

MAESTRO PEREZ, THE ORGANIST

(A Legend of Seville)

When I was in Seville, waiting for the beginning of midnight mass on Christmas Eve in the entrance of Saint Ines, I heard this story from someone who works in the convent.

As you might expect, after hearing the story, I was eager for the beginning of the service so I could witness this prodigious event.

However, nothing was less prodigious than the organ of Saint Ines, nor anything more ordinary than the music played by the organist that night.

When the mass was finished, I couldn't help but go and find the person who had told me the story and make the following remark:

"Why is it that the organ of Maestro Perez now sounds so awful?"

"Well," responded the old woman, "that's because this isn't his organ."

"It isn't? What happened to his organ?"

"It was so old, it broke down some years ago and wouldn't play.

"And what about the soul of the organist?"

"It hasn't reappeared since they installed the new organ."

If it ever occurs to one of my readers to ask the same questions, after reading this story, they will know why the miracle it describes no longer occurs today.

I

"Look, neighbor, can you see that man with the red cape and white feathers on his hat who looks like he is carrying all the gold from the New World in his pockets, the one who has just gotten out of his coach and is offering his hand to that woman, who has also gotten out of hers and is coming toward us, preceded by those four pages with swords? He is the Marquis of Moscoso, who is the suitor of the widowed Countess of Villapineda. They say that before setting eyes on this woman he wanted to marry the daughter of some rich lord, but the father of that young lady, who they say is rather miserly... But wait... Speak of the Devil, and here he comes. Do you see that man coming through the Arch of San Felipe, on foot, wearing a dark cloak, and preceded by the servant with a lantern? That's him; he is now in front of the altar.

When he uncovered himself in front of the the virgin, did you notice the embroidered cross there on his chest? If it wasn't for that distinctive device, anyone would think he's a merchant from Market Street... Well, that's the father I was talking about. Look how all the people are stepping up to greet him. All Seville knows about his colossal fortune. He alone has more gold ducats in his chests than our Lord, King Phillip, has to maintain his army, and with his galleons he could form an armada large enough to oppose that of the Ottoman Empire...

See that group of solemn lords... they are the Brotherhood of Twenty-Four Gentlemen. Hello! There is also a Lord from Flanders, who they say hasn't thrown down the gauntlet to the Lords of the Green Cross, thanks to the influence of the magnates from Madrid... That one only comes to church to hear the music... No, if Maestro Pérez wasn't able to

stimulate his emotions with music, you could be sure that, if he wasn't carrying his heart on his sleeve, it would now be frying in hell. Oh look, neighbor! That's not good! Now it seems that we are going to have a scuffle. Come, we must take refuge in the church, because it looks like here there will be more fisticuffs than paternosters. Look over there; the people belonging to the Duke of Alcalá are just coming around the corner from the Plaza of San Pedro, and I think those coming out of Calle de las Dueñas are those of the Duke of Medina Sidonia. What did I tell you?

Now they've seen each other, but they are not moving... The two groups are waiting... But look, the constables who are supposed to protect us are withdrawing... Even the Chief Officer of Justice with his staff of office is going into the church. And they say there is justice!...

Here we go again; now you can see the shields shining in the darkness... Dear God in Heaven, have mercy! The fighting has started... Hurry, neighbor!... Here, before they close the doors. But wait, what is that? The fighting stopped before it hardly began... What light is that? Ah, lighted torches! Coaches! Yes, it's the Lord Archbishop.

It must have been the Holy Virgin of Protection I was invoking with my thoughts who brought him to help us... Thank goodness, no one knows how much I owe that Lady!... There are so many times she has repaid me for the candles I burned each Saturday!... Just look how handsome the Archbishop is, with his purple robe and his red biretta... May God preserve him in his holy seat for as long as I live. If it wasn't for him, half of Seville would have been destroyed by the conflict between these Dukes. Look at how the big hypocrites approach his coach to kiss his ring... Look at the way they are following him and chatting with his servants. Imagine how long the friendship between those two groups would last if, sometime later, they happened to meet each other in a dark street... But still, may God prevent me from calling them cowards, because He knows there have been times when they have fought against the enemies of Our Lord. But if only they would try to come together... And if they were to do that with the idea of getting along, they certainly *could* come together; and that would put an end, once and for all, to these continuous brawls in which those who are really paying the price are their families, their allies, and their servants.

But come, neighbor, let's enter the church before it becomes too crowded, because on nights like this it often gets so full you can never find a seat... Those nuns have certainly been fortunate with their organist... Where could you ever find a convent as blessed as this? I know other religious communities have made generous offers to Maestro Pérez. And it's no wonder; in fact, even the Archbishop has offered him a fortune to come and play in the Cathedral... But he won't even consider it. He would rather give up his life than abandon his favorite organ... You haven't heard about Maestro Perez? That's right, you're new in this neighborhood... Well, he is a wonderful man, but poor as a beggar... With no family but his daughter, and no friend but his organ, he spends his entire life protecting the innocence of the first, and repairing the stops of the latter... Because the fact is, that organ is very old! But that has never been a problem, because he knows how to fix it so that it sounds marvelous... He knows it so well, that just by touching it... oh, and by the way, I don't know if you have heard that he was blind from birth... And with what patience he bears that misfortune! When they ask him how much he would give to be able to see, he says: 'A lot, but not as much as you might think, because I have hopes.' 'Hopes to be able to see?' 'Yes, and very soon too,' he adds, with a smile like an angel.

‘I am already seventy-six years old. But even if my life lasts for a while longer, I know I will soon see God.’

And the poor fellow certainly will see Him, because he is as humble as the stones in the street that let people walk on them... He always insists that he is nothing more than the organist of a convent, but he could give lessons to the Royal Choir Director. He cut his teeth on this profession, because his father was also a musician. I never knew him, but my mother, may she rest in peace, said that when he went to play the organ he always took his son to work the bellows. Then, as time passed, the boy showed such talent that, when his father finally died, it was only natural for him to inherit his father’s position. And what hands he has, may God bless them! They ought to be taken to a jeweler and set in gold... He always plays well, but on a night like this, he is absolutely marvelous... He has always felt a special devotion to the Midnight Mass, and when they raise the Host of the Blessed Sacrament on the stroke of midnight, which is when our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world, the notes of his organ sound like the voice of angels...

But then, there is no need to speak any more of what you will hear for yourself tonight. It will be enough to see how all the people of Seville, including the Archbishop himself, come to a humble convent to hear him. And don’t think that the experts, and those who know music, are the only ones who recognize his talent, since there is no one who doesn’t love his music. Contrary to their usual custom, the groups of people with burning torches who sing Christmas carols accompanied by tambourines, timbrels, and drums, filling the church with their boisterous spirit, become as silent as the dead, when Maestro Perez places his hands over his organ...; and when he starts playing, you cannot hear a fly...; there are tears in everyone’s eyes, and when the music ends you hear a tremendous sigh, when everyone releases the breath they were holding for as long as the music lasts... But come; the bells have stopped ringing and the mass is about to begin. Let’s go inside... For all people, Christmas Eve is a blessed time, but for us, it is even more blessed than for anyone else.”

Saying this, the good woman who was acting as guide for her neighbor, passed through the entrance of the Convent of Santa Ines and, elbowing her way through the throng of those who had already arrived, she entered the church and was lost in the crowd.

II

The church was illuminated with astonishing richness. The torrent of light that poured out of the altars spread through the naves and sparkled on the rich jewels of the ladies who knelt on velvet cushions placed by the ushers and who, with a prayer book in their hands, formed a brilliant circle around the railing of the presbytery.

On foot next to the railing, enveloped in colorful capes adorned with gold that were opened enough to reveal the red and green cross of their Order, one hand holding their hat with long feathers that brushed the tapestries, the other resting on the pommel of their swords, the members of the Brotherhood of Twenty-four Gentlemen, together with many of the nobles of Seville, seemed to form a barrier whose purpose was to protect their wives and daughters from any contact with the common people. The latter, who were gathering in the naves with noisy enthusiasm, broke out with a loud cry of jubilation, accompanied by the discordant sound of timbrels and tambourines, when they saw the

Archbishop appear and take his seat next to the main altar under a red canopy, where he cast his blessing three times over the congregation.

It was time for the mass to begin. However, several minutes passed and the officiating priest still did not appear. The crowd was beginning to react with impatience; the nobles exchanged a few quiet words, and the Archbishop sent one of his assistants to the sacristy to inquire why the ceremony had not started.

“Maestro Perez is very sick and will not be able to attend the midnight mass tonight,” was the assistant’s response.

As the news spread through the crowded church, it would be impossible to describe the pandemonium it produced. Suffice it to say, that there was such a tremendous uproar the Chief of Justice stood up and constables entered the church, spreading through the crowd trying to quiet people down.

At that moment an unpleasant-looking man who was thin, bony and squinty-eyed came up to the place where the Prelate was sitting.

“Maestro Perez is sick,” he said, “so the ceremony cannot begin. If you wish, I will play the organ in his absence, because Maestro Perez is not the only organist in the world, nor will this organ cease to be played if he should die.”

The Archbishop nodded his head indicating his agreement, and some of the faithful who knew this strange person was an organist who had been envious of Maestro Perez, began to voice their objections, when suddenly a shout was heard in the entrance.

“Maestro Perez is here!... Maestro Perez is here!...”

With the cries of those who were gathered in the doorway, everyone turned to look. Maestro Perez had in fact entered the church, although he was pale and shaken, sitting in a litter, which others struggled to have the honor of carrying on their shoulders.

It seems that nothing, not the doctor’s orders nor the tears of his daughter, had been enough to make him stay in bed.

“Yes, I know this is the last time” Maestro Perez had said. “I know it, and I don’t want to die without playing my organ, and especially on Christmas Eve. This is what I want. In fact, I insist. Come, let’s go to the church.”

His wish was now fulfilled. The people carried him on their shoulders to the organ loft and the mass began. At exactly that moment the clock in the Cathedral struck midnight.

The Introit began, then the Gospel, then the Offertory, and finally the solemn moment arrived when, after it was blessed, the priest took the Host in the tips of his fingers and held it up.

A cloud of incense spread out with waves of blue until it began to fill the entire church. Bells rang with a vibrant sound, and Maestro Perez placed his tense fingers on the keys of the organ.

The multiple voices of its metal tubes resounded with a prolonged, majestic chord that softened little by little, as though a gust of wind had carried away its final echoes.

This first chord was followed by another that seemed to be a voice that stretched from earth to heaven, and then another that was soft and distant began to grow until it changed into a thunderous harmony. It was as though the voice of angels was traveling through space until it reached the earth.

After that, notes began to sound like distant hymns that were sung by choirs of angels. Thousands of hymns all at once, which were then combined into a single hymn, which nevertheless, was still only the accompaniment of a strange melody that seemed to float

over that immense ocean of magnificent chords, like a strip of fog that spreads over the waves of the sea.

Then, a few chords began to disappear, and after that, still more. The harmony became simplified until there were no more than two voices whose echoes merged together; then, there was only one isolated melody that carried a brilliant note like a thread of light. The priest bowed his head, and above his gray hair seen through the bluish cloud of incense, the Host appeared before the eyes of the faithful. At that precise moment, the trembling note of Maestro Perez opened into a gigantic explosion of harmony that spread through the church until it filled the air and shook the stained-glass windows.

From each of the notes of that magnificent chord, different themes were developed: some were nearby and others were far away, some were brilliant and others were muted; it seemed as though all the creatures of earth and heaven were singing, each with its own voice, a hymn to the birth of the Savior.

The multitude was listening with amazement and awe. There was a tear in every eye, and in every spirit, a profound devotion.

The officiating priest felt his hands tremble because the One who was raised in them, the One who was greeted by men and angels, was his God. It was his God, and it seemed that the heavens were opened and the Host was transfigured.

The organ continued playing, but its voices gradually grew softer, like a voice that was lost amid the echoes and becomes less audible as it moves away. Then, suddenly, up in the organ loft, the sharp, heartrending cry of a woman was heard.

The organ gave off a strange, discordant sound, and then, with a sigh, became silent. The crowd surged toward the steps to the organ loft, toward the woman at whom all the faithful were looking, as they were jolted out of their religious ecstasy.

“What’s wrong? What has happened?” they were saying, not knowing what to think. But then they all began to guess the cause, and the confusion grew, until the din began to threaten the order and devotion of the church.

“What is it?” some ladies asked the Chief of Justice who, preceded by his constables, was one of the first to climb to the organ loft and, with an expression of concern, went to the Archbishop, anxious to know the cause of the disorder.

“What’s wrong?”

“Maestro Perez has died.”

Indeed, when the first of the faithful climbed the stairs to the organ loft, they saw the organist had fallen, face-down, over the keys of his organ which was still vibrating softly, while his daughter knelt at his feet, sobbing and calling to him in vain.

III

“Good evening, Lady Baltasara. Are you also going to the midnight mass tonight? Originally, I intended to go and hear it in the parish church; but now this has happened ... You ask where Vicente is going? Where everyone else goes. To tell the truth, now that Maestro Perez has died it feels like they have placed a tombstone on my heart every time I enter Santa Ines... The poor fellow! He was such a saint! I can tell you, confidentially, I am keeping a small piece of his doublet as a relic, and he deserves it... Because, in my opinion, if the Archbishop had taken the responsibility, our grandchildren might have

been able to see it on the altars... But that's the way it is... Nobody cares about the ones who have died and passed away... Now all they ever care about is some big novelty...; you know what I'm saying. What, you say that you don't really know what's happening? Well, I can tell you, we're both in the same boat there. There are a lot of things going back and forth, and we don't always pay much attention to what is being said... I know that at times I have also heard some gossip... a word here a word there... so even without hearing all of the facts, I manage to keep up with the news.

But yes... It seems to be a fact that the organist from San Roman, that squinty-eyed fellow who says so many nasty things about the other organists, who seems more like the manager of a Butcher Shop than a musician, is going to perform this Christmas Eve in place of Maestro Perez. You must have heard, since it is common knowledge in Seville, that no one else was willing to do it. Not even his daughter, who is a teacher and who, after the death of her father, decided to enter the convent as a novice.

And that was only natural: when you're used to hearing wonders, anything else would seem poor, no matter how much you tried to keep from making comparisons. Therefore, when the people decided that, in honor of the deceased and, as a sign of respect for his memory, the organ should not be played that night, here comes our man saying that he would like to play it... There is nothing bolder than ignorance... And it's not just him; it's those who agreed to let him commit this profanity. But that's the way things are... And I'll tell you... this is not a matter of those who attend... Anyone who does will say that nothing has changed from one year to the next. It will be the same people, the same extravagance, the same rush to get in, the same struggle in the entrance, the same crowds in the church... But if Maestro Perez could see all this, he would turn over in his grave, and he would die all over again to keep from hearing his organ played by hands like those of this intruder.

And what's more, from what they are telling me, the people of the community have a plan to welcome him. When he gets ready to place his hands on the keys, they are going to make a tremendous racket with tambourines, timbrels, and drums that will drown out everything else... But wait, the devil himself has just entered the church. My Lord, will you just look at the ridiculous clothing he's wearing, with that starched ruff around his neck, and that presumptuous air. But come; the Archbishop is here, and they are ready to start the mass... My, my, it looks like what is going to happen tonight will give us plenty to talk about for a long time."

Saying this, the good lady, whom the readers will remember for her frequent, cutting remarks, entered Santa Ines as usual, pushing and elbowing her way through the throng of people without hesitation.

The ceremony had already begun, and the church was just as brightly decorated as it had been the previous year.

After making his way through the crowd and going to kiss the prelate's ring, the new organist climbed the steps to the organ loft, and he began to touch each one of the stops, one after the other, with an expression of seriousness that seemed as affected, as it was ridiculous.

Amid the young people gathered outside the church, there was a noisy racket that was a foreshadowing of the storm that was about to break loose inside the building.

“He is a fool, who doesn’t know what to do and is just pretending to do something important,” one person said.

“He is an ignoramus who, after making a lot of noise with the organ of his own parish, wants to come and try the organ of Maestro Perez,” another said.

While the latter removed his cloak and got ready to use his tambourine, another tested his timbrels, and others were also waiting to start making a racket; a few people made weak excuses for the intruder whose pompous demeanor and pedantic behavior offered such an obvious contrast to the modest appearance and the affable nature of the deceased Maestro Perez.

Finally, the solemn moment arrived when, after making a bow and saying some words of prayer, the priest took up the Host in his fingers... The bells began to peal, and their pealing sounded like a shower of crystal notes. A diaphanous cloud of incense began to rise up, and the the organ sounded.

At that moment a raucous din began to fill the entire church, drowning out the organ’s first chord.

Pan pipes, bagpipes, timbrels, drums, tambourines... all the instruments of the people raised their discordant voices in unison. But the confusion and noise lasted only a few seconds. As quickly as it started, the crowd suddenly became silent.

The second chord—spacious, spirited and magnificent—still continued, pouring out of the organ’s metal tubes in a sonorous cascade of beautiful harmony.

Heavenly songs like those that caress the ears during moments of rapture; songs which the spirit perceives but lips cannot repeat; disconnected notes of a distant melody carried by gusts of wind; the sound of leaves rustling in the trees with a noise like falling rain, chirping of skylarks rising happily out of the flowers, like an arrow shot from the clouds; deafening sounds, as strong as the roar of a tempest; choirs of angels without rhythm or measure, the unknown music of heaven that only intuition can sense, soaring hymns that seem to rise to the throne of the Lord like a column of light and sound...: all this was expressed by the multiple voices of the organ with more vigor, with more poetic mystery, with more fantastic color, than it had ever produced before.

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When the organist descended from the organ loft, the crowd of people that clustered around the steps was so large and so eager to greet him that the Chief of Justice, fearing they would trample him, ordered a few of his officers, batons in hand, to clear a path to the main altar where the Prelate was waiting.

“Hear I am again,” the latter said, when the organist was finally able to approach him. “I have come all the way from my Residence to hear you. Are you going to be as cruel as Maestro Perez and insist that I travel every Christmas Eve to hear the midnight mass?”

“Next year, I promise to please you,” the organist replied. “Because I would not come back and play that organ again for all the gold in the world.”

“And why not?” the Prelate interrupted.

“Because...” the organist continued, trying to contain the emotion that was revealed by the paleness of his face, “because it is old and broken-down, and it cannot express all that it should.”

The Archbishop withdrew, followed by his attendants. One after the other, the Lords filed out of the church and were lost in the bends of the nearby streets; the groups in the

entrance broke up and spread out in different directions, and the doorkeeper was about to close the doors, when he noticed two women who, after crossing themselves and saying their final prayer before the altar of San Felipe, walked out of the church and made their way down the Calle de Las Dueñas.

“So what is your opinion, Lady Baltasara?” one asked the other. “I know what I think. Everyone has peculiarities. But even if it were some Franciscan Friars who assured me, I wouldn’t be convinced... That man couldn’t possibly have played what we just heard... I have heard him play in his parish, San Bartolomé, before he was expelled by the priest for bad conduct, and what he played was enough to make you want to cover your ears. And then, you only have to look at his face which, like they say, is a mirror of the soul... I can remember Maestro Perez—poor fellow—as if I were seeing him right now; when he stepped down after playing on a night like this... what a beautiful smile, what a cheerful expression!... He was old, but he looked like an angel... Not like this other fellow who stumbles down the steps as though a dog were barking at him on the landing... Indeed, Lady Baltasara, believe me when I say I am absolutely convinced: here there is some sort of mystery...”

As they contemplated these last words, the two ladies turned the corner of the street and disappeared from sight.

We think that it should not be necessary to tell our readers who one of them was.

IV

One more year had passed. Half hidden in the shadows, the Abbess of the Convent of Santa Ines and the daughter of Maestro Perez were speaking in low voices in the choir of the church. While the church bells in the steeple were calling the faithful, every now and then someone would cross the portico which was still silent and deserted, and after taking some holy water in the doorway, they would take a seat in the corner of the nave where a few residents of the neighborhood were waiting for midnight mass to begin.

“Now you can see,” said the Abbess; “your fear is unfounded; there is hardly anyone in the church; all Seville is going to the Cathedral tonight. So go ahead and play the organ, you can play it without worrying, because you’re at home here... But... still you hesitate and continue sighing. Why is that? What is the matter?”

“It’s just that I am afraid,” the young woman said with an expression that revealed how disturbed she was.

“Afraid? Of what?”

“I don’t know... of something supernatural I guess... Last night, when I heard you say I should play the organ for the mass, I was happy to have that opportunity, and I thought I would come and fix the stops and tune it, so that it would surprise you today... I came to the choir alone... I opened the door that leads to the organ loft... The Cathedral clock was striking the hour, I don’t remember which one it was..., but the bells sounded very sad, and they kept on ringing during the entire time that I was standing on the threshold, which seemed like a century.

The church was dark and deserted... Deep inside it, a tiny light was shining like a distant star in the sky at night...; it was the light of the lamp burning on the main altar... And in its dim light, which only made the shadows around it seem to be more frightening,

I saw... you must believe me... I saw a man with his back turned toward the place where I was standing, a man who was silently running one hand over the keys of the organ, while the other hand was touching the stops..., and the organ was playing, but the sound it made was indescribable. Each one of the notes seemed like a poignant sigh that was coming through the metal tubes that were vibrating with the compressed air, making a soft sound that was almost imperceptible, but still audible.

And the Cathedral clock was still striking the hour, and the man kept running his hands over the keys. I could even hear his breathing.

I was so frightened it felt like the blood had frozen in my veins; in my body I felt an icy coldness while, at the same time, my temples were burning... I wanted to cry out, but I was not able. The man had turned to me and was looking at me...; no, that is not right; he wasn't looking at me, because he was blind... It was my father!"

"Oh, sister; you must get rid of these fantasies that the devil uses to disturb our feeble imagination... Say an *Our Father* and an *Ave Maria* to the Archangel Michael, who is the leader of the Heavenly Hosts, and ask him to help you resist these evil spirits. Around your neck wear a scapular which has touched the relic of San Pacomio, the saint who protects against temptations; then, go ahead and climb up to the organ loft. Mass is about to begin and all the faithful are waiting... Your father is in heaven and, instead of wanting to frighten you, he would want to inspire his daughter on this solemn occasion of great devotion.

The Prioress went to occupy her seat in the center of the chancel, facing the altar. Maestro Perez' daughter opened the door to the organ loft with a trembling hand and went to sit on the bench as the mass was beginning.

The mass began, and it continued with nothing unusual, until it became time for the consecration. At that moment the organ started to play, and immediately there was a cry from the daughter of Maestro Perez. The Prioress, some nuns, and a few of the faithful rushed to the organ loft.

"Look at him! Look at him!" she exclaimed, pointing to the organ bench, from which she had risen to go and hold onto the railing.

Everyone was staring at that spot. The bench was empty, but still the organ continued playing... and was making a sound that only the angels could have produced during their moments of mystical rapture.

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"Didn't I say so, Lady Baltasara; is that not what I told you? Didn't I say there was a mystery? You say you didn't attend the midnight mass last night? But you must have heard what happened. In Seville, that's all they are talking about... The Archbishop is furious, and rightly so. He had stopped coming to Santa Ines and, because of that, he was not able to witness this miracle. And for what? To hear a shivaree, with lots of clanging and banging, because that's what they are calling the music in the Cathedral when the organist of San Bartolomé is playing... I told you so. That squinty-eyed fellow could never have played what we heard... Here there was a mystery, and that mystery was, in effect, the soul of Maestro Perez.