# 7 . . . Venice

One day in July of 1983, I happened to call Willie Ruff and he mentioned that he was about to go to Italy for a few weeks. I assumed that he was going for a vacation, or to see friends, or to practice his Italian—the usual reasons. But then I remembered that with Ruff there are no usual reasons, and I asked him the purpose of his trip.

"I'm going to Venice to play Gregorian chants on my French horn in St. Mark's cathedral at night when nobody else is there," he said. "I'll take my tape recorder along and make a tape of what I play."

That was a sound I knew I would like to hear and a sight I would like to see. But why Venice?

"Venice was the center of the musical world in the 1500s and 1600s," Ruff said, "and that was mainly because of the remarkable acoustics in St. Mark's. It's where a very important style of polyphonic music began. The great innovative composers of the period were Venetians—the Gabrielis, Zarlino, Monteverdi—and what inspired them was this church that gave incredible richness and clarity to what they wrote. I want to know what that sound is like."

I asked Ruff how the idea of making this pilgrimage had come to him.

"It goes back to my student days at Yale," he said, "when I studied with Paul Hindemith. Hindemith had totally immersed himself in the history of music, and he insisted that students coming to work with him do the same. He introduced us to all this fabulous music that had come out of Venice and he made us see what a crucial bridge it was to everything that followed. He was also deeply interested in the history of science. He talked very forcefully in his lectures about the scientists of the old world who got involved in music theory—especially Johannes Kepler, who was his hero. He spent twenty years writing an opera about Kepler's life. He said that if Kepler hadn't been a musical theorist as well as a mathematician he might not have discovered the three laws of planetary motion that are still milestones in the natural sciences."

I already knew about the Hindemith–Kepler connection. At Yale I had heard Ruff talk about how Hindemith excited him with Kepler's "music of the spheres"—the theory that musical principles are involved in the paths that the planets take around the sun. In 1619, in a book called *The Harmony of the World,* Kepler described the consonances that the orbiting planets would make, but there was no way to test the theory. With the advent of the computer, however, Ruff saw a way to bring the music of the spheres down to earth. In 1978 he enlisted the help of an eminent Yale geologist, Professor John Rodgers, and they fed formulas into a computer-

synthesizer instructing it to generate the frequencies that Kepler published. The resulting LP record of Kepler's "music," widely reported in the press, has since sold thousands of copies to science buffs everywhere, especially in Japan. Ruff mails them out from the Yale post office and puts the proceeds into the Duke Ellington fellowships.

Now, as Ruff talked about Hindemith and the acoustics in St. Mark's, the rest of the connection was falling into place, and I saw what was drawing him there. I asked if I could join him. He reminded me that he didn't have permission to play in St. Mark's and didn't know if he could get it. I reminded him that he didn't have any assurance when we left for Shanghai that he and Mitchell would be allowed to play in China; I would take my chances. Ruff said he hoped to reach Venice in about a week. I said I'd meet him there.

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I was in Italy during World War II and have been back many times since. Of all foreign countries it's the one I know best. But Venice to me is a different country altogether—an Eastern place, perched so far out on Italy's eastern rim that it has slid into the water. I still remember my surprise as a soldier when I first saw the gaudy striped cathedrals of Pisa and Siena, with their playful colors and glittering gold mosaics. How had such exotic notions pushed their way into the pious architecture of Tuscany? "Byzantine," the guides said. "Trade routes from the East," they said. "From Venice," they said. After the war, when I finally got to Venice and saw

St. Mark's basilica and its five Byzantine domes, I felt no kinship with the Italy I knew. Something old and mysterious was at work there.

Only once did I feel that I was in touch with the city, and that was when I was leaving it by boat. I had always wanted to visit Jerusalem, and it was important to me to approach the Holy Land by sea, slowly and with some preparation. I didn't want to get into a jet plane in New York and wake up in Israel. Rummaging in the travel ads, I found a car ferry that left Venice on Wednesday evening and reached Haifa on Sunday morning, stopping at Piraeus and Limassol. That was the boat for me. I had first seen the Mediterranean from North Africa, when I was stationed in Algiers and Oran, and I have loved Mediterranean ports ever since for their ancient mixture of races. A car ferry to Israel was therefore the answer to many old stirrings, and on that Wednesday evening, just before sunset, as my boat sailed out into the Adriatic past Venice, the crazy city finally made sense to me. It was a creature of the Levant, and that was where I was going.

Now, in 1983, I was back, bringing emotional baggage of my own to my rendezvous with Ruff. I had cabled him the name of the hotel where I would be staying, and when I checked in I asked if there was a message for me. The concierge brightened.

"You should call Mister Willie," he said, handing me a piece of paper with a number on it. I did, and got Ruff, and he came over and we found a table overlooking the Grand Canal where we could eat and talk. Again, it was almost sun-

down. Ruff chatted with the waiter in fluent Italian. He had been in Venice almost two days, he said, and he already knew his way around the convoluted streets and canals. He had also spent some time in St. Mark's, getting the feel of the place, and he was eager to tell me about it. But first I had to know more about the various forces that had gone into his being here now.

"In my first year as a music student at Yale," Ruff recalled, "I was required to take a very boring history-of-music course. We were taught all about the Catholic church service, and being an Alabama Baptist I wasn't too interested in that. The professor was one of those teachers who never tell you *why* you're being made to study something. He made us learn all the old liturgical modes from a book called the *Liber Usualis* and translate them into modern notation. Later, of course, that turned out to be very valuable because those modes were so central to how Europe developed its secular harmony. But I had no inkling of their importance at the time.

"In my second year I was allowed to sign up for a course with Hindemith, and it was on the history of the theory of music. After that introductory course I never wanted to hear another word about the history of music. But Hindemith was my whole reason for being at Yale. Back in Columbus I had seen an interview with Charlie Parker in which he was asked, 'If you could take a year and do anything at all, how would you spend the year?' He said there was a cat at Yale named Paul Hindemith and that he'd like to go and work with him. Hindemith's music was becoming known to inno-

vative jazzmen, especially his *Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes by Weber,* which has a strong jazz flavoring. His own instrument was the viola, but he had supported himself by playing drums in a jazz band in hotels all over Europe before coming to the United States in 1939. Anyway, what Charlie Parker said stuck with me, and when my horn teacher in Columbus, Abe Kniaz, also insisted that I go to Yale so I could study with Hindemith, that settled it."

Ruff recalls Hindemith as a short, round, bald man who was jovial when he was pleased—a condition that evidently didn't occur often. "He'd get angry if you performed sloppily and he'd swear at you in German and throw things at you," Ruff said. "I remember he emptied a music stand at one trumpet player. He threw every item at him, one by one—every sheet of music, the pencil, and the stand itself. Just ran him off the stage."

But when Hindemith taught the history of music, Ruff forgot that he hated the history of music. "He made it *live,*" Ruff said. "He was a nut on the necessity for the person who was going to make music his life—not his living; his *life*—to be in touch with the musical past that made the present possible. The way he did it was to make us experience old music by performing it. He wanted us to actually *hear* it. He would organize programs of very early music, and those of us who were in his class had to play it and sing it. If the old instruments were still available, like the krumhorn and the sackbut, we'd use those.

"The music of St. Mark's was central to what Hindemith

was trying to teach us. It also turned out to be the music that spoke most directly to me, maybe because of the luxurious sound that Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli achieved in their polychoral compositions." The Gabrielis, uncle and nephew, successively dominated the music of Venice in the late 1500s, giving the city a renown as the center of European music that lasted well into the Baroque era, perpetuated by such composers as Monteverdi and Vivaldi. The Gabrielis wrote for vast choirs of voices and instruments, which sang and played antiphonally from opposite lofts of St. Mark's cathedral. Hindemith, knowing that the acoustics of St. Mark's had inspired the Gabrielis to reach for such remarkable effects, tried to approximate the sound by having his class sing and play the Gabrielis' music from the balconies of Sprague Hall, one of Yale's music auditoriums. Once he even took Ruff's class to New York to play in the huge entrance hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"When we played that music of the Venetian school," Ruff said, "it moved me harmonically, and rhythmically it thrilled me to my roots. Under Hindemith's direction it had none of that tight-assed, choirmaster, metronome strictness. It was performed with the kind of rhythmic abandon that's common in the jazz world. What Hindemith did was to make me know that I had to discard nothing of my own cultural past. I've had a fascination with that music ever since. I knew that someday I wanted to play it in a place that was architecturally interesting and that also had some connection with the music I'm involved with now."

That connection was revealed to Ruff when he came upon a recording of a concert that Paul Robeson had given at Carnegie Hall in 1958. Robeson, who could sing folk songs in many languages, demonstrated that the folk music of widely disparate countries comes from a common source. He sang an American Negro spiritual, an East African tribal chant, a thirteenth-century plain chant from Czechoslovakia and an old Jewish chant from the Near East that were strikingly similar. "I had known that American spirituals were a source of wonder in Europe when they were first performed there by touring choirs like the Fisk Jubilee Singers," Ruff said. "They were just close enough to the Europeans' own folk songs and to their religious music to be strangely familiar.

"Robeson's point was that it all ties in—that the folk music of huge areas of the world is compatible. And he asked, 'Why is this so?' He said it was because the Abyssinian church and the church of the Sudan were a part of the Eastern church of Byzantium. Therefore, music from many parts of Africa and the Near East found its way into the liturgy of the early Byzantine church and subsequently filtered out into Europe."

There it has popped up in odd pockets ever since, often to the surprise of its discoverers. It was the folk music that Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály found, for instance, when they went to remote villages of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the early 1900s to collect peasant songs—and that Bartók later incorporated so vividly in his own work. The songs were based on old Greek ecclesiastical modes and on penta-

tonic scales from Central Asia, which, Bartók said, freed him from "the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys." Thus Bartók was listening to Slovakian plain chants long before Robeson picked up the trail from another direction, and now Ruff had picked it up from Robeson.

"Suddenly it hit me," he said, "that what I wanted to do was to play my horn in St. Mark's. But what would I play? I realized that I'd have to go back to the *Liber Usualis,* the book that I couldn't wait to sell after my first year at Yale. So I took it out of the Yale music library and started learning the material again. *Liber Usualis* means 'the book of use,' referring to the hymns and chants that have been most used in the Catholic liturgy. These in turn were colored by the music of the Byzantine church. So what I'll be playing in St. Mark's is sacred music that goes back to the Middle Ages and that fits directly into this church. That whole stream of music came through here and was waiting for the Venetian masters to develop it. Those sacred chants are also at the core of my spirituals, as Robeson made me realize, so I'm going to play some of them, too."

Before coming to Venice, Ruff had stopped off in Rome. He attended an early Sunday morning Mass in St. Peter's and a later one in Santa Maria Maggiore, taping the Gregorian chants in those two historic churches because he wanted to know how they are used in the liturgy today. Then he went on to Venice, where he had never been before.

"As soon as I got off the *vaporetto,*" he said, "I felt that this was where I should be." He checked into his hotel and

went around to see St. Mark's before it closed. "The place was full of tourists," Ruff said, "and I walked around clapping my hands to test the echoes while everyone else was looking at the mosaics. There are five enormous domes—and domes are interesting musically. What is it that's so *balanced* in that church? Today I went back and just sat and looked and listened. I eavesdropped on the different sightseeing tours, trying to hear what the guides were saying about the church's history. I heard tours in English, German, Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese, and not one of the guides mentioned one word about the music. Everybody in St. Mark's was on a visual trip. I was the only person there who was listening for a distant sound."

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The next morning Ruff set out on his mission systematically. His first goal was to get permission to play in St. Mark's. He had consulted various Catholic scholars before leaving the United States, and they agreed that a sum in the neighborhood of 50,000 lire, or forty dollars, would probably be persuasive. One of them, a student of canon law, said that the proper word to use in such a transaction was *offerta*. Ruff also had a letter from Yale University attesting that he was a member of the faculty on a scholarly quest.

Ruff's second goal was to study the acoustics of Venice's other churches before playing in St. Mark's. "I want to visit as many as I can in the next few days," he said, "and play some Gregorian chants on my horn when nobody else is

there. Otherwise I won't have any basis of comparison. All I know is that St. Mark's is different from the other churches here. What I need to know is *how.*"

Thus primed for the day's conquests, we went forth into the city. Even in midmorning St. Mark's square had no shortage of its two main commodities: tourists and pigeons. If Venice is sinking, it is not from the weight of time but from the weight of sightseers. We walked across the vast piazza toward the bulky presence of St. Mark's cathedral, anchoring the square at its eastern end, as it has since 1067. We joined the throngs pushing their way in. (During the summer, 25,000 tourists a day enter the church.)

I stood in the nave and looked up at the huge domes, thinking of them for the first time as hollowed space, conducive to sound. The five domes form a Greek cross—three over the nave and one over each transept. Ruff had told me that music hates opposite walls and 90-degree angles. St. Mark's, I now saw, was a temple of rounded surfaces—not only the domes, but the Romanesque arches that they rest on and that also frame the upper balconies, where the Gabrielis placed their antiphonal choirs.

Ruff asked a guard if he could talk to someone connected with the church, and we were led through several dark corridors to the office of a monsignor. He was a suave, silver-haired man who had the look of Venetian nobility. He also had the look of someone who was adroit at his job of screening petitioners and turning them away. Ruff seemed nervous—not sure that his Italian was good enough to explain

the complexities of his project. "I hope he speaks English," he said to me.

The monsignor greeted Ruff with a politeness that was neither warm nor cold and waited for him to state his business. Ruff began by introducing himself. (The conversation had just enough fragments of familiar Italian so that I could piece it together.) Ruff presented his elegant letter from Yale with its university seal. The monsignor said he didn't speak English and handed the letter back. Ruff pressed on, extolling the musical glories of Venice. I heard the sonorous words *acustica* and *armonica* and *eco* and *Gabrieli*. The monsignor seemed unmoved by the musical glories of Venice. He asked Ruff how he proposed to study the acoustics of St. Mark's. Ruff said he wanted to play his French horn in the balconies and in the nave. Fine, the monsignor said. Go ahead. Play. Ruff said he meant that he wanted to play alone, at night, when the church wasn't full of people. The monsignor shrugged. It was the Latin shrug that needs no translating. He said he couldn't give permission for such a request. Ruff asked who *could* give permission. The monsignor shrugged again, his hands spread wide in the classic position of helplessness. He said maybe the *arcidiacono*. The strange word fell into our midst like a stone. Ruff asked if he meant the archdiocese, and what city was that in? Where would he have to go? Rome? Milan? But the interview was suddenly over and we were back out in the corridor, and then we were back out in St. Mark's square, blinking in the bright Mediterranean sun. "I never even got to mention the *offerta*," Ruff said.

Ruff didn't waste any time bemoaning his fate. He had been given one word—*arcidiacono*—and that was enough. Now he was eager to get started on his next project: playing in Venice's other churches. He had made a list of them, and for his first test he selected a church called San Rocco, on the other side of the Grand Canal, which he had heard was quite deserted. We walked to his hotel to get his horn and then made our way through a maze of alleys to San Rocco, Ruff moving with the agility of a native son.

At the church, his research turned out to be correct. Only two or three people were in the nave, and they were finishing their prayers and would soon be gone. Ruff told me he would wait until the church was empty—he didn't want to disturb or offend anyone. Meanwhile he got out his *Liber Usualis* and opened it to a hymn called the "Pange Lingua," which he said was one of the oldest and most beautiful melodies in the book. Finally the last worshiper left. San Rocco was absolutely still.

Ruff lifted his French horn to his mouth and blew what was at the most a sixteenth note. It was stopped by an old sacristan who came running at high speed, shouting *"Vietato! Vietato!"* and repeatedly extending his arms in the motion of a baseball umpire signifying that a runner is safe. He stood in front of Ruff, a small man, barely five feet tall, shaking with outrage. *"Chiesa! Chiesa!"* he shouted, meaning that we were in a church. "This is church music," Ruff said. He couldn't believe what was happening. The old man had struck like a summer squall. Ruff showed him his *Liber Usualis,* a

black book that looks like a Bible and has the solemn weight of Roman Catholic authority. He flicked through the pages, stopping to point out the "Gloria" and various other chants that are still used in the liturgy today. The sacristan was in no mood for ecclesiastical proofs. This was a *chiesa* and there was to be no music.

Ruff made one more start at protesting his good intentions, but in midsentence the humor of his situation hit him. Ruff and Mitchell are both men of tremendous humor, quick to laugh; once, on a concert tour in Europe, they got laughing so hard in a hotel lobby that the manager ordered them to check out immediately and never come back. Now Ruff hardly made it to the door, and when he was out on the steps of San Rocco he doubled up. "That's got to be the shortest note anybody ever played," he said. "I had just finished my inhale and was about to blow out when I saw this flash coming at me out of the corner of my eye—at the velocity of Jesse Owens. It was the fastest putdown of my career."

But the encounter drained some of Ruff's optimism. "If that's a typical reception by the clergy," he said, "I think my preliminary tests are over." He wanted to try once more—in a church called the Frari, which was right around the corner. Inside, one look told us that it was no place to play the French horn. Not only was the church quite full of tourists. Architecturally it was an immense Gothic barn, with none of the enveloping curves of St. Mark's; any music performed there might quickly dissipate. One look would also have told the Gabrielis to go somewhere else with their antiphonal choirs.

Artistically, however, the Frari rewarded us with Titian's *Assumption* over the altar—a giant painting that almost vibrated with color and motion—and to the left of the altar we came upon a chapel that contained the tomb of Monteverdi. Someone had left a small bunch of flowers on it that were beginning to wilt. Ruff was moved by the tomb. "I wish I could play for *him,*" Ruff said. He looked around the crowded church and thought better of it. But the moment seemed to give him an idea, and when we got out in the street it had taken shape.

"You know, Stravinsky is buried in Venice," Ruff said. "There's an island called San Michele that's the cemetery for the whole city, and it has one section of Russian Orthodox graves." I remembered seeing a television documentary about Stravinsky after he died in 1971 that ended with his coffin being taken by boat across the waters of Venice. "*That's* who I can play for," Ruff said. "Come on. I'm going to play the 'Pange Lingua' for Stravinsky."

We walked to the Grand Canal and caught the *vaporetto* that takes passengers out to San Michele and several other islands. It left the main city and headed across a strait of open water, and I thought the cemetery might be quite far away. But the ride took only ten minutes. On the way I asked Ruff why Stravinsky was such a giant to jazz musicians.

"He's *the* giant," Ruff said. "He was so advanced and hip. He's the main hero to jazz musicians because he was *weird*. That was an important word in the bebop era, and it was highly complimentary. It meant that you were thinking with

superintelligence and that you were pushing beyond the conventions. At the end of World War II the first cadre of highly educated black people was coming into the mainstream of American society. These people needed a music—a music that was more of their day. The sophistication of jazz as it existed then was not enough. There was nobody, not even Duke Ellington, who was speaking to that period as these people needed to be spoken to musically. But Stravinsky spoke to them: first to Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk and Art Blakey and Kenny Clarke and Max Roach—the great bebop innovators in New York who pulled all this music together. Then the music was taken in an even more outrageous direction by Miles Davis and John Coltrane and the other pioneers of 'modern jazz.' Stravinsky was a god to them all. He's what modern jazz was all about."

We got off at the cemetery and the custodian gave us a map of the grounds. Probably he thought we had come to see Ezra Pound. We took a gravel path leading past rows of tall cypresses that were the only touch of formal landscaping. Four gravediggers were singing at their work, and Ruff found this encouraging; here at least, among the dead, there was no objection to music. The graves were long slabs lying on the ground, not upright headstones in the American and English style. We found Stravinsky and his compatriots in a small enclave at a far end of the cemetery. His immediate neighbor was Aspasia, Widow of H.M. Alexander I, King of the Hellenes, and a few yards beyond that was a grave marked "SERGE DIAGHILEV, 1872–1929." That the impresario

of *The Firebird, Petrouchka* and *The Rite of Spring* had preceded his composer to this distant plot of Mediterranean earth so long ago was one of the most touching of the Byzantine mysteries that kept being revealed to me.

Stravinsky's grave was a slab of white marble with just two words in slanted capital letters: *IGOR STRAVINSKY.* The letters were made of deep-blue stone embedded in the marble. They had the informal rhythm of calligraphy, the second *S* more antic than the first. "It looks like him," Ruff said; he was reminded of the graceful pen strokes on Stravinsky's own music manuscripts.

Ruff opened his *Liber Usualis* to the "Pange Lingua," took his horn out of its case, and looked around to see if he would be disturbing anyone. Only a few birds were within disturbing range, but Ruff was taking no chances and, as an afterthought, he put a mute in his horn. Then he stood by Stravinsky's grave and played. The ancient melody had great power, yet it also had a quality that was modern in its associations. Ruff looked quizzical, surprised by the same paradox, and when he finished he said, "Did you hear it? It was the mute! It never occurred to me when I put it in, but of course that was one of Stravinsky's favorite sounds. There are whole sections of *The Firebird* and *Petrouchka* that are scored specifically for muted horns and brasses. He was a master of that coloring—he could paint pictures with muted brass. It all came back to me when I started to play. I remembered how I went to *Fantasia* every night at our army base just to hear that sound. And how we used to play Stravinsky

records over and over in the dayroom at Lockbourne. That sound is unique. If I had thought about it all morning I couldn't have come up with anything more distinctive—because it's also in Stravinsky's religious music. He wrote a number of Masses—he was rooted in the music of the liturgy."

Ruff played the "Pange Lingua" one more time, giving it a joyful lilt. Then he took the mute out of the horn and put the horn back in its case and we walked out of the cemetery and took the *vaporetto* back to Venice. Ruff was at ease. The frustrations of the morning had been blown away.

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We got off the boat at St. Mark's square, and as we made our way past a row of bookstalls Ruff noticed a poster announcing that the Amherst College glee club was scheduled to sing in St. Mark's cathedral on the following Sunday. "Someone gave *them* permission," he said. "There must be somebody in charge of making special arrangements for that church. I'm going to find him." It was now midafternoon and the crowds milling around the entrance of St. Mark's were thick, but we joined them and let the gravitational force of tourism pull us into the basilica.

Ruff walked past the clusters of tour groups looking up at the mosaics that their guides were describing and went to the velvet rope at the rear of the church that partitioned off the chancel. Several sacristans were coming and going around the altar, and Ruff studied them for a while. Finally he said, "That's my man—I can work with him." Ruff's man was a

genial middle-aged Italian, who said he was the *capo,* or chief, of the sacristans. Ruff went into his speech, and this time it went better than it had with the monsignor; he was more confident, and when he had finished praising the acoustics and the Gabrielis and explained that he wanted to play his horn there, the sacristan became almost as enthusiastic as Ruff. He said that Ruff should talk to the *arcidiacono.*

"Where is he?" Ruff asked.

"He's here in Venice," the sacristan said. "His name is Monsignor Spavento and his responsibility is for what happens in this church. In English I think you call him the archdeacon." So that was the dreaded *arcidiacono*—a mere mortal, like the Wizard of Oz. Earlier, the word had been thrown at us so fast that we hadn't stopped to analyze it and demystify it.

"How can I find him?" Ruff asked.

"He usually comes to the church around six o'clock at night," the sacristan said. "He will be here tomorrow. Can you come back then? I will take you to him."

"I'll be here," Ruff said.

That gave Ruff an empty day, and he had two pet projects to fill it with. In the morning he went to the town of Castelfranco to see a tailor who is known for the suits that he makes for musicians for their concert appearances. Ruff is a natty and eclectic dresser, and his wardrobe of elegant duds, cut by tailors that he has found as far away as Bali, needed replenishing. In the afternoon he went to an old library in Venice called the Biblioteca Nationale Marciana. He had a

list of five Italian Renaissance composers whose manuscripts, now very scarce, he hoped to turn up for the Yale School of Music—especially the work of Carlo Gesualdo. In fact, as Ruff explained his quest I realized that Gesualdo was one of his major heroes.

"Gesualdo was the Thelonious Monk of his day," Ruff said. "He was the father of dissonance, and I'm amazed that he was able to stay alive and flourish because he must have offended everybody. He was so daring! Being introduced to him in a course on old music that was taught by a modern master like Hindemith was a thrill I've never forgotten, because here was a statement, made almost four hundred years earlier, that this man knew all about dissonance—about this rubbing together of notes." At the library Ruff unearthed six books of Gesualdo's *Canzoni*, five-part madrigals that scholars still marvel at for their audacity. He arranged to have them microfilmed and sent to New Haven. "It was like found gold," he said.

So the day was spent on the trail of new clothes and old music, and it was just on the hour of six—struck by the famous mechanical bell ringers of St. Mark's on their famous outdoor clock—when we got to the cathedral for Ruff's meeting with the *arcidiacono.* I told him I would wait for him at one of the outdoor cafés in St. Mark's square; this was one occasion when I thought he should present himself as a single pilgrim.

I found a table and settled down. The heat was ebbing out of the day, and the tables had begun to fill up with tourists

released from their sightseeing vows and eager to restore their depleted energies. St. Mark's square has been called the world's biggest living room, and the string orchestras at the cafés struck up their medleys of Strauss waltzes and international hits like "Volare" that evoke memories of every European hotel and assure the tired traveler that the verities are intact. The major chords and saccharine violins lulled me into a world far simpler than the one that Ruff had been leading me through and that he was now trying, one last time, to conquer. I put him out of my mind and sank into the hot bath of "Tales from the Vienna Woods."

Ruff was gone a long time. Finally I saw him coming across the square. He was walking slowly and thoughtfully. He didn't look elated, but he also didn't look discouraged, and when he pulled up a chair I sensed that something more important than victory or defeat had happened to him.

"I found the sacristan," Ruff said, "and he took me to the rear of the church and led me to a confession booth. He tugged at the curtain and pulled it aside and I saw a very old priest slumped down in the seat—asleep. The sacristan tapped him and he woke up. He had white hair and a very old face and his tongue was working in that rhythmic way of people who have had a stroke. I thought, 'That finishes me. I'm dead.' But I started my speech anyway. By now I had it pretty well mastered, and I spoke with great feeling about my reverence for the magnificent music that had been created in St. Mark's, and about its place in the history of the music of Western civilization, and about the contribution of the

Gabrielis, and Monteverdi, and Zarlino, who was the most brilliant musical theorist of his day and had been *maestro di cappella* at St. Mark's, and I finally said that there must be something special about the acoustics, for all these achievements to have taken place in this basilica and not in any of Venice's other churches.

"Well, the monsignor started to come up out of his chair and I saw twenty-five years drop off this man's face and body. He sat up straight, and he became an elegant old man, and his tongue stopped working and his eyes opened wide and he said, 'The acoustics in St. Mark's are *perfetto!! Per-fet-to!*' I told him how I had heard all the tour guides in St. Mark's describing the marvels for the eye, but that for the marvels of the ear there didn't seem to be any memory or any monument. 'Is music really so perishable?' I asked. He looked at me harder. I had the feeling that he had been sitting and waiting there for years and nobody had ever come and talked to him about his church. He began to speak to me about the Byzantine consciousness that had gone into St. Mark's and about the distinctive style of the architecture and the mosaics. But then he remembered that my concern was with the acoustics, and he came back to that. He made it a dialogue. At one point I was struggling to express one of my ideas, and I said, 'Monsignor, I'm so sorry I have to make this request in my poor Italian,' and he stopped me and said, 'No, no! Don't apologize! I wish I could speak as much English as you speak Italian,' and he reached out and took both of my hands in his. I had expected this old man to be cold, but

it was the warmest physical contact I think I've ever had. He continued to hold my hands in a very strong grip and he said, 'What do you want to do?'

"I told him I needed time to bring a microphone and a tape recorder into the church and that I wanted to take some measurements for the qualities of the sound, which I would do by using a musical instrument. He asked me what instrument I would use, and I told him I was a *cornista,* and he said '*Bene!*' I said I wanted to go to different parts of the basilica and just walk around and play, but that I needed silence. He said, 'How much time?' I didn't want to press my luck, so I said, 'An hour and a half; two hours maximum.' He said, 'Would tomorrow night be all right?' I said it would be wonderful. He said that a side chapel of the church stayed open for a Mass until seven-thirty, but if I would come to the side door at that time the sacristan would let me in and I could stay until nine-thirty.

"I thanked him and started to leave, but he held me. He said, 'Tell me, are you Latin American?' I had noticed him studying my face; he hadn't seen many like me. I said, 'No sir, I'm an American—I'm a mixture of American and African.' He said, 'You are an *Afro*-American?' Well, that's not a word I often use, but I said, 'Yes, sir, I am an Afro-American.' He said, 'This is the first time I have ever talked to an *Afro*-American.' He was still holding me in that warm grip. Suddenly he said, 'The Mediterranean! That's where the civilization of the West came from. That's what brought together this rich mixture of cultures from Africa and many other

regions. That's what makes this church unique. St. Mark's itself is this mixture.' Then he said, 'What an idea! Wouldn't it be something if the glorious musical history of this church were to be brought back to the attention of the world by an *Afro*-American.'"

. . .

The next morning Ruff spent an hour in St. Mark's, learning his way around. He wanted to know how to reach the balconies and lofts, and he scrambled up and down the different flights of stairs. In the afternoon, like an athlete preparing for a big match, he went back to his hotel to rest. At seven-thirty we went to the side door of the church; the people who had attended Mass were just coming out. The sacristan was waiting for us, and he led us into the vast basilica. We were the only people there.

Ruff set up a camera tripod in the middle of the nave and put a microphone where the camera would ordinarily be. From there he ran a wire to his tape recorder, which he placed on the floor next to the tripod. It was a small monaural recorder; Ruff wasn't after stereophonic sound, which he considers a distortion. People's ears are so close together, he says, that they receive sound in a way that is more monaural than stereophonic. The encircling music of a Sony Walkman may be an acoustical treat, but it's not how music is really heard.

Ruff turned the tape recorder on, checked to make sure that it was going, picked up his French horn and blew one

note, a concert C, not particularly loud. The note filled the entire church. It was a note of amazing volume and purity, one that seemed to seek out every inch of the basilica and leave no crevice unoccupied. If Ruff had played only that one note his trip would have made its point; the acoustics were indeed *perfetto.* Ruff then walked around the nave, stopping under each of the five domes to blow a few notes. He always announced where he was ("I'm standing under the main dome, facing the congregation"); the teacher in him saw to that. I thought of all the students who would listen to his tape and hear, however remotely, what the Gabrielis heard.

Next Ruff climbed to the balcony over the main entrance and played from there. Then he went to the side lofts and played. Wherever he went, the music filled the church; distance didn't attenuate the sound. Then he came back down and checked the tape by playing part of it back. "That's it!" he said. "That's what my horn sounds like. It's never been caught before."

That was the end of the preliminaries. Ruff propped up his *Liber Usualis* on a small altar halfway down the aisle and started to play Gregorian chants. The first was the Gloria from Mass no. 2; the second was the Kyrie from Mass no. 8. Both of them were jubilant melodies, nothing like the lugubrious minor hymns that I associated with Catholic services. I sat across the nave from Ruff, watching the changes as the church settled down for the night. The last sunlight picked up the gold in the high mosaics around the dome nearest the main entrance; then, abruptly, all color was gone from the

basilica and I saw it as a skeleton—as the building that the builders built, without ornamentation. The five domes now looked enormous. Outside, the mechanical bell ringers struck a quarter-hour, and once, when Ruff paused between Gregorian chants, the merry strains of Offenbach drifted in from the square.

Ruff played an Agnus Dei and I was in the world's biggest sound chamber, wrapped in music. "It doesn't take any breath," Ruff said. "I could play forever." He played the Gloria from Mass no. 8, and the sacristan appeared from wherever he had been. "Gloria," he said, wanting to tell us that he knew it; it's still part of his liturgy. Seeing that Ruff was now in partial darkness, he lit a candle and put it on the altar next to the *Liber Usualis.* Then he left again. I moved to another part of the nave, and when Ruff played a Sanctus I noticed how extraordinarily long the echo was—about six seconds. The successive notes lingered in the air and joined to form chords. With such acoustics, I thought, the Gabrielis could hardly miss. St. Mark's was telling them how to write polyphonic music.

Next Ruff played the "Pange Lingua," without the mute that he had used so as not to waken the dead at Stravinsky's cemetery. The unmuted melody asserted its ancient authority, as it presumably had in that church since the Middle Ages, though perhaps no two people had ever listened to it as intently, there being no other sight or sound in the basilica. It had been emptied of distraction; Ruff and I were alone with our emotions. When he finished the "Pange Lingua" I wasn't

looking in his direction, and the next music I heard was so unexpected that it sent a chill through me. It was the "Pange Lingua" again, but it seemed to be sung in a woman's voice. I walked over near Ruff; the sound was coming from his horn, but he was playing very quietly, and what was filling the church was one of the purest contraltos I have ever heard. When he stopped I told him about it. "I was thinking about Miss Celia," Ruff said. He meant Celia Appleton, the singer in the Baptist church in Sheffield, whose voice had been his inspiration for learning the French horn.

Outside in the square, the mechanical bell ringers struck nine, bringing us back to real time. Ruff's two hours were dwindling down. He closed the *Liber Usualis,* took his horn to the center of the church, stood under the central dome, and played "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?" The great spiritual sounded as old and as majestic as the Gregorian chants, and it obviously had some of the same roots. When Ruff finished, the sacristan appeared, almost on the run, and I assumed that he was going to call a halt. *"Bene! Bene!"* he said, clapping his hands, trying to convey to Ruff the joy we could already see in his face. That the American spiritual had moved him even more deeply than the Gloria was a mystery too Byzantine to unravel; I only knew that it was no accident.

Ruff played three more spirituals. The first was "Steal Away to Jesus." The next was W. C. Handy's arrangement of "Give Me Jesus," which took me back to Ruff's Alabama boyhood town and the nearby log cabin where Handy had

been born. The last was "Go Down, Moses," a pentatonic melody that could have come out of the *Liber Usualis* and that carries further emotional weight for anyone who knows its final words: "Let my people go."

The spirituals used up Ruff's remaining energy. He had been playing steadily for almost two hours. His tone had been beautiful throughout; he had played with care and control, respectful of the melody, but also with warmth. What he had just done was in many ways the summing up of his life. Dozens of unusual teachers had crossed his path and taught him what he needed to know next, but nobody had taught him more than he had taught himself. The fifty-one-year-old man in St. Mark's was the fifteen-year-old private who willed himself to learn the French horn in the boiler room of an army barracks in Cheyenne. The man who taught himself eight languages because of the doors they might unlock found that one of them could unlock the doors of St. Mark's. No interpreter could have opened those doors for him.

Ruff played one last melody, from a Bach cello suite, and put his horn back in its case. Except for a few candles the church was now dark. The sacristan told Ruff he would be glad to stay longer, but Ruff was through, and the sacristan said he would let us out. He blew out the candles in the nave and led us toward the back of the church. Ruff had prepared an *offerta,* and he gave it to the sacristan in two envelopes—one for him and one for the old monsignor. The sacristan took us through several corridors and rooms, turning out

the lights and locking up behind him as he went, and finally brought us to a small door. He unbolted the door and gave us a warm Italian goodbye and we stepped out into the crowded streets of Venice.