

INT. SALON - NIGHT

Twenty or so well-dressed guests sit in chairs arranged around a grand piano in a large room, warmly lit by gas sconces and candelabras.

CLARA SCHUMANN, 76, sits at the piano bench. Once the most celebrated musician in Europe, she still conveys elegance, though her body is frail and her posture slightly bent.

Her daughter MARIE, early 40s, perches on the edge of a seat over Clara's right shoulder.

Clara plays beautifully for a few measures. Some guests close their eyes, absorbing the sound of the living legend before them. Then...

A missed note. And a mangled chord.

She raises her left hand. It trembles. Her balance wavers. She stops playing. Inhales.

Tries again. Two solid measures. Then her right hands starts to shake and she flubs an entire passage. She stops again.

Marie rushes to her side. Leans down. They whisper urgently.

MARIE

Mama, stop. You'll hurt yourself.

CLARA

If I don't play, I don't exist.

MARIE

They'll understand.

Clara's eyes flash defiantly.

CLARA

It's never been about them.

She lifts her hands once more. They look at each other.

Clara turns back to the keys and improvises a soft, graceful flourish-- not part of the piece she began, but graceful enough to pass as a dignified ending.

A beat of silence. Then polite, hesitant applause.

Maria helps Clara stand. She addresses the crowd.

CLARA (CONT'D)

I've long said that when I can no longer play, I will finally be able to listen. It seems, for tonight at least, I shall have the honor to hear our young Maestro Mahler.

She nods toward GUSTAV MAHLER, 25. Handsome, with fiery eyes and dark, curly hair.

Mahler steps forward, takes Clara's hand reverently, and kisses it. Clara gives him a small smile. The audience claps.

Mahler sits at the piano, while Marie leads Clara past the seats toward the other dozen people standing in the back.

Mahler's fingers touch the keys and unleash a dazzling, confident cascade of sound. Like what Clara once embodied.

MARIE

They're honored you were here,
Mama. That they heard your famed
fingers play even a few notes.

Clara keeps her face forward, aimed at the open doors.

CLARA

They should be haunted.

Marie squeezes her hand. They slip through the crowd and out the doors. Mahler's fingers dance. The crowd is entranced.

EXT. VIENNA STREET - DAY

The heavysset, bearded JOHANNES BRAHMS, 63, tromps down a wide, bustling street. His coat flaps in the late afternoon autumn wind. His boots splash through a puddle.

A businessman doffs his top hat as Brahms approaches.

BUSINESSMAN

Herr Professor!

To his right, a butcher closes up his shop. He spots Brahms.

BUTCHER

Good evening, Maestro!

Brahms GRUNTS an acknowledgement. He coughs into his sleeve and keeps moving.

He passes a pair of workers stringing electrical wires between posts to replace the old gas lamps. One waves at him. Brahms eyes the equipment suspiciously.

BRAHMS

(mutters)

As if daylight weren't intrusive enough.

He checks his pocket watch as he rounds a corner. He slows.

Outside a **restaurant**, a small crowd has gathered around a trio of musicians.

A dark-skinned BANJO player sits on a bucket, twanging a fast, syncopated rhythm. Another man plucks a CONTRABASS with fingers instead of a bow. A HARMONICA PLAYER wails a countermelody and stomps on a makeshift percussion box.

Brahms steps closer, annoyed at the foreign-sounding noise... until he recognizes the melody:

"Hungarian Dance No. 5." *His* Hungarian Dance No. 5.

He winces. It seems mangled, and too fast, off-kilter. Improvised and sloppy. But then... it finds itself. Or he finds *it*. It's wild and joyful and alive. New.

Brahms leans in, mesmerized.

Some in the crowd watch Brahms to see his reaction.

The banjo player launches into a frenetic flourish. Brahms' eyebrows shoot up. Then he laughs, delighted.

He fishes into his pocket and drops all of his coins into the tin beneath the bass player's feet. The musician grins. Looks Brahms up and down. He speaks in a southern American accent.

HARMONICA PLAYER

Thanks, mister.

The musicians are seemingly the only people around who don't recognize the original composer of the piece. This delights Brahms even further. He beams.

The trio barrels into a chaotic stomp of an ending. The small crowd cheers. Brahms joins in the applause.

Then he glances at his watch again. The smile retreats behind his usual gruff mask.

He turns and pushes open the big wooden restaurant door. The music resumes behind him. Bright and modern. The future already rewriting his past. He couldn't be happier.

INT. RESTAURANT PRIVATE DINING ROOM - EVENING

A long table set for five. Candles flicker in tall brass holders. An upright piano waits against the far wall.

JOSEPH JOACHIM, early 60s, paces nervously near the door.

Already seated:

- PYTOR TCHAIKOVSKY, 53. Immaculate beard. Aristocratic.
- ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK, mid-50s. Modest, observant.
- RICHARD STRAUSS, 30. Energetic, anxious.

All eyes dart toward the entrance as they hear a door open down the hall, followed by a grumble.

BRAHMS (O.S.)

I was promised dinner, not an
Alpine climb.

Joachim, relieved, exhales and peers out into the hall.

JOACHIM

Johannes! We were beginning to fear
you'd gotten lost.

BRAHMS (O.S.)

If I survive the stairs, I'll join
you.

Joachim ushers him in. The room is silent, save for Brahms' heavy breaths. Five giants of music unsure what to say.

Tchaikovsky rises politely. Strauss stiffens. Dvořák smiles nervously. Brahms nods in the general direction of the table, gruff but not entirely unfriendly.

They all sit.

A long, excruciating silence follows. Everyone studies their menus. Then, finally...

TCHAIKOVSKY

(in a Russian accent)

Ah. Dumplings with smoked meat. My
favorite dish on the continent.

Brahms looks up sharply. Then breaks into a wide grin.

BRAHMS

There it is!

(flicks the menu)

We despise each others' music and disagree on nearly every cultural trend. But at least, Maestro Tchaikovsky, here we stand united.

The table erupts in relieved, genuine laughter. Tchaikovsky raises his glass. He and Brahms toast. The others join, too.

INT. RESTAURANT PRIVATE DINING ROOM - EVENING

Dinner consumed, they've moved on to wine and brandy.

Strauss plays the piano. Though somewhat nervously performed, the music is lush, youthful, and full of romantic color.

Tchaikovsky and Dvořák listen appreciatively. Brahms listens like a man enduring dental work.

Joachim leans in to Brahms ear and whispers pleadingly.

JOACHIM

Johannes, please. Be kind.

Brahms rolls his eyes, nods, and shoos Joachim away.

Strauss ends with a triumphant flourish.

A hopeful silence. Strauss turns slowly.

Brahms stands, approaches the music stand, and picks up Strauss's handwritten sheet. He examines the paper.

BRAHMS

I say, Herr Strauss... this is the finest... *music paper* I've ever seen. Where did you acquire it? You must tell me.

Joachim scowls at Brahms. Strauss blinks, devastated.

STRAUSS

(quietly)

A... a shop on Kärntner Street.

Brahms nods. Returns the pages.

BRAHMS

Splendid. Now, of course you must promise never to compose anything like that ever again.

(MORE)

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Return to what you excel at. A nice waltz next time, perhaps.

Tchaikovsky bursts into laughter.

TCHAIKOVSKY

Johannes! Must you savage the boy so mercilessly?

He claps Strauss warmly on the back.

TCHAIKOVSKY (CONT'D)

(to Strauss)

Don't fret. He insults those he respects. At least that's what I tell myself.

Strauss manages a shaky smile. Tchaikovsky turns to Brahms.

TCHAIKOVSKY (CONT'D)

Johannes, you must come tonight. This young **Mahler** is incandescent.

BRAHMS

Many young men are incandescent. Until they burn out.

Tchaikovsky's eyes burn mischievously.

TCHAIKOVSKY

That's why we must find them in their youth. Temper them into iron.

DVOŘÁK

(Scandinavian accent)

We have a private box. It's quite comfortable.

BRAHMS

Alas, Antonín, I have a long night of carousing ahead of me. I must rest first.

JOACHIM

There's a couch in the back.

Brahms' eyes widen.

BRAHMS

Now we're talking. I will go, if you all promise to join me afterward at the tavern.

TCHAIKOVSKY

You have my word.

BRAHMS

You promise, Pytor? No more of this refined Russian restraint?

TCHAIKOVSKY

Johannes, please. You've mastered counterpoint. We Russians mastered drinking centuries ago.

Brahms lets out a booming laugh. He drapes an arm around Tchaikovsky.

BRAHMS

Then sirs, it's a deal. Let's go!

They all stand, gathering scarves and hats and coats.

INT. *MUSIKVEREIN* PRIVATE BOX - NIGHT

As promised, Brahms SNORES, sprawled across the couch in the back of the box. His bulk hangs over its edges. His arms are folded across his chest like an obese vampire.

The eerie minor-key "Frère Jacques" variation from **Mahler's First Symphony (Movement Three)** drifts up from the stage.

Brahms' snoring stops. His eyes flutter open. He stares at the ceiling. He listens attentively as the funeral band section starts up. His eyes widen even further.

Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Strauss, and Joachim sit forward in their chairs, rapt.

A faint creak behind them. The nervy Strauss jumps.

Brahms looms behind their row, leaning over the railing, utterly absorbed. His eyes shine as the orchestra swells.

BRAHMS

(to himself)

I wouldn't have dared. This shouldn't be allowed... It's marvelous.

INT. *MUSIKVEREIN* BACKSTAGE ROOM - NIGHT

The marble-walled room buzzes with post-concert energy. Some musicians still hold instruments. Patrons drink champagne.

Mahler, in tails, accepts congratulations from admirers.

Tchaikovsky leans against a wall, chatting cheerfully with the disconcertingly young FIRST VIOLINIST. The boy blushes. Tchaikovsky lightly touches his arm.

Across the room, Brahms notices. He watches for a moment.

Mahler approaches and clasps hands with Brahms.

MAHLER

Maestro Brahms.

BRAHMS

You surprised me, young man. That's not easy at my age. Your music certainly doesn't tiptoe, does it?

Mahler smiles. Bows slightly.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

I've promised to drink myself into oblivion with some other old disappointments. Could you endure our company?

MAHLER

I would love nothing more than to palaver with you. But my patrons demand an interview for the *Zeitung*. And I must leave tomorrow. But... If you're free in the morning, I take long walks at dawn. I'd be honored if you'd join me.

Brahms blinks. Then scoffs.

BRAHMS

Dawn? Good God, Mahler, what an uncivilized hour.

Mahler laughs.

MAHLER

I could pass by your apartment and throw rocks at your window.

If it was meant as a joke, Brahms takes it seriously.

BRAHMS

Very well. Wait for three minutes afterwards to see if that rouses me.

(MORE)

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

If not, then I will see you next
time you pass through, if I'm still
drawing breath.

Mahler bows and is pulled away into the crowd.

Strauss and Dvořák approach Brahms, ready to leave. Joachim
waves from the doorway. Brahms calls out to Tchaikovsky.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Pyotr! Can you bear to part from
your new friend? Or shall we bring
the lad and corrupt him properly?

Tchaikovsky blushes. The violinist pauses, then nods.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Drinking with adults, it is!

The composers laugh as they begin their exit. Brahms casts
one last glance at Mahler in the crowd.

INT. VIENNESE TAVERN - NIGHT

A low-ceilinged room, thick with smoke. Long wooden tables.
Mostly men, but a few women scattered about. The CROWD belts
out a drinking song.

CROWD

*And we drink, yes we drink, till
the morning dawns again!...*

Brahms pounds the table in time with the song. He, Strauss,
and the violinist BELLOW the words. Tchaikovsky and Dvořák
try to follow the German. When the song finishes. They all
clink their steins.

Dvořák glances at the clock on the wall. He grimaces. Then
reaches for his coat.

DVOŘÁK

I must go. My Anna will be waiting.
The Lord rarely blesses men who
drink past midnight.

BRAHMS

Then I've been damned since I was
eight.

Dvořák feels something inside his coat. Remembers something.

DVOŘÁK

Ah, Johannes, I nearly forgot.

He produces a small, slightly battered cylinder can.

DVOŘÁK (CONT'D)

An American gentleman, Wangemann,
pressed this upon me in *Praha*. He
asked me to pass it to you.

He hands it over. Brahms squints at the can. Turns it in his
fingers. Words are scrawled on its side: "*Professor Brahms -
1894 - A Waltz.*" Brahms recognizes it.

BRAHMS

Ah. Yes. That business.

DVOŘÁK

He said it was history in wax.

Brahms scoffs and rolls his eyes. He nods a thanks at Dvořák
and then rolls the cylinder carelessly onto the table.

Dvořák kisses Brahms' cheek. Then he pushes through the crowd
toward the door. Strauss slips out with him, too.

Tchaikovsky leans in closer to the violinist, whose cheeks
are flush from too much beer and attention.

A barmaid swoops in to refill Brahms' empty stein.

Loud, FEMALE LAUGHTER cascades in from near the door.

A trio of flamboyantly (relatively) dressed PROSTITUTES
enters. They wear bright scarves and smudged rouge. One of
them, GRETA, late 20s, spots Brahms immediately.

GRETA

Herr Professor!

Brahms freezes, stein halfway to his lips. Greta approaches.

GRETA (CONT'D)

You promised me a waltz the next
time I saw you.

Her friends laugh. A few men at nearby tables turn to look.

Brahms reddens behind his beard. A flicker of something old
but raw crosses his face. Then he straightens, and forces a
booming cheerfulness.

BRAHMS

I pay all my debts, Fräulein Greta.

A few drinkers pound the tables in encouragement. Joachim
watches uneasily.

Brahms rises with some difficulty. He strides to the battered upright piano in the corner. He sits down heavily.

He flexes his hands. Then launches into a rough, rollicking bar tune. Simple chords, a cheerful melody.

Greta and her companions shriek with delight. They flock around Brahms, draping themselves over his shoulders. They rest hands on his chest. Muss his hair. He grimaces.

But he plays louder. Faster. The tavern crowd claps and stamps their feet. At the table, Joachim's face tightens. He looks away. Tchaikovsky watches, frowning.

Brahms pounds the keys with increasing, muscular brutality. Something sordid and angry flickers behind his eyes.

FLASHBACK - INT. BROTHEL - NIGHT

A twelve-year old boy, YOUNG BRAHMS, sits at another piano in the corner of a loud, seedy brothel. He plays the same song.

Two other prostitutes, much more scantily dressed on their home field, sit on either side of him. A drunken client leans on him from behind. One prostitute squeezes his cheeks. Another reaches between his legs.

BROTHEL PROSTITUTE

Let's see if anything is happening
down there yet.

Brahms winces. Stares at the sheet music. Keeps playing.

The client leans in and starts to massage his shoulders.

END FLASHBACK

INT. VIENNESE TAVERN - NIGHT

The song crashes to an end. Greta leans over and plants a sloppy kiss on Brahms' cheek.

GRETA

Another, Herr Professor!

The other women giggle and touch his shoulders. Sporadic claps around the tavern.

Brahms is expressionless. He pulls Greta closer by her wrist. His voice drops to a quiet growl.

BRAHMS

Listen to me carefully.

Her smile falters.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

You will walk out of the door now.
Quietly. All of you.

Her eyes narrow. She tries to pull away. His grip tightens.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Or I will have your house shuttered
and the lot of you tossed in jail.
(even quieter)
You forget yourself, Fräulein. What
I pay you for in private does not
give you claim to me in public.

Greta yanks her hand free and steps back quickly, as if from
a snake. The two other women retreat with her.

GRETA

You miserable old pig.

They turn and push through the crowd.

Around the piano, the laughter has died. A few men mutter.
But most pretend not to have seen or heard. Brahms remains
seated on the bench, breathing hard, hands on his thighs.

Tchaikovsky, seated at the end of the table nearest the
piano, rises and approaches. Brahms drains his glass.

TCHAIKOVSKY

Tell me, *Professor*, do you threaten
everyone who asks you to play?

Brahms' eyes flick up. Sharp and dark.

BRAHMS

Only those who mistake familiarity
for privilege.

TCHAIKOVSKY

You think harshness makes you
honest. It only makes you small.

BRAHMS

Would you have me drown everything
in sentimental hysterics like you?

TCHAIKOVSKY

Cruelty isn't wit.

BRAHMS

And indulgent excess isn't passion.

Tchaikovsky sets his stein down atop the piano. Turns away.

TCHAIKOVSKY

I bid you goodnight, Johannes.

He grabs his coat. Tchaikovsky catches the violinist's eye and cocks his head at the door. The violinist follows him.

BRAHMS

(calling after him)

Enjoy indulging in your excess,
Pyotr!

Brahms staggers back to the table. He grabs a half-finished stein and drains it. He watches Joachim intercept Tchaikovsky and plead with him. Tchaikovsky shakes his head and leaves.

Joachim crosses the room toward Brahms. But Brahms rises. He gathers the cylinder from the table. Struggles into his coat.

JOACHIM

Let me walk you home. You might--

Brahms waves him off and then pushes past him.

BRAHMS

Go scold someone else, Joseph.

He slams open the tavern door and stumbles into the street.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

The front door rattles. Outside, a key drops to the floor.

BRAHMS (O.S.)

Schiesse.

A prolonged grunt. Then the knob rattles again and, finally, turns. The door flies open.

Brahms steps inside and slams the door shut behind him with his foot. He coughs out the night's smoke and beer.

He shakes himself out of his coat. FUMBLES it onto the hook. He pulls out the cylinder from his pocket. Then...

He notices the low glow of a burning gas sconce.

Someone sits in one of his chairs near the fireplace. Half in shadow. Waiting.

CLARA

Hello, Johnny.

He freezes for a moment. Then shakes it off. Moves closer, from the entryway toward the living room.

BRAHMS
Frau Schumann.

CLARA
Frau. So you're still cross then.

BRAHMS
I've been cross for forty years.
How did you get in here?

CLARA
Your landlady tolerates you because she adores me. We commiserated.

Brahms bristles. He notices the worn satchel at her feet. It's stuffed beyond the brim with letters and envelopes.

BRAHMS
Those don't look like ash.

Clara glances down at them.

CLARA
You expected me to haul a satchel full of ash from Düsseldorf to Vienna to dump out at your feet?

BRAHMS
I expected you to bring nothing. I didn't expect you at all.

CLARA
(smiles)
It's good to see you too, Johnny.

He softens. Just for a moment. He grunts in vague agreement.

BRAHMS
It's hard to miss you when I see you every night I close my eyes.

She rolls her eyes. Makes a shooing motion.

CLARA
You're too drunk to attempt flattery. You look as if you've drunk half of Vienna. What do you hide behind that ridiculous beard?

He looks her up and down.

BRAHMS

May I comment on you as well?

CLARA

You may not, you old beast.

He passes by her to the opposite end of the room. A small machine sits on the small table beside a bookshelf. A **phonograph**: brass horn, crank handle, mandrel.

CLARA (CONT'D)

That thing startled me when I came in. What is it?

BRAHMS

An American gimmick. A toy.

He opens the cardboard can and rolls the wax across his palm.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Wangemann made this months ago. I'd forgotten about it till tonight.

He slides the cylinder onto the mandrel. Clara watches, curious. He winds the crank. The spring motor clicks alive with a faint whir. He lowers the reproducer into place.

A burst of static hiss fills the room. Then...

A tinny voice-- Brahms' RECORDED VOICE-- as if shouted across a vast room filled with water.

RECORDED VOICE

This is Doctor Brahms. Johannes Brahms.

Clara gasps softly.

Then a wobbly tangle of warped, spectral **piano notes** spill out of the horn. As Brahms continues to turn the crank, his skeptical expression softens into almost childlike wonder.

It lasts less than a minute. It ends abruptly.

CLARA

Do you realize what this means? The future will hear your voice and your playing long after we're dust.

BRAHMS

I'm already a ghost. This only proves it.

He walks back across the room and plops down onto the small sofa across from Clara. He indicates the satchel of letters.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Why did you bring those here? Or...
I mean to say, it's good to see
you, Clara.

CLARA

You already burned half the truth.
You begged me to burn the other. I
won't do your dirty work for you.
Nor will my family.

Brahms lowers himself to his knees with a wince. He tears a page from a newspaper, crumples it, and tosses it atop some already arranged logs in the fireplace. Clara watches.

CLARA (CONT'D)

We will have a discussion first.

He tears off another sheet. Tosses it in. Then another.

BRAHMS

That's why you've come? To palaver?
Did you bring it?

CLARA

It?

BRAHMS

You know which. The letter I asked
you to burn before all others.

He checks his pockets for his matches. Finds them.

CLARA

It's in here somewhere, I imagine.

BRAHMS

You *imagine*? Good God, woman. How
can you be so flippant?

CLARA

Why are you so serious about it?
You were a baby when you wrote it.

He strikes a match. Lights the edges of a couple pieces of paper. The flames curl. Grow. He leans back. Watches.

BRAHMS

In reply to you. A grown, married
woman.

CLARA

A widow.

BRAHMS

You don't seem to understand what's at stake.

CLARA

Yes, yes, yes. Your *reputation*.

Brahms turns to face her.

BRAHMS

My legacy. *Our* legacy. Do you really want history prying into our private affairs? Think of Beethoven. His mental image has become disfigured by unwelcome, unsavory features.

CLARA

"Think of Beethoven," the humble Professor Broom says of himself.

Brahms almost cracks a smile. Stares at the fire instead.

BRAHMS

You've no idea how it feels to hear the footsteps of a giant like Beethoven tromping behind you.

CLARA

Oh, how could I? Robert's footfalls were always behind me. Then yours. So loud they drowned my own.

BRAHMS

You were the most famous musician in the world. Your playing dwarfed any background noise. And if it didn't, the roaring applause would.

CLARA

I was a composer once, too.

BRAHMS

And your romances for violin and piano were delightful.

CLARA

Delightful. That's lovely.

He refuses the bait.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Have you any opinions about female composers you'd like to share? You have so many... colorful, and public, comments on women.

He refuses to bite at this either, for the time being.

BRAHMS

Not at the moment.

He grabs a sweeper and begins to tidy ash from the hearth.

CLARA

My dear Johnny Broom, always trying to sweep away all the bits of his life he thinks are... unsavory. What you call embarrassing, I call feelings. Emotions. Life. You would expunge them so casually.

Brahms nods. He starts the long process of getting back up on the couch. He breathes heavily. The fire is steadier than he.

BRAHMS

I don't want to be a ghost. I don't want my life remembered. My music should survive. Not me.

CLARA

(mimicking his voice)

"This is Doctor Brahms. Johannes Brahms." Yet you spoke your own name before you played. And made sure the future knew that you're a doctor. An honorary professor. And I don't suppose you put any emotion into your music. It's all clinical. Meaningless. Right?

He scowls.

BRAHMS

I strive to be true to myself, even when that self is disagreeable.

CLARA

Yet you wish that self to be forgotten the moment you die.

BRAHMS

It's a fine way to live. It's a horrible way to be remembered.

He reaches into his breast pocket. Pulls out a cigar. Lights it. Inhales. He immediately has an intense coughing fit. She watches him in quiet horror until it abates.

CLARA

That's quite the cough.

BRAHMS

No, Clara, that was a fugue. I've been composing it with my heart and performing it with my lungs. You never did appreciate my work.

CLARA

Not as much as Robert did, no.

He's briefly taken aback. Then he sees the look in her eyes. He laughs, which turns into a cough, then back into laughter.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Unlike me, he loved you from the moment he first laid eyes on you.

BRAHMS

What's that supposed to mean?

CLARA

You're far too old to be this naive, Johnny.

BRAHMS

Stop batting me around like a cat with a mouse. Say what you mean.

CLARA

(sighs)

Robert told me of certain... *Greek* encounters with men in his younger days. Oh, don't pretend shock.

BRAHMS

You mean he was... He loved you. He never touched me.

CLARA

Of course. By then, he only admired from a distance. His constitution forbade any further excitement. But you must know you weren't the first. There was Ludwig Schuncke. And Ritter. Joachim, of course. All the beautiful, talented boys.

(MORE)

CLARA (CONT'D)

He wholly believed each of them would become the Messiah who'd restore true Romanticism to its rightful place. He believed in each and every one of them. In their soft hands and their piercing eyes. But do you know what was different about you, Johnny?

BRAHMS

(a bit shaken)

I do not.

CLARA

I came to believe that about you as well. Eventually.

He smirks.

CLARA (CONT'D)

And so much more than that.

She leans forward, forcing eye contact for a moment. Then he looks away, back at the fire. Puffs on his cigar.

BRAHMS

When I turned up at your door, I was nervous of course. I was always a mess of nerves back then. I wanted to impress you both. I hoped you'd hear me play, write me another letter, and send me on my way. So that I could continue my ridiculous ascent through the ranks of respected musicians. I didn't expect to stop. To stay. To--

CLARA

To become entangled in our mess?

BRAHMS

... To feel.

CLARA

Ah. That pesky human trait you wish to erase any record of ever having.

BRAHMS

Yes.

(beat)

Though I wouldn't mind remembering for a little while first.

She reaches down into her satchel. Rummages around. Pulls out a letter. Holds it up.

CLARA

Is this be a good place to start?

BRAHMS

Maybe a bit further back. Liszt.

EXT. MOUNTAIN PATH - DAY

A high Alpine trail. Late morning. Sunny, though mist still clings to the firs. Birdsong. The sound of distant water.

Young Johannes Brahms strides downhill with a battered rucksack and muddy boots.

Or rather, at this age, he's JOHNNY BROOM (19). Already a rising star. He still speaks with a slightly rough northern accent, befitting a plain, common name and upbringing.

His appearance is anything but plain. He is startlingly handsome and athletic. Only his piercing blue eyes resemble his future self. A cap barely contains his blond hair.

Young **JOSEPH** JOACHIM, 22, walks beside him, a violin case slung over his shoulder. He's slender with dark, curly hair.

They round a bend and the valley opens below. A patchwork of farm fields, a lazy river snaking toward a far-off city. Smoke rises from chimneys. A church bell tolls distantly.

Johnny stands there a moment, soaking it in.

JOHNNY

It feels like music just before
it's been written.

Joseph smiles. He has heard this kind of thing before. Johnny climbs up onto a rock.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Look around, Joseph. Who needs
palaces when the world looks like
this?

JOSEPH

You say that now. In a few hours
you'll pace around Liszt's
antechamber wishing for a better
coat...

(Brahms laughs)

...

(MORE)

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

And please remember he's honoring you. I've vouched for you. Be polite. And gracious.

JOHNNY

I'm always polite.

JOACHIM

Except in your letters. And in your playing. And in your head. And out loud, too.

JOHNNY

(laughs again)

I'll behave. Promise.

They continue down the trail.

As they descend through a meadow, Johnny absentmindedly hums a little **motif**. A seed of something grand that doesn't yet exist. Joseph listens closely.

JOSEPH

Remember that one.

INT. ALTENBURG MANSION ENTRY HALL - NIGHT

The heavy wooden doors shut behind Johnny and Joseph.

They stand in an entry hall as large as most homes. Tall ceilings, dark wood, framed paintings.

A SERVANT takes their coats and gestures them onward.

Johnny's eyes take in everything. Then his soiled clothes.

JOHNNY

You were right.

JOSEPH

You could arrive in a crown and still feel underdressed here.

They move deeper inside.

INT. ALTENBURG SALON - CONTINUOUS

Seven or eight of Liszt's students and hangers-on cluster in small groups around the salon, orbiting a missing center.

Near the door, a YOUNG PIANIST rattles through a Liszt étude. Two other STUDENTS hover behind him.

STUDENT 1

You're dragging. Keep pace.

The pianist mutters something inaudible. The second student flicks his ear. The pianist slaps his hand away.

A WOMAN in a loose silk gown lounges on a settee with a glass of wine near the windows. One strap has fallen from her shoulder. She makes no effort to fix it. She wears a necklace adorned with a tiny painting of Liszt.

She laughs at something a young man whispers in her ear.

Next to the largest piano, PRINCESS CAROLYNE (mid 30s), Liszt's wife sits in an armchair. She has a notebook open on her lap. She surveys the room with imperious calm.

Johnny and Joseph keep walking toward the center of the room. Johnny whispers to Joseph.

JOHNNY

Who are all these people?

Too loud. The princess hears him and responds.

CAROLYNE

Some play. Some applaud.

(glances at the woman)

Some are decorative. You've brought us another prodigy, Herr Joachim?

JOSEPH

Johannes Brahms, Your Highness. My friend from Hamburg.

He bows. Then he nudges Johnny until he remembers to bow, too. Carolyne smiles.

CAROLYNE

Ah. The rising star from the North.

Before Johnny can respond, something in the room shifts. A hush. Heads turn toward the doorway.

FRANZ LISZT (early 40s) enters, with an even grander sense of regality than that which hovers around his royal wife. He is tall and his shoulder-length hair drapes over an actual cape.

LISZT

Joachim! It's wonderful to see you again, my friend!

They clasp hands. Liszt pulls Joseph in for an embrace. Then his gaze shifts to Johnny.

LISZT (CONT'D)

And this must be Herr Brahms. Word travels fast of you, young man.

JOHNNY

It's an honor, Herr Liszt.

LISZT

Franz, please.

(studies Johnny)

Joachim promised you'd bring music.

Johnny glances at Joseph, who nods at him. Johnny reaches in his pack and pulls out a somewhat crumpled sheaf of papers. He hands the bundle hesitantly to Liszt.

Liszt shakes his head. Gestures to the grand piano.

LISZT (CONT'D)

Let's hear it. I'm getting goosebumps already.

Johnny freezes. Then looks at Joseph, who also motions for the piano. Johnny shakes his head slightly. His hand, still holding out the paper, trembles.

Liszt softens. He reaches out, steadies Johnny's hand, and gently takes the sheaf from him.

LISZT (CONT'D)

Very well. I shall play it then.

He swoops across to the piano. All eyes follow him. He flips his cape back and lifts his legs over the bench theatrically. He undoes the cord and spreads the sheets across the rack. He glances for three seconds at the notes.

The room is absolutely silent as he begins.

Liszt's hands leap and dance. He plays Brahms' "**Scherzo in E-Flat Minor**" effortlessly, as if he had written it himself.

But he also plays it in a distinctively **modern way**. A spontaneously radical reinterpretation of the piece. He even bangs his knee rhythmically on the underside of the keyboard for a percussive accompaniment. He comments as he plays.

LISZT (CONT'D)

Mmm. You're not afraid to strike the left hand like a blacksmith.

The rolling, demonic melody announces itself. Liszt grins.

LISZT (CONT'D)
Nor are you afraid of the dark.

He drives toward the end of the stormy intro, and adds a bold variation that works wondrously. He finishes with a fierce final chord that hangs in the air.

All in the room applaud. Princess Carolyne stands.

Johnny's face is red. Liszt spins on the bench to face him.

LISZT (CONT'D)
You're nineteen?

JOHNNY
Yes, sir.

LISZT
If this is your first storm, I look forward to the inevitable flood. You write as if you've already endured several brutal wars.

CAROLYNE
You're mixing metaphors, darling.

LISZT
(smiles)
No, dear wife. The first was a metaphor. The second merely a description.

A ripple of laughter. Johnny manages a small smile.

From the back of the room, a confident voice rings out.

ACOLYTE (O.S.)
Master, something of yours?

Liszt tilts his head in mock modesty. The room already expects this.

LISZT
Very well. If only to keep the gods from becoming jealous of our new friend from Hamburg.

Another roll of soft laughter. Liszt turns back around. Closes his eyes. He begins to play his "**Transcendental Étude No. 4 in D-Minor**" while Johnny and Joseph sit down on a sofa.

It's a ferocious showpiece. Thunderous, galloping rhythms and huge climactic surges, right out of the gate.

At first, Johnny is swept along with it. Impressed. His head bobs along. He counts to himself.

And then the long journey here catches up with him. His eyes blink slowly. The sound blurs a bit. Johnny's head tips once, twice, and then settles forward. He lets out a soft snore.

Joseph notices. Bumps his friend's shoulder. Johnny jerks awake, mortified. He blinks several times. Joseph seems satisfied. Then, as Joseph turns his attention back to the music, Johnny falls asleep once again.

INT. ALTENBURG GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

An opulent, velvet-draped guest room. A carafe of wine sits nearly empty on a table. Candlelight flickers.

Johnny drunkenly paces the room with a glass in his hand. Joseph sits on the edge of a bed, amused.

JOHNNY

The way they looked at him like he was Moses descending from Sinai.

JOSEPH

He *is* Franz Liszt.

JOHNNY

Yes, but must he float around in that cape? And this house. This *verdammte* velvet everywhere. The incense. The statues.

JOSEPH

A princess shouldn't have a palace?

Johnny jabs a finger at him.

JOHNNY

Yes! He even has a princess at his side. And his playing...

JOSEPH

You slept through most of it. I thought he played your scherzo beautifully.

JOHNNY

He played it like he was wrestling it to the ground. Like he's auditioning for Olympus.

JOSEPH
Now look who's mixing metaphors.

JOHNNY
(undeterred)
Does he collect people?

Joseph can't help but laugh now.

JOSEPH
People collect themselves around
him, I think. Fall into orbit.
(beat)
He meant the praise, though.

JOHNNY
I know. That's what makes it worse.

Johnny tosses the rest of his wine back and collapses onto
the bed with a groan.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
I've never heard anything like it.
I hated most of it. I loved all of
it. I'm furious... Damn him for
being so good. And damn me for
wishing I could do half of it.

Joseph pats Johnny's shoulder.

JOSEPH
That's how everyone feels after
meeting him. You're not wrong...
You're just an ass.

Johnny stares up at the ornate ceiling.

JOHNNY
I don't belong here, Joseph.

JOSEPH
Perhaps not. But his endorsement is
more valuable than gold. So behave.

Johnny rolls his eyes.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
But I know where you might belong.

Johnny turns his head lazily. Raises his eyebrows.

Joseph rises and goes to the small desk. He lights a candle
and takes out paper and an inkwell.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Go to Düsseldorf.

Johnny groans dramatically.

JOHNNY
More travel. I'll pass out in a
river next time. What's in
Düsseldorf?

JOSEPH
My dear friends. The Schumanns.
Robert and--

Johnny shifts up onto his elbows. Squints at Joseph.

JOHNNY
Good God, man, why drag me out here
to meet this arrogant princeling if
you know the Schumanns?

Joseph chuckles.

JOSEPH
They're different. They are the
most wonderful people I know. No
incense. No theatrics. Just art.
Heart. And love.

Johnny's breath slows. His eyes widen.

JOHNNY
Why would they want to meet me?

Joseph begins to write.

JOSEPH
Genius recognizes genius. Even in
its most arrogant, youthful form.

Johnny flops backward again with a theatrical moan.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
I'll write the letter of
introduction. I can't accompany
you. I have appointments in Vienna.
You may continue your lament. Your
lunatic ravings.

Johnny buries his face in the pillow and makes a muffled
groan.

INT. TRAIN - DAY

Johnny sits in a second-class car. He HUMS and watches countryside blur past. Then he scribbles in his notebook.

EXT. DÜSSELDORF STREET - DAY

Johnny walks down a narrow street in the heart of Düsseldorf, with a puzzled expression as he studies the house numbers. He glances down at a slip of paper between his fingers. Then jogs ahead to the corner to look up at the street sign.

EXT. SCHUMANN HOME - DAY

Johnny stands in his worn alpaca jacket under the arched doorway of a modest two-story house on a quiet street. He has a battered pack on his shoulders.

He inhales. Straightens his collar. Smooths his hair.

Then he reaches for an iron bell pull and gives it a tug.

He waits. Adjusts his pack. Touches his hair again.

The door opens.

ROBERT SCHUMANN, 43, peers out. He wears a dressing gown and slippers. His hair is unruly and uncombed. He looks tired, but his eyes are sharp and piercing. He blinks in the sunlight. Then he looks at the stranger on his doorstep.

They stand in silence for several seconds before Johnny gathers his nerve enough to speak-- rapidly, nervously.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann? Forgive the
intrusion. My name is Johannes
Brahms. From Hamburg. I believe my
friend... our mutual friend...
Joseph Joachim sent you a letter...

Robert stares for a beat too long, as if processing this information. Finally, he speaks.

ROBERT

Ah. Yes, yes. I've been listening
for your footsteps. They arrived
two days before you did.

Johnny blinks rapidly, unsure of what to say next. Robert looks him up and down. Settles on his face.

JOHNNY

(stuttering)

I... well, I was passing through...
I'm leaving tomorrow... and I was
hoping... that you might hear my
work. If it's not...

Robert's gaze drifts pass Johnny, as if expecting someone else. Then he looks back, suddenly decisive.

ROBERT

Yes, of course. Come inside.

He steps aside. Johnny, uncertain, steps over the threshold.

INT. SCHUMANN HOUSE HALLWAY/PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Johnny waits for Robert to shut the door, then falls him down the small hallway to a narrow parlor.

ROBERT

Forgive the robe.

Worn carpet and armchairs. A couple framed pictures. Flowers a few days past their prime. A beautiful Graf piano. The ceiling thumps above him. Distant laughter and shouts.

Robert gestures to the piano. Sits in one of the chairs.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Play. Please.

Johnny sets his pack down. He pulls out a thick stack of music paper. Flips through it. Chooses a piece.

JOHNNY

(halting)

If... if you like, sir, I could
play a new sonata I've... or maybe
you have something else in mind...

Robert nods, but his eyes are elsewhere, as if listening to something only he can hear.

ROBERT

Yes, yes. Play. Please.

Johnny unclips the pages and spreads them out on the stand. He takes a breath. Places his fingers on the keyboard.

He begins to play his **"Piano Sonata No. 1 in C-Major."**

After only a few measures, Johnny jumps. A hand rests lightly on his shoulder. Johnny's hands fly off the keys. Robert stands behind him.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Please. Stop.

Johnny starts to push the bench out and get to his feet.

JOHNNY

I'm sorry. I should have chosen--

ROBERT

(softly)

No, no. I must call my wife.

He smiles at Johnny. Pats his shoulder again. Then shuffles out into the hallway.

Johnny, alone in the room, stands awkwardly between the bench and the piano. Then he sits. His heart pounds.

From upstairs, the sounds of small, pattering feet. A squeal of laughter. A creaking door. Someone SHUSHES someone else.

Two children appear in the doorway. YOUNG MARIE (13) and ELISE (10). They peer in, wide-eyed at the stranger.

Johnny notices them. They jerk back, then slowly lean in again, curious. He nods and smiles at them.

Julie stifles a giggle. Marie elbows her, trying to appear older and more dignified.

Johnny turns back to the keys and plays a little flourish of several dancing notes, as if addressing them.

The children both smile at him. He returns it.

Further down the hall, another head appears. Then another. JULIE (8), LUDWIG (5), and FERDINAND (3) jostle for a look.

Johnny relaxes.

Then louder footsteps approach from deeper in the house. The children scatter.

Robert reappears in the doorway. Then steps aside.

CLARA Schumann (34) enters. Several decades younger than when she was first introduced, but still **fifteen years older** than Johnny.

She wears a plain dark dress. Her dark hair is neatly braided and pinned. She is slender and small. Her skin smooth and pale. Deep, brown eyes with slight circles beneath them.

Johnny rises too quickly. Knocks his knee on the bench. Grunts. He stands. Bows.

JOHNNY

Frau Schumann.

His eyes drop, almost instinctively to her famed hands. Her fingers are smooth and long. As if aware he is studying them, she folds them across her stomach, eliminating any chance of an offer to kiss them.

She glances at his fingers as well. He pulls at them unconsciously. Then she takes in the rest of him. His travel-worn clothes. His hair. His bright blue eyes.

CLARA

You must be Herr Brahms.

JOHNNY

Johnny. Please.

She looks slightly amused. Or a bit off-guard at his immediate offering of his nickname.

Robert, suddenly more alive, moves to her side and wraps his hand lightly around her back. He guides her to a chair.

ROBERT

Here, dear Clara. You shall hear
music such that you've never heard.
(turns to Johnny)
Begin your sonata again, young man.

He and Clara both sit. Johnny swallows hard. Sits down at the bench. Places his fingers on the keys. Inhales.

INT. SCHUMANN PARLOR - DAY

Johnny's coat lies on the floor. The music pages, unclipped and all played through, piled next to them.

Sweat beads on Johnny's forehead as he nears the finale of the last of the pieces he brought.

Clara stands next to him. She re-shuffles his pages and places the final page in front of him. Her eyes flick down to his hands. Watches as they dance across the keys.

A few of the children are curled up on the floor just outside the doorway. Some listen, some snooze.

Johnny crashes into the final chord. He lifts his hands. Then his foot from the pedal.

For a moment, there is silence, save for the fading vibration of the strings.

Clara steps back. Robert stands and steps forward. He places a hand on Johnny's shoulder. Firm and familiar now.

ROBERT

You and I understand each other.

Johnny searches Robert's face, unsure what he means, but feeling the weight of the words regardless.

JOHNNY

Thank you, sir.

More silence. Robert and Clara exchange a look. Johnny glances toward the window. The afternoon light is fading. He is suddenly aware of how long he's been here.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I... I should go. I apologize. I have an appointment this evening. I didn't mean to waste so much of your afternoon.

CLARA

You've wasted nothing.

Johnny jerks his head at her. His eyes widen, as if he had been waiting to hear those three words his entire life.

ROBERT

Then you must come back. Tomorrow. For lunch. I insist. Yes?

CLARA

If you don't mind a bit of chaos.

As if summoned by the room, all five children swarm in. Braver now. They circle Johnny. One picks up his jacket. Feels its softness. Hands it back.

MARIE

You walked all the way from Hamburg?

FERDINAND

Can you play faster than Mama?

The others giggle. Clara clicks her tongue.

CLARA
Children. Give Herr Brahms space.

Johnny laughs, the last of his shyness melting away.

JOHNNY
No one can play faster or more
beautifully than your mother.

Clara shoots him an amused look.

Johnny starts to push his way through the flock of children,
back into the hallway.

ROBERT
Tomorrow, then. We will speak more.
There is much... so much to do.

JOHNNY
I would be beyond honored.

Johnny swings his pack over his shoulder. He glances once
more at the cozy mess of the parlor, and Clara and the kids.
He looks almost reluctant to leave. Clara nods at him.

CLARA
Tomorrow.

The children trail him into the hallway. Tugging at him and
chattering amongst themselves.

He opens the front door. He steps out into the daylight. He
seems a different, more grown man, than the one who rang.

Robert door closes behind him. The sound of the lively house
muffles, but does not vanish.

INT./EXT. DÜSSELDORF - DAY

SERIES OF SHOTS:

Robert Schumann walks urgently through the **streets**. He wears
a coat thrown over the same dressing gown from the day
before. He HUMS tunelessly, as if trying to block out noise.

Robert pushes into a dim **inn**. A few men eat lunch and drink
at tables. He scans the room, MUTTERING to himself. The
innkeeper approaches.

ROBERT

A young man. Blond hair. Northern
accent. Is he staying here?

The innkeeper shakes his head curtly. Robert leaves abruptly.

A **second inn** is louder, busier. Chairs scrape, men argue over a game of cards, steins and silverware clank. Robert winces at the noise. Touches his head.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Too much. Too much at once.
(to the crowd)
Brahms? Anyone seen him?

No one responds. The din swallows his voice. He backs out.

He weaves through a busy **square**. Vendors shout, dogs bark, children laugh. The noise strains him. He HUMS louder.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

(mutters to himself)
Why would he lie? No, not lie. Just
lost. Or tired. Or... writing?

He glances into the cafe window to his left... He sees him.

Johnny, writing at a table, inside the **cafe**.

Robert's entire posture shifts. He stops humming and muttering. He inhales and exhales deeply.

Johnny looks up. He stares absently for a moment without comprehension. Then he recognizes Robert. He jerks his head and arm. He knocks some papers on the floor.

EXT. DÜSSELDORF STREETS - DAY

Johnny and Robert walk along the Rhine. Johnny clutches his papers. Robert walks hands clasped behind his back.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann. I'm... I'm so sorry.
I thought you and Frau Schumann
were merely being kind. I didn't
imagine... I thought it better if I
didn't intrude again.

ROBERT

Intrude? We invited you. You
accepted. That is all.

JOHNNY

My work isn't worthy of all the time you and your wife spent with me yesterday. I didn't want... to take advantage of your kindness.

ROBERT

Clara was right. She said you'd say that. She sent me to fetch you. She's eager to hear more. We both are. Yesterday, when you played... There were moments when I thought I heard my younger self in you.

Johnny smiles shyly.

JOHNNY

That's... perhaps the greatest compliment anyone has paid me. You're a master, sir.

Robert shakes his head.

ROBERT

No. It's frightening.

Johnny looks at him, confused. Robert taps his own temple.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Small pieces of myself keep drifting away. Up into the air. I can't catch them. Your music reminds me how much of myself is gone. And makes me want to hold on to what I still have.

Johnny looks away from Robert. Frowns. Swallows hard.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann, I... if there's anything I can do--

ROBERT

You have already done it. You brought something new. You are something new. New things steady a man. Makes him believe... Or is it that they unsteady him? That would be alright too, I suppose. Make it faster. Let it come. We shall see.

Johnny nods. But has no idea what to say. He drops a couple steps behind.

They turn a corner. The Schumann house is in sight.

The front door opens. Clara steps out. Smile warmly. She's holding her four-month old BABY, FELIX.

INT. SCHUMANN DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Johnny, the Schumanns, and the five children crowd around the long dining room table. The plates have all been scraped clean. A maid, FRAU PLIMPTON, silently begins to remove them.

Clara rocks baby Felix's basket on the floor with her foot. Robert dabs at a spot on his dressing gown. He attacks it with increased focus throughout the discussion.

Three of the kids-- Ludwig, Ferdinand, and Marie-- BICKER mostly inaudibly. Robert raises a gentle hand.

ROBERT

You're all right. Music is meaning.
And music is being. In the best
works, they are inseparable.
(points at Johnny)
Herr Brahms understands this.

Johnny blushes. Sips gingerly from his wine glass.

JOHNNY

I... well... I do believe that
music should always come from
somewhere inside that can't lie.

Marie nods as if this aligns with her perfectly mature worldview. Clara smiles at him. He quickly averts his eyes.

CLARA

You play with uncommon honesty.

JOHNNY

(mumbles)
Johnny.

CLARA

Pardon me?

JOHNNY

You can call me Johnny.

Her mouth twists unpleasantly. She shakes her head.

CLARA

I'll do no such thing.

MARIE

Do you write every day like Papa?

JOHNNY

Most days.

MARIE

Isn't that boring?

JOHNNY

I'm usually bored *until* I write.
Not tonight, of course.

This earns a thoughtful nod from Ludwig, as though Johnny has unveiled a grand secret.

Johnny leans back as the maid takes his plate away. Then he clears his throat.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

That said... this has been *truly* wonderful. You are unbelievably warm and gracious. But I should head back to the inn soon. I have an early train.

Clara's brow lifts slightly.

CLARA

Oh? Where are you bound?

JOHNNY

Home. Back to Hamburg. Briefly.

Robert shifts forward. He looks surprised and offended.

ROBERT

You mean to say you have no further engagement scheduled?

JOHNNY

Not until Joachim returns from abroad in a month. Then he and I and Remenyi will resume our tour.

ROBERT

No, no, no. No engagements? No performances? You don't have a sponsor? That's an affront to art itself. You must be seen, boy. You must be heard. You must stay here.

JOHNNY

Stay in Düsseldorf? For a month?

ROBERT
No, no... I mean, yes. But in this
house. With us.

Johnny blinks slowly, shocked by the offer.

JOHNNY
With... you?

ROBERT
Of course! We can't have you in
some ill-begotten inn for a month.
We keep a guest room open. And
you're far more interesting than a
relative.

Clara shoots Robert a look that's affectionate and chiding.

CLARA
What my husband means is that we
would be glad to have you as our
guest. If you wish it.

Johnny stares between them, overwhelmed.

JOHNNY
I... don't know what to... I
mean... if you're sure--

ROBERT
Quite sure. I want you to introduce
you to our friends. There are fine
musicians here who must hear you.
Performances we can arrange.
Publishers who must be contacted.
You will not be idle. And, if you
desire instruction-- my wife is the
finest pianist in Europe.

Clara shakes her head with sincere modesty.

CLARA
After what I heard today, I'm not
sure how much I can teach. But...
if I can be helpful, I will.

Johnny's face flushes.

JOHNNY
Frau Schumann... that would be an
honor beyond anything I deserve.

CLARA
(smiling softly)
We shall see what you deserve.

The children erupt.

FERDINAND
He's staying?

MARIE
Did Ms. Plimpton prepare his room
already?

Johnny laughs helplessly as they surround him and tug at his sleeves. Robert stands and lifts his glass.

ROBERT
Then it's settled. You stay.
Starting tonight.

Johnny looks around at the table. At the chaos. At the warmth. Clara's steady gaze. The children climbing around him. Something shifts inside him. He smiles earnestly.

JOHNNY
Yes. Thank you. Truly.

INT. SCHUMANN GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

Moonlight shines through thin curtains in the modest guest room. Johnny closes a book. He rubs his eyes.

He slips out of bed, careful not to make the floorboards creak, and opens the door.

INT. SCHUMANN KITCHEN - NIGHT

The house is dark and finally quiet. Johnny pads into the kitchen in bare feet. He rummages around until he finds a cup. Then he pumps a bit of water from the ceramic jug on the counter. Drinks.

As he sets the cup down, he hears a very soft ribbon of a piano melody. Johnny follows the sound.

INT. SCHUMANN PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Clara sits at the piano in her nightdress, a shawl draped loosely around her shoulders. She plays quietly.

Johnny stands silently outside the doorway, transfixed.

He starts to pull away. Clara stops abruptly. She speaks without turning around.

CLARA
You're not one of mine.

Johnny freezes.

CLARA (CONT'D)
I know the sound of every footstep
in this house.
(turns to face him)
Yours is new.

JOHNNY
I didn't mean to intrude.

Clara gestures vaguely to the stool beside her. Not quite an invitation, but not a dismissal. Johnny remains standing.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
I heard you playing. It was--

CLARA
Don't say beautiful.

JOHNNY
Terrifying. Was what I was going to
say.

Clara laughs lightly, genuinely.

CLARA
Was that a joke, Herr Brahms? You
have a sense of humor?

JOHNNY
(flat)
I was quite frightened.

He fails to maintain a straight face. She laughs.

CLARA
Good. I prefer it that way.

She wriggles her fingers like an old witch casting a spell. His smile widens. She rests her hands back on her lap.

CLARA (CONT'D)
Robert can't sleep. When he can't,
I find it hard to pretend I can.

JOHNNY
Is Herr Schumann all right?

She seems momentarily taken aback by his directness.

CLARA

He has many good nights. And some bad ones. A few bad days, too. But I believe he'll win out in the end.

Johnny nods, as if that answers his question.

JOHNNY

Are you certain you're comfortable with me here? We've known each other mere hours. I'm a stranger.

CLARA

You won't be for long. I have a feeling you and I... and Robert... will know each other for a very long time.

JOHNNY

I can honestly say that nothing would please me more.

CLARA

This time I'll have to caution you even more directly about flattery.

Johnny blushes in the darkness. Draws back slightly.

CLARA (CONT'D)

I'm quite certain you're in the right house at the right time. Now try to sleep, Johannes. Tomorrow will be... lively.

JOHNNY

Goodnight, Frau Schumann.

He backs toward the hallway and then turns toward the kitchen. Clara watches the empty doorway for a second longer than necessary before returning to the keys.

INT. SCHUMANN UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Johnny quietly ascends the stairs.

He approaches Robert and Clara's room. It's cracked open. A gas lamp is lit inside. He hesitates. Peeks in.

Inside, Robert paces in tight circles. He WHISPERS to himself - fragmented phrases, in shifting tones, all indecipherable.

He grabs at his hair. Tugs. Then begins that HUM again.

Johnny watches for another moment. Robert doesn't see him. Johnny backs away slowly. Continues on down to his room.

The baleful hum rises, and then is muted as he closes the door behind him.

INT./EXT. - DÜSSELDORF & SCHUMANN HOME - **MONTAGE**

A) INT. SMALL SALON - NIGHT

A dozen well-dressed musicians and critics sit around the grand piano in a salon. Candle-lit. A more modest version than the older Clara's final private concert.

Johnny plays the piano, eyes closed.

Clara sits in the audience, listening with intense focus. Her fingers subconsciously trace the shape of the keys on her lap. Robert sits beside her, his eyes closed and lips moving as if silently harmonizing, or arguing, with what he hears.

A critic leans forward, impressed. He scribbles notes.

B) EXT. SCHUMANN GARDEN - DAY

Johnny attempts a wobbly handstand for a different audience--the Schumann children. He starts to falter. Marie catches his legs. The children shriek with laughter as he starts to walk on his hands with her support.

Clara watches from an upstairs window, smiling. Behind her, Robert's shadow passes by. Pacing.

C) INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - DAY

Robert presses a thick pamphlet, titled, "*New Music Journal*," into Johnny's hands. He opens it to a page that has a pencil sketch of Brahms' face above an article titled, "*New Paths*."

ROBERT

The world now knows what I know.

As Johnny's eyes scan the article, color rises in his cheeks.

INSERT:

Highlighted phrases:

- "...springing like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove..."

- "...fated to give expression to the times in the highest and most ideal manner..."

- *"Even his external appearance displays characteristics which proclaim: this is a man of destiny!"*

BACK TO SCENE

Johnny flips the page, overwhelmed. Robert watches him with pride and a hint of something like desperation.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann, how can I ever live up to this?

SCHUMANN

When the angels beckon you, you must follow. You can't outrun them.

D) INT. SCHUMANN PARLOR - DAY

Clara sits beside Johnny on the piano bench. He struggles a bit through a difficult series of scales.

Clara leans in, watching his hands. She gently stops him with a touch on his wrist. She takes his right hand and repositions two of his fingers. Then slides two of her own fingers under his palm to lift it into more of an arch. Nods.

He plays again. More relaxed. Perfect this time.

Their eyes meet for a brief, charged moment.

E) INT. PUBLISHER'S OFFICE - DAY

A man in a suit leafs through Johnny's scores. Stacks of engraved plates, covers, and reams of paper are positioned around the man's desk. Robert and Johnny sit opposite him.

A carved wooden sign above him reads, *"Breitkopf & Härtel - Publishers of Fine Engraved Music Scores."*

The publisher closes the folder of music. He stands. Extends his hand. Johnny stands and shakes it. Robert reaches forward and squeezes Johnny's other wrist.

F) INT. ROBERT'S STUDY - NIGHT

Johnny straddles the bench of the smaller piano in Robert's upstairs study so he can easily play notes and converse with Robert, sitting at his desk a few feet away.

Robert scribbles on a piece of music paper. Atop the page, a title: *"A-B-F Trio, for Joseph Joachim: Alone But Free."*

Robert hums the melody he has just jotted down aloud. Brahms turns and plays a quick counter melody.

Robert nods enthusiastically. Scribbles down the notes.

ROBERT
Yes, yes, yes! Keep going!

G) INT. SCHUMANN CHILDREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Johnny lies on the floor with Ferdinand, Julie, and Ludwig. They are all setting up their own regiments of toy tin soldiers. The children's men are arranged haphazardly, in action scenes. Johnny's are lined up perfectly.

Julie reaches over and nudges one of Johnny's soldiers slightly, so that it's out of order. She giggles. Johnny swats playfully at her. Then moves it back in its place.

H) INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - NIGHT

A single candle burns in the dim sitting room. Robert, Johnny, and a couple of Robert's FRIENDS sit around a table. The room is silent, except for the occasional creak of wood.

Their fingertips rest on a wooden planchette with a pencil fixed through it, that hovers over a sheet of paper.

Then the planchette twitches and begins to move. It starts to scribble jagged letters on the paper. Robert's eyes shine with overenthusiastic fascination.

ROBERT (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Do you feel it? The current?

Johnny's face suggests that he does not. He glances toward the doorway. Clara stands there, in the shadows, her arms crossed, watching with clear disapproval and worry.

Johnny looks down at what the planchette has scratched out:

"THE RHINE AWAITS"

Johnny stares at the words, unsettled. Clara's face has gone still. Robert lets out a long sigh of relief.

I) INT. ROBERT'S STUDY - NIGHT

Robert sits at the piano in the dark room. His hands are positioned above the keys, but he doesn't play.

Suddenly, he claps his hands over his ears, as if to block out a sound only he can hear. He HUMS loudly. Tunelessly.

J) INT. CONCERT HALL - NIGHT

Johnny sits in a packed concert hall. He watches Clara, on stage, alone.

Her hands crash down in a final chord. They linger there for a moment. The sound reverberates.

Then a roar of applause.

Johnny leaps out of his seat, along with most everyone else. He glances over at the Schumann children next to him.

Then he notices Robert's empty seat. He frowns. He WHISPERS something to Marie. She nods.

Still clapping, he slides past the other people in his row.

On stage, Clara rises. Poised, serene. She turns to the crowd and bows deeply. The applause grows even louder.

K) EXT. OUTSIDE CONCERT HALL / STREET - NIGHT

Johnny walks around outside the concert hall. The faint sound of applause can still be heard. He searches the streets. Finally, he spots Robert across the street, facing the other way. He jogs across the street and approaches his friend.

Robert leans on a wooden railing overlooking the Rhine, staring out at it.

Johnny stands next to him for a moment. Robert grunts softly, acknowledging his presence. But continues to stare. Johnny drapes his arm around Robert's shoulder. Pulls him in close.

JOHNNY

Your wife has once again propelled
the audience from their chairs.
Let's go back and congratulate her
together.

INT. SCHUMANN GUEST ROOM - EVENING

A soft knock on Johnny's door. He looks up from his papers scattered about the tiny writing desk.

JOHNNY

Come in.

The door opens. It's Clara.

CLARA

Ms. Plimpton is still visiting her
sick mother. I must attend to some
errands.

(MORE)

CLARA (CONT'D)

Would you keep watch over the children? Marie is here, but you know how she sometimes bosses them too much.

JOHNNY

Of course. Is Robert out?

She grips the doorframe.

CLARA

He's in the midst of one of his... deeper spells. You may want to look in on him, as well.

JOHNNY

Is he all right?

CLARA

He will be. The *apotheker* agreed to see me after-hours. He has a new remedy to try.

JOHNNY

Shall I go instead?

She hesitates. Then shakes her head.

CLARA

No... I need the break. I'm a bit stretched. Thank you, Johnny.

His head twitches at the mention of his more intimate name.

She heads out into the hall.

INT. SCHUMANN MASTER BEDROOM - EVENING

Another knock. This time on Clara and Robert's bedroom door.

Silence. The curtains are drawn. Only thin shafts of light from the setting sun slip in around the edges.

Yet another knock. Nothing.

Johnny pushes the door open and steps inside.

He sees a large lump completely buried beneath the blankets. Johnny clears his throat. The lump doesn't move.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann... Is there... Can I help you with anything?

Finally, Robert's head slithers out from beneath the tangled blankets. His hair is a mess. His eyes are ringed with dark circles. He has been crying. He shakes his head.

ROBERT

No, dear Johannes. You have helped more than you can imagine. Thank you for all your kindness to Clara and my children. I know now they are in good hands.

Then he retreats back under the covers.

Johnny stands there a moment, unsure how or if to respond.

JOHNNY

I'll be downstairs. Call if you need me.

Silence. Stillness. Johnny retreats.

INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - EVENING

Johnny sinks onto the couch. He rubs his eyes. He hears a distant cacophony of clanging, shouts, singing. Curious, he climbs up to his knees and pulls back the lace curtains...

The usually quiet street is about to be overrun by the approaching "**Rosenmontag**" **carnival** procession.

Throngs of people, most of whom are masked, swing lanterns against the darkening sky. Musicians, dancers, and horse-pulled floats make their way toward the Schumann house.

He watches for a moment, but tiredness overtakes him. He closes the curtains. Lies back down. His eyes drift shut as the noise gets nearer.

INT. SCHUMANN UPSTAIRS HALLWAY / MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

Incoherent, muffled shouting. A loud SOB.

Alarmed, Marie steps from her room into the hallway.

MARIE

Papa?

She walks toward her parents' room. Pushes the door open.

Inside, Robert stands in the center of the dark room, clad only in his long white undershirt.

He's pale, trembling, and weeping. He pounds on the dresser. He mutters and shouts to himself.

ROBERT

No! I won't do it. I won't hurt them, no matter what it means for me! Do with me what you--

He sees Marie. His face collapses with shame and horror.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Oh, God.

Brahms' "Piano Concerto No. 1" (composed in the aftermath of and specifically about this incident) begins to play, and continues over the course of the next several scenes.

Suddenly, Robert pushes past her and bolts into the hallway.

MARIE

Papa!

INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Robert barrels down the stairs.

Johnny, asleep on the couch, jolts upright and jumps to his feet. Robert nearly collides with him.

The front door flings open. Robert hurls himself into the night. Cold air rushes in. Parade noise erupts louder.

Marie descends the stairs, terrified and in tears.

MARIE

Onkel Johnny! Please! Please bring Papa back!

Johnny rushes out after Robert.

EXT. DÜSSELDORF STREETS - CONTINUOUS

Johnny sprints into the chaotic festival crowd. Lanterns bob around him. Drunken shouts. Masks, confetti, torches. He pushes through the tide of bodies, searching desperately. But he's swallowed by the throng.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann! Robert!

A masked reveler bumps into him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Johnny shoves through.

He looks in every direction.

Nowhere. He's lost him.

EXT. TOLL BRIDGE - NIGHT

Robert, covered in soot and grime, barefoot and trembling, reaches the toll bridge over the Rhine. His nightshirt, torn in several places, barely clings to him.

The festival moves parallel to the bridge, so a few revelers notice him as he departs the crowd for the bridge.

A TOLL KEEPER steps out from his station. Like most citizens of Düsseldorf, he recognizes Robert.

TOLL KEEPER

Herr Schumann? Are you unwell? I'm
sorry, but you can't pass
without...

Robert extends his hand. The confused toll keeper outstretches his arm and accepts a crumpled silk handkerchief as payment.

Robert toward the center of the nearly deserted bridge.

He stumbles over to edge. Stops. He grips the wooden railing. Looks out over the wide, black water.

With shaky fingers, he pulls off his wedding ring. He holds it tightly in his fist for a moment. Kisses his hand.

ROBERT

Forgive me.

He tosses the ring into the river.

The toll keeper approaches.

TOLL KEEPER

Herr Schumann, don't!

Robert climbs onto the railing. Stands. Wobbles. He inhales deeply. Then he steps forward.

He falls fifty feet into the Rhine.

EXT. DÜSSELDORF SIDE STREET - NIGHT

Johnny stumbles down another street. His chest heaves. He stops to catch his breath. Then...

Clara bursts out of a side alley. Her eyes are wide with panic. She almost collides with him.

CLARA

Johnny! Please tell me you've seen him. Marie said...

Her voice breaks. Johnny shakes his head sadly.

JOHNNY

I lost him in the crowd.

Clara starts to shake. She gasps. Tears spring from her eyes. Johnny reaches out. Holds her shoulders.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Let's see if he came back home.

EXT. RHINE RIVER - NIGHT

A small fishing boat rocks in the otherwise placid river. Two fisherman struggle to haul something heavy into their boat...

Robert. Sopping wet, wild-eyed. He thrashes. Strikes at them. Tries to climb back into the river.

ROBERT

Let me go. Let me go! They're calling to me. They're singing! Oh God, I have to get to them.

The fisherman restrain him with difficulty.

EXT. SCHUMANN HOME - NIGHT

Johnny and Clara arrive at the front walk leading to the Schumann home. Again breathless, still desperate. They rush to the door. Marie opens it immediately.

MARIE

Mama, I've still not seen Papa. He--

Clara pulls her daughter into her arms.

Johnny turns toward a rising commotion down the street.

A wave of costumed revelers approaches. They're chanting. No, they're singing. They're carrying something overhead.

As they draw closer, it becomes clear...

They're carrying Robert.

Still soaked. Nearly naked. Eyes wide, but unseeing.

He SINGS loudest of all. The rest of them try to mimic him.

REVELER 1

Frau Schumann, we found your
husband! Fished him out of the
water like Jonah!

Clara lets out a quiet cry. She rushes toward him.

CLARA

Robert, Robert, my love. I'm here.
I'm here...

His head lolls in her direction, but he doesn't seem to recognize her. Or anyone.

They set him down gently on the doorstep. Marie rushes inside. He can't, or won't stand. He crumples into a heap.

Clara collapses beside him. She cradles him. Sobs deeply.

Most of the revelers start to disperse, but a few hang around. One of them calls out before jogging away.

REVELER 2

We'll fetch a doctor!

Johnny stands a few steps back, frozen. Overwhelmed. Helpless and horrified.

Marie returns with a blanket. She throws it over her father. The other kids crowd the doorway. Confused. Some cry.

Johnny looks over at the children. He takes a breath. Forces himself to move. He walks over to them. Kneels. Gestures for them to come to him. They do. He gathers them close.

JOHNNY

Come on. Let's go inside. We'll
take care of each other tonight.

He leads them into the house. Clara rocks Robert in her arms.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

OLDER Clara stares at the fire. Brushes her fingers over a handful of envelopes. **OLDER** Brahms regards her for a moment

BRAHMS

Silence implies the recollection of memories. It's intolerable. Why would you want to relive that time?

CLARA

Robert was more alive at that moment than most people have ever been. He was resurrected.

BRAHMS

But he didn't want it. He wasn't born again. He wanted to die in that river, Clara. He *did* die. It merely took a while for his body to become convinced of it.

CLARA

You had a cynical streak back then, but you were far from cruel. What has happened to you, Johnny?

BRAHMS

What happens to most people after the passage of forty years. Clarity. The expulsion of the trivial. The ability to see true progression without the distraction of superfluous grace notes.

CLARA

(undeterred)

You were a miracle. An angel.

Brahms scoffs.

CLARA (CONT'D)

What? Only women are allowed to be virginal angels? You were there for us--for me--at the most difficult, heartbreaking time in my life.

BRAHMS

Happenstance. Or worse. Robert deteriorated as soon as I arrived. I unraveled him. I'm responsible.

CLARA

No. He held on as long as he possibly could *until* you arrived.

Brahms repeats the scoff and rolls his eyes.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Perhaps I'd believe it was chance if you were there only at that moment. But you *stayed*. For more than two years. You put everything aside. You were a phenomenon on a path to the stars. Yet you dropped everything. To be at my side. For Robert. For the children. I know of no other man on this earth who would have done the same. Nor would I ever have asked it of anyone.

Now it's Brahms' turn to contemplate the fire for a moment.

BRAHMS

My life turned around yours. Then it *became* yours. *I* became... Your husband was committed to an asylum. You had six children. You were the most famous, most ravishing, most talented woman in the world...

CLARA

Oh, please, go on.

BRAHMS

What choice did I have?

CLARA

You made a choice, whether you admit it now or not. I began, in my half-widowed state to understand your rare and beautiful character every day. And your genius burned so brightly that I feared it.

BRAHMS

Stop. Please.

CLARA

Perhaps you were right.
(he arches an eyebrows)
Did I tell you of the note he left?

BRAHMS

No. I didn't know there was a note.

CLARA

I didn't find it until weeks later. It was quite short... "Dear Clara, I am going to throw my wedding ring into the Rhine.

(MORE)

CLARA (CONT'D)

Do the same with yours, and then the two will be united. With any luck, so will we someday. As we were when I was whole." Perhaps that's why he never spoke of me. Never asked for me to visit until the very end. He believed the act had been completed. Or that it should have been, and that I should treat it as though it had...

EXT. ENDENICH ASYLUM - ESTABLISHING - DAY

A manicured gravel path leads to a white stucco building that could pass for a country manner if not for tiny details such as a locked side gate and a guard watching from a window.

INT. ENDENICH ASYLUM REGISTRATION STATION - DAY

Johnny, hat tucked under his left arm, signs his name into a ledger under a GUARD's supervision.

GUARD

Herr Doktor asks that you try not to excite him.

JOHNNY

I remember.

A porter gestures for Johnny to follow.

INT. ENDENICH ASYLUM MAIN CORRIDOR - DAY

A long, bright hallway. Sunlight filters through tall windows. No filth or chaos. There is, however, an unsettling orderliness of a place a bit too determined to be calm. Small fractures beneath a polished surface.

Johnny follows the porter down the corridor.

Behind a half-closed door, someone recites a prayer.

A nurse gently guides an older woman, eyes dulled by glaucoma, back into her room. She whispers encouragement with each tiny step.

A young man in a dressing gown is escorted down the hall by a doctor, who nods at Johnny. The patient shakes his head violently. The doctor places a light hand on his back.

The hall ends at a side door. The porter opens it.

INT. ENDENICH ASYLUM GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

Johnny steps out to a modest, well-kept garden. A broad lawn, shade trees, and a path through neatly tended flowerbeds.

A nurse reads on a bench while another patient dozes nearby.

The porter leads Johnny to the shade of an old chestnut tree.

Robert sits in a wheelchair. He's terribly thin. Hair nearly gone. Mottled skin. But he smiles.

ROBERT

Johnny!

Johnny forces a smile in return.

JOHNNY

Herr Schumann.

Robert's smile widens, revealing a couple missing teeth. His hand trembles on the arm of his chair.

ROBERT

Let me rise to the occasion at
least once more.

He struggles to stand. The porter moves to help. Robert brushes him away. Manages to get upright. But he sways.

Johnny steps in and catches him. They embrace.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

Ah. There you are. The Muses'
favorite darling, in the flesh.

Robert chuckles, coughs, and allows Johnny to help him sink back into the wheelchair. The porter retreats to the far end of the garden.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

You haven't aged a day.

JOHNNY

I've aged precisely twelve weeks,
since the last time you invited me
here. You look well.

SCHUMANN

You're a very bad liar, Johnny
Broom.

JOHNNY

Fine. You need to eat more.

ROBERT

I'm being pared down, to a theme without variation. I'm pleasantly sedated. They've found a balance. Enough powder that the demons are blurred, but not so much that I forget the angels entirely.

He leans his head back to look up at the flashes of sunshine slipping through the mesh of branches.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

And you? You wrote me of your summer expedition.

JOHNNY

My expedition?

ROBERT

Your letter. The holiday with Clara and the children. Your little army, marching through the Rhine valley.

JOHNNY

(smiling)

It did them good to be away. To be in the open air. And me as well. I am most inspired when in nature.

ROBERT

Ah. You've been composing then?

JOHNNY

Here and there.

Robert looks at a specific point at the roof of the main building. He nods thoughtfully and waves at someone or something invisible there. Then turns back to Johnny.

ROBERT

Good, that's very good. Clara wrote of your trip, too. With equal or greater elan. You know, Johnny, a letter from you or her can make these walls recede for entire days.

Johnny is seized by a sudden frustrated tenderness.

JOHNNY

Then why do you never write back to her? Or allow her to visit?

Robert's gaze drops to his hands in his lap.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

It's breaking her. Slowly. It's been eighteen months, Robert.

ROBERT

If I write, she will hope.

JOHNNY

Good. She *should* hope.

ROBERT

No. She should remember who I once was. She should learn to live without what I am now. And you should be helping her do that.

He exhales a thin, whistling breath. Cracks his knuckles.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

If I had died before my thirty-fifth year, perhaps they'd have called me the Shelly of music. "The star of youth, most resplendently gleaming." You can't know how that feels, Johannes. To feel the source dry up while the body goes on. I hope you never know it.

JOHNNY

You're wrong. You're not finished. There is more music in you. I can see it. I can almost hear it.

Robert reaches out. His fingers search for Johnny's sleeve. Johnny leans forward so he can find it.

ROBERT

Listen to me, Johnny. One day they will no longer speak of my music at all. They will say, "Ah, Schumann. Wasn't he the one who went mad and was married to Clara for a time and discovered Brahms?" If I am very fortunate, they'll put those in a different order.

JOHNNY

You are a master, Herr Schumann. Your work will outlive all of us.

Robert's grip tightens on Johnny's sleeve.

ROBERT

Take care where you place your name. Take care what you burn and what you leave. The world, history, is cruel. You must be even more ruthless. It will decide your story for you if you don't choose it yourself.

Johnny inhales deeply. It hits hard and deep. Obviously. Robert releases him.

A breeze rustles the leaves. Robert tilts his head toward the same corner of the roof. Then he closes his eyes.

JOHNNY

What is it?

ROBERT

They're singing again. They still call to me, you know. Sometimes it's a choir as beautiful as Mendelssohn's. Sometimes it's that single damned note. Sometimes perhaps it's simply my own melodies. The ones I'll never write. The ones that floated away before I could catch them, now sent back to me. Beckoning. Teasing. But I still can't catch them.

He opens his eyes again. Stares at the same spot. Johnny watches him. Reaches out. Pats his hand.

JOHNNY

(quietly)

Robert.

Robert doesn't react. He's out of it. His eyes glazed. Entranced by the invisible choir of angels or demons howling silently at him from the parapets.

INT./EXT. - SCHUMANN HOME & DÜSSELDORF - **MONTAGE**

A) INT. SCHUMANN KITCHEN - DAY

Clara rises from the table and pours coffee for Johnny without asking. He reaches automatically for the sugar bowl and slides it toward her. A practiced subconscious coordination.

B) INT. SCHUMANN CHILDREN'S ROOM - DAY

Johnny sits on the floor with 20-MONTH-OLD FELIX. Julie waits impatiently for him to pretend to tune a fake violin. Suddenly, Ferdinand bursts in and tackles Johnny from behind. He tips over, laughing.

C) INT. SCHUMANN PARLOR - DAY

Clara practices a difficult passage. Johnny stands behind her, following the score.

D) EXT. DÜSSELDORF STREETS - DAY

Johnny carries a basket of groceries while Ludwig, Julie, and Ferdinand skip ahead.

E) INT. GUEST (JOHNNY'S) ROOM - NIGHT

Johnny sits on the floor, scribbling out notes on music paper atop a crate. Ludwig's sleeping head rests on his lap.

F) INT. CARRIAGE - DAY

Johnny, Clara, and all six children dressed up and excited on the way to a holiday event.

G) INT. SITTING ROOM - EVENING

Heavy rain outside. Clara reads aloud from a children's book, Felix asleep in her arms. Johnny reads silently from a thick volume in an armchair. The youngest three children lie on the rug. The last of them drifts to sleep. Clara stops reading. She glances at Johnny. He looks up, sees they're all asleep, nods, and puts his book down. He stoops to pick up Ferdinand.

H) EXT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - DAY

Johnny lies on the couch while Clara's playing drifts in from the parlor. He squeezes his hands and bites his lip.

I) INT. SCHUMANN CHILDREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Felix fusses in Johnny's arms in the darkened room. He paces in a small circle and rocks Felix gently. Softly, absentmindedly, he **hums three unmistakable notes**.

Ferdinand bursts in before Johnny can take the melody any further. Clara follows close behind. With a grateful nod, she takes the child from his arms. Johnny leaves with Ludwig.

J) INT. SCHUMANN HOUSE - NIGHT

The house is asleep. Johnny silently moves from room to room. He extinguishes lamps, closes windows, and picks up toys. The unnoticed rituals of a second parent.

K) INT. SCHUMANN GARDEN - DAY

Clara and the children picnic on a blanket. Johnny brings out a tray of tea. Clara smiles at him as he sits. She touches the small of his back. Caresses it gently. Then pulls away.

INT. SCHUMANN PARLOR - DAY

Clara sits at the piano. Johnny stands beside her. She studies a page of Johnny's latest manuscript. The distant racket of the children playing punctuates the air.

CLARA

You always want to resolve too soon.

She taps a particular measure on the page.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Let it ache a little longer.

Johnny's mouth tightens. He clenches his fist unconsciously.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Otherwise, it's... beautiful. I mean terrifying. I shall perform it soon.

JOHNNY

You don't need to play it first?

CLARA

I already know how it will sound. How it will feel. I want the moment to be special. And earned. I must think on it a while yet.

She stands, hands him his papers, touches him on the shoulder, and exits.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

A small, candle-lit bistro. Rain slides down the windows.

Joseph Joachim sits opposite Johnny, who stares into an untouched plate of stewed vegetables, pork, and dumplings.

After a long, awkward beat, Joseph leans back in his seat.

JOSEPH

So what terrible burden is Herr Schumann's "Young Eagle" carrying?
(MORE)

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
 Besides being the promised Messiah
 of Romanticism?

Despite his low mood, Johnny lets out a laugh.

JOHNNY
 Is it that obvious?

JOSEPH
 Yes, my friend, it is. Let's hear
 it.

Johnny dithers-- or pretends to-- for a moment. Then he sets
 down his fork. He speaks quietly but passionately.

JOHNNY
 It's no longer a matter of
 obligation or admiration. I believe
 I love her. I'm under her spell...

Joseph doesn't appear to be shocked. He patiently waits for
 Johnny to spill the rest of it.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
 I have to restrain myself from just
 putting my arms around her and
 drawing her to me. Other girls, the
 ones we used to flirt with, only
 promise heaven. Clara reveals it.

He sits back, ashamed and relieved at once. Joseph shrugs.
 Dabs his face with his napkin.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)
 What, you're not scandalized? Or
 even surprised?

Joseph reaches forward and pats his friend's hand.

JOSEPH
 Of course not, Johnny. You've
 chosen, each day for eighteen
 months, to live in the same house
 as a kind, beautiful woman who also
 happens to be the most talented
 musician in Europe. I'd be
 surprised if you *weren't* in love.

Johnny looks relieved. He pats Joseph's hand.

JOHNNY
 I'm stuck, brother. In every
 conceivable way.
 (MORE)

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I can't imagine leaving her...
them. But I also can't imagine...

He trails off. Drains his beer. Signals for another.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Anything I do or don't do is a
betrayal of someone. Of Robert. Of
myself. Of my music.

JOSEPH

You forgot someone. Does Clara feel
the same as you?

JOHNNY

She's still a mystery. After all
this time. But... I think so...
Sometimes I'm certain. Then she
pulls away. Once she told me that
she is still half a wife and half a
widow. And that she loves me like a
mother.

Joseph snorts.

JOSEPH

That doesn't sound particularly
promising. You're only, what, seven
years older than Marie?

JOHNNY

She knows what to say to lower the
gas when we start to burn too hot.

JOSEPH

She has much more to lose than you.
I implore you to be... considerate.

JOHNNY

She still believes Robert will get
better.

JOSEPH

He won't though, will he?

Johnny shakes his head.

JOHNNY

He's given up. If I leave, she'll
be alone.

Joseph leans back in his chair. Crosses his arms.

JOSEPH

Maybe you can go without leaving.
 Maybe what you both need is a
 break. A tour. Show the world what
 you've written. Let them hear how
 you've grown. It'll remind you that
 you have a life beyond her parlor.

Johnny nods noncommittally. His gaze drifts toward the window
 and the rain-slicked city beyond.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

Just don't drown, brother. And
 don't even think of pulling her
 down with you.

The waiter returns with another beer. Johnny attacks it.

EXT. SCHUMANN GARDEN - EVENING

Fireflies drift through the air. Clara stands barefoot in the
 grass while the children dart around her, cupping their hands
 to catch the insects. They shriek with delight.

Johnny steps out of the house and approaches them.

JOHNNY

Ms. Plimpton says dinner is ready.

Groans all around. Clara scolds them lightly.

CLARA

Go on, then.

The children race past Johnny toward the house. He turns to
 follow them.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Johnny. Stay a moment, please.

He pauses.

JOHNNY

The food will get cold.

She reaches out. Her fingers close around his wrist. His
 breath catches.

CLARA

Why have you been so distant
 lately? Did I offend you?

Her voice is steady, but her eyes are not.

JOHNNY
No. Of course not.

CLARA
It feels like a punishment.

He looks away, his expression a mix of guilt and fear.

JOHNNY
It's for... preservation.

A beat of silence.

CLARA
Preservation from what? And for
whom?

Her hand slides down his wrist into his palm. She interlaces his fingers with his. He trembles, but he doesn't withdraw. He looks down at their entwined hands. Then at her face.

JOHNNY
Let's tell ourselves it's for
Robert, and leave it at that.

He lifts her hand and kisses it lightly. Then he releases her and turns away. Walks back toward the house.

Clara remains in the faded light. Fireflies blink around her.

Johnny glances back at her one last time before stepping inside. The door closes behind him. She balls her fists.

CLARA
No. Let's not.

She marches inside.

INT. ENDENICH ASYLUM - ROBERT'S ROOM - DAY

Robert lies in bed in his tidy room. The shades remain drawn. His face is emaciated. Purple blotches on his cheeks and arms. He HUMS a droning, tuneless sound.

An ATTENDANT wheels in his chair.

ATTENDANT
Time for the garden, Herr Schumann.

With great effort, Robert turns away.

ROBERT
No. Not today. No more.

He resumes humming.

EXT. SCHUMANN HOME - DAY

A carriage waits in the street in front of the house. The DRIVER adjusts the reins.

Clara is dressed for travel: dark dress, jacket, gloves, boots, and a bonnet. Johnny is dressed not nearly as nicely.

Clara embraces each of her children in turn. She hands Felix over to Ms. Plimpton after kissing his head.

MS. PLIMPTON
Come inside, children.

They obey. Clara turns to Johnny.

CLARA
Thank you. For helping watch them.
They behave better for you.

Clara glances toward the driver to ensure he's still focused on the horses. She steps forward. Then she reaches out and quietly takes one of Johnny's hands. He takes the other. Their fingers lock together. Clara's voice trembles.

CLARA (CONT'D)
When I return... we'll talk.
Properly.

Johnny's eyes scan her face. Searching, nervous, hopeful.

CLARA (CONT'D)
This tour will be only three weeks.

JOHNNY
Still longer than I can pretend
will be easy.

She lightly kisses his cheek. He pulls her into a brief, but tight hug. She allows it for a few seconds. Then pulls away.

He helps her into the carriage. The driver climbs up to his seat. The carriage pulls away. Johnny doesn't move.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

A small room in an inn somewhere in Europe. A bed, a table, a washbasin, and a single oil lamp.

Clara stands barefoot and in her nightdress at the basin. Her hair is down. She splashes her face. Exhales contentedly.

She passes by a table, upon which sits a letter from Johnny.

She goes to the window. Opens it. Feels the breeze. Looks out on the city.

Then she plops onto the bed. Sprawled out. Content. In her element. Alone. Not the Widow or the Wife or the Mother or the Virtuoso. Just Clara.

INT. CONCERT HALL - NIGHT

The hall is empty. Clara sits at the grand piano on stage. She wears a simple rehearsal gown. Her hair is still undone.

She plays a complex passage of one of Brahms' songs. Then a snippet of a Robert Schumann intermezzo.

Then she pauses. Bites her lip. Thinking.

She begins something new. Simple. Emotional. Basic chords that feel **very modern**. Like it could turn into a pop song. **An E-Flat chord, then a B-Flat, then an F, then a G-Minor.**

She HUMS along. A pleasant melody. The opposite of the droning hum her husband inflicts on himself. Then she sings.

CLARA

I'm a lighthouse... I'm in your head now... I'll press you to the pages of my heart...

She keeps playing variations of the same chords. She hums what could be a modern chorus. She smiles and smiles. Free.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

CLARA

You disapproved of my touring.

OLDER Clara has a mess of letters spread across her lap.

BRAHMS

That's a mischaracterization. You needed a babysitter.

CLARA

Oh, please. We had Ms. Plimpton. You wanted to stay there with the children. You loved it. Loved *them*.

BRAHMS

(shrugs)

Yes. I did. So what?

CLARA

What was it then that made you so sour? You wrote for eternity and I played for the rent? Is that it?

BRAHMS

I missed you when you were gone. Or when I was away. That's all.

A flicker of satisfaction crosses her face.

CLARA

So it seems.

(reads from a letter)

"I always kiss the children for you, but I would very much like to give you those kisses back again."

OLDER Brahms grunts. She reads from another letter.

CLARA (CONT'D)

"I can do nothing but think of you and gaze at your dear letters. What have you done? Can't you remove the spell you've cast over me?"

BRAHMS

So you've brought these here to embarrass me with my youthful folly?

CLARA

These are what you wish to destroy?

BRAHMS

I wouldn't mind. But let's not pretend you were innocent.

He scoots his chair, leans forward with effort, and rummages through a box. He finds a folded letter. He opens it. Reads.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

"Brahms is like no one else-- so honest and true, and yet so tormenting.

(she nods)

I love him more than I can say.

(MORE)

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

I feel a mother's affection for him, though at times I would more aptly say a woman's."

CLARA

So you haven't burned them all.

Brahms tosses it aside. But not into the fire. Not yet.

CLARA (CONT'D)

If you had it your way, you'd erase those years entirely? They don't fit into your neat, upward trajectory toward perfection. Those years of uncertainty, longing, and messiness, and... love.

BRAHMS

What I keep in my heart is quite different from what I want the world to know about me. I've said it a dozen times... You, your husband, and your family constitute the most beautiful experience of my life, and represent all that is richest and most noble in it.

INT. ENDENICH ASYLUM - ROBERT'S ROOM - DAY

Robert lies in his hospital bed, propped up on a stack of pillows. Skin and bones. Lips cracked and dry. Patchy whiskers. Scratch marks and bandaged arms. Shallow breaths.

Clara sits at his side. Johnny stands on the other. He holds one of Robert's shaky hands. Johnny raises it gently to his lips, and kisses the knuckles. Robert's mouth moves; barely. A rasp of air, no sound.

JOHNNY

Thank you for everything, Master.

Robert's eyes meet his. Johnny backs away with reverence.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I'll leave you to your Clara now.

Clara swallows and leans in as Brahms steps toward the door.

CLARA

I received the flowers you sent.
And of course the invitation.

Robert smiles a gummy, half-toothless grin that still somehow looks like himself. Clara covers her mouth to stifle a sob.

In the hallway, just beyond the door, Robert's DOCTOR stands, arms folded. As Johnny joins him, the doctor gives him a sympathetic pat on the arm.

Robert motions Clara closer with a shaky hand. She leans so near her cheek almost touches his lips.

JOHNNY
(softly, to doctor)
How long?

DOCTOR
A matter of hours, I'm afraid.

Inside the room, Robert whispers into Clara's ear. Whatever he says makes her eyes drift to Johnny in the doorway. She nods. Squeezes Robert's hand.

CLARA
Yes. He certainly has.

Johnny steps all the way into the hall, out of sight.

Clara turns fully to Robert. She slips onto the narrow bed, curled beside him like she used to. She presses her forehead to his temple.

CLARA (CONT'D)
Oh, Robert. I've missed you so much.

Her tears fall freely. Robert's eyes are wet, too. He attempts to lift his hand to wipe her cheek, but he's too weak. It trembles and falls. She catches it, guides it to her hair, and nestles beneath it.

CLARA (CONT'D)
Thank you. For letting me lie here with you once more.
(beat)
And for the children, they're so...
And for the music... And for all the years and all your love and for fighting for--

She stops speaking as he manages the smallest motion of brushing his fingers against her temple. She leans into it. They breathe together. A few final moments of the private, sacred world they shared for so long.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

Robert's coffin is carried out through the church doors by the pallbearers, including Johnny and Joseph. Clara stands at the steps with her children as the coffin passes.

EXT. CEMETERY ROAD - DAY

The procession winds along the lane: the pastor at the front, then the hearse wagon, then Clara with her children, and finally many rows of mourners. Johnny walks near the rear.

A violinist walks near the wagon, playing an instrumental version of Schumann's "**Traumeri**," from "**Kinderszenen**."

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The mourners gather around the open grave. The coffin rests at the bottom. The PASTOR gives his graveside address (*the text is the same as from Brahms' later **Requiem***).

PASTOR

Blessed are those who mourn; they will be comforted. Those who sow tears will reap joy. Blessed are the dead. So, says the spirit, that they may rest from their labors, and their works do follow them.

He lifts a handful of soil and spills it onto the coffin. He turns and gestures for Clara to approach.

PASTOR (CONT'D)

Allow me to know my end, and the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am.

Clara rises from the front row, flanked by her children and OLDER SISTER. Johnny watches from several rows behind. Clara steps to the grave and drops her own bit of soil.

PASTOR (CONT'D)

All who walk the Earth are as nothing. They go around like shadows. And all their noise amounts to nothing... The grass withers, and its flower falls away.

Clara starts to return to her seat. But stops. Frozen. She scans the gathered faces. She looks panicked. Until her eyes lock onto Johnny's.

She pushes through the rows of mourners and rushes into his arms. She breaks a sob against his chest. Johnny holds her tightly, steady and wordless-- trying not to lock eyes with the other people watching them.

PASTOR (CONT'D)

Behold, I show you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

OLDER Clara reads from a letter.

CLARA

"All my happiness is over. A new life is beginning."

OLDER Brahms reaches over and hands her another one. She scowls at him. Scans it. Frowns again. Then reads aloud.

CLARA (CONT'D)

"When I'm with you, I never think of your youth. I only feel myself wonderfully stirred... When you draw in great breaths of nature, one tends to grow young with you."

She tosses it back to him.

CLARA (CONT'D)

The fire can have that one. Never mind the sentiment. The prose is unforgivable.

INT. SCHUMANN PARLOR - DAY

Johnny sits alone at the piano in the Schumann parlor, almost literally playing his heart out.

He plays the most dramatic, emotional, and intense passages from what will become later compositions, turning them into a single song. A reflection of what he is and has been feeling over the past two years. Awe, love, heartbreak, and grief.

And halfway through, he begins to sing. His voice is not like the operatic singers of his time who would have accompanied his *lieder*s. His voice is tender, half broken and half reaching for the sublime. It is overall... **modern.**

(NOTE: This scene will be the closest musical equivalent to a set piece for the film.

And if executed properly, it will serve as a sort of Rosetta's Stone, translating the inner feelings and musical expressions of a buttoned-up 19th century classical musician to a modern audience.

Though unorthodox, I have included a link to a crude approximation of what this could be. In this surreal interpretation, important people from his life would join him in playing at singing at key moments as it grows. This is just one idea, and it can be easily replaced with better ones: sincereclaptrap.com/attempts-in-c-major)

INT. REHEARSAL STUDIO - DAY

A cramped rehearsal room. An upright piano and several chairs. Three musicians-- a VIOLIST, a CELLIST, and a singer. The singer is LINA VOGEL, early 20s, blonde, quite pretty.

They play the final notes of Johnny's newest *lieder*.

INT. STUDIO HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Johnny and Joseph approach, each carrying a coffee mug. As they near the door, laughter spills out.

Johnny slows. Joseph gives him a questioning look. Johnny raises his hand: *wait*. They listen, just outside the door.

VIOLIST

That's why Frau Schumann's playing
has taken on such renewed vigor.

Laughter.

CELLIST

He moved in before they even carted
Master Schumann away!

LINA

That's not fair. He has been
helping the family through a
terrible time.

CELLIST

Please. Be realistic.

VIOLIST

Honestly, Herr Broom should marry
the widow and be done with it if
this is the kind of trite love song
he's going to vomit out.

Johnny's jaw tightens. Then he snaps. He pushes Joseph aside and bursts through the door.

INT. REHEARSAL STUDIO - CONTINUOUS

Johnny storms to the violist, grabs him by the collar, and slams him against the wall. A music stand crashes down.

JOHNNY

Say it again. Louder. With vigor.

The man gasps, terrified. Lina rushes forward.

LINA

Herr Brahms, please. Let him go.

Joseph hurries in behind her.

JOSEPH

Johnny! Enough!

Johnny's grip tightens. His knuckles are white.

JOHNNY

You don't know her. You know nothing about her. Or her husband. Or me. Don't speak our names. I don't even know yours.

Lina gently touches Johnny's wrist.

JOSEPH

Calm down, Johnny. This isn't you.

Johnny glances at Joseph, then Lina. Shame flickers behind the rage. His grip loosens. Joseph pulls him back.

The violist slumps down the wall.

Johnny straightens, turns, and storms out. Joseph follows.

INT. TAVERN - NIGHT

A crowded, smoky tavern near the river. Musicians, laborers, and students packed into long benches and dim corner booths.

Johnny sits at a table with Joseph and ALBERT DIETRICH (26), a friend and fellow composer. Many empty steins sit between them. A full shot glass of Schnapps waits in front of Johnny.

Johnny, already quite drunk, is deep into a rant.

JOHNNY

That anti-semite Wagner is just
jealous that most Jews play twice
as well as he does.

Dietrich tries to hush him. Joseph half-laughs, half-winces.

The singer Lina enters, laughing, through the front door,
along with two girlfriends.

Johnny spots her instantly. His posture straightens.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I'm going to say hello.

JOSEPH

Johannes... maybe wait til morning.

JOHNNY

Cowards promise tomorrow. Men seize
the night.

He grabs the Schnapps, throws it back in one violent gulp,
and stands.

DIETRICH

(under his breath)

God help her.

Johnny crosses the tavern toward Lina. He stubs his knee on a
bench. Winces. Continues.

Joseph and Dietrich watch from a distance.

DIETRICH (CONT'D)

He seems shaken. How bad was it?

JOSEPH

The gossip is poisoning him.

Across the room, Lina greets Johnny warmly with a bright
smile. Double-cheek kiss. She introduces him to her friends.
He bows dramatically. He looks quite animated.

DIETRICH

How much of it is true?

Joseph shrugs silently, but his expression says a lot.

Johnny leans in and whispers something in Lina's ear. She
freezes. Pulls back. Shocked.

He says something else, loud enough her friends can hear.

Lina slaps him hard across the face.

Johnny LAUGHS. A high, bitter sound that doesn't normally belong to him.

Lina storms off, dragging her friends to a far corner.

Johnny staggers to a nearby patron, snatches the man's shot glass from his hand, and slams the drink back.

Joseph and Dietrich jump to their feet.

JOSEPH

Johannes, enough! Come on.

Johnny sees them advancing. He bolts past two drinkers, almost falls, and stumbles out the front door.

EXT. SCHUMANN HOME - NIGHT

Johnny staggers down the empty, moonlit cobblestones. He SINGS off-key. Fragments from the medley he played earlier.

He sways, nearly collapses.

The front door of the Schumann house opens. Clara stands in the doorway, wrapped in a shawl.

CLARA

Johnny?

He looks up at her. Glassy-eyed. Broken. He tries to smile, but it fractures into something closer to a sob. He steps toward her. His voice cracks.

JOHNNY

Clara... We can't keep... We must do something.

Clara sizes up his condition. She steps toward him without judgment. He sways. She reaches for his arm.

CLARA

Yes, Johnny. We really must.

She steadies him. Leads him inside.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

OLDER Clara studies **OLDER** Brahms with a twinkle in her eye, as if deciding whether or not to pounce. She does.

CLARA
Singers were always your greatest
weakness, weren't they?

BRAHMS
(distracted)
Hmm?

She points to a fragment of a burned envelope still clinging
to the hearthstone.

CLARA
I recognize sweet Agathe Siebold's
writing. I'm sure you convinced all
the girls with the high, pretty
voices to part with your letters.
They dare not deny a request from
the dear old Professor.

Brahms' eyes flash with annoyance. But he deflects.

BRAHMS
Singers, Frau Schumann? No. It's
cellists who set my heart racing.

CLARA
Nonsense. Where have you even seen
or heard a woman play the cello?

BRAHMS
Oh, dear Clara, you should see how
they play in inner Bohemia, when
they think no outsider is watching.
Or when daughters of industry
titans play private recitals in
their parlors. I even hear tell of
feminine mastery of the form in the
Orient. Can you imagine that? Oh, I
can, dear Clara.

CLARA
That's obscene.

He mimes the tender placement of a cello between his open
legs. He caresses the air in front of his chest.

BRAHMS
The way their feet drag across the
floor in time. And when their
heeled boot digs in and twists with
uncontrolled passion.

Clara wrinkles her nose in disgust.

CLARA

See? You really are a beast.

Brahms straightens. More serious. His eyes darken.

BRAHMS

People call me rough. Tactless.
Where should I have learned tact?
Twelve years old playing for the
half-naked St. Pauli girls and the
filthy sailors in those depraved
dockside brothels, so my family
wouldn't starve? You expect me to
have some exalted respect for women
with a childhood as cursed as mine?

CLARA

I expect you to know the difference
between a lady and--

BRAHMS

Pouring beer down my throat.
Fondling me as I tried to play
their bawdy music. Sitting me on
their laps, pulling down my pants.
Laughing. "Look at little Johannes,
fair and pretty as a girl."

CLARA

I'm sorry that was inflicted upon
you, Johnny. Truly. But you've used
those stories as armor your whole
life. I've heard about it more often
than your damn lullaby.

Brahms smirks.

BRAHMS

I treasure what I learned there.

CLARA

You should grieve what it took from
you.

BRAHMS

My time there made me understand
the evils of such primal... lust.

CLARA

(scoffs)

Says the man whose reputation in
Vienna for his brothel patronage
nearly rivals that of his music.

(MORE)

CLARA (CONT'D)

You don't seem nearly as concerned about wiping them from your image.

BRAHMS

Exactly. Passions and desires are distractions that must quickly pass. Or they must be hunted out and extinguished. Those employed by such places perform sacred duties. In that way, I respect them.

CLARA

But the problem with what you say, Johnny, is that it's not true.

BRAHMS

It is! I treat them respectfully, as long as they do the same.

CLARA

No, not that.
(points to the burned
letter on the hearth)
That.

He looks where she indicates. Then shrugs.

BRAHMS

That will be true too, soon, once the fire has done all its work.

CLARA

If you truly employed prostitutes merely so you could live otherwise free from love and companionship and what you call "distractions," I'd almost understand. You proudly proclaim that you've always stayed away from respectable women, but we both know that's not the case.

He averts his gaze.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Forget about you and me for a moment. I know of all the other "respectable" women. Shall I list them? Shall we talk of them? Start with poor Agathe there, burned on the floor. Luise. Ottilie. Elizabeth von Herzongenber. Hermine Spies. God knows how many in that flock of adorers in your women's choir.

(MORE)

CLARA (CONT'D)

Alice Barbi was recent. Ilona Eibenschutz was my student--

BRAHMS

Enough. You sound obsessed.

CLARA

And Julie. My own daughter.

He finally meets her eyes.

BRAHMS

I never touched her.

CLARA

(softens slightly)

I understand that. Yet you were obsessed. Until the day she was married. Or perhaps until she died. You are not a passionless man, no matter what you tell yourself, or the world. You are not a monk, above the errs of humanity. How could you be, with what you've created and given to the world?

His arms are crossed. He sulks silently. She points to the burned letter once more.

CLARA (CONT'D)

You can coerce them to destroy their letters. But when you're gone they'll still boast to your biographers. What are you so afraid to let the world see? Proof that you weren't the honorable, sexless gentleman who glorifies virginal perfection? You either had relations with them, or you wanted to, *craved* to, and they spurned you. That's what you want destroyed. The certainty. Because whores in brothels aren't known for their letter writing.

She now holds the letter that Brahms first enquired about. She turns it over and over, not yet looking at it.

CLARA (CONT'D)

No one who hears a measure of your music will believe you led a life lacking in passion.

Brahms stares at the fire, still pouting.

BRAHMS

My upbringing taught me how to make music. But not how to be a friend or a husband. Or how to live at all, really.

He finally meets her eyes.

CLARA

Johnny...

BRAHMS

The problem, I suppose, is eventually I will always despise any woman who takes an interest in me. What is it that they're actually falling in love with? My fame? My money? Or God forbid, my art? To be accepted out of admiration... that inspires a special kind of hatred.

CLARA

Why is admiration so terrible? And how do you expect them to love for you for anything else when you hide away who you really are.

BRAHMS

My identity *is* hiding from myself, and from others. That's who I am.

CLARA

That wasn't always true. And it has never been with me.

She holds up the letter.

CLARA (CONT'D)

We have come, I suppose inevitably, to this. This reminder of fact. What you wrote after the Black Forest. What happened. And what didn't. What you can't hide from.

BRAHMS

There's always somewhere left to hide, Clara. And if not, the fire awaits.

INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - DAY

Half-packed travel bags are strewn about. Children's shoes heaped by the door. A dress draped over a chair. Marie wedges a doll into one of the cases.

Johnny's sister ELISE BRAHMS (23) attempts to fold a concert gown in polite agony. Clara gently rescues it.

Johnny enters with a tall stack of books. His mother, FRAU BRAHMS (mid-60s)-- small, neat, modestly dressed-- follows.

FRAU BRAHMS

You'll sprain your spine before you reach the train station.

Ferdinand toddles in and wraps himself around Johnny's legs. Johnny drops the books and lifts him above his head.

Frau Brahms watches with both maternal affection and perhaps awareness of how naturally her son fits into this household. Frau Brahms steps in and adjusts Johnny's crooked collar.

FRAU BRAHMS (CONT'D)

You'll write?

JOHNNY

We'll only be gone a week.

She gives him a withering look.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Yes, Mama, I'll write.

Frau Brahms turns her attention to Clara.

FRAU BRAHMS

I can hardly believe my Johnny is playing private concerts in Austria with the great Clara Schumann.

Clara shoots Johnny a brief look, but recovers.

CLARA

Your son honors me, Frau Brahms. He's a rare talent indeed.

FRAU BRAHMS

Johnny always did play best when he has someone to impress.

Johnny reddens.

CLARA

We're so grateful you're staying
with the children.

FRAU BRAHMS

They'll be saints. I extracted an
oath.

JOHNNY

Their oaths mean nothing. They've
sworn loyalty to a dozen empires
today alone.

Frau Brahms lowers her voice to Marie and Ferdinand.

FRAU BRAHMS

I would imagine the promise of
sweets might mean something.

She produces two wrapped candies from the folds of her dress.

MARIE

It might very well, ma'am.

Frau Brahms holds them out and then points to the back door.

FRAU BRAHMS

Let's give your mother and Johannes
time to finish up. Who wants to
show me and Aunt Elise the garden?

The children whoop and race toward the back door. Frau Brahms
and Elise follow. Clara resumes packing.

CLARA

They love you very much.

JOHNNY

They have no choice.

CLARA

Lucky them.

Johnny fruitlessly attempts to stuff the books in his case.

INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT - DAY

The soft clatter of rails. Sunlight through the window.

Johnny and Clara sit opposite each other in the small
compartment. Clara studies the passing hilly, rural
landscape. Then she turns to him.

CLARA

It was quite nice, meeting your family. To see who formed you... Though I'd rather not have lied to your mother.

Johnny shifts in his seat.

JOHNNY

Mm. Well... It couldn't be avoided. She's far more Lutheran than you.

CLARA

She didn't believe a word of it.

There's a polite rap at the compartment door. It slides open.

Two female FANS and an older GENTLEMAN peer in. Hesitant, but excited. Their voices OVERLAP.

FAN 1

Frau Schumann? It *is* you. Forgive the intrusion. We wondered if...
(holds up a notebook)
... an autograph might be possible?

GENTLEMAN

We attended your concert in Cologne last spring. I still haven't recovered from such... radiance.

FAN 2

Will you perform in Innsbruck soon? My sister will be beside herself.

Clara slips into her public mode of polished warmth.

CLARA

Of course. One at a time, please. Tell your sister I'll return soon.

As they crowd their way inside and offer their pens and papers, Johnny's face sours. He mutters under his breath.

JOHNNY

Yes, let's all gather round and give praise.

No one hears him. Or cares. He stands abruptly.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I'll fetch us something from the bar cart. To celebrate... whatever this is.

Clara looks up with faint concern mixed with amusement.
Johnny squeezes past the fans into the aisle.

INT. TRAIN AISLE - CONTINUOUS

Johnny moves down the narrow aisle, a bit unsteadily with the sway of the train. He shakes his head.

JOHNNY
That's not how I remember it.

OLDER Clara, invisible in the future, responds.

OLDER CLARA (V.O.)
Quiet, Johnny.

He stops. Her voice is soft and teasing.

OLDER CLARA (V.O.)
This isn't just your story anymore.

Johnny almost smiles.

JOHNNY
As if it ever was.

He continues down the aisle toward the bar.

INT. CARRIAGE - LATE AFTERNOON

A carriage rattles softly along a forest road. Late sunlight flickers through the trees.

Johnny and Clara sit side by side. Peaceful. Their hands rest on the seat between them. Close, but not touching.

Clara extends her little finger. Hooks it gently around Johnny's. A tiny gesture, but tender.

Johnny squeezes her finger with his. Once.

The trees pass by. If there was anything to forgive, is indeed forgiven.

EXT. FOREST ROAD / COUNTRY HOTEL - LATE AFTERNOON

The carriage rounds a bend on a wooded hillside and emerges into a quiet clearing near Baden-Baden and the Black Forest.

Ahead sits a gorgeous, two-story, timber and stone inn. It's modestly sized, 5-10 guest rooms at most.

A steep roof with several chimneys poking through. A wraparound porch faces the meadow. Dense forest presses close on the other side, and a narrow river winds through it all.

It feels tucked away, a hidden refuge from the world that has been waiting for them.

The carriage slows as it nears the front steps.

INT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN RECEPTION AREA - LATE AFTERNOON

A small front room with wood floors and walls.

A CLERK (female, 40s) smiles as Johnny and Clara enters. She takes them in, and in that single glance obviously recognizes Clara. But she maintains propriety. Smiles warmly.

CLERK

Welcome to *Waldhaus Zwiesel*n. May I have your names?

Clara sets her handbag on the counter.

CLARA

I'm Frau Wieck.

Another flicker of recognition, or perhaps confirmation, at the use of Clara's maiden name. She moves her pen down to the next line in her ledger.

CLERK

And I remember you, Herr Brahms.

He reddens. Caught.

JOHNNY

(mumbles)

Herr Kreisler this time.

Clara blushes, too. The clerk nods and scribbles on her paper. Her expression smooths back into professional neutrality. She offers them the ledger to sign. They do.

CLERK

Very good. Your rooms are ready.

She pulls two brass keys from the wall behind her.

CLERK (CONT'D)

Take your pick. One is forest view, one is river. Both the same inside.

CLARA

Thank you.

CLERK

If you need anything, please ring.
Dinner is at seven.

They take their keys and walk toward the stairs.

INT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN SECOND-FLOOR HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

The narrow corridor creaks underfoot. The hall is lit by an oil sconce-- and the fading afternoon light filtered through a small window at the far end.

Johnny stops at the door to his room. Clara stops at hers--
directly opposite.

They face each other for a brief moment, keys in hand.

Then they turn and unlock their doors in near unison. Slip inside their rooms. The two doors close.

INT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Johnny and Clara sit near an open window. The low murmur of the river drifts in. A gentle breeze ripples the linens. A nearly empty bottle of wine rests between them. Only three of ten tables in the candlelit hotel restaurant are occupied.

CLARA

It's peaceful enough here to make
me forget we're fugitives.

Johnny smirks.

JOHNNY

The clerk recognized you, you know.
Using your maiden name didn't help.
You were famous as a Wieck, too.

CLARA

(shrugs)

Using a pseudonym didn't exactly
help either, when you've been here
before under your real name.

JOHNNY

I suppose neither of us thought
this out very well.

They both sip their wine.

CLARA

You've hardly touched your dinner.

JOHNNY

I didn't come here for the food.

Clara's hand tightens around her glass. It looks about to shatter. Johnny winces. Perhaps over the line. He pushes a piece of fish around his plate.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I'm pacing myself. Maybe we'll be here for weeks. Perhaps we'll never leave.

CLARA

Is that supposed to be a threat?

JOHNNY

Perhaps my tone was off.

Clara laughs, softly but genuinely.

CLARA

Everything feels different here.

JOHNNY

Fewer people to hide behind.

They both look toward the window. The forest swaying. The lace curtain rippling.

CLARA

Tomorrow... will you show me where you walk? The places you look for?

JOHNNY

If you like. There's a trail that follows the river. Another that goes up the ridge. There's a hidden lake. You'll enjoy the water.

CLARA

I'll enjoy the company.

He flinches minutely. Then busies himself buttering a roll.

Another long silence. Clara lifts her wine glass. Turns it slowly between her fingers.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Do you ever think-- No, never mind.

Johnny sets down his knife.

JOHNNY

Clara. We came all this way. Say the thing.

Her gaze finds his.

CLARA

That we waited too long?

JOHNNY

Yes. And no.

Clara, in no mood for games, waits for him to explain.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Maybe we missed our moment.

(beat)

Or maybe if we'd done this a year ago, we'd have ruined it. Made a mess of it. Of each other.

CLARA

We're older now. Wiser. More frightened.

He drinks. When he lowers the glass, his expression has changed. He looks young. And yes, a bit scared.

JOHNNY

Clara... What if we choose the wrong version of us?

She considers the question seriously. Then she reaches forward. Grasps his hand. He leans in. Looks into her eyes.

CLARA

Whatever happens may echo forever in eternity. Or it might be a fleeting secret known only to us.

The clerk-- doubling as a waitress-- arrives with their dessert. The spell shifts but doesn't break. This clerk's discretion must be trusted. Their hands separate, slowly. Johnny leans back.

The waitress leaves. They eat. Quietly. Peacefully. Outside, the river murmurs. The forest calls.

EXT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN PATIO - MORNING

Johnny stands on the back patio of the hotel, sipping coffee and watching the sun rise above the treetops.

JOHNNY

And then, that day in the forest...

Clara arrives. She carries his knapsack. He nods a thanks and throws it over his shoulders.

CLARA

Who are you talking to?

JOHNNY

You... I think.

Without either of them initiating, they are suddenly holding hands. They walk together down the path toward the trees.

EXT. FOREST PATH - DAY

They walk side by side, hand in hand, as if it's the most natural part of the natural world. Johnny looks ahead. Clara glances over at him, smiling. She squeezes his fingers with her own.

EXT. RIVER CROSSING - DAY

A wide, shallow stretch of the river with slick stones.

Clara steps onto a rock. Slips.

Johnny catches her quickly around the waist.

They are suddenly very close. Both laugh, breathless.

EXT. FOREST GLEN - DAY

A small clearing ringed by trees. Grass moves in the breeze.

Johnny divides bread and cheese between them.

CLARA

I wonder if we've been walking
toward this for years.

JOHNNY

I've been here before, but you
always know exactly where we are.

She smiles. He tears into a piece of bread.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

We could go back. It's only a walk,
after all.

CLARA

Eat. You'll be unbearable if you're
both hungry and guilty.

He huffs a laugh more of obligation than amusement.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

They stand under a broad beech tree. Light filters through
the leaves.

Johnny leans against the trunk. She follows suit. Wedges
herself beneath his arm.

Clara looks up at him. Then her eyes go briefly to his mouth.

He leans in a little, hesitant.

She closes the gap.

They kiss.

It's gentle at first, then not. Johnny's hand lifts halfway,
as if to pull her closer, then thinks better of it.

He pulls back first, his breath unsteady.

They gaze at each other a moment. Then kiss again.

EXT. FOREST PATH - AFTERNOON

Clara walks ahead of him along a narrower path. Johnny lags
several steps behind, watching her.

She turns back once, gifts him a small smile, then keeps
going.

The trees thicken. The path forks around a fallen trunk.

Clara suddenly quickens her pace. She takes the left side,
disappearing between thick underbrush.

Johnny takes the right, still seeing what he thinks are
flashes of her dress between branches.... And then he
doesn't.

He jogs ahead for twenty feet or so.

JOHNNY

Clara?

No answer besides the chirping birds.

He keeps jogging. Scans the trail and the surrounding trees.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Clara!

Panic begins to set in.

EXT. TREE LINE / MEADOW - LATE AFTERNOON

Johnny bursts out of the trees into the sloping meadow above the inn.

He's a little breathless. His eyes search. His heart races.

The inn is visible. No sign of her. He turns in a slow circle, calling out again, more desperate.

JOHNNY

Clara!

Silence.

He is very small, surrounded by all that green.

From somewhere in the woods, a figure moves. Indistinct. A dress. Coming closer.

Johnny squints, unsure if he's seeing her, imagining her, or remembering. He waits expectantly for her to reveal herself.

EXT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN PATIO - MORNING

Clara stands on the back patio of the hotel, sipping coffee and watching the sun rise above the treetops.

CLARA

No, Johnny. I don't believe it happened quite that way.

Johnny arrives. He's already wearing his knapsack.

JOHNNY

Who are you talking to?

CLARA

No one. Myself. As usual.

Johnny indicates the path ahead that leads toward the trees.

JOHNNY

Shall we?

She nods. They set off, side by side, not touching.

EXT. FOREST PATH - DAY

They walk down the forest path to the sounds of birdsong and rushing water.

Clara glances at Johnny. His jaw is tight, eyes on the path.

After a moment, she brushes her fingers-- deliberately, lightly-- against his.

He startles out of his reverie. Looks down. Then he takes her hand, almost shyly.

JOHNNY

May I?

CLARA

You already have.

EXT. RIVER CROSSING - DAY

The same wide, shallow stretch of river.

Johnny steps onto a rock, misjudges the slickness, wobbles.

Clara grabs his arm. Steadies him.

CLARA

Careful. Your future adoring
throngs need all ten fingers.

Johnny looks embarrassed, then amused.

JOHNNY

I'll never be a genius pianist.
Composers only need the two.

He holds up his thumb and forefinger. She rolls her eyes.

She keeps hold of his arm after they make it to the other side.

EXT. FOREST GLEN - DAY

Same clearing, same breeze, same grass. Same bread and cheese.

Johnny swallows a bite. Then starts nervously pulling up small tufts of grass, like a child.

JOHNNY

I keep thinking someone will step out from behind a tree and demand to know why we're here.

CLARA

We're walking.

JOHNNY

We're not though, are we? Not only.

He pulls another clump of grass out from the roots. Starts piling it up.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

I'm trying to... enjoy this without feeling like I'm stealing it.

CLARA

From whom?

JOHNNY

Everyone. You. Your children. Him. Myself.

She touches his knee.

CLARA

You're allowed one selfish afternoon in your life, Johnny. No one will begrudge you that. I certainly won't.

He looks at her as if she's offered him the whole world.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Same beech tree. They stand close, against its broad trunk. Not yet touching.

Johnny looks wrecked. Tortured. Finally, he turns to her.

JOHNNY

I don't know how to keep walking beside you and pretend we...

He trails off. Clara's breath catches.

He leans in closer, but doesn't quite reach for her.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

May I...

He can't finish.

She lifts a hand, rests it against his chest.

CLARA
Enough of that. Yes.

He kisses her. It has the same intensity. The same hunger.

This time, she pulls back first.

CLARA (CONT'D)
We should go back soon.

He nods. His eyes search hers, as if waiting for a verdict that doesn't come.

EXT. FOREST PATH - AFTERNOON

Clara walks a few steps ahead of him along the path.

She glances back at him. Mischief flickers across her face.

CLARA
Try to keep up.

Before he can respond, she darts ahead on the path. Not far, just enough to tease.

Johnny laughs, surprised.

JOHNNY
Clara!

But she's already around a bend. Her dress vanishes behind a stand of birches.

CLARA
Catch me if you can, Herr Kreisler!
Last one back is a lame finch!

Clara rushes forward. Her heart pounds with delight, not fear. She looks back only once to see Johnny giving chase.

She slips along the left fork of a narrow split in the path. She skips lightly between roots with a youthful energy.

A rustle behind her. She giggles and speeds up.

For her, the game continues.

But the forest starts to close in. She slows, expecting Johnny to appear at any moment.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Johnny?

No answer. Still, she's not concerned.

EXT. TREE LINE / MEADOW - LATE AFTERNOON

Clara nears the edge of the forest by the meadow above the inn. She's neither breathless nor particularly alarmed. Just flushed from running. Still amused.

She smooths her hair. Scans for him.

CLARA

Johnny?

Her expression is still playful, still expecting him to leap from behind a tree.

Then she sees him.

At the far end of the meadow, Johnny bursts out of trees. He looks frightened. Panicked. He spins around.

Clara's expression changes. Her smile falters, replaced with a pang of guilt.

JOHNNY

Clara!

She lifts a hand. Prepares to call back to him.

EXT. MEADOW - DAY

Johnny and Clara walk back toward the inn along a wider path, a few paces apart, not touching.

They are both quiet.

INT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN DINING ROOM - NIGHT

They sit across from each other at the same table as the night before. Close enough to reach, too far to risk. Their wine glasses are untouched; the wine bottle almost full.

They eat in silence. Their eyes meet only in fleeting glances. Small smiles. Both appear lost in thought.

The window is closed. The curtains are still. The sound of the river is muted.

INT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY - NIGHT

Darkness.

Two sets of footsteps approach, moving down the creaky upstairs hall. Only the faintest hint of moonlight leaks through the tiny window at the far end.

CLARA

We should tell the clerk the hallway lamp has gone out.

JOHNNY

Doesn't matter. It's too late.

They continue in the near-black.

A soft RUSTLE of clothing as hands plunge into pockets to retrieve keys.

The metallic CLINK and SCRAPE of their respective keys entering the locks. Two doors CLICK.

As Johnny and Clara push their CREAKY doors open, soft warm light spills out from each of their rooms, illuminating the narrow space between them.

They step just inside their thresholds. Both turn to face the other across the small divide.

They speak calmly. Buttoned-up. Composed.

CLARA

Goodnight, Johnny.

JOHNNY

Goodnight, Clara.

But Johnny's grip on the doorframe tightens. His veins rise. His fingers dig into the wood.

Clara's hand on her doorknob is bone-white as she squeezes it with all her strength.

They hold there a moment, suspended, as if something else might be said. Or done.

Then they each retreat to their respective rooms.

Both doors CREAK close.

Darkness again.

Several seconds of it.

A spare piano progression enters, almost imperceptibly soft.
E-Flat. B minor. F. G minor.

The final chord ECHOES. Dissolves.

Silence.

Then, the unmistakable sound of one of the doors opening. A
 CREAK. A soft WHOOSH of air. Then it CLICKS shut.

Another beat.

The piano progression PLAYS once more, even softer.

A faint SIGH drifts through the dark. Impossible to say who
 it came from.

Then...

A door OPENS again. Closes.

It might be the same door. It might be the other.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

OLDER Clara holds the letter up. **OLDER** Brahms eyes it
 hungrily.

CLARA

We can resolve this quandary simply
 by opening this up and remembering.

He shakes his head emphatically.

BRAHMS

I would have thought I've made it
 quite clear by now how little I
 care about clarity or resolution...
 Or wounds.

She indicates the pile of opened letters scattered on the
 floor about her feet.

CLARA

These suggest otherwise.

BRAHMS

It doesn't matter what did or
 didn't happen. On that trip, or on
 the earlier one, or in the previous
 three years I remained by your
 side. The effect, the outcome, is
 the same.

CLARA

That's true, at least.

(beat)

You left.

FLASHBACK - INT. CARRIAGE - DAY

Johnny and Clara ride in the carriage. Through the woods, away from the hotel, toward the train station. They sit on opposite sides this time.

They both look out their respective windows. She turns once, smiles at him. He returns it. But there is a space between them now that's not merely one of physical proximity.

INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - DAY

The Schumann children throw themselves at him as he stands near the front door. He's dressed in a traveling suit and two large suitcases wait on the floor.

They cling to his legs and waist, and nuzzle his shoulder. He pats their arms and heads and plants kisses on their cheeks.

Clara wades through and starts to peel them away one by one.

Then, alone for a moment, she straightens his collar. Only a few inches apart, they gaze into each other's eyes.

She kisses his cheek. Then wraps her arms around him. Holds him tight. He squeezes her as well. They rock slowly back and forth for a moment.

JOHNNY

I wish I could put you under glass.
Or have you set in gold.

CLARA

Good luck, Johnny. Take care of
yourself. Be kind. Be...
undeniable.

With one final deep inhale, she releases him. It takes him another moment to do the same.

OLDER BRAHMS (V.O.)

I did, yes. And I also didn't. Not
really. Not fully.

END FLASHBACK

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - NIGHT

CLARA

I suppose that's true, too.

OLDER Brahms indicates the piles of letters.

BRAHMS

These letters. Hundreds more like them. Our real tours together. More holidays. I visited often. I was there at Ferdinand's death bed. I mourned Julie with you. You have remained, these past forty years, my truest friend. And the only critic whose opinion I give a damn about.

CLARA

Your guilt runs that deep, does it?

BRAHMS

I have many friends. Many... companions. I've only ever had one intimate.

She sighs. Turns the letter over in her hand once again.

CLARA

I don't judge, or begrudge, your leaving. I did for a time, of course. But I never tried to stop you. I understood. Before you met Robert and I, you were an eagle on a rapid ascent. And then you paused everything and stayed for three years. Only a saint would do that.

BRAHMS

Or an obsessive. Or a lunatic.

CLARA

I'd never have forgiven myself, or you, if you hadn't finally left when you did. All that greatness was still inside of you, ready to be let loose. I wouldn't dare deny the world what you thrust upon it. So no, that's not what vexes me.

BRAHMS

This must be where I'm to ask, "What does vex you, dear Clara?"

She leans forward slowly in her chair. Either the chair, or her ancient bones, creak. She offers him the letter.

He leans forward too, and snatches it greedily.

CLARA

Do with it what you see fit.

He glances at the fire. But he doesn't toss it in. He studies it for a moment. Then tucks it away with the others she's passed to him throughout the evening, in the crevice of the sofa. He looks at her challengingly.

CLARA (CONT'D)

I understood your choice. But it stings me, that even now, you still want to forget what happened. For as long as I've known you, you've been obsessed with holding *the whole* in mind with every note. Every accent, phrase, rest, or tempo shift must feed the overarching idea. The larger theme. So why would you purposefully omit something so important?

BRAHMS

Because this is life, not music.

CLARA

As if you could disentangle the two. Oh yes, I know you've tried. But you can't erase all traces of yourself. It's impossible. So why not let the whole truth emerge? The truth about us? You boast about our close relationship now, but you deny what we were back then. Why try to hide it? Why must you burn all traces of the thing that I know you must believe is a significant part of your life. Wouldn't it help people understand you, and then by extension, your music better?

Brahms shakes his head emphatically.

BRAHMS

No. It would do the opposite. They will ignore every other part of my life, and yours, and this wonderful relationship we've had these many years, to focus on this one thing between us.

(MORE)

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

They will twist and distort everything into it. All will be seen through it, like a smeared, filthy lens...

He speaks with such force that he has to stop to catch his breath. He shoves his hand down into the gap of the sofa and grabs at the letter. He shakes it at her.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

... And because this was meant only for your eyes. Not for historians, or rumormongers. I shouldn't have to explain my music. It's *my* private life. *Ours*. What happened between us is *for us* and no one else.

Clara looks a bit alarmed at the intensity in his voice.

CLARA

It's okay, Johnny. I didn't mean to upset you. But you quarrel like a man who expects applause after every line.

Brahms doesn't diminish.

BRAHMS

Of course you did. But that's okay, Clara. That's what we do to each other. We provoke and challenge and make each other better. It's no one else's goddamn business. It will make it less special. Less holy. I want the things I treasure in my life to be mine and ours only. What is so terrible about that?

Clara speaks softly.

CLARA

Nothing, Johnny. If that's your real, honest reason. **That's why I had Marie send these letters to you.** I do trust you, you know.

He catches his breath for a moment. He looks at the window. The sky has begun to turn from black to gray. Dawn nears.

He looks back at her.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Of course I made copies of a few.

He glares at her. Then breaks a bit. A ghost of a smile. She meets his gaze. A mutual softening.

BRAHMS

In case there's any doubt in your mind-- and it would enrage me to no end if there was... I ought to have put under all of my works, "Really by Clara Schumann." For with only myself to inspire me, nothing beautiful or profound could possibly ever occur to me. Indeed, if anything I've ever done is passably good or worth remembering, it's because of you. I love you more than myself. More than anybody or anything on this earth.

She sits silently for a moment. Then makes the effort once more to lean forward. She touches his knee.

CLARA

I do know that. But it's still nice to hear. I feel the same.

BRAHMS

(after a moment)

Is it the same, though? I do wonder, from time to time. What is it, back then, that you truly wanted from me? Did you want me for a husband? Could I have replaced Robert, in any capacity? I know what we are to each other now. But what *were* we, Clara?

She **freezes**. Almost literally. She doesn't move or reply. For several seconds.

CLARA

You know I can't answer that, Johnny.

BRAHMS

Why not?

CLARA

Because that's the question you wrote in your last letter to me. And **I didn't live long enough to answer it.**

Now he freezes, if not quite so dramatically. Then he shakes it off. Smiles.

CLARA (CONT'D)

But you know what I would have said.

BRAHMS

Probably, yes. We never agreed on what happened back then. Even when we lived it side by side.

He looks again to the window. It's getting lighter still.

CLARA

I had to make my case. But I trust your judgment, Johnny.

She indicates the letters.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Do what you feel is right.

He nods tersely.

CLARA (CONT'D)

I love you too, Johnny. Always. I hope you let the world do the same.

He grunts. The fire crackles and pops. He snaps his neck to look at it.

Four soft piano chords: **E-Flat. B minor. F. G minor.**

Then, when he turns back to her...

She's gone.

The chair is as empty as it has always been.

He sits on the couch, surrounded by their letters which he has been poring over all night. **Alone.**

After a moment, he lowers himself down to the floor. Starts to gather them up. He examines each one, and puts them into two piles.

Then he pulls free the letters wedged in the couch cushion. He puts three of them into the larger of the two piles.

He takes one last look at the letter in question. The one he never opened. He places it atop the smaller pile, which he picks up, and tosses into the fire.

He watches it burn. Then he sweeps up the larger pile of letters into his arms and slowly rises to his feet.

He crosses the room, to the phonograph. He sets the letters next to them.

BRAHMS

There. A real ghost now.

The satchel is still there. He walks over to it. Leans down. Picks up an envelope that sits on top of it. The writing is in a different hand. It reads, "*Onkel Johannes.*"

He opens the envelope and reads it once more.

INSERT - LETTER

*"Dearest Onkel Johannes -
Our mother fell gently asleep on Monday. She was unable to reply to your last letter, but she spoke with me, and she instructed me to send these letters back to you and to tell you to do with them what you feel is best. I am certain I will see you at her funeral, but I wouldd like to implore you now so that I don't debase myself in person, to not become a stranger. Please keep visiting. We keep a place for you at every holiday dinner. I have enclosed her last letter, which she began to write, but couldn't finish.
Love, Marie."*

BACK TO SCENE

Brahms dabs at his eyes. Then looks at the second piece of paper contained within the envelope.

It's only a couple lines long, and stops mid-sentence. It's written in Clara's hand, but it's shaky and almost illegible:

INSERT - SECOND LETTER

*Johnny -
I performed what I'm certain will be my last concert last week. It was a disaster. The reason should be obvious in the quality of my penmanship. I have begun to lose control of my body. I suppose this is what honesty looks like. As far as*

BACK TO SCENE

Johnny stands in silence a moment in the dawn light. Then he dabs at his eyes. He inhales deeply.

Then...

A loud plunk.

He spins around. Looks to the window. He walks over to it. Looks down at the street below.

Mahler. In a suit, overcoat, and top hat. Mahler raises a hand in greeting.

Brahms gazes down at him. Nods.

EXT. DANUBE RIVERSIDE - MORNING

Sunlight shimmers on the wide river.

Brahms and Mahler walk along the embankment. Mahler tries his best to match Brahms' slower pace, but he periodically moves a few steps ahead, then waits for Brahms to catch up.

It's windy. They're both bundled up. The wind creates waves and choppy water in the usually slow-moving river.

BRAHMS

... It's all sentimentality and spectacle. A brackish swamp underneath. And they call it progress.

Mahler gives a small, sympathetic laugh.

MAHLER

You woke in a cheerful mood, I see.

BRAHMS

Who says I had to wake up at all?

Mahler's smile fades. He grows more serious.

MAHLER

I was sorry to hear about Frau Schumann. Truly. She was a treasure.

Brahms grunts and keeps walking.

MAHLER (CONT'D)

I've been studying some of her early compositions. There is much beauty there, and even more promise. One wonders why she didn't keep composing.

BRAHMS

Life has a way of pruning people. Women especially, I suppose. She gave what she could.

He stops walking for a moment, ostensibly to catch his breath. He gazes out at the river.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

And now I have no one else to lose.

Mahler bows his head.

MAHLER

You still have us, Herr Professor.

Mahler tentatively reaches out and pats Brahms' shoulder. Brahms tenses. Wiggles away as politely as possible.

MAHLER (CONT'D)

I know you were close. But her loss is felt everywhere. The entire musical world is dimmer.

BRAHMS

No, that's the problem. Most people won't notice. It's all far brighter and more dazzling than it should be. Artificial and garish.

MAHLER

You speak as though everything worth hearing has already been written.

Brahms smirks.

BRAHMS

It has. Unless you've got a few more symphonies like I heard last night swimming around in that head of yours. You're young. And quite talented. If a bit... never mind. It was a nice surprise. But it's not enough. No one cares anymore. We're a dying breed. I don't envy the indifference you'll face.

Suddenly, Mahler seizes Brahms' shoulder with an unexpected force great enough to startle the older composer. Mahler points excitedly at the river.

MAHLER

Look, Herr Professor. Look at that!

BRAHMS

Have you gone mad, Mahler?

MAHLER

Don't you see it? The final one. There goes the very last wave! How could any more follow?

Brahms chuckles to acknowledge the point.

MAHLER (CONT'D)

What, none of that famous sardonic wit? You must hurry. We must remember that one. It must be memorialized. The last of its kind. Oh. Wait... There's another. And another. My God, there are so many. How can this be? How can we remember all of them?

BRAHMS

You've merely proved my point, Mahler. Waves leave no trace. They're ephemeral illusions. The tiniest bit of a chaotic mass. A shapeless thing given form and purpose for a single moment.

MAHLER

Exactly, Maestro. Did you believe this to be an argument? We are in agreement. Each is a small part of the same enormous, eternal song. Let's neither inflate our own importance, nor diminish the music. Listen to the sound it makes as it laps against the shore. Enjoy it. Then move on.

He claps his hand once again on Brahms's shoulder.

MAHLER (CONT'D)

I have a train to catch. Let's go home, Herr Professor.

Brahms pats Mahler's hand. His smile becomes wider and more genuine.

They turn and start to walk back in the direction of Brahms' apartment.

BRAHMS

Are you quite sure you wouldn't rather stay here and stretch this metaphor a bit more? I could come up with something even more contrived. Something about the waves eventually carving a seashore.

MAHLER

If it's any consolation, I'll never
forget what your music taught me
and what it made me feel.

Brahms nods, almost solemnly. Mahler's compliment actually
seems to affect him. Then...

BRAHMS

You're a pedant, and a terribly
gifted nuisance, Mahler. It's a
shame I didn't meet you earlier. We
would have had endless fun
torturing each other and everyone
around us.

They walk together along the quay.

EXT. BRAHMS' BUILDING - DAY

Mahler stands at Brahms' stoop. Brahms grunts and tugs open
the heavy door. He turns enough to give Mahler a brief nod
before disappearing inside. Mahler raises his hand.

Mahler turns. He waits for a carriage to rattle past. Then he
crosses the street. He glances at his pocket watch. Shrugs.
He sits down on a bench and waits for whatever appointment or
ride he has arranged.

He sees movement in Brahms' second floor window.

Upstairs, Brahms grips the edge of his kitchen counter. Leans
forward. Wipes at his brow and tries to catch his breath.

Mahler watches with a somewhat pained expression.

Brahms starts to move slowly. Hobbles by the other window. He
looks like he's talking to himself. He picks up some letters.

MAHLER

The last wave. There it goes.

INT. BRAHMS' APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Brahms stands in his sitting room, near the window, so he can
better read the letter in his hands. The one from Marie.

He focuses on the lines, *"to not become a stranger. Please
keep visiting. We keep a place for you at every holiday
dinner."*

Then his eyes drift over to the empty chair where his memory of Clara sat all night.

EXT. SCHUMANN HOME - DAY

Snowflakes drift down lazily.

A gloved hand pulls the same iron bell pull Johnny first rang more than forty years ago.

From inside: the muffled clang of the bell, immediately followed by an explosion of sound. Children shout, something clatters to the floor, an older voice scolds, younger voices laugh.

Footsteps thunder toward the door. It swings open.

Marie Schumann stands there, an apron over her dress. Two small children squeeze in around her legs, trying to see. The YOUNGER CHILD gasps.

YOUNGER CHILD

Weihnachtsmann! Father Christmas is here!

The OLDER child peers up, squints, then breaks into a grin.

OLDER CHILD

No, it's *Onkel* Johannes!

Brahms stands on the doorstep, bundled in a long, fur-lined coat. His thick white beard hangs over his scarf. A fur hat sits on his head, with a small sprig of holly tucked into the band. A heavy sack of presents is slung over one shoulder. He does, in fact, look like Father Christmas.

The now familiar four-chord progression begins to softly play. E-flat. B minor. F. G minor.

He addresses the children.

BRAHMS

I was told there were many children here deserving of gifts. But I only see two naughty gremlins.

The children squeal and laugh.

Marie steps forward and throws her arms around him, nearly knocking the sack from his shoulder.

MARIE

I'm so glad you came, *Onkel*
Johannes.

BRAHMS

You promised you'd keep a chair for
me. And, as it happens, my knees
are preparing to buckle.

She pulls back. Her eyes glisten. She wipes at them.

MARIE

Come in, come in.

INT. SCHUMANN FOYER/SITTING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The children tug at his coat, his sleeves, and the hem of his
sack. They're soon joined by two more toddlers. They CHATTER
with each other. Coats hang from every hook. Boots crowd the
floor. Voices spill in from every room. Laughter. A baby
cries out.

Marie tries to take his coat, but he waves her off.

Marie's HUSBAND walks in from the parlor. He smiles and
shakes Brahms' hand.

MARIE'S HUSBAND

Good to see you again, sir.

A TEENAGE GIRL darts past, nearly colliding with him. Then
she doubles back.

TEENAGE GIRL

Onkel!

She throws her arms around him, then disappears again.

ADULT ELISE Schumann appears in the doorway, her female
partner, the singer EUGENIE FILLUNGER, by her side.

ADULT ELISE

Herr Doktor Professor Maestro
Brahms! You're late. The children
have been sniffing around your
presents like hungry dogs.

Brahms looks down at the children with a shocked, mock-angry
expression. They giggle and scatter.

Marie leads him into the living room and the Christmas tree
in the far corner.

MARIE

Come, Father Christmas. Your audience awaits.

The four chords continue, with a spare melody starting to grow between them.

A heavy hand claps his back. ADULT LUDWIG embraces him.

BRAHMS

Hello, Ludwig.

Ludwig helps him remove the heavy sack from his shoulder and set it down on the ground beneath the tree amidst piles of other presents, and the detritus of previously opened ones.

A CHILD peeks inside the bag. Brahms swats him away.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Let's save it till after dinner.
But in the meantime, let's spoil it...

He reaches into his coat pockets and pulls out handfuls of sweets. He distributes them to the nearest children. Small hands paw and grab, shriek with delight and scatter, to hide or consume their treasures.

The melody grows into a variation of the one Clara played decades ago while alone on the empty concert hall stage.

Brahms, breathless and his face as red as the figure he imitates, turns to Marie.

BRAHMS (CONT'D)

Now... about that promised chair.

INT. SCHUMANN SITTING ROOM - DAY

Brahms sits in a sturdy armchair.

The music continues. Same chords. The melody starting to simplify. Coalescing.

There's another empty chair across from him. Its cushioning is worn deeply in a way that suggests it once had a regular occupant.

Johnie watches the children at the tree, finally unleashed upon the contents of his gift sack. Tearing paper, trading sweets, holding up toys to show each other.

It's warm, loving chaos. He lets it wash over him.

More instruments start to join the piano. A **drum**. And is that... a **guitar**?

Then his gaze drifts, almost absently, back to the chair across from him and...

It's no longer empty.

Clara sits in it.

The OLDER Clara, dressed exactly the same as she was when he imagined her sitting in his apartment.

A **low, synthetic tone** from some a keyboard descends and meets the chords. And yes, it's a guitar. It repeats a simple lick.

Clara smiles warmly at him. He raises one eye in mild surprise. Then he winks at her.

Then, a female voice sings softly, barely audible: "With all the lights out, where you goin'? / I keep a window for you, it's always open..."

One of the children who first greeted him at the door rushed toward him, holding a toy train aloft.

YOUNGER CHILD

Thank you, Onkel! I love it!

Brahms smiles and pats his head. The child runs off back toward the tree.

The song gets louder. The lyrics are easier to make out: "I'm like a lighthouse, a reminder of where you're going / I'm in your head now, from every second now, is your love growing?"

The song is, unbelievably, "Want You In My Room," by Carly Rae Jepsen.

Brahms turns back to Clara. But now...

She's young again. The same age as when he met her. Radiant. This at last causes both of his eyebrows to raise.

The pre-chorus kicks in: "Oh, when I'm with you, a girl could get a little bit bolder / I just wanna get a little bit closer / And I'll press you to the pages of my heart..."

She's dressed in her normal style, but something seems different. More casual. Perhaps the top button is unfastened. Or maybe it's the way she sits in a somewhat *inviting* way. No. It *is* all that. But it's also her hair, loose and cascading down over her shoulders.

She cocks her head at the mirror above her shoulder. He looks into it.

In his reflection, **he is young**, too.

"Don't go, no, the night's not over / I just wanna get a little bit closer / And press you to the pages of my heart."

She shrugs. Her smile widens.

Johnny wears a suit, without a tie. The top two buttons are undone. He looks like he's fresh from a long round of drinking and dancing at a modern-day wedding.

Then the chorus unleashes, and perhaps now we start to realize where this is going: "I want you in my room / On the bed, on the floor..."

Johnny's jaw drops. His eyes twinkle.

"I want you in my room / I don't care anymore..."

Clara lip-syncs the next line.

CLARA

"I wanna do bad things to you..."

Johnny laughs.

She crooks her finger. Beckons him to come to her. He stands.

"I want you in my room / Slide on through my window / I want you in my room..."

He crosses the short distance to her. The Christmas chaos starts to fade and blur behind him.

CLARA (CONT'D)

(lip syncing)

"Baby, don't you want me, too?"

He reaches for her. She takes his hand.

FLASHBACK - INT./EXT. DAY/NIGHT

The second verse and pre-chorus of the song continues through these next shots...

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- At the **edge of the woods** near the hotel, Clara raises her arm and waves to Johnny. He spins around and sees her. He smiles in relief. They run toward each other.

- They embrace, in the **field**. Then kiss again. As they pull apart, Johnny points down at the hotel: other guests are milling about the back patio. They reluctantly break apart.
- They walk down **the path** toward the hotel a few feet apart.
- That evening, in the hotel **dining room**, they eat in silence. Under the table, however, Clara runs her bare foot up along Johnny's leg. He flushes. Smiles. She does, too. He tries his absolute best to stoically focus on his meal.

FLASHBACK - INT. WALDHAUS ZWIESELN HALLWAY/ROOM - NIGHT

The darkness of the hotel hallway. A door CLOSES.

The song starts its second chorus: "I want you in my room..."

And then, inside one of their rooms...

Clara and Johnny kiss even more passionately. Hungry desperation.

Johnny pushes Clara up against the wall. He starts to unfasten the top buttons of her dress.

"... On the bed, on the floor / I want you in my room / I don't care anymore..."

She twists around and switches position. Gets him up against the wall. Kisses him on the mouth. Then his neck.

"I want you in my room / I wanna do bad things to you..."

She reaches down. The sound of a belt buckle coming undone.

They collapse onto the bed together. She climbs on top of him. Helps him with her dress.

"I want you in my room / Baby, don't you want me to?"

FADE TO BLACK.

*The song continues into its joyous, instrumental outro. **E-flat. B minor. F. G minor...***

SUPER:

"Clara never married again.
Brahms remained single his entire life.

"They visited each other many dozens of times and exchanged thousands of letters for over 40 years, most of which were destroyed-- at Brahms' insistence.

"What is known about Brahms' character, and their relationship, comes mostly from Clara's diaries and the few letters she refused to burn. In that way, this is very much her story.

"Brahms died less than a year after Clara."

By the end, only the piano remains, until it decides the song is over.

FADE OUT.

*NOTE: I chose this particular song to power the coda because it had the right lyrical content, chord progression, and sense of unbridled, lustful exhilaration. This is the one I included as a "blueprint," but I'm sure other songs could work similarly. The main point is that this modern pop song is **not an anachronism, but a translation**. Classical/romantic music can often feel remote, stifled, or stuffy to present-day audiences. At the height of its popularity, however, it was anything but. This type of song choice connects the same emotions imbued in two different kinds of music across the centuries. And Clara was in some ways the 19th-century equivalent of a pop star. So she gets the last word.*