



The Artistic Life (1853–1855)

THEIR STAY abroad lasted several years, four or five. Albert came to Düsseldorf in 1853. He got a spot in one of the studios at the Academy.

The ground floor had several large rooms full of students from many countries. They worked standing in long rows by their easels; the teachers would walk around and make comments on their work. The Swedish artist colony was big and growing.

Isaac left Albert in Düsseldorf and traveled with Lina and Helena to Paris. He wanted to attend the music season there and at the same time get some students for himself. They rented an apartment in rue Duphot, near the Madeleine Church just north of the Tuileries Garden.

“You want to perform?” Isaac asked Helena. “There is no doubt you have talent but a performer? Think about it. You’ve known many performers. They’re all glitter and splendor on the surface. But, underneath there’s melancholy, self-doubt, and lack of conviction.”

“Not Grandfather Hjortsberg,” Helena interjected and looked up.

“Hjortsberg fawned on his audience,” Isaac said curtly. “He was as vain as a rooster. In the weaker sex, vanity undermines the natural sense for what is genuine and sincere.”

“Aunt Jenny . . .” Helena objected. She bit her lip.

She didn’t want to be immodest and compare herself to Jenny Lind, who was famous and feted. But there were other women in

the family who had appeared onstage. Grandfather Hjortsberg's mother had sung in the chorus under Gustav III, and Hjortsberg's sisters, Anna and Hedvig, were both dancers at the Opera, talented and appreciated, real artists and female. And performers.

"Only out of poverty," Isaac answered.

Anyway, there were many performers in the family. What would be wrong if she joined them? In the Hjortsberg family many were actors, and mama Lina had two brothers and a sister-in-law who performed at the Royal Theater and Helena mentioned them, too.

"Calle is a drunkard," Isaac answered, "and Theo is so incompetent that they mostly have him look after the costumes. And Calle's wife?" Isaac snorted. "Fanny was brilliant for a while, and then her youth slipped away. She got as fat as a cow and began drinking on the sly. Unfortunately, your mother's family consists mainly of boozers. I have always tried to rise above that kind of misery. We've had enough of such jugglers in the family."

"Jugglers?" Helena felt her anger rising.

"My dear little Helena," Isaac looked distressed. "Do you want to paint your cheeks red and make fun of the upbringing we have given you? Artistic life distorts people. It lacks inner substance. You end up trying to please people, then comes drink and immorality. Believe your old papa, who has seen a lot of that misery."

The French maid served tea. Lina came in with her needlework and sat down. Helena repeated that she wanted to perform as a singer. "For that you don't need to work professionally," Isaac answered and went on to say that he wanted to develop Helena's singing into a genuine art. Singing for charity she could very well do, but not become a professional singer. Surely, she planned to marry one day? What sort of a mother would her children get if she was to depend on the stage for her living?

From rue Duphot cold air snuck in through the chinks in the window frames. Isaac stroked Helena's cheek. The candles in the

brass candlesticks were burning down, and however many times they discussed the matter, they remained stuck at the same point.

“Rely on your old papa,” Isaac said. “He knows best.”

Green light was streaming through the leaves; a hut had been set on a little boat. Helena dreamt that a little boy at the rudder was touching the leaves as grottos and crevices and pathways disappeared into the darkness.

“You don’t love me,” the boy said.

“Oh, but I do.”

The boat was gliding along a river. The riverbanks were full of big flowers, chicory, lupines, gigantic bluebells. The boy resembled Jacopo, and then he looked more like leaves and billowing grass. On the riverbanks, the chicory was in bloom. The river grew wider. But then they drifted into twigs and sharp-edged thistle leaves. She awoke with a start.

They were back in Düsseldorf again, and the rain wouldn’t end. Helena got up from the sofa and stood in front of the mirror and looked at the contours of her face. Her glance landed on the ugly sore she had on her lip. She had turned down an invitation to sing at the annual musical *soirée* at the Singverein. She had done so out of anger and spite against her father. A few days later she changed her mind and decided, yes, she would sing there.

All she really wanted was to go home to Jacopo.

In Düsseldorf, Albert shared a room with a young painting student he knew from Stockholm, Fagerlin. Helena met several of their friends: Larsson, Jernberg, and Ericsson. They had paint under their nails and smelled of turpentine. They were passionately interested in the simple life and painted peasants—peasant girls, cows, shepherd’s dogs, and peasant dances.

Helena performed at the Singverein, and Abbe was there at her request. He didn’t know what music was. That was painful

for her. Everything was painful. Afterward, Isaac, Lina, and Helena went back to Paris and the apartment in rue Duphot. Isaac put advertisements in the newspapers and got students and gave them singing lessons in their homes.

Music was Helena's consolation. While Isaac was away teaching, she sat at the piano and played for herself—melancholy Schubert, Mozart, and Chopin. She wrote no letters. She had lost everyone at home. All she had was the music. In Düsseldorf, everyone said she was exquisite. Aunt Clara Schumann said often, "*Die Kleine ist entzückend.*"* Helena would have liked to confide in her, in Aunt Clara, who was herself a pianist. But what could she tell her? That inside she wanted only to weep? Only Lina saw her sorrow. Lina became her best friend, her only one. Helena confided in her mother that there was a man back home whom she loved. Lina grew worried.

"Little child," she said. "You are so young. Be patient."

Helena didn't dare mention Jacopo's name. He appeared in her dreams. He was what she wanted and couldn't have. She was locked inside a grotto. There she met her self-contempt. The delicate femininity that she was supposed to preserve according to Isaac was just incompetence. It disgusted her that she had to pretend that she was alive.

She fell into numbness and languor.

Isaac wrote to the composer Adolf Lindblad, who was his best friend in Stockholm.

All of my present efforts are directed at guiding, as best I can, my Helena's knowledge of the world and how it works. Despite some attempts at performing, with its treacherous temptations, she has finally decided against becoming a performer. That corresponds fully with my view. Many reproach us for that choice, she is a superb singer, but I feel confident I am right and am happy about it.

* The little girl is charming. (Germ.)

Isaac was dissatisfied with the musical life on the continent. Not with Frau Clara; she was an exquisite pianist and a splendid hostess. But her husband, Robert Schumann, was, in Isaac's view, much to blame for the degeneration in the music in Düsseldorf.

"*Tiefe* they call it." Isaac made a wry face. Depth! Everything was full of bottomless abysses of depth. He found the German composers mired in gloom. Their hearts no longer beat. They plodded about in their philosophical mist with their abysses following them like lapdogs on a leash. Did their work deserve to be called music? *God help us*, he wondered, *what has happened to melody and harmony?* Schumann was, no doubt, a genius, but he was caught in his own madness.

And Schumann's followers were consumptive ghosts. Musical life in Paris didn't please him either, but for different reasons. The singing style there was very shrill and slick, the voices affected. Germany was all unhealthy depths, and France was superficial and vacuous. *In my view*, he wrote to Lindblad, *the Nordic approach will be music's salvation, simple and unspoiled. The song. The ringing sound. The authenticity well rooted in music's origin.*

Albert wanted to go to Flanders to paint the sea, Isaac mentioned in his letter to Lindblad, and he needed to find someone to accompany his son. Otherwise, he'd have to go himself. But he'd rather not have to do that. Albert had certainly shown an amazing ability to manage on his own. But, to let him go off to Flanders alone to the Atlantic coast, a deaf-mute?

"Abbe will manage fine," Helena said, picking at the sore on her lip.

"Yes, that's what he thinks," Isaac answered.

Isaac called her H el ene now. He was planning for her to sing in the Salle Pleyel concert hall in Paris at a charity concert. At the same time he wanted to show off what he thought was the best

in music, the pure soul of the song. She should, he thought, sing pieces by his friend Lindblad. Her singing would prove what an exquisite music teacher he himself was. He needed more pupils in Paris.

Helena was black inside. There was no one as ambitious as her father, she thought. He had once hoped to have European opera audiences at his feet but had been blocked by fate. Now it was as if he wanted to get revenge. And through her. He was using her like an instrument.

He spoke of clarity and purity, but she found lots of impurity inside her.

Evil thoughts and immodesty. She then blamed herself for being a spoiled child. Who had promised her anything? She was egotistical and conceited, she told herself. She felt waves of shame for her spiteful and hurtful thoughts about Isaac. What would she be without her father?

She was a nobody, she thought. And her wishes were impure. Owing to her impurity she would have to make an effort to meet her father's expectations, she thought. In the Paris apartment with its drafts running along the floor, Isaac rehearsed her and had her repeat until he was satisfied. The concert in Salle Pleyel was a charity benefit, and everyone in the establishment was expected to attend, he stressed, including the banker Baron Rothschild, who was the most distinguished gentleman in Paris.

"The leading connoisseurs will be there. These are no spring chickens, but the most demanding *critici*. This is an important event for you, Hélène."

But more so for Isaac, she thought. Before her performance, she was unable to eat. She hardly drank anything. She bit her nails. She practiced until she was exhausted and her throat hurt. She understood how much was at stake for Isaac in the concert; he had worked hard to get her performance set up. She was the

most insignificant of all the renowned musicians who would be performing; she had to succeed. Isaac's warm hand held hers as the carriage took them to the hall.

She wanted to tell him about Jacopo. Once, just once, she had hinted that there was someone in Stockholm whom she cared for. Isaac had looked at her, and his mouth broke into a wry smile. The moisture in the air drifted around the street lamps. Elegant horses and carriages drew up around their cab. Everything was wrapped in mist as if in a dance of fairies.

Faces emerged and smiled at her.

She saw her father sit down at the grand piano. The hall was full of shiny clothes and flickering candles. The audience consisted of a hundred white spots. She forgot the pain in her throat, and she sang. The acoustics were generous and gave resonance to her singing. Her voice rose as if from some unknown person.

Afterward, she noticed she had made an impression on the audience. She had sung well and made no mistakes. But then she felt ill. After the concert, she was led by the hand by a master of ceremonies. An elegant gentleman opened a little chest lined with velvet. Carefully, he passed a chain over her head.

Then she realized who the gentleman was: Baron Rothschild, the banker. She glanced down toward her décolletage: gold and sapphires. She was surrounded by excited faces; she felt as if she were drowning and sought Isaac's eyes. She sank to the floor in a deep curtsy and murmured that she wasn't worthy to receive an object of such great value. The baron replied that the jewels were hers in recognition of her singing and of her empathy for the poor. The poor? She hadn't even thought about them.

Isaac bragged about her to Lina afterward. The difference between her singing and what one usually heard in Paris was like that between day and night. Her tone, thanks to his instruction,

was graceful and refined. Her singing was as pure as spring water. The concert was a breakthrough for her, and the choice of Nordic compositions a stroke of genius. H el ene’s performance bestowed honor on Isaac’s “school of singing,” as he called it.

He devoted great attention to the jewelry that H el ene had been given, drop-shaped gems set in gold in which small diamonds sparkled. He turned it over and over. He even pulled out a magnifying glass to examine the gold work.

“Baron Rothschild,” he muttered. The words sounded replete with meaning.

Helena was as before: empty.

Isaac took H el ene to the Conservatory to hear Beethoven’s Piano Concerto in C minor—for once, something worth listening to. They had tickets for seats down in front of the orchestra. But soon after they had taken their seats, H el ene was noticed.

Countess Potocka and Princess Czartoryska, who had heard her sing at Salle Pleyel, came in person to fetch her. She was taken by her patrons to the imperial box. *The Emperor himself was not present, but my little H el ene got to sit amidst the most prominent people in Paris. Imagine what an honor,* Isaac wrote to Lindblad.

Carriages began to arrive at the rue Duphot apartment with notes for H el ene. One came from Baroness James Rothschild, Madame Betty, who requested that H el ene grant her the pleasure of a visit. Accompanied by Countess Potocka, she granted the baroness that pleasure. *She came home afterward, overwhelmed by how amiably and warmly the Baroness had received her,* Isaac wrote to Lindblad. Shortly afterward, she was invited to sing in Princess Trubiewska’s home, and then in Princess Chimay-Beauvau’s drawing room, and then at Countess Cerrini’s home on her estate outside Paris. H el ene also performed in Countess Bilinska’s drawing room. People admired her voice, her manner, and her technique. They were touched by her modesty as well.

Isaac wrote to Lindblad,

I tag along with her and handle the piano and even sing every now and then. It is quite remarkable that H el ene was invited to sing in the home of Monsieur de Morny. He is thought to be the half-brother of Emperor Louis Napol eon, who used to be the President of the Republic but then proclaimed himself Emperor Napoleon III. Monsieur de Morny lives in the grandest style in Paris, second only to the Emperor.

In another letter, Isaac reported,

It is so remarkable that, despite all this finery, one can succumb to bouts of melancholy, but I am pleased with my situation here, since the honor that H el ene attracts to my skills confers the highest regard on my school. More and more students have been requesting my services.

Helena saw beggars on the street, frozen old people, war invalids, and women in rags nursing infants. France was an empire, and all the revolts since 1848 had been quashed. She doubted it was for the poor that she sang. She was in fact Isaac's living advertisement and drew students for him from the most prominent and wealthy families, which was necessary, as every step in Paris cost money.

The opera was expensive; they seldom went. There weren't many visits to the theater either. She was nobody but had been given a special role to play; she was part of what enabled them to survive. That role wasn't her. But who was she? She played many roles at the same time. One role was to observe herself from the outside, with cold and critical eyes.

Another role was to be scared stiff. A third role tried in vain to combine the first two. And there was a fourth that she tried mightily to banish. It was a foul and slimy shape that crawled up out of mire and sludge with drooping hair. Even though that being

had drowned, it screamed. She tried, out of shame, to escape it. She was either nobody or a whole gallery of personas. None of them was pure and sincere, and none of them was her.

Only the few times when she and Lina snuck into a church and listened to organ music did she feel happy. Once they managed to listen to César Franck play. But there weren't many times like that.

The sore on her mouth blossomed out like a flower. She couldn't bear drafts. She lay in bed with migraines. She lost interest in food.

"You are delicate," Isaac said, sounding sympathetic.

Fragile. Sensitive to drafts. Delicate nerves. Lina said nothing. She didn't attend performances either. Isaac and Lina had agreed on that. She wasn't interested in society life. And then there were the clothes. Paris salons were glitzy and ostentatious; keeping two women in elegant dresses was out of the question. So, Lina stayed home, sewed new dresses and altered old ones for her daughter. Helena's wardrobe was nevertheless a heavy burden for the household.

One of Lina's many brothers, Alfred Hjortsberg, lived in Paris and sold cloth and furs. Lina would go to see him, partly just to get out but mostly to have some ideas for fabrics and lace. *Only now and then*, Isaac wrote to Lindblad, *Lina accompanies us to teas at the homes of people she can bear to be with and who can accept her views*. What views did Lina have? That Isaac didn't say.

Isaac and H el ene became a sought-after musical couple at soir ees and banquets in the Paris of the rich, where people needed entertainment. They performed for famous authors and artists and in the houses of noblemen and the rich bourgeoisie. The mature man and the young girl. Father and daughter, but almost like a couple in love.

The daughter was sweet, attractive, and very shy. Her father kept a close watch over her. When the champagne flowed too

freely and the gentlemen around her got immodest, the father and daughter would leave. "Papa is jealous," Countess Potocka would whisper to her neighbor. "Will he ever find someone suitable for her?"

After the performances, Helena would lie in bed, unable to sleep, images flickering behind her closed eyelids. She was praised and feted. But she was nobody. Everyone's eyes were turned on her. Who was she? She supposed that Isaac was hoping that some wealthy gentleman would come courting. She was the bird that she and Lina had seen one day in an elegant jewelry shop. Silver on its wings, beak of gold, and diamonds for eyes.

If you turned the key, the bird would raise its wings and dance. The gemstones flashed. The bird was wondrously beautiful, but what could it be used for? For nothing at all. It served only as a decoration. A decoy. And so expensive, they blanched when they heard the price. Wasn't she a decoy? A daughter represents a kind of capital, just like a factory or an estate; she could see that. She had been introduced to various young gentlemen. After each encounter, Isaac waited, full of expectations. But none of the gentlemen interested her.

In bed, alone, she would reach her arm across her face and smell the perfume. Her hand would sneak in under her camisole. She didn't stop it. She rubbed and scratched. If she got a husband half as rich as Rothschild the banker, she would be able to provide her parents with a very comfortable life and take care of Abbe, too. She would have a splendid palace, with a park with walnut trees. With deer, fountains, and hedges. Horses and silver carriages. Hunting dogs, peacocks, a lake with swans.

She saw herself the mistress of the palace, stepping out onto the stairs. She drew in deep breaths full of the skies and the rosy clouds. She was a countess or a baroness. Then her palace burst like a soap bubble.

Isaac and Helena traveled across the English Channel to visit Aunt Jenny Lind, who had been performing for several seasons at Her Majesty's Theatre and decided to stay in London. She had a stone house and lived there with her accompanist, Mr. Goldschmidt, whom she had married. Aunt Jenny started complaining as soon as they arrived.

People were always asking her to sing, she told them. They never left her in peace. There were letters from admirers and letters begging for money. She had been on tour in America; a circus director named Barnum had promised her a fee the likes of which singers in Europe had never heard. "It wasn't just for my own sake," Jenny said. "The charitable work that is expected of me has to be paid for."

She had sung in many of the states in America, as well as in Cuba, and had earned a lot of money. She hoped to become wealthy enough not to have to sing anymore, except when she wanted to. In any case she intended not to sing any more opera. They produced only illusions. Isaac chuckled good-naturedly at his former pupil. Mr. Goldschmidt was quiet and served sherry. Jenny complained, "Opera provides only shallow entertainment, intoxication of the senses." She could now tolerate only music with spiritual content. "Wouldn't Mr. Berg agree? You yourself often spoke of the spirit."

Johann Sebastian Bach was the greatest composer ever, Jenny believed. She sang his works every day for peace of mind. She spoke about the freedom when one sang praises to God. "Joy and sorrow can't be separated; the old cantor in Leipzig knew that. My God, the old man wrote out his scores and trained the choir and paid the milkman. In his mind arose a music that knew death, the pain of birth, and our longing for freedom."

Aunt Jenny talked a lot about liberty. That put color in her cheeks, and her eyes began to gleam. "Dear Helena," she said, and

her eyes grew warm. "You have to push hard and open the gate to reach the light and liberty." Mr. Goldschmidt sat down at the piano, and Jenny sang Bach.

Helena listened and saw a large body of water; she and her brother were small children. Abbe stopped and looked out across the silvery pathway of light. "Come," he said, "don't be afraid." She followed him. She could see them before her, how they walked hand in hand along the pathway of light that Aunt Jenny made for her with her singing.

Now, she was twenty years old and longed for Abbe. To be a child again and run across the grass in a yellow cotton dress and the trips by horse and carriage with her grandmother and grandfather. And Abbe, who was happy. How they ran! How the water sparkled and the wind sighed in the trees! Bach. His music was marvelous. *Dearest Abbe*, she thought, *I long to be with you and wish I could confide in you, if only you could hear.*

Isaac wanted Helena to sing in front of Jenny; she refused.

At supper Jenny said that she would, of course, always respect her first singing teacher, but Mr. Berg hadn't properly understood her voice. She had been made aware of that when she started working with her second teacher, Monsieur García, in Paris, who had found her voice pinched as if it had been mishandled by her Stockholm teacher.

Isaac kept silent. The skin on his cheeks grew tight. "Mr. Berg drilled me in chromatic scales for ten or fifteen years," Jenny said, "and that damaged my throat and spirits. One has to allow room for uncertainty; that's what Monsieur García taught me. But Mr. Berg was so frightfully demanding that no uncertainty was allowed to exist. Don't be annoyed at my saying this straight out." Jenny patted Isaac's hand. He didn't answer.

After that, the visit became quite painful. They looked at London through a carriage window: poor people and widespread

misery. Helena was glad when they left for Paris. On the ferry across the Channel, she stood by the railing with the wind in her face, listening to the seagulls. Something was beginning to go very wrong.

Home at rue Duphot, Isaac was bitter. "Jenny is ungrateful. She doesn't realize that I built the entire foundation for her singing." Isaac twisted his napkin ring and looked at Helena. "You are less ungrateful. And your abilities are fully the equal of Jenny's." That was unreserved praise on his part, and Helena felt embarrassed. Her debt to Isaac was complex.

She was no one, really no one. Everything was so mixed up that she felt like screaming.