a little, his eyes wet with tears behind his glasses, and disappeared like a sombre, silent shadow.


Note

1. [Editors' note. A girl who entertains the guests at a Japanese tea house.]