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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Concert to Death

By PAUL ERNST



"She collapsed over the piano, hands clutching its funereal folds."

A novel ghost-story, about a great musical genius and a weird concert to his memory

THE stage was illuminated brightly, rawly. Every ridge on the ugly steel fire-curtain stood out in the ghostly white radiance.

On the stage were a concert grand piano and a battered piano stool. The top of the piano was down, shutting in the sounding-board. A black drape was thrown over it. A vase of yellow roses was set on the closed, draped lid.

All was in readiness for Lucchesi to

enter from the wings, to bow and smile as he walked to the piano, as he had done so many times in his life. Everything was as the master pianist liked it: his favorite, battered old piano stool; piano set in the right-center of a perfectly bare stage; nothing but the raw steel fire-curtain for a backdrop; harsh, uncompromising light.

Only the piano itself was different. For it is not usual for the lid of a concert

grand to be down during a performance, nor for the case to be draped and to support a vase of flowers or anything else that might muffle pure clarity of tone.

In the orchestra pit sat the orchestra, instruments tuned and ready, musical scores opened on the racks before each member, tiny lights glimmering like glow-worms over the racks. The orchestra conductor stood before them with arms poised like the wings of a bird about to take off, and with his head back to nod for the opening crash of harmony.

Behind him, in the great auditorium with its thousands of seats, a breathless hush prevailed. In the hush the gradual dimming of the indirect lights overhead had been like a silent dusk over an unrippled lake. In the vast silence just one sound was heard, for an instant—a woman's sobbing.

The conductor's arms swooped down. The opening bar of Lucchesi's *Minuet in G* flooded the huge hall with quivering melody. Every instrument was adding to the tide of music—but the piano. Every musician was playing—but the great Lucchesi himself.

The sobbing sounded again, instantly stifled.

The piece, a short one, drew to its conclusion and silence again held the house. The conductor turned from his rack and faced the thousands of seats. He raised his baton as though to still thunderous applause; which was odd, because there was no applause.

"We will now play Lucchesi's *Dance of the Sprites*," the conductor said. And his voice rang in the auditorium with the hollow boom of a voice in an empty cavern. Rightly so! For there was no one in the vast hall.

The thousands of seats were empty. The boxes, galleries and balconies were empty. On the bare stage was Lucchesi's

piano. Yes, but there was no Lucchesi there to play it. There never would be again.

Lucchesi was dead.

"Kind of gets you, doesn't it?" whispered one of the three men in the left wing.

The three were Howard Kent, star reporter for the *Globe*, who was here on sufferance and not for publicity purposes; Milnor Roberts, music critic on the same newspaper; and Isaac Loewenbohn, owner of the auditorium. It was Kent who had spoken.

"Kind of gets you," he repeated, looking across the length of bare stage between the footlights and the fire-curtain.

IN THE other wing a woman stood alone: a woman dressed in mourning, with a white face standing out against the black like a dainty white cameo. The woman's red underlip was caught between her teeth and her body shook with suppressed sobs.

"It's certainly a unique idea," Kent whispered on. He was afraid that if he didn't talk he would get sloppy, which is no way for a hard-boiled reporter to get. "Staging a Lucchesi concert when Lucchesi is food for worms. Eccentric idea."

"A nice idea, I t'ink," said Loewenbohn, scowling at the reporter. "Today, one year from the day Lucchesi has died, his friends and fellow musicians hold an all-Lucchesi concert in memoriam. That is a nice tribute."

Roberts, the music critic, nodded abstractedly. His mind was full of the piece the orchestra was now playing. *Dance of the Sprites* had been written for a piano lead. There were three long interludes in it when only the piano played—and the piano on the stage had no player before its keyboard!

"Wonder how they'll treat the piano

interludes," he whispered to Loewenbohn as the first one drew near. "Will they fill in?"

The auditorium owner shrugged. There was a piano in the pit. Perhaps the orchestra pianist would play Lucchesi's interludes.

But the conductor was more subtle than that.

The three men leaned forward a little as the composition reached the first interlude and died away in a shower of flute notes. Now it was time for the piano to pick up the thread. Now it was time for Lucchesi to crash in. . . .

Only there was no Lucchesi.

There was silence, while the conductor faced the piano on the stage, with his baton at rest by his side. Silence. The tense, oppressive silence that comes when music is interrupted, but when you know the piece is not yet finished.

In that silence conductor and orchestra stared at the piano on the stage; stared and held their instruments in readiness to play again. There was an eerie matter-of-factness about orchestra and conductor. It was as though of course Lucchesi was seated on the stool; of course he was playing his piano. Death? They were wordlessly refusing it its power. Particularly the conductor. . . .

"Look at him!" muttered the reporter, running his forefinger around under his collar. "Look at him!"

The orchestra leader's body was swaying very slightly. His eyes were wide, mystic, as he stared at the piano—and at the empty stool.

"You'd think Lucchesi really was there, playing!"

The other two paid no attention to him. The critic softly hummed the interlude Lucchesi would be playing if he were alive. Loewenbohn's heavy face seemed less florid than usual.

The critic stopped humming. Even as he did so, the conductor raised his baton and the orchestra went on with the composition, softly, for the piano notes were supposed to sound over the other instruments for a few more bars.

Kent moistened his lips and stared at the keyboard. Curious. For just an instant it had seemed to him that the keys were being rhythmically depressed, as though at the touch of unseen fingers. But that, of course, was imagination.

The piano standing on the bare stage in lonely majesty; the funereal drape over the closed case, and the scent of the yellow roses; the somber dignity with which the orchestra played to an empty auditorium—these things tended to make you see what did not exist.

"Marvelous stuff, that music," Kent said, resolutely keeping the shiver out of his voice.

Roberts nodded. "Lucchesi had supreme genius. It was tragic that he had to die."

"Yeah. And only forty-one. A guy that could turn out stuff like this!"

Roberts smiled.

"Yes, this is superb. But it's not as fine as Lucchesi's last composition—one he finished just before he died last year. That piece was greatest of all."

Loewenbohn's heavy eyebrows went up.

"I don't t'ink I ever heard of that piece," he said.

"Few have," replied Roberts. "And no one ever heard it played. It's lost."

"Huh?" said Kent. "But if nobody ever heard it, how do you know it was so great?"

The critic shrugged.

"Lucchesi said it was," he said simply. "He worked on it for nearly a year, in secret, as he always composed. He finished it. He told me and one or two other

close friends about it. He died—and no one has ever been able to find the score.”

Kent shook his head. “That’s tough. And Mrs. Lucchesi is flat broke, too. I did a story on her six months ago. Living with her sister—lost the insurance money—even Lucchesi’s piano in storage. By the way, the piano on the stage is really Lucchesi’s own, isn’t it?”

Roberts looked at the shrouded piano and nodded.

“We got it out of storage for the occasion. Tomorrow”—he looked across at Lucchesi’s widow—“it is to be sold at auction. She has to have money.”

“If only she could find the song!” sympathized Kent.

“It would mean a lot to her,” responded Roberts. “There’s no real wealth in genius. But the song would bring several thousand dollars. And it would bring Lucchesi tremendous posthumous fame.”

He stopped talking. The second piano interlude was near.

THE orchestral notes slowed. The conductor and each musician in the pit gazed at the draped piano.

Instinctively the three men in the left wing stared at it too. And in the right wing Lucchesi’s widow swayed forward a little, with her arms going out and her lips parting.

The orchestra stopped playing. Everything was in readiness. All was waiting on Lucchesi, who would play no more. . . .

But as the thick stillness of the interlude continued, Kent, watching the keyboard of Lucchesi’s piano with eyes that were less cynical than usual, began to have an insane idea that perhaps the great composer *was* here at the concert held in his memory.

Surely there was a tall, shadowy figure seated on the old stool. Surely long, steely fingers were flying over the keyboard.

Surely a shower of notes was sounding from the instrument that had known for so long the touch of those fingers.

The conductor was again swaying, as though to a cascade of harmony. But now his eyes were wide, almost frightened-looking; and his mouth was a little open and his head was bent as though he dimly heard something not quite audible to others there. The musicians, too, in this second, almost ghastly silence, were not quite the same as they had been in the first interlude. They were rigid in the pit, the lights over their racks reflecting on the whites of their staring eyes and on points of moisture on their tense faces.

Kent drew a deep breath, and glanced at Roberts and Loewenbohn quickly to see if they had heard how shaky his sigh was.

The atmosphere of this memorial concert—this concert to death—had changed. A new element had entered it, somehow. A sort of electricity charged the air. Kent could feel it. He knew the others felt it. He found himself holding his breath, waiting, waiting . . . for what? He did not know.

Once more he tore his eyes from the keyboard of Lucchesi’s piano. The keys were *not* moving! How could they, with no fingers to move them?

He saw Lucchesi’s widow stagger a little, and started impulsively toward her. She raised her slim hand and waved him back.

The conductor raised his baton. Sweat was glistening on his forehead. He waved his arms, and the musicians, with an obvious effort, swung into the *Dance*.

Kent gulped with relief as the hushed stillness was broken. The strain was lifted a little now; and he took refuge from his inexplicable nervousness by telling himself that this whole thing was a

silly farce: getting Loewenbohn to donate the place this afternoon, scraping up an orchestra, dragging Lucchesi's piano from the warehouse—and then acting as though the dead man were here and playing before an accustomed audience! Crazy!

And it was ripping Lucchesi's widow to pieces. He stared across at her and was alarmed by her pallor. They simply shouldn't have permitted this.

She must be terribly broke—forced to put Lucchesi's piano in storage because she had no home of her own to put it in. And it must be the devil for her to have to sell it. It would bring a good price, though. Lucchesi's own piano. . . .

"You say they looked everywhere for that last composition of his?" he whispered to Roberts under cover of the music.

The critic nodded. "Of course. All his effects were gone over." His voice was like Kent's: not quite steady, a little strained. And his eyes, like Kent's, were continually turning toward the keyboard of the funereally draped piano. "I helped in the search myself. But he'd hidden it too well."

"Hidden it?" repeated Kent. "Why did he hide it?"

"He thought somebody was trying to steal it. At the very last, he was not a well man. He had delusions. But there were no delusions about his composition. That must have been grand."

The music welling from the musicians in the pit was sublime. No man there had ever played so well before. They were inspired, playing beyond themselves, as though they themselves were but instruments manipulated by a master hand.

THE third, and last, piano interlude in *Dance of the Sprites* drew near. The orchestral notes began fading as the piano was supposed to pick up the thread of the composition. Kent scowled.

"I wish they wouldn't ~~do~~ this! It's . . . it's . . . damn it, it's ghostly!"

"Shut up," whispered Roberts, his voice thin and brittle.

The last note died away. The great, empty hall swam again in silence. Live, electric silence. Every gaze was riveted on the black-draped piano on the bare stage.

Again the illusion came to Kent, terrifically, that there was a figure on the stool, that long fingers raced over the keyboard in the climactic crash of the interlude. Surely, surely . . .

Roberts started, and stared first at the piano on the stage and then at the piano in the pit. His mouth hung open and his face paled. The great vein in his throat pulsed jerkily.

Kent avoided looking at him. The reporter didn't want to see in the critic's eyes confirmation of something he was telling himself wildly had *not* happened. For he, too, had thought to hear the thing that had sent the blood from Roberts' face: a low, dim note sounding from Lucchesi's piano.

It did not help any to gaze at Loewenbohn and discover that the auditorium owner's face had gone a sickly gray; nor to look from there to the orchestra pit and see that the conductor had dropped his baton and was pressing his fists against the sides of his head while he stared as though in a trance at the piano on the stage.

The interlude was ending. On the score a fountain of notes in upward crescendo culminated in a single note, loud and clear, sustained a moment; then a crescendo to the bass.

Kent gazed at the keyboard of Lucchesi's piano. He didn't want to look at it; he willed his eyes to turn away; but he couldn't look in any other direction. He stared at it, and he saw the keys rip-

ple in an upward sweep. Up and up. A trick of the light! he told himself wildly. A trick of the light!

In the throbbing silence of the empty auditorium a piano note sounded loud and clear.

The three men stared at each other and then, like sleep-walkers, at Lucchesi's piano.

The note faded in the immense stillness . . . faded and was lost.

Lucchesi's widow screamed. She stumbled onto the stage toward the piano, fell, got up again, went on. She collapsed over the piano, cheek to the sable drape, hands clutching at its funereal folds.

"He's *here!*" she screamed. "That note . . . you all heard . . . he's *here!*"

Kent's nails bit into the palms of his hands. Then he caught Roberts' shoulder in a convulsive grip.

"The piano in the pit!" he stuttered. "It was the piano in the pit! Someone in the orchestra sounded it!"

ROBERTS only wrenched his shoulder free and turned to the woman sobbing over the piano. There was no one near the piano in the pit.

"Here—with us!" cried Lucchesi's widow brokenly. "He came to our anniversary concert! Carlo . . . Carlo! . . ."

"I won't be a fool!" Kent heard his own voice sound out, high and flat. "I won't believe this! I won't!"

But no one paid attention. His voice died away. But the ghostly vibration of the clear high note still seemed to stir the air of the empty hall.

Lucchesi's widow stood erect beside the piano, with her arms spread in supplication toward the empty piano stool.

"Carlo, you are here! You are! Carlo . . . tell me . . . where is the missing score? Where is your last masterpiece?"

The silence hurt the ears as she faced

the battered, empty stool, as she called to a man a year dead. Loewenbohn's thick lips were moving soundlessly. The musicians in the pit seemed figures of stone. Roberts and Kent rigidly faced the piano.

"Carlo, tell me," entreated Lucchesi's widow. "Tell me! Please, please, where is the score? Not for me—for you. Your greatest piece. Tell me where it is."

The myriad seats in the auditorium seemed occupied by a vast audience turning ghostly faces toward the stage, uniting with the living folk in wings and pit in staring at the keyboard of Lucchesi's piano.

And the keys—the keys! . . .

They were rippling in a downward sweep, a downward crescendo toward the bass.

"Carlo!" called Lucchesi's widow.

A bass note sounded from Lucchesi's piano—that piano which had no player that mortal eyes could see. A single note, loud and clear. . . .

No, not clear! Loud, it was; but it was cracked, tinny, as if invisible hands were laid on the strings in the closed ebony case.

A thick exclamation tore from Roberts' lips. He stared at the orchestra leader, who stared back at him while comprehension dawned in the eyes of both. Then the music critic started running along the strip of stage to the piano.

Lucchesi's widow was gazing pitifully, tragically, at the battered piano stool.

"Here!" she faltered. "He was here. And he would not answer me . . . would not tell me!"

"But he *has* answered you," Roberts said gently. "He *has*. With that last note. You heard how it sounded. How stupid for no one of us to think to look there before!"

With a trembling hand he took the

vase of yellow roses from the top of the concert grand and set it on the floor. He swept the black drape aside and opened the lid—the first time the top had been opened since Lucchesi's death a year ago.

There, on the bass strings where Lucchesi had hastily thrust them, were penciled sheets of music.

The priceless score, Lucchesi's missing masterpiece!
