

Theme & Variations

Frederic was in a stuffy little practice room, plunking out notes on the upright piano to pass the time. He looked up at the clock: four minutes after two.

Three... Two... One...

The door opened and a black-coated earth pony with a white treble clef on his flanks stumbled in.

Five after, every time.

"Sorry I'm late!" he gasped. "I, um, I forgot what room it was... again... sorry."

"It's okay, Ritardando," Frederic said. *At least, now that I allow room for those extra five minutes in my schedule.* "Now, then," he said. "What did you want to work on first?"

"The aria," Ritardando said, nodding. Frederic flipped through the music folder he had in front of him to the piece in question. He placed his hooves on the keyboard and began to play the opening of the piece. Ritardando opened his mouth and sang, in a deep *basso cantante*:

"Deh vieni a la finestra..."

"*Alla finestra*," Frederic corrected.

"Huh?"

"*Alla*, not *a la*," he explained. "Remember in Istallion there's an important distinction with double consonants."

"Oh, sorry..." Ritardando said, shuffling his hooves a little. "Again?" he asked, still embarrassed about the mistake.

Frederic began the introduction to the aria again. And again, Ritardando sang:

*"Deh vieni alla finestra, o mio tesoro,
deh vieni a consolar il pianto mio.
Se neghi a me di dar qualche ristoro,*

davanti agli occhi tuoi morir vogl'io."

Frederic had been prepared for the mistake. He made it every week. Ritardando was a very talented pony. He had a good ear and a gorgeous voice. He was, however, very lazy and very stupid, and he didn't practice as much as he should have.

Frederic made a distinction in his mind between "talent" and "skill." Pizzicato, he thought, was a skilled musician. He worked diligently to develop his abilities. Ritardando had a great deal of innate musical ability, but he was late to his coaching sessions and he didn't practice. Frederic also suspected from his unfocused eyes that he let his mind wander. He had absolutely no sense of discipline.

Still, he wasn't a bad musician. Just a lazy one. At least, he qualified as a musician.

"Y'know, I was thinking," Ritardando mused as the piece ended, "I could get a mandolin and accompany myself. The thing's written for mandolin, right?"

"I believe so."

"Yeah, that'd be neat. I'll get a mandolin!" Ritardando said with an excited resolve.

Sometimes, Frederic played accompanist for ponies who were singers, but not musicians. Frederic and his friends often had laughs at the expense of singers. There were countless jokes to be made about their lack of practicing, their egos, or their lack of musical education.

A foal tells his parents that he wants to make music, Frederic thought, but his parents tell him he doesn't know anything about music. He can't read music and he doesn't know anything about theory. "That's okay!" the foal says. "I'll be a singer!"

Such was the case of a young mare named Ovation, who arrived at precisely three in the afternoon. Frederic remembered their first meeting.

"What do you mean, you can't read music?" he asked.

"Well, you just play it out and I sing along," she said with a shrug.

"Hello!" she called, opening the door. That was one thing Frederic admired: punctuality.

She wasn't a musician. She was an actress who dealt in musical theatre. She had a big, if

somewhat untrained, voice, and Frederic wondered if she could be an opera singer if she pursued a more classical style as opposed to belting.

Admittedly, he hadn't ever actually gone to any of her shows, though he had accompanied her to several auditions. Sometimes she had to deliver a monologue, and from what he could tell she was a very good actress. The gold trophy on her flank had to mean something, after all.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm doing fine, thank you." Frederic nodded curtly. "And you?"

"I'm doing well. We have that audition on Saturday, remember?"

"Of course," said Frederic, "I marked it on my calendar. Have you picked out what you plan to sing?"

"Yes." Ovation rummaged through her folder, opening it and placing it on the piano stand. "I want to start from there, okay?" she asked, pointing to a section she'd put a line in front of with pencil.

"Okay," said Frederic. He placed his hooves on the keyboard.

Ovation took a deep breath and proceeded to belt:

"Weeeeeeeelllllllll..."

I wonder how long she's going to hold that note, Frederic thought.

*"Someone tell me, when is it my turn?
Don't I get a dream for myself?
Starting now, it's gonna be my turn!
Gangway world, get off of my runway!
Starting now, I bat a thousand!
This time, boys, I'm taking the boys and..."*

*Everything's coming up Rose!
Everything's coming up roses!
Everything's coming up Rose!
This time for me!*

For me!

For me!

FOR ME!"

She struck a dramatic pose at the end of the song.

"Good," said Frederic. "I'll make sure to come see the show."

"Hey, don't get me prepared for that," warned Ovation. "I haven't been cast yet."

Frederic chuckled. "Fair enough."

"You know, I think a lot of ponies can relate to this song," said Ovation. "That's why it makes such a great audition piece."

Frederic looked at her. "How so?"

"Well, the song's all about disappointment. I mean, there are lots of ponies at these auditions," she explained. "And a lot of them have probably been trying to get a good part for a while. And every audition they go to, they're wondering: 'When do I get my chance to shine?' And that's what the song is about."

"Hm."

"I mean, have you ever been disappointed?" Ovation asked. Frederic looked up.

"Well..." he said. "I guess I have." He shook his head. "I don't let it get to me, though. Can't get through life if you can't deal with disappointment."

"How do you deal with it?"

Frederic shrugged. "I move on."

Ovation laughed. "That simple with you? I get mad. With me, I like to vent my frustrations by working as hard as I can to prepare for my next audition. That way I'm able to take all that energy and use it constructively."

"Hm," said Frederic. He flipped through the pages of her folder, back to the start of the song.

"Can't say I get 'energetic' when bad things happen to me. I just try not to let anything get to me."

But anyway, this is eating up time.” He placed his hooves on the keyboard. “Ready?”

Octavia sat at the window of the cafe, mulling over her cup of coffee. The establishment was full of various ponies who were either socializing or writing terrible novels that would never get published.

The bell at the door gave a light little jingle as Frederic hurriedly entered.

"Terribly sorry," he said as he marched to the table. "I'm afraid I got held up a bit."

"At least it's just coffee," said Octavia.

"Still, it's not polite."

"It's not a problem. Really," Octavia reassured him. "I saved you a cup of coffee." She pushed an extra drink towards him.

"Ah, thank you," Frederic said, taking the cup. "So, how's that concerto coming?"

"It's coming along great. I had my first rehearsal with the orchestra yesterday."

"Did you now?" Frederic asked. "That's great."

"Kind of nervous about that, though," she said. "If I make a mistake that means the whole orchestra has to stop. I was wondering..." She laughed. "I was wondering if you could work with me a little? I could lend you the score and you could help me on my own time."

Frederic smiled. "I'd be delighted, Octavia."

"How are things going with you?" she asked.

"Oh, things are going well," he said with a shrug. "That operetta I'm working for will be going into sitzprobe in a week."

"An operetta?"

"Yes, I've been rehearsal pianist for it." Frederic took a sip of coffee. He paused, as though he were almost surprised. "You've memorized my usual order?" he asked.

"You order the same thing every time. It's not hard."

"Fair enough," he conceded.

"What's the operetta about?"

"Oh, it's some silly thing about a bunch of unicorns and a bunch of fairy-ponies. The fairy-ponies are basically unicorns with big butterfly wings."

"I think there was something like that in Cloudsdale," said Octavia. "I think a unicorn had a friend of hers make wings for her."

"Really?" asked Frederic. "Interesting."

The two sat there, enjoying their coffee and looking out the window. Frederic spotted Ritardando outside, strolling through the street with a big dopey grin on his face, singing his heart out.

He isn't very diligent, Frederic thought. But he does seem to love what he does.

"Well, well!" called a voice. "I didn't know you classical-types drank coffee. I thought you lived off of truffles and thirty-year-old cider."

Frederic and Octavia turned around to see Vinyl leaning against their table. A smile crawled across Octavia's face. Frederic's expression, however, was as stony as ever. He didn't want to be interrupted like this— this was his time to be with Octavia, and the last pony he wanted to barge in was her girlfriend.

"Hello, Vinyl. I didn't know you came here," Octavia said, greeting her.

"Hey, I stay up late and I need coffee," Vinyl said, inviting herself to sit down next to Octavia. "So what's up?" Without waiting for an answer, she looked at Frederic and then burst out singing, "*Son, can you play me a memory? I'm not really sure how it goes. But it's sad and it's sweet and I knew it complete, when I wore a younger mare's clothes.*" She took a deep breath. "Wearing clothes, that's a funny idea." She threw a foreleg around Octavia's shoulder. "So, how are ya?"

"I take it you've had your coffee already?" asked Frederic. He looked around and saw that the unicorn's outburst had not gone unnoticed by the other patrons, who were shooting annoyed glances at the window-side table. Vinyl obviously either didn't mind or didn't care.

"Something like that, yeah," Vinyl said in an off-hoof tone. "So, what're you two doing here?"

"Frederic and I meet once a week for coffee," explained Octavia.

"How did that recording session go?" Frederic asked. "You mentioned something about..."

"It wasn't all that much. She just had me play a few lines," Octavia said, shrugging.

"Just so I can sample and remix it," said Vinyl. "You'd be amazed at how much mileage you can get out of a few samples. A little goes a long way, as they say."

"They also say mountains out of molehills," Frederic muttered.

"And Octa here was one great cellist!" Vinyl said as she leaned in and nuzzled her.

"Aw, Vinyl, don't flatter me!"

Frederic didn't want to watch it. It gave him that sickening sinking feeling in his stomach. He hated that feeling, but he tried to be subtle. When he saw Vinyl lean over, he quickly turned to his cup of coffee and took a sip. All the while he hated that he felt some sort of perverse aversion to the prospect of his friend being happy.

What's wrong with me? he thought.

"I don't believe," Octavia said, "that Frederic has heard any of your music, Vinyl."

Frederic snapped back to attention.

"Yeah, I don't figure he would," Vinyl agreed.

"Glad to hear the expectations are low," Frederic said as he took another sip of coffee.

"Why don't you two come by my club tomorrow night?" Vinyl suggested. "I'm gonna be playing the new song."

No, I really don't want to, Frederic thought. The last place he wanted to spend an evening at, besides a rusty torture chamber, was at one of those "clubs" where they served bad drinks and blared awful music at such an unbearable volume that a conversation consisted solely of yelling.

However, Frederic had to be polite.

"I'd be delighted," he said. *Come to think of it*, he thought, *I might prefer the rusty torture chamber.*

"I'm sorry, I'm teaching," sighed Octavia. "But I'm sure Frederic would enjoy it."

"Well, I guess it's okay," Vinyl said with a shrug. "You've already heard it."

"It's quite something." Octavia chuckled.

"'Something-good' or 'something-I-don't-really-like-it-but-let's-pretend-that-it's-just-out-of-my-range-of-interest?'" Vinyl asked, teasing.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Octavia asked, her eyelids narrowing.

"Well, I guess I'll come by tomorrow night and see whether or not it drives me to amputate my own ears," Frederic decided. "I see Octavia still has both of hers, so I should be fine."

"Another rave review." Vinyl smirked.

"Anyway, I have to go now." Frederic stood up. "I have a rehearsal to accompany for."

"The club's called *The Purple Horseshoe*," said Vinyl. "You know where it is?"

"I can read a map. Lovely having coffee with you. I'll see you two later. Oh, and by the way, before I forget." Frederic tossed a few coins on the table. "Thanks for getting me coffee."

Vinyl and Octavia watched as Frederic went straight for the door. Vinyl looked at Octavia with a dubious expression.

"Lovely?" Vinyl asked.

"Alright, let's take it from the start of the nightmare song."

"You mean the start of the song or the recitative?" asked Frederic.

Frederic was at an upright piano in a small gymnasium, while various other ponies were sitting or walking about. He was at the rehearsal for the operetta, and the lead comic baritone, a white earth pony - he would attach a fake horn as part of his costume - stood in the middle.

"Um, yeah, let's start from the recitative," said the director, a smaller unicorn. Frederic began to play, and the earth pony began to sing in an accent even more outrageously fake than Frederic's own.

*"Love, unrequited, robs me of my rest:
Love, hopeless love, my ardent soul encumbers:
Love, nightmare-like, lies heavy on my chest,
And weaves itself into my midnight slumbers!"*

Frederic had to suppress a sigh. *I'm starting to get sick of songs about heartache.*

The song proceeded for another thirteen pages as the baritone half-sang about an absurd nightmare he had. He didn't put a whole lot of work into projecting an operatic voice, as the song and the role called for a heavier focus on diction and comic acting. The singer once joked that he got the part because it called for the worst singer in the company.

"Alright!" announced the director. "Now let's have our run-through and then we can go home. And let's not forget to give a big hoof to Frederic here."

Frederic, who had been moving the score back to the beginning, looked up as there was a thundering of hooves around him. He smiled, grateful for the recognition, but he realized why the director was doing this: this was the last rehearsal they had before they started working with the orchestra. Once that happened, he wouldn't be necessary. His job was practically finished.

Well, he thought, *time to get a new gig*. He stood up and smiled, admitting to himself that it was nice that he was getting his own applause for once.