

The Audition

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Maria Tartaro paced back and forth, checking her watch and shifting the music she held in her tightly folded arms. She wondered if she looked all right, had put on just enough makeup, if her hair looked good, and if her black dress flattered her figure or made her look fat. For the twentieth time, she went over in her mind the words and music of the aria she was prepared to sing, this time in German instead of the aria's original Italian. You had to sing in German when you auditioned for a provincial German opera theater. Maria had labored over this aria for two weeks to learn it in German and perfect her pronunciation.

Maria was one of two American singers auditioning for the Landestheater in the city of Detmold that day, the other being a young baritone. Maria was not unknown to Herr Jaeger, the General Music Director of the theater. He had recently made a guest appearance as a conductor in the theater where Maria had been engaged for part of the season and had conducted one of her performances. She thought she had made a favorable impression on him, although she had found him somewhat unpleasant in a bullying sort of way.

On her way to the backstage area, Maria ran into the man and greeted him with a friendly *Guten Tag*. He had not only not answered her; he had not even looked at her. She was taken aback by the snub but had put it out of her mind, thinking that he must have been preoccupied.

The semi-darkness of the backstage area where they were required to wait was oppressively comforting, and it stood in contrast to the brightly lighted, empty stage on which a grand piano stood in the far corner. There were no chairs backstage, and Maria and the young male singer had to stand while waiting for their turns to audition. The two singers didn't speak to each other, preferring to spend their time mentally preparing to go onstage and sing for the heads of the company.

After what felt like a long time, the auditioners called the young baritone, and he exited onto the stage. The young singer had not yet learned to speak German, and the auditioners accommodated him by talking to him in English. He presented them with a well-sung version of an aria from Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* in Italian instead of German. The auditioners politely complimented him and told him to go and wait for them in the General Music Director's office. The young singer left the stage, smiling and looking happy.

The auditioners didn't call Maria immediately, and they made her wait for what seemed an interminable time while discussing something among themselves. She renewed her pacing and tried breathing exercises and prayers, hoping to calm her nerves. For one awful moment, she couldn't remember some of the words of her chosen aria, but she soon retrieved them again. She wished she could sit down, but there were no chairs, and she was forced to remain standing. At one point, she dropped her music and stooped to pick it up, hoping the bookmark she had put in it was still in place.