

MISERY LOVES ACCOMPANIMENT

by DAVID GUNN*

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- singer
- pianist
- chorus of six
- handsome grand piano with 12-24 prepared notes (middle register)
- prerecorded tape and handy playback device

The pianist begins a sparse noodling on the prepared notes. The singer soon joins in singing plaintively in Sprechstimme and approximate notes:

“O misery, o tragic suffering! Such pain and anguish have I endured. And to what end? Thou shooting, gnawing, tweaking and stabbing pain – verily do you discomfit me! Yikes! What torment next? What distress is soon for me in store? What smarting, aching, racking and consuming cruciation must any moment now afflict me? Alas, I am doomed. Yea, for sure amst I doo ...”

At “*What distress is soon ...*” the singer begins vocalizing into the piano soundboard while the sustain pedal is depressed. At the moment of the second “*doomed,*” the piano lid suddenly crashes down on her, pinning her head inside the piano. She screams (wouldn’t you?), but her protestations are ignored by the pianist. In fact, he (or she) begins pounding madly on the unprepared notes, as if trying to deafen her (or him).

The chorus now emerges from opposite stage wings, three from each side, singing approximate notes and Sprechstimme: “*Torment! Misery! Migraine! Ouch!*”

They spin in slow circles towards the piano, then circle the pianist and trapped singer. Their song becomes a ululation just as the tape – a processed recording of people and animals moaning and shrieking – begins.

Meanwhile, the singer struggles valiantly to free herself, but she is unsuccessful in this and, apparently, any future endeavor. Gradually, she succumbs, though her screaming remains forthright. After a final prophetic circling of the piano, the chorus spins offstage, confident of a job well done. The tape recording changes to gentle whispering and quiet whooshing, which reflects the singer’s feeble quiescence. The pianist follows suit, and returns to a sparse melody on the prepared keys.

As the curtain falls (or the lights dim), the pianist stops playing and is seen skulking up to the singer with a hatchet partially concealed in his (yes yes, or *her*) hand. When the curtain closes completely, there is one final scream.

As the curtain opens for bows, the singer is being carried offstage on a stretcher by white-smocked medical types. The pianist ignores the activity and steps to center stage, where he or she is joined by the chorus members. The curtain then falls quickly, signifying an end to both the performance and to my performance art career.

* the admittedly psychasthenic