Every When: The Vienna Letters

by Lenora Vale

The second assignment. The second love. Thirteen letters, still waiting.

MyTropes / RomanceBots

Prologue: The Archive

2157. New Geneva. Three weeks after the return from Paris.

Sera Calloway stands outside the archive room for eleven minutes before going in.

She knows about the letters because Moss told her — not in the formal debrief, but in the space between the formal debrief and the hallway, the corridor of unofficial truth that every institution maintains alongside its official one. Twelve letters. 1926 to 1934. Held pending her clearance.

She has the clearance.

She stands outside the archive room for eleven minutes. She is counting.

What she thinks, during those eleven minutes: if she reads the letters, she will have more of him. More of his voice, his precision, the handwriting she has not seen but can imagine because she knew his hands — the way they moved across piano keys and across the particular air of 1925 Paris and across her face in the dark of the apartment on the Passage d'Enfer.

She will have more. And the more will make the less more acute. The less being: his death in 1968, documented in the archive, a heart condition at sixty-five, the music preserved, the man gone.

She is twenty-eight years old. She will not die until a date she does not know because the Bureau prohibits operatives from accessing their own future records, which she considers the single most ethical policy in the field charter. She has, actuarially, a great deal of time ahead of her. The time is not presently useful to her.

The letters are behind a door she has been standing outside for eleven minutes.

She turns around.

She goes back to her desk.

She reads the Vienna file instead.

Assignment Thirteen

Vienna. 1881.

The displacement arrives — the subtraction, the absence, the gone-ness of the present — and then: December in the Ringstrasse.

This is what the archive had prepared her for, and the archive had prepared her inadequately.

1925 Paris had been alive in the way of a city between wars — a feverish, beautiful, provisional aliveness, a city holding its breath between the last catastrophe and the next. It was a city of artists who believed the future was being made in their cafés.

Vienna in 1881 was something else entirely. Monumental. The Ringstrasse was barely twenty years old — the great circle of imperial buildings that the Emperor Franz Joseph had ordered built to demonstrate what the Austro-Hungarian Empire wished to believe about itself — and the stone was still young enough to shine. The Vienna Court Opera. The Kunsthistorisches Museum. The Rathaus. Buildings that were not merely functional but argumentative: *we are permanent, we are ordered, we are the rightful inheritors of civilization's peak.*

Sera stood on the Ringstrasse in December 1881 and breathed imperial air and felt the specific quality of a city that was absolutely certain of itself and therefore had no idea what was coming.

The cover identity: Miss Sarah Callow, assistant to a British musicologist named Professor Edwin Marsh, who was visiting Vienna to evaluate scores and correspondence for possible publication through a London academic press. Cover documents in order. Professor Marsh himself was a Bureau-constructed entity — documentation existed in the academic record, letters of introduction had been pre-placed with the relevant Viennese musical institutions. The cover allowed her to ask questions about composers and scores without it being unusual.

The landing was at the Stadtpark, the public garden beside the

Ringstrasse, which in December was leafless and iron-cold and beautiful in the way of gardens that didn't need foliage. She walked to the pension — a Viennese boardinghouse on the Schottengasse, two clean rooms, a landlady of severe habits and genuine kindness — and read the file again.

The deviation: Elise Hartmann, 28, composer. She had written a symphony over two years — the Bureau catalogued it as Symphony in D Minor, the only surviving record the musicologist's monograph of 1927, based on the score she was supposed to preserve. Instead, on the fourteenth of December 1881, she was going to burn it.

The chain: the symphony, discovered in a Viennese archive in 1927, would become a central document in the musicological study of women composers in the late Romantic era. The 1927 monograph would influence a chain of scholarship that, in 2044, would directly shape a cultural heritage policy concerning the digitization and distribution of women's creative work — a policy that would, in 2098, determine how a specific archive in the rebuilt Americas was administered. The thing the archive contained: the technical documentation of a process that, in the wrong hands in 2109, would—

Sera had read this far in the file and stopped. The full cascade was documented. She didn't need to read it to the end to understand its weight.

The symphony needed to survive.

The deviation's cause: Elise Hartmann had submitted the symphony to the Vienna Court Opera's programming committee three months earlier. The programming committee — six men, average age fifty-seven, with no institutional mechanism for considering the submission of a female composer — had returned it without comment. Not a rejection letter. No letter at all. The score, wrapped in its original paper, placed outside her door.

No note.

She had sat with the unwrapped score for two months. And then she had decided.

Sera read this part of the file three times.

She wrote in the field log: *Deviation is structural, not individual. The source is not a misdirected patron or an earlier operative's interference. The source is a system. This will require a different approach.*

She wrote in the personal journal, on the first page of the clean book: *I understand her. That is not enough. I need to figure out what would have been enough for her. And I need to find the person in this city who can do something about it.*

The Hartmann Problem

She found Elise Hartmann through the social network that took a week to construct.

The cover identity gave her access to the city's musical circles — letters of introduction to three of the major musical institutions, an appointment at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (the Society of the Friends of Music, which held one of the world's great musical archives), and a general permission to attend concerts and salons in the capacity of a musicologist's representative.

She attended a concert at the Bösendorfer Hall on her fourth day and heard a program of Brahms and Schubert performed with the technically precise, emotionally correct execution that was the Vienna style. She sat in the audience and listened and thought: *this is extraordinary and it is also exactly as far as it's willing to go.*

At the interval she was introduced by a mutual acquaintance — the assistant director of the Gesellschaft — to a woman standing alone at the edge of the refreshment room.

Elise Hartmann was small and dark-haired and had the particular stillness of someone who had learned to take up as little space as possible without ever fully consenting to it. She was dressed well but not elaborately — a musician's dress, practical at the shoulders, made for someone who spent a great deal of time at a keyboard. She was holding a glass of punch and not drinking it, watching the room with the expression Sera recognized as the expression of a person who was present in body and somewhere else in mind.

"Miss Hartmann composes," the assistant director said, introducing them. "Piano, primarily. Some chamber work." He moved on.

Some chamber work. Sera filed the erasure and smiled at Elise.

"Miss Hartmann," she said. "I understand you've done considerable work beyond chamber music."

Elise looked at her with the specific sharpness of a woman who was accustomed to being reduced and had developed the alertness of someone who expected it but was occasionally surprised.

"You have been asking about my work?" she said.

"I've been asking about composers working in Vienna," Sera said. "Your name was mentioned several times."

"By whom?" Elise said. Not flattered — assessingly. The question of a person who needed to know which rooms she existed in and which she didn't.

"Several people at the Gesellschaft." True, though the people at the Gesellschaft had mentioned her with a quality of careful reservation that contained the specific Viennese art of reducing a person's credibility without technically saying anything against them. "I'd very much like to see your work."

Elise held her gaze. "For what purpose?"

"Professor Marsh's evaluation project includes compositional manuscripts that haven't yet reached the printed concert repertoire," Sera said. "We're interested in work that's significant regardless of whether it's been performed."

Elise's expression shifted. A very small movement, but Sera had been trained to read these — the adjustment of a person who had been braced for condescension and received something they'd almost stopped expecting.

"There is a symphony," Elise said, carefully.

"I'd very much like to see it," Sera said.

They made an appointment for the following Wednesday. Sera walked back to the Schottengasse in the cold December dark and breathed the imperial air and thought: *ten days until December fourteenth. Ten days to make a woman who has been told systematically and without words that her work is invisible believe that it is not.*

The Court Opera

The deviation required, as she'd written in the field log, a different approach.

The different approach required a person with institutional standing in Vienna's musical world who was willing to act on that standing in an unconventional direction. The programming committee of the Court Opera had ignored Elise's score. The programming committee was composed of six men who answered to a single person: the principal conductor of the Vienna Court Opera.

His name was Friedrich Haas.

The Bureau file on Friedrich Haas was sparse in the way that the files on people who were not the deviation's central subject were always sparse — enough to locate and navigate, not enough to predict. Thirty-four years old. Born in Salzburg, trained in Vienna, appointed to the Court Opera at twenty-nine, which was considered prodigiously young and which he had managed with the gravity of someone who understood that prodigies owed a debt to their institution in the form of conservative propriety. Well-regarded. Technically excellent. The sort of man who received unanimous praise and about whom, consequently, very little specific was said.

She attended the Court Opera on her sixth day — a performance of Mozart's Don Giovanni, conducted by Haas.

She watched him conduct.

There was something in it she hadn't expected. The technical execution was exactly what the reviews described — precise, controlled, architecturally sound in a way that the Vienna audience, who knew this repertoire the way other cities knew their own names, received with nodding satisfaction. But underneath it — in the specific quality of attention he brought to the moments between the notes, the way he held the orchestra in a kind of tension that never fully resolved — she heard something else. Something that was trying to exceed the frame it had been given and wasn't quite being allowed to.

She filed this and did not immediately know what to do with it.

After the performance she was brought, through the assistant director of the Gesellschaft who had become her primary social facilitator, to the reception for the visiting British musicologist's representative. The reception was held in the lobby of the Opera House, which was a room that had been designed to make everyone in it feel the appropriate smallness of being in a civilization's monument.

Friedrich Haas crossed the room toward her group and she saw him from a distance of twenty feet — still in his conductor's evening dress, which in 1881 was not the spare modernity of Sera's era but the full formal weight of a man who was also an institution. Tall, dark-suited, with the kind of face that had been assembled by discipline as much as inheritance. The face of someone who had been practicing a particular expression for so long it had become the actual expression.

He was introduced to her as the representative of Professor Edwin Marsh.

He looked at her.

She looked back.

"Professor Marsh's project," he said. "The unpublished manuscripts."

"Yes," she said.

"Vienna has a great many unpublished manuscripts," he said. "Most of them unpublished for reasons that have nothing to do with their quality." He said it as the kind of statement that existed to be contradicted by whoever was listening — a test, she read, for what she'd say.

"That's precisely the argument for including them in an evaluation," she said.

He looked at her for a moment with the expression she would come to recognize: the specific assessment of a man who had expected a particular kind of response and received a different one and was deciding what to do with the recalibration.

"Miss Callow," he said. "How long will you be in Vienna?"

"Fourteen weeks," she said.

"Then you have time to form an accurate opinion," he said. "Rather than a rapid one."

"I already have a rapid opinion," she said. "I'm using the fourteen weeks to see if accuracy confirms it."

The corner of his mouth moved. It was not quite a smile — too controlled for a smile, but something in the same category.

"And what," he said, "is the rapid opinion?"

She looked at him across the Habsburg-marble lobby of the Vienna Court Opera.

"That there is work being done in this city that this city is not listening to," she said. "And that the people with the capacity to change that are choosing not to."

The not-quite-smile disappeared. He held her gaze for a beat.

"Good evening, Miss Callow," he said. He moved on.

She looked at his back.

She wrote in the personal journal that night: *He heard everything I said. He knows exactly what I mean. That's the problem — or the beginning of the solution.*

Coffee and Counterpoint

Vienna in 1881 ran on coffee and counterpoint, which was to say: on the coffeehouse and the argument.

Sera spent her first two weeks in the coffeehouses. This was professionally necessary — the coffeehouse was the Viennese institution where the city's intellectual and artistic life was conducted in public, where composers and critics and writers and architects argued over newspapers and coffee for hours in rooms that were warm when outside was not and that provided, crucially, the atmosphere of being in the presence of serious thought without requiring anyone to have any immediately.

She went to the Café Landtmann, where the musical world clustered. She went to the Café Griensteidl, where everyone went eventually. She went with a notebook and listened and built the social map of which figures intersected where, and specifically: where Friedrich Haas placed himself in the city's intellectual geography.

He came to the Café Landtmann on Thursday mornings. She learned this from the assistant director of the Gesellschaft, who was becoming, without entirely realizing it, her primary intelligence source.

She went to the Café Landtmann on a Thursday morning in her second week.

He was there: a corner table, papers spread, coffee, and a man across from him who was clearly a librettist by the quality of his argument. Haas was listening with the contained attention she was beginning to associate with him — not the warm, open listening of a person who finds other people instinctively interesting, but the careful listening of someone who was extracting information and assessing it as it arrived.

She sat at a separate table. She ordered coffee. She read the musical journal she'd brought.

The Thursday pattern repeated for two weeks. She did not engineer a conversation at the café — that would come later, from a different angle.

She was doing what she'd told him she did: forming an accurate opinion rather than a rapid one.

What she observed at the Café Landtmann: Friedrich Haas was not the man his institutional profile suggested. The institutional profile — the spare biographical file, the unanimous praise, the conservative propriety — described a man who had been fully claimed by his position. But across three Thursday mornings she watched him interact with six different people, and what she saw was more complicated.

He had opinions. Strong ones, held back. When the librettist said something he disagreed with, she watched the split-second of restraint — the moment when the actual response was selected against in favor of the measured one. When a music critic held forth about the superiority of the German tradition, she watched Haas's expression perform agreement while something behind it declined.

She noted: this was a man who had learned that the most powerful position was the position that expressed agreement with authority and therefore gave authority no reason to constrain you. The compliance was strategic. The interior was different.

She wrote in the personal journal: *He is performing the right character for his position. The character underneath is the one I need.*

The Score

Wednesday came and she went to Elise Hartmann's apartment.

The apartment was on the Alsergrund, the ninth district, which was the university quarter and therefore the part of Vienna where it was least unusual to have an unaccompanied woman working in a professional capacity. Elise's apartment was on the third floor of a building that had good light and not much else to recommend it — the kind of place where a person with professional ambitions and limited financial resources conducted her life with competence and without complaint.

Elise brought the symphony out of the drawer where it lived.

It was a physical object — a manuscript score, hand-copied in a precise, meticulous notation, bound with a ribbon that had been tied and retied so many times the bow no longer held its shape. Elise set it on the table and looked at it with an expression Sera had seen before and would not have been able to precisely name at the beginning of her career but could now: the expression of a person looking at the thing they'd made that the world had refused to acknowledge, which was a specific kind of grief — the grief of invisibility, sharper than the grief of failure.

"The first movement," Elise said, "is in D minor. The traditional opening." She said *traditional* with a flat precision. "I knew they would be looking for reasons to dismiss it. I gave them the form they expected."

Sera sat down and opened the score.

She was not a trained musician. Bureau operatives assigned to music-related deviations received a training module — music theory fundamentals, score reading, period-specific analysis — which was thorough enough to navigate conversations competently. But she had also, across her time in Paris, developed the habit of listening that was not analysis but the thing underneath analysis.

She read the score and heard it in the way she'd learned to hear music that was not yet sound — the pattern of it, the logic. And the pattern was — she

read the first movement, the second, into the third —

"This is extraordinary," she said, looking up.

Elise looked at her.

"Not as a compliment," Sera said. "As an assessment. The way the second theme develops — it doesn't arrive where you expect it to, and then when it resolves in the final movement it's retrograde. You've built a whole architecture facing backward." She paused. "You knew what you were doing."

Elise sat down. She looked at the score as if Sera had said something that made it briefly legible again after a long time of it being written in a language she'd been told not to speak.

"The committee," Sera said. "When they returned it."

"There was no note," Elise said. "Not even a rejection. The score, the paper, the ribbon. As if it had never been opened."

Sera held this.

"I want to take this to a conductor," she said. "Not the committee. The conductor directly."

Elise looked at her. "Which conductor."

"Friedrich Haas."

A pause. "Haas is the principal conductor of the Court Opera," she said. "He does not accept direct approaches. He works through the committee, through the institutional—"

"I know," Sera said. "I'm not approaching him through the institution."

Elise held her gaze for a moment. She had the alertness of someone who had been disappointed before and had learned to spend her hope carefully.

"What makes you think he would listen?" she said.

"Because," Sera said, choosing her words with care, "I think he already has an opinion about what this city is not listening to. I think he's been waiting for a reason to act on it."

"People wait a long time for reasons," Elise said.

"Yes," Sera said. "They do."

She borrowed the score with Elise's permission. She walked back to the Schottengasse in the December cold with it under her arm and felt the weight of it — not the physical weight, which was slight, but the other kind.

What Lies Under the Form

She went to the Court Opera on a Tuesday afternoon.

Not to a performance — to the administrative offices, which were in the east wing and were staffed by people who had learned to protect the conductor's time with the precision of fortification. She asked for fifteen minutes with Herr Haas on a matter related to the evaluation project. She was told he had no time available.

She said she would wait.

She waited for two hours in the anteroom, which was furnished with the particular combination of opulence and discomfort that was the Austro-Hungarian Empire's gift to institutional waiting rooms: beautiful to look at, designed for brief occupancy, punishing to anyone who stayed.

He came out at five o'clock, saw her in the anteroom, and stopped.

"Miss Callow," he said.

"Herr Haas," she said. "I have something I'd like you to look at."

He looked at the score under her arm.

"The evaluation project—" he began.

"Is real," she said. "This is the piece." She held it out.

He looked at it. He did not take it yet.

"Whose work?" he said.

"Elise Hartmann," she said.

A beat. "Hartmann submitted to the committee in September," he said. "The committee reviewed—"

"The committee did not review it," she said. "The committee returned it without opening it." She kept her voice level. "I have read the score. I am not a conductor, so my opinion of what it requires technically is limited. My opinion of what it is, structurally and musically, is not. It is a significant piece of work."

He held her gaze. His expression was the one she had watched manage itself for three Thursday mornings at the Café Landtmann.

"Leave it," he said. "I will look at it."

"When?" she said.

The not-quite-smile again. "You are very direct, Miss Callow."

"I have fourteen weeks," she said. "Some of them have already been spent waiting."

"Thursday morning," he said. "The Café Landtmann. You know where it is."

He took the score and went back through the door.

She stood in the anteroom for a moment.

She did know where it was.

The Salon

On the evening between Tuesday and Thursday she attended a musical salon in the third district — the kind of Viennese social institution where the city's artistic life was conducted in drawing rooms rather than coffeehouses, with slightly better wine and considerably more performance.

The hostess was a woman named Katharina Freund, who was forty-five and ran her salon with the political precision of someone who understood that in a city where official institutions were controlled by a narrow class of men, the salon was one of the few spaces where the actual intellectual life of the city could happen.

Elise Hartmann was there. Sera had hoped she might be — Freund's salon was one of the few spaces in Vienna where Elise existed as a composer rather than as a curiosity.

At the piano portion of the evening, Elise played. A set of piano pieces — not the symphony, the chamber work. And what happened to the room when she played was the same thing that had happened to Sera in the coffeehouse on the first hearing: the work was beyond what its setting expected of it. The room adjusted itself; the conversation stopped; people who had been performing attention found themselves actually paying it.

When she finished, the room applauded with the warmth of a room that had been surprised into feeling something.

Friedrich Haas was there.

She had not expected him. He was standing at the back of the room — she saw him when she turned — with the score she'd given him two days ago visible under his arm. He had been holding it through the piano performance.

He caught her eye.

She crossed the room.

"You came," she said.

"Freund's salon is one of the—" He stopped. He looked at her with the expression she was learning — the management being briefly suspended. "I heard she would be playing tonight," he said.

"You read the score."

"Most of it." He was still looking at the piano, where Elise was speaking to the hostess. "It's — the formal structure is very correct. Almost defensively correct. And then in the second movement—" He stopped.

"It exceeds the frame," Sera said.

He turned and looked at her. Something shifted in his face — the particular shift of recognition, of someone finding the precise word for something they had been carrying.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that."

She looked at him. The formal evening dress, the contained posture, the face that had been assembled by discipline. And underneath, briefly visible: the man who sat at the Café Landtmann and heard what was being said to him and withheld the actual response.

"Herr Haas," she said. "What did you actually think of the Don Giovanni?"

He looked at her.

"You conducted it brilliantly," she said. "I was there. And it was—" she paused, "—correct. Almost defensively correct."

A silence. She'd used his own phrase back at him and they both knew it.

"That is an assessment," he said carefully, "I would not typically invite."

"I know," she said. "I'm inviting myself."

He looked at her for a long moment. Then, with the quality of a person

opening a door they had been considering opening for some time: "Come to the café Thursday morning. We'll discuss the score properly."

She nodded.

He moved away — social duty, the salon requiring his attention elsewhere. But he looked back, once, from across the room.

She filed this.

Thursday Morning

The café on Thursday was different from the café of the observation Thursdays.

He was already there when she arrived at nine — the same corner table, coffee, but no papers spread today. He was sitting with the score in front of him.

She sat across from him.

"Tell me what you heard," he said. Not *what do you think — what you heard.* The distinction was his.

She told him. The retrograde architecture of the themes. The way the D-minor opening that had been placed there defensively — give them the form they expect — was then gradually, across four movements, made into something else. The way the final movement didn't resolve so much as recontextualize: by the end, the opening theme had been so thoroughly worked that it came back not as the same thing but as evidence of everything that had happened to it.

"It's a symphony about transformation," she said. "Not triumph — transformation. The difference being that triumph is about arriving somewhere better than where you started, and transformation is about becoming something you couldn't have predicted."

He was holding his coffee cup and looking at her with the full, intent quality she had been watching manage itself for weeks and was now — here, at the corner table, over the score — present without management.

"The second movement," he said. "The sustained passage in the winds, starting at bar sixty-eight."

"Where it feels like it's going to resolve and doesn't."

"It delays the resolution for thirty-two bars," he said. "Thirty-two bars of — the orchestra holding a tension that has no release in sight. In a different

work that would be a failure of form. In this work—"

"It's the point," Sera said. "The tension is the content."

He looked at her.

"Yes," he said. "That is what I thought." He set down the score. "The committee did not open this."

"No," she said.

A pause. He looked at the table. "I did not know they had returned it. The committee has autonomy in the first review." He paused again. "I should have known."

"Yes," she said, without inflection.

He looked up at her. The directness again. He had, she was realizing, an internal precision that matched his external control — when he was accused of something valid, he accepted it rather than defended against it. The precision of a person who had trained himself to know the difference between an uncomfortable truth and a convenient excuse.

"What do you want me to do?" he said.

"Read the full score," she said. "And then decide honestly whether you believe it's significant."

"And if I do?"

"Then do what a principal conductor with the standing and the authority does," she said. "Champion it."

He held her gaze. "That is not a small thing to ask."

"I know," she said. "How long since someone asked you for something large?"

He was quiet for a moment. Something moved across his face — not the not-

quite-smile but something older and less managed.

"A long time," he said.

They sat at the corner table for two more hours. They talked about the score and they talked about Vienna and they talked about the specific difficulty of being an institution's representative while maintaining any private conviction about what the institution should do.

It was the most honest conversation she had been in since Paris.

She wrote in the personal journal that night: *He is not Théo. He is entirely himself. This is the obvious thing to say and it is also the thing I apparently needed to say.*

C-7

On the ninth day she found the trace.

It was in the Gesellschaft archive — the great card catalog of the Society of the Friends of Music, which held records stretching back decades. She had legitimate access; the evaluation project cover gave her broad research permissions.

She was looking for documentation related to Elise Hartmann's earlier submissions — specifically, whether the symphony had any prior record in the institutional system before the September committee submission. It was background work, the kind of thorough documentation an operative compiled when the deviation's source needed to be fully mapped.

She found, instead, a card for a manuscript submission from 1878 — three years earlier. A piano concerto, composer listed as E. Hartmann. The card notation indicated it had been received, evaluated, and returned.

Attached to the card: a note in a different hand from the archive cataloguer's. In English. A precise, small handwriting she didn't recognize.

The note read: *This work should not be overlooked. The formal structure is unorthodox but intentional. I have spoken to the committee on this occasion without result. For whoever comes after: the composer's full name is Elise, not simply E. She is twenty-five years old and she is writing the best work produced in Vienna right now. The system will not see it. Someone else will have to.*

Unsigned. Undated within the note, though the card was from 1878.

Bureau operative. English-language note, small precise handwriting, slipped into a Viennese archive where it would survive but not be official, the specific methodology of someone who was working within temporal constraints and trying to leave information for someone they knew would come.

The handwriting. She stared at it for a long time.

She pulled the compact mirror and opened the archive query. TCB Contact, Historical: Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna. Cross-reference: 1878.

The result: *TCB Contact, Historical. Operative identifier: C-7. Assignment date: 1878. Assignment classification: Closed.*

C-7 had been here in 1878. Three years before Sera's arrival. She had seen the piano concerto, spoken to the committee without result, and left a note in the archive for whoever came next.

C-7 had known someone was coming. She'd written directly to them.

Sera sat in the archive reading room with the small card in her hand and felt, across eighty-three years and the full technological apparatus of the Temporal Continuity Bureau, the precise sensation of not being alone.

She photographed the card with the compact mirror and returned it to the file.

She wrote in the personal journal: *She was here. She tried. She left me a map.* A pause. *Who is she? What happened to her in 1878? Did she fall in love here too?*

She wrote: *I am going to find out who C-7 is.*

What He Withholds

Friedrich Haas came back to the café the following Tuesday with a question she hadn't expected.

He sat down, ordered nothing, placed the score on the table and looked at her.

"Miss Callow," he said. "How is it that you read a musical score with the facility of a trained musician and yet you claim to be a musicologist's assistant rather than a musician yourself?"

She looked at him.

"I've been in the field long enough," she said.

"The field," he said.

"Musicology. The work."

He held her gaze. "You have the listening habits of a practitioner," he said. "Not a scholar. The way you described the retrograde architecture — that's not analytical description. That's the description of someone hearing it from the inside."

She held his gaze and said nothing, which was an answer she had learned was sometimes more accurate than language.

He let it go — not because he accepted the evasion, she thought, but because he recognized it. He too had practiced the art of the evasion that preserved the interior.

"I've read the full score," he said.

"And?"

"And it is—" He looked at the table. The pause of a person locating the accurate word. "It is the most alive piece of music that has crossed my

desk in five years."

She was still.

"That is not a small statement," she said.

"No," he said. "It is not."

"What will you do with it?"

He looked up. "That is the question." He held his coffee cup without drinking. "To champion this score in the context of the Court Opera would require—" He paused. "The committee. The Opera's board. The expectations of the audience, the critics, the—" He stopped. "The entire institutional weight of Viennese musical culture, which has very specific opinions about what a symphony is and who writes one."

"Yes," she said. "I know."

"You are asking me to swim against it."

"I'm asking you to decide whether you believe the work is worth it," she said. "That's a different question."

He looked at her. "Those are not different questions, Miss Callow."

"They are," she said. "The first question is about the cost. The second is about the value. You decide the value first. Then you count the cost. If you count the cost first, you've already decided the value isn't enough, and you're using the cost as permission."

He held her gaze for a long moment. The controlled expression, the managed interior. And then something — not the not-quite-smile, but something below it, something that was the face under the face.

"You are a very uncomfortable person to talk to," he said.

"I've been told that," she said. "Usually by people who prefer comfortable conversations."

"I don't prefer comfortable conversations," he said. "I've been having them for twelve years because my position requires it."

"I know," she said. "That's why I'm talking to you differently."

He looked at his coffee.

"Give me a week," he said. "I need to think about the approach."

"You have a week," she said. "After that, the window may be smaller."

"What window?"

She looked at him. "Miss Hartmann's patience," she said, which was accurate, and was not the only window she meant.

The Close

By the fourth week they were no longer conducting conversations — they were having them.

The distinction, which she felt precisely because she had been in conversations rather than having them for eleven previous assignments, was this: a conducted conversation had a purpose external to itself. A conversation that was being had existed in its own right, went where it went, and produced things that were not pre-planned.

Their conversations went everywhere. She had not expected this of him — the institutional profile had suggested a man of conservative precision. The man who showed up at the Café Landtmann every Thursday morning, who met her at concerts and at the Gesellschaft and once, by arrangement, at the Musikverein where they sat in the empty hall before a rehearsal and argued about Brahms for an hour, was someone who had been intellectually starved and was eating.

He had opinions about everything and had been not-expressing them for so long that the process of expressing them had a particular quality — the quality of a person discovering that what they actually thought was both more interesting and more uncomfortable than the position they'd been performing.

She found this — she was honest in the personal journal — very attractive.

She also found: the way he moved through Vienna. The city was his in a way that Paris had been Théo's — not possession but deep familiarity, the knowledge of a place that had formed you and that you'd been arguing with ever since. He knew which coffeehouse had the best Einspänner. He knew the specific quality of the light in the Stephansdom at three in the afternoon in December. He knew the city's rhythms and its stubbornness and its beauty and its specific capacity for burying things it didn't know how to process.

"You love this city," she said, one afternoon on the Ringstrasse in the cold.

"I have complicated feelings about this city," he said.

"That's what I said."

He looked at her sideways. That expression. She was cataloguing it now — the exact configuration of his face when he found her precisely right and didn't want to say so directly.

"Miss Callow," he said.

"We have been meeting daily for four weeks," she said. "I think you might call me Sarah."

A pause. "Sarah," he said.

Her cover name. She filed the specific quality of wanting him to use her actual name.

What She Carries Now

The personal journal was becoming less of a professional document and more of a private one.

She wrote: *I am carrying Paris and Vienna simultaneously. I did not expect this to be possible. I thought each assignment was its own closed room. What I am learning is that they are not — or rather, that I am not. I walk through Vienna thinking about harmony in a way I learned from Théo. I walk through Vienna thinking about what it means to believe in someone's work when the institution won't, which is a thing Elise Hartmann taught me. I walk through Vienna thinking about what it costs to maintain a careful performance of the correct self for twelve years, and this is something Friedrich has shown me without intending to.*

She paused in the writing.

She wrote: *I have not opened Théo's letters. I have thought about them every day.*

She wrote: *I think I am not opening them because I am afraid they will make it impossible to be here. To be present in each place as itself. The letters are from a different when. This is the when I'm in.*

She wrote: *This is going to be the pattern of my life, isn't it. Different cities. Different whens. Different people who—* She stopped.

She wrote: *Different people who see me.*

She put the journal down and looked at the ceiling of the Schottengasse pension, which had a water stain in one corner that was shaped like nothing in particular.

She picked up the journal.

She wrote: *Yes. And it is going to be worth it every time.*

The Resistance

Friedrich brought her the news on a Tuesday in the fifth week, sitting across from her at the Café Landtmann with the specific expression of a man who had done something and encountered the expected consequence.

"I raised Hartmann's symphony with the Opera's programming director," he said.

"And?"

"And he reminded me that the committee has reviewed all submissions for the current season and the programming is set." He paused. "He also—" He stopped.

"Tell me," she said.

"He also said that the submission of a work by a woman composer to the Court Opera was irregular and that its routing through the committee had been the appropriate institutional response to an irregular submission." He held her gaze. "He did not say 'returned without reading.' He said 'responded to appropriately.'"

Sera was still.

"He knows it wasn't read," she said.

"Almost certainly," Friedrich said. "And he does not consider this a problem."

She looked at her coffee.

"What will you do?" she said.

He was quiet for a moment. She watched him — the internal process of a person who had been maintaining a position for twelve years and was deciding, right now, in a café in Vienna in December, whether the position

still served its purpose.

"There are other venues," he said. "The Gesellschaft hosts a reading series — performances of new and unrecorded work, outside the official repertoire. Less formal. Less politically loaded than the Court Opera." He paused. "I have influence there."

"A reading would be—"

"Less than a full performance," he said. "Yes. But it would be a public hearing. It would put the work on record — formally, in a room full of Vienna's musical establishment, conducted by someone whose opinion they cannot easily dismiss." He looked at her. "It is the possible good rather than the impossible ideal."

She looked at him.

"Yes," she said. "That's the right thinking."

He held her gaze for a moment with the expression that was the face under the face.

"You approve," he said.

"I think you already know whether it's the right thing to do," she said. "You don't need my approval."

"No," he said. "But I find I want it."

The Evenings

The evenings were becoming specific.

After the fourth week they had developed a pattern that neither of them had established formally and both had shaped: after the day's work — his at the Opera, hers at the Gesellschaft or with Elise — they would meet in the late afternoon and walk. Vienna in December in the late afternoon was dark by four o'clock and the city responded to the darkness with the Viennese solution of warmth: the coffeehouses lit, the restaurants open, the particular amber quality of gaslamp light on cobblestone.

They walked and talked. This was, she was aware, the most normal thing she had done in four years — the ordinary life of two people who had found each other's company necessary and were conducting that necessity through the simple act of being in the same place at the end of the day.

She was also aware that this was specifically *not* normal. She was from the future. He was from 1881. She would leave. He would not know she was leaving because — and this was the thing she was not ready to address yet — she had not told him the truth the way she had told Théo.

She had told Théo because he had heard the space around what she said and asked directly. Friedrich had not asked directly. He had accepted the cover with the specific grace of someone who knew a person was not fully present in their story and had decided to trust them anyway.

Which meant, she was realizing, that she owed him the truth more rather than less.

She told him on the fourth Saturday.

They were at the Musikverein — after a concert, in the marble lobby, the crowd thinning. She looked at him in the amber light and said: "Friedrich. There's something I need to tell you about why I'm actually in Vienna."

And she told him. The way she'd told Théo — two hours, a table, the slow architecture of a truth that needed careful construction.

He listened without interrupting.

When she finished, the lobby was empty.

He sat with it for a long time. She waited.

"The symphony," he said finally. "It needs to survive for — all that."

"Yes," she said.

"And you were sent here to ensure it survived."

"Yes."

He looked at his hands. "And you have eight weeks left," he said.

"Eight weeks and four days," she said.

He held his hands loosely on the table. The precise, controlled hands of a conductor — the tools of his specific mastery.

"In Paris," he said. "The assignment before this one."

She looked at him. She had mentioned Paris in the course of telling him — the structure of the Bureau, the previous assignment.

"Yes?" she said.

"Did you—" He stopped. "Did you fall in love."

She held his gaze. "Yes," she said.

He nodded, once. "And you are telling me this now because you are — going to again," he said. He said it flatly, without accusation. Just precision.

"I think," she said carefully, "that the question is not prediction but permission." She held his gaze. "I'm not going to fall in love with you as a consequence of my assignment. That's — not what's happening. What's happening is that I have been in your company for a month and I have

found you—" She stopped. Found the word. "Necessary," she said. "And I won't do what that implies without being honest about what I am."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Thank you," he said. Not the social thanks — the real kind.

"Well?" she said.

The not-quite-smile. "Well," he said. "Eight weeks and four days." He picked up his coat. "We should not waste them, then."

The Night

It was different from Paris.

Paris had been the discovery of an interior that had been waiting to be found — the slow revelation of a person who was fully himself once the frame around him was right. Vienna was the discovery of something that had been constrained and was now, in the space she'd helped to open, exercising itself.

He was a formally composed person who was, in private, the opposite — not chaotic, but alive in a way that the formal exterior made no room for. When the formal exterior was down — and she had watched it come down gradually over five weeks, the performance of correctness losing its grip in proportion to the amount of time he spent in honest conversation — he was warmer, more immediate, more willing to be surprised than she'd expected.

What surprised him: she surprised him regularly. He had been in rooms full of brilliant people for twelve years and had maintained the performance of appropriate deference, and now he was with someone who was from two hundred and thirty years in the future and was not performing deference to anything, and the combination was, she could see, something he was finding difficult to contain.

She found this — she was honest with herself and with the journal — very difficult to contain herself.

The evening they stayed in the apartment on the Schottengasse rather than going out — the sixth week, a night of snow, the city outside blurred and quiet — was not planned. They had been to a concert and come back to the pension to warm up before he left, and then it had been later than either of them had noticed, and the warmth of the room had made the cold outside seem unnecessary, and at some point the tea she'd made was cold and neither of them had noticed.

He looked at her across the small table in the pension room — the same kind of sparse, functional space the Bureau placed her in every time, the room that asked nothing — and said, with the direct precision that was the

thing about him she had found most purely herself: "I find I don't want to leave."

"I know," she said.

"That's a problem."

"Only if we treat it as one," she said.

He looked at her with the face under the face — entirely present, the performance gone, the man who had been conducting the correct character for twelve years and had found, over six weeks and daily conversations and four hours of arguing about Brahms and all the evenings on the Ringstrasse, that the correct character was no longer the most interesting version of events.

She reached across the table.

The snow outside made the room quiet in the way that snow does — absorbed, muffled, the city temporarily made gentle. The lamp on the table threw its amber light. And in the amber light, the formal, armored, carefully composed Friedrich Haas was simply a man who looked at her with the full weight of what he felt and didn't manage it.

She had not known, until Paris, that being looked at like that was something she'd wanted. She knew it now.

He came around the table.

The snow fell outside. The city was quiet. The room was warm.

What He Reads

He read the full score in a single sitting on a Saturday in the seventh week, alone in the Musikverein's rehearsal room, with a piano for the passages he needed to hear rather than see.

Sera knew this because he told her afterward — they had established, by then, the particular domestic transparency of two people who had run out of reasons to maintain professional distance, and he told her things the way she'd learned to tell him things: with the directness of someone who had decided that clarity was more respectful than tact.

He came to find her at the Gesellschaft archive at four in the afternoon, knocked on the reading room door, came in, and sat down.

He had the score.

"The last movement," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"She brings everything back," he said. "Every theme from the previous three movements, transformed." He paused. "The D-minor opening theme — the defensive one, the one that was giving them the form they expected — she brings it back in the last movement and it's — it's been worked on so thoroughly that it's become—" He stopped.

"What?" she said.

"Free," he said. "It comes back free."

She looked at him.

"Yes," she said. "That's exactly what it is."

He set the score on the table. He looked at her with an expression she was memorizing in the way she was memorizing the Schottengasse pension ceiling and the quality of Viennese afternoon light in December and the

sound of Friedrich Haas saying her name across a café table.

"I'm going to conduct the reading," he said. "At the Gesellschaft. Publicly. With my name on the program."

"When?" she said.

"Three weeks," he said. "I need two weeks of preparation and then a week's notice for the announcement."

Three weeks. She had five weeks left.

"Yes," she said. "That's enough time."

"For the reading," he said. "Not for—" He stopped.

"I know," she said.

He reached across the table — the archive table, the reading room, the February 2157 equivalent of a room that needed to hold the weight of this — and took her hand.

"I'm aware," he said, "that you have three assignments ahead of this one. At least."

"Yes," she said.

"And that each of them is—" He paused.

"Another when," she said. "Yes."

He held her hand. The conductor's hands — precise, practiced, used to holding something that needed care.

"I want you to know," he said, "that this—" He stopped. Started over. "You gave me something back," he said. "Before the symphony, before Hartmann. You came into the Café Landtmann and looked at me and said the things I had been not-saying for twelve years and I—" He stopped. "I had forgotten what it felt like to think a true thought out loud."

She looked at him.

"Don't thank me for that," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because the true thoughts were already there," she said. "I didn't give you those. I just—"

"Made it safe to say them," he said.

"Or unsafe not to," she said. "I think that's more accurate."

He smiled. Not the not-quite-smile. The actual one. She had seen it three times and was going to see it again — but she was also keeping count.

Elise

She brought the news to Elise on a Tuesday.

Elise opened the door of the apartment on the Alsergrund and looked at Sera with the expression of a woman who had been here before — who had held the expectation and been disappointed and had trained herself to reduce the expectation in advance of the disappointment.

Sera told her.

Elise stood in the doorway.

"Haas," she said.

"Yes," Sera said. "He read the full score on Saturday. He wants to conduct the reading himself. His name on the program."

Elise was still. The stillness had a different quality from the stillness Sera had read in her across four weeks of conversations — the stillness not of suppression but of absorbing something too large to react to immediately.

"Why?" she said. Not the suspicious *why*, the real one. "He has nothing to gain from this."

"He believes the work," Sera said. "And I think—" She paused. "I think he has been waiting for a reason to do something he believes in rather than something the institution finds appropriate."

Elise looked at her for a long moment. "You did this," she said. "You brought it to him."

"I brought him the score," Sera said. "What he decided about it was his."

Elise turned and went back into the apartment. She crossed to the piano — the upright against the wall, the instrument that was, Sera had come to understand, the space where Elise was most fully herself. She sat. She put her hands on the keys.

She played the opening of the symphony's first movement. The D-minor theme — the defensive form, the frame she'd given them because she knew they'd be looking for reasons to dismiss her.

Sera sat in the chair by the window and listened.

"I was going to burn it," Elise said, while she played. Her voice was flat, matter-of-fact.

"I know," Sera said.

"The committee—" She stopped playing. "Not even a note. The ribbon still tied. I had written — I had spent two years—" She pressed a chord. Released it. "I thought: if this is what it means to have made it, then perhaps the making was the mistake."

Sera thought about C-7's note in the archive. *For whoever comes after: the composer's full name is Elise. She is twenty-five and she is writing the best work produced in Vienna right now.*

C-7 had been here three years earlier. Had tried and failed. Had left a note for whoever would come next. Had trusted that someone would.

"Can I tell you something?" Sera said.

Elise looked at her.

"There will be a time," Sera said, "when this work is not an irregular submission to a committee that doesn't open it. When the full name on the score is not a problem but a fact. When the people studying it—" She stopped. She was getting close to the timeline. She backed up. "The work exists because you made it. Whether it's heard now or later — the making was not the mistake. The making is the thing that survives."

Elise held her gaze for a long moment.

"You know something," she said. "Something you're not telling me."

"Yes," Sera said. "I know the music survives. I can't tell you how I know."

Elise looked at the piano keys.

"That is—" She stopped. "That is the strangest comfort I have ever been offered," she said. "And it is also the best." She put her hands back on the keys. "Tell Herr Haas I will come to the rehearsal."

The Letters

On the last Tuesday before the reading, Sera opened the compact mirror and queried the Bureau archive.

She had been composing the query for eight weeks. Specifically: she wanted to know if the Bureau would allow an operative in the field to access the twelve letters that were waiting in the archive under her clearance.

The answer came back in the seventy-two-hour sync: *Field access to personal correspondence archive items is outside standard protocol. Requested access may be granted at Director Moss's discretion upon return from active assignment.*

She looked at this for a while.

She was not surprised. She had been using the query as a way of asking herself what she wanted, and the answer she'd arrived at across eight weeks was: she wanted to carry the letters rather than read them. The letters existed — that was enough. They were there, waiting, the full evidence of what had been. She would read them when she was ready.

She didn't know when that would be.

She put the compact mirror down and looked at the snow outside the pension window. The same snow that had been falling intermittently for three weeks, the way snow did in Vienna, without apology.

Friedrich knocked an hour later.

She opened the door.

He was in his outdoor coat with a small book under his arm — something he'd mentioned wanting to show her, a volume of Viennese musical history that had a footnote he found wrong and wanted her opinion on. He held it up.

She laughed.

He came in.

They sat at the table where they always sat, the book between them, and argued about the footnote and then about the thing the footnote was addressing and then about something else entirely, and outside the snow fell in its Viennese way, and she thought: *this is the texture of it. This is what I'll carry.*

Not the formal Friedrich of the first weeks, the man assembling the correct expression. The man who came to her pension with a book under his arm to argue about a footnote because he'd been thinking about it and wanted to think about it out loud with her.

"You're quiet," he said.

"I was thinking about carrying things," she said.

He looked at her. He had learned, across eight weeks, to hear the space around what she said — not the way Théo had heard it, which was the hearing of someone for whom music was the primary language, but his own way, the hearing of a person who had learned precision in the service of truth. "What kind of things?" he said.

"The things from each—" She paused. "From each time I've been somewhere."

"Paris," he said.

"And here," she said. "What I've learned here." She looked at him. "About what it costs to do the right thing when the institution says it's irregular. About how long someone can perform the correct version of themselves before it costs them something real." She paused. "About you."

He held her gaze.

"I'm going to go back," she said. "And I'm going to go somewhere else after that. And somewhere else after that." She paused. "And I want you to know

that this—" She stopped. "You are not a stop between the assignments. You are not—" She stopped.

"Sera," he said.

She looked at him.

"I know what this is," he said. "I knew what it was from the night in the lobby when you told me." He held her gaze. "I am not asking you to stay. I would like you to, but I am not asking, because asking would be—" He stopped. "It would be making my wanting more important than your work. And your work matters."

She looked at him.

"It matters to Elise Hartmann," he said. "And to a woman named Léa Fontaine who doesn't exist yet. And to whatever happens after her." He paused. "And the fact that you do it — that you come into these places and find the thing that needs protecting and protect it—" He stopped. "I am not sorry you came," he said. "I am sorry you are going."

"Yes," she said. "Me too."

He reached over and took her hand.

Outside, the snow fell in the dark.

The Reading

The reading at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde took place on a Thursday afternoon in the third week of December.

The program listed: *Symphony in D Minor. Elise Hartmann. Conducted by Friedrich Haas, Principal Conductor, Vienna Court Opera.*

The room: the Brahms-Saal, the smaller hall, which held an audience of two hundred and was full. The Viennese musical establishment, invited by Friedrich with the specific directness of someone who had twelve years of goodwill stored up and was spending some of it.

Sera sat in the third row.

The orchestra — an ensemble drawn from the Court Opera, who had rehearsed for two weeks with an efficiency that Friedrich had enforced with the focused intensity of a man who had decided to believe in something and was not interested in wasted time — tuned.

Elise Hartmann sat in the front row. She was wearing the same dress she'd worn at the Bösendorfer Hall in November — the practical musician's dress, nothing elaborate. She was holding her program with both hands and not reading it.

Friedrich came out.

He stood at the podium.

He looked at the orchestra. Then he looked at the audience. Then — just for a moment, so briefly that it existed more in her memory than in the room — he looked at Sera.

She looked back.

He raised his baton.

The symphony began.

It was not a polished performance — a reading was not a premiere, had no pretension to being a premiere. There were moments of roughness, of ensemble hesitation, of the orchestra still finding the unfamiliar logic of the score. But the logic was there, and it was doing what it had done when she'd read it on the page in Elise's apartment: it exceeded its frame.

By the second movement — the thirty-two bars of suspended resolution, the tension held without release — the room was paying the kind of attention that doesn't come from politeness.

By the third movement it was quiet in the way the Café Landtmann had gone quiet when Elise played at Freund's salon.

The fourth movement. Everything returned — all four movements' worth of themes, transformed, and then the D-minor opening, defensive and formal, brought back free.

When it ended, the room was still for a moment.

Then it applauded.

Not the polite Viennese applause of a room doing its social duty. The real kind.

Friedrich turned and looked at Elise in the front row. He stepped down from the podium and crossed to her and offered his hand and she stood and the room kept applauding and Sera sat in the third row with her hands folded and did not perform anything because the expression on Elise Hartmann's face was not a thing that required a performance from anyone else.

The Last Morning

She had two days.

She spent them the way she'd learned to spend the last days — fully present, not cataloguing for the field log but simply inside the time as itself.

On the first day she went to the Gesellschaft archive and verified the thread: the score was now in the Society's formal collection, catalogued under Elise Hartmann's full name, with Friedrich Haas's signed notation of the reading in the accompanying documentation. The archive would hold it. The musicologist's monograph would find it in 1927. The chain was intact.

She wrote in the field log: *Deviation corrected. Symphony preserved. Thread secured.*

On the second day she spent the morning with Elise.

They sat in the apartment on the Alsergrund, coffee, the piano in its corner. Elise had started writing — Sera could see the new manuscript pages on the writing table, the first sketch of something that was not the symphony. Something new.

"What is it?" Sera asked.

"A string quartet," Elise said. "I have four things I want to say that the symphony didn't say." She paused. "It turns out that once the first door opens—"

"There are more," Sera said.

"Yes," Elise said. She looked at her. "You're leaving soon."

"Yes."

"Will you come back?"

"I don't choose the assignments," Sera said. "But I hope so." She paused.

"There's someone who came here before me," she said. "In 1878. A woman. She saw your piano concerto and she tried to advocate for it."

Elise was still. "I don't remember—"

"You wouldn't have known who she was," Sera said. "She was working indirectly. She left a note in the Gesellschaft archive, for whoever came next. For me." She paused. "I wanted you to know that you've been seen for longer than the last three months."

Elise looked at her hands.

"Who was she?" she said.

"I don't know her name," Sera said. "Not yet." She paused. "I'm going to find out."

She left the apartment at noon and walked back to the Schottengasse through the December Vienna cold, past the Ringstrasse buildings making their argument about civilization, through the Stadtpark where she'd arrived, and thought: *this city is going to be magnificent and terrible and complicated and it has produced Elise Hartmann and Friedrich Haas and a note left in an archive by someone I am determined to find.*

Friedrich came at seven.

They didn't go out. They stayed in the pension room with wine and the book about the wrong footnote and a conversation that moved through everything they hadn't gotten to yet and some things they had, and at some point the wine was done and the candle was lower and neither of them wanted to be the one to say what was next.

"Friedrich," she said.

"I know," he said.

She looked at him in the low light — the formal man, entirely gone. The man who had been managing his interior for twelve years and had spent eight weeks thinking true thoughts out loud and was going to have to decide,

after she left, what to do with the habit of it.

"The symphony isn't the last thing that needs advocating for in this city," she said. "You know that."

"Yes," he said.

"The habit you've built — of saying what you actually think—"

"I know," he said. "I'll use it."

She looked at him.

"Will you?" she said. Not doubt — the question she'd learned to ask, the one that wasn't about the answer but about making the person account for their own intention.

He held her gaze. "Yes," he said. "I will."

She believed him.

Epilogue: Two Records

The first record is official.

Symphony in D Minor by Elise Hartmann, premiered at the Vienna Court Opera in the season of 1884, conducted by Friedrich Haas, to reviews that were divided along the lines one would predict and enthusiastic from the portions of the Viennese press that were prepared to be enthusiastic. The work entered the repertoire intermittently through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was rediscovered in the postwar period, and is currently performed approximately forty times annually by orchestras worldwide. The TCB musicological archive designates it as Timeline-Critical, Classification Level Four.

The second record is unofficial.

In the Bureau archive, held under Operative Calloway's clearance, there are now two sets of letters.

The first set: twelve letters, handwritten in French, 1926–1934. Théodore Aubert. Still waiting.

The second set: one letter, handwritten in German, dated March 1882, addressed to *Miss Sarah Callow, care of the British Musicological Association, London* — which was the address in the cover documentation, the address that didn't exist, except that the Bureau's historical logistics network had, apparently, been maintaining a letter-drop there for exactly this kind of correspondence for forty years.

The letter reads, in part:

I have been thinking about something you said: that the true thoughts were already there. That you didn't give them to me, you only made it unsafe not to say them.

I have been conducting unsafe thoughts since February. The board has noticed. The programming committee has been reorganized. Elise Hartmann has three new works premiering this season, one at the Court

Opera and two at the Gesellschaft. I mention this not to claim the credit, which belongs to the work, but because I want you to know that the habit you gave me has had — as you would say — certain downstream effects.

I have also been thinking about the woman from 1878. The one who left the note for you. I have a theory about who she was — I found a record of an English woman visiting Vienna in the summer of 1878, registered at a pension on the Wipplingerstrasse, purpose of visit listed as research. Her name in the register was different from yours. But the handwriting in the archive note — I found it, looked again — has the quality of someone from your world. Someone trained the way you are trained.

If I am right, she was here before you. She tried, and couldn't do enough, and left you a map. And then she went somewhere else. And you came.

This seems to me to be — not tragic. The right word is something else. Purposeful. A chain of people who cared about the same thing, doing what they could in the time they had.

I think that is what you do. I think it is extraordinary. I wanted you to know I think so.

— Friedrich

The archive note appended to this letter, in Moss's handwriting: *Delivered to Operative Calloway's file per temporal recovery protocol. Recommend operative be informed of correspondence.*

She has been informed.

She has not yet opened either set.

The archive notes this without judgment.

Book One: 1925 Paris. Théodore Aubert. *Twelve letters, waiting.* **Book Two:** 1881 Vienna. Friedrich Haas. *One letter, waiting. And the identity of C-7 getting closer.* **Book Three:** The final assignment — the one that brings Sera home. The letters. The truth about C-7. The question of whether a woman who moves through time can find a place to stop.

Every When: The Vienna Letters
by Lenora Vale

The rule every Meridian operative breaks is Rule Seven. The letters all get delivered. Eventually, she reads them.