Rediscovering Awe: Even the Sun Must Set

A darkened room, fifteen candles, and the Sun King listening to a girl sing the world’s oldest lesson in grief.



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I. Aleph

Versailles, 1701. The King’s chambers. Holy Week.

Footmen glide through the room without a sound. They carry candelabras, three in number, five flames each. While the harpsichordist is still tuning the last strings, one is placed beside his music stand. He acknowledges it with a brief nod. The gambist, however, seems nervous

—the young man has only recently been admitted to the Chapelle Royale. “Careful,” he snaps at the footman setting a candle beside his stand, though in truth the instrument was in no danger at all.

The older musician notices his colleague’s unease. “Don’t worry, they know what they’re doing.” The gambist does not look convinced. “And so do you,” says the harpsichordist, with something fatherly in his voice, before lowering his head with a smile and returning to the tuning. The young man glances over, puzzled. For a moment he considers saying something in return, but decides instead to nod his thanks and take one deep breath.

The third candelabra is placed beside a standing desk. Behind it, eyes closed, stands fifteen-year-old Marie-Anne de Lalande. Her lips are moving silently, as though she were praying or running through her part one final time. In certain rare cases, these are the same thing.

A few paces off stands her father, Michel de Lalande, court composer to Louis XIV. He has written the work his daughter is about to sing for the Sun King. In earlier years he would have accompanied her himself, but that would only have drawn her attention away from the music she was now about to sing. No — he has every confidence in her, and besides, it is a fitting form of penance in Holy Week to let go of the reins for once.

One by one, the footmen now close the shutters—not entirely, mind you; a thin line of light still steals through here and there—and plunge the royal chambers into darkness. As they leave the room as silently as they entered it, Michel de Lalande leaves with them. Passing his daughter, he catches her eye with a look of absolute certainty that whatever may come, it will be well. She knows that look. *Dieu y pourvoira*—God will provide—has been drummed into her since she was very small.

After the footmen close the door, the three musicians remain alone in the dark, lit only by fifteen candles. They do not speak. The harpsichordist

lowers his head. The gambist, lips pressed tight, silently fingers the last difficult passages on his instrument's neck. Marie-Anne stares wide-eyed into the darkness of the room, letting her pupils adjust, slowly, to the twilight.

Then the door opens again. At once the two instrumentalists rise and bow. Marie-Anne is startled for a moment, but composes herself immediately and drops into a deep curtsy. They hear only slow, deliberate footsteps making their way with the certainty of their own weight toward a chair at the far end of the room. While the musicians hold their bow, Marie-Anne cannot help but lift her gaze, just slightly, to catch a glimpse of the King. But in the flickering candlelight she can make out only the red heels of his black velvet shoes.

The footsteps cease. He sits, but does not lean back. The sun has arrived, having left its stars and its planets behind. This darkness it must face alone.

A small gesture of the hand, and the musicians set to work. The Leçons de Ténèbres begin—the Lessons of Darkness. Marie-Anne and her colleagues exchange a glance. All are ready. The young woman draws a deep breath, and for one long moment the room is perfectly still.

Aleph.

II. The Lessons of Darkness

A historical source confirms that Marie-Anne de Lalande, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the court composer, performed her father's Leçons de Ténèbres for Louis XIV so stunningly that she became the talk of Paris for months. The scene you have just read is built on that foundation. If it isn't true—as Guareschi would say—it ought to be.

The Tenebrae—Latin for "shadows" or "darkness"—is one of the oldest and most dramatic offices of the Christian liturgical year (at least up until

the Second Vatican Council, which changed the office quite drastically, so for the duration of this article we're talking about the Tridentine Rite when describing the Tenebrae).

Sung on the evenings of Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of Holy Week, it takes its readings from the Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah: the voice of a man watching the destruction of Jerusalem unfold, crying out to a God who has turned His face away. Each verse is introduced by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet—*Aleph, Beth, Ghimel, Daleth*—and sung in long, melismatic lines that seem to stretch time itself.

As the readings proceed, the fifteen candles on the triangular candelabrum are extinguished one by one, until only a single flame remains. That last candle is not snuffed out but hidden behind the altar—it is Christ in the tomb, concealed from the world but never destroyed. Then comes the *strepitus*, a sudden noise made by the congregation striking their pews or prayer books, evoking the earthquake at Golgotha. After that, silence. The hidden candle is returned. The faithful leave without a word.

Composers have been drawn to this ritual for centuries. Victoria's Tenebrae Responsories, written in Rome in 1585, remain among the most devastating choral works ever put to music. Gesualdo—prince, genius, murderer—wrung from the same texts harmonies so strange they sound modern four hundred years later. After 1800, however, the tradition vanished; the French Revolution had swept away the convents and court chapels that had sustained it. While the Romantic era rediscovered many beauties of the past, the Tenebrae were not among them. A few composers returned to it in the twentieth century—Poulenc's *Ténèbres factae sunt*, Stravinsky's *Threni*—but these are acts of devotion to relics from the past rather than living practice. The tradition belongs to the world before the flood.

It was in France that the Tenebrae took its most remarkable and surprising turn. Where earlier settings had been choral—communal acts of mourning scored for four, five, six voices—the French Leçons de Ténèbres stripped the texture down to its barest elements: a single voice (Couperin's setting for two voices is the rare exception), usually a high soprano, accompanied by nothing more than a harpsichord or organ and a viola da gamba. The liturgy became a performance. And the performance became something dangerously close to theater.

This was anything but accidental. During Lent, operatic and theatrical music was forbidden at court. The curtains stayed drawn, the instruments fell silent. But not entirely—for the composers who spent the rest of the year writing ballets and earthly delicacies for the King's amusement now turned their energies to sacred music, shot through with the same instinct for drama and vocal display.

The Leçons de Ténèbres became a prestige genre, a proving ground where a composer demonstrated that he could marry strictness to refinement—the two qualities the French style prized above all others. Michel Lambert, Lully's father-in-law, is generally credited with having established the genre. Others soon followed. Marc-Antoine Charpentier gave it harmonic depth. François Couperin, in his three Leçons of 1714, brought it to an almost unbearable level of beauty. And Delalande, writing for the voices he knew better than anyone alive—his wife's and daughters'—gave it a tenderness that borders on the confessional.

Unmistakably, these works are full of a subdued eroticism, though not in a crude or blasphemous way. The long, curling vocalises on the Hebrew letters, the way the solo voice lingers, ornaments—the rising *plainte*, literally a lament, or the *tremblement appuyé*, a suspended trembling, a sigh put to music—and breathes, the sheer physical intimacy of a young woman singing alone in a dark room for a small audience: all of this carries a charge that composers and listeners back then understood perfectly well.

Rather than a contradiction of the sacred purpose, it was considered an extension of it. In the theology of the Song of Songs, the erotic and the divine are mirrors of each other, not opposites. The French Baroque understood this instinctively—as did, for that matter, the pietistic composers of northern Germany, whose devotional music is drenched in the language of longing, of wounds, of a soul that aches for its bridegroom. Buxtehude (in his *Membra Jesu nostri)* and a young Bach, whose *Actus tragicus* brought it to perfection (the "Ja komm, Herr Jesu, komm" soprano line almost being a German Leçon de Ténèbres), knew this as well.

The body prays in its own language, and the seventeenth century was not embarrassed to let it.

III. Quomodo sedet sola civitas

The first Hebrew letter unfurls slowly, almost hesitantly. Marie-Anne's voice, steadied by the heartbeat of the continuo, feels its way into the dark the way a hand tries to find a wall—carefully at first, then with growing sureness. *Aleph.* Long, plaintive tones, broken and shaped by expressive melismas like volutes, lambrequins, and rocaille lending motion to a static column. Behind her the harpsichord lays down a spare, steady ground. The gambist has forgotten his nerves, but they have not yet found each other, nor the music. Not entirely. They are searching for it, with their ears.

By the second verse they have found it. The Latin of Jeremiah fills the room like smoke—*Quomodo sedet sola civitas*—and the ornaments that had until very recently been tentative now move with intent. Marie-Anne no longer stares into the darkness. Her eyes are closed. She is inside the music now, and the music is inside the room, and the room has begun to change.

After the verse ends, the harpsichordist reaches over without hurry and pinches out the first of his candles. A thin ribbon of smoke twists

upward.

Beth.

Another verse, another candle; this time, it's the gambist's. He snuffs it out between two fingers, matter-of-factly, as though he has done this a hundred times. Perhaps he has been practicing the gesture all week.

Ghimel.

Marie-Anne leans forward and blows out one of her own, which makes the remaining flames shudder. She watches them steady themselves, then lifts her eyes and sings.

With each flame that is snuffed out, the room contracts. The walls disappear first, then the gilded furnishings, then the paintings. The King's chambers transform, gradually, into something older, something essential. A cave. A place where light is not taken for granted but guarded like life itself. The cold of early spring still presses against the shutters outside, but inside the air has thickened. The three musicians are flushed. The music has grown urgent without growing loud, and the heat of concentration and breath and candlelight has made the small space almost feverish.

Daleth.

At the far end of the room, the King has changed. Not visibly—a courtier entering now would see nothing unusual—but something has shifted in the way he holds himself. Early in the performance his back did not touch the chair. Now it does. Not to rest, not to settle in. It is an act of surrender, slight but deliberate, the way a man lowers his guard before a confessor. He allows his spine to meet the wood. He allows himself, before God, to be bent.

Then his hand rises to his face and he rests his brow against it. His thoughts wander—where? Only he and his Maker know. And then: a small stirring. He looks up at Marie-Anne, clear-eyed, and thought has given way to something deeper—a listening of the soul, as though he had received an answer to a question he didn't even know he was searching for.

His countenance of old is still there; it never leaves, not really, not even in sleep. But the mask has loosened. Now he is not a king, but a penitent, and penance requires that you sit still long enough for the weight to find you.

He.

Another candle has gone out. The gambist's face is now half in shadow. The harpsichordist plays from memory—he can barely read the page.

In the growing dark, the King is no longer the sun. He is what the sun becomes when it stops pretending it will never set: a mortal man, a sinner, already sixty-two years old, who finds himself listening to a girl sing about the destruction of a city that fell because God willed it. The darkness is not a metaphor. It is coming, candle by candle, for all of us. And he does not look away.

Vav.

IV. Convertere

When Louis XIV was young, France danced. The King himself danced—in public, on stage even. He performed in court ballets from the age of fourteen, most famously as Apollo in the *Ballet Royal de la Nuit* in 1653, the role that earned him his title as the Sun King. The preferred form of his early reign was the *comédie-ballet*, a hybrid of spoken theater, dance, and song perfected by Molière and Lully: witty, spectacular, and above all sociable. It was art designed for a court that understood itself

as a performance. The King danced, as did France, with the world being expected to watch.

The emphasis on dance was also a declaration of independence. Across the Alps, Italy had opera—and Italy knew it. The sung drama was their invention, their export, their cultural currency, and every court in Europe that imported Italian singers and Italian scores was, in a sense, paying tribute to Rome, Venice, and Naples.

Louis XIV, who paid tribute to no one, was not about to let his court become a province of Italian taste. By making dance the center of French musical life, Lully—himself ironically a Florentine by birth—built a style that was unmistakably, defiantly French. The *comédie-ballet* was cultural policy dressed up as entertainment. The greatest king in Christendom would have his own art form, thank you very much, and it would exert the feet, not the vocal chords.

But by the 1680s, the dancing had stopped. Louis's last stage appearance was in 1670. His second wife, Madame de Maintenon—devout, austere, and quietly powerful—drew him toward a more sober piety. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was not the act of a man still interested in playing Apollo. The wars grew longer, victories were fewer, funerals more frequent. And French music changed with him—less by royal decree than by a gradual shift in the culture's center of gravity, from spectacle to something deeper.

The *tragédie lyrique*, which Lully had pioneered in the 1670s and which Rameau would later bring to its full maturity, was the musical expression of this shift. It was also, quietly, a homecoming. Now that the French style stood on its own feet—no one could mistake a Lully overture for a Cavalli opera—France could afford to do what it had perhaps always wanted: to sing. But to sing in its own way.

Where Italian opera gloried in vocal acrobatics and the superhuman instrument of the castrato, the *tragédie lyrique* insisted on the word, on declamation, on the marriage of music and French prosody. Where the *comédie-ballet* had been playful and composite—a little of this, a little of that, stitched together for an evening's entertainment—the *tragédie lyrique* was unified, serious, and unafraid of sustained emotion. It demanded that an audience sit still and feel something difficult. It replaced laughter with catharsis. In short: French opera's coming of age—an answer to Italy, delivered in France's own voice.

The Leçons de Ténèbres are where that transformation becomes audible. They are liturgy, smaller in scale than anything on the operatic stage, yet they share with the *tragédie lyrique* the conviction that a single voice, given enough space and enough darkness, can carry the full weight of human suffering. The same compositional instincts that shaped Lully's monologues for Armide—the long vocal lines, the careful prosody, the refusal to let virtuosity outrun feeling—are at work in Delalande's settings of Jeremiah. Only here the suffering is no longer theatrical. In the King's chambers on a Wednesday during Holy Week, the lament is real.

By 1701, the emancipation from Italy was complete. French sacred music had its own voice—literally, in the person of a fifteen-year-old girl singing her father's music for a king who had once been the most magnificent dancer in Europe and was now sitting alone in the dark.

The young king had dazzled crowds. He had built Versailles, conquered Flanders, made the sun his personal moniker. That same man, now sitting in a chair in darkness, has buried a son. And he will bury more. The wars are draining the treasury, and the Protestants he expelled are enriching his enemies. He will hold power until he breathes his last in 1715, but somewhere along the way the illusion that authority and control are the same thing has crumbled. Something larger has come into view,

and he has done what the proud do only under great duress: he has looked up.

He has rediscovered awe. The awe of Versailles is the awe one experiences when faced with what Man is capable of. This is the older kind—being awed by what Man cannot escape.

The Leçons de Ténèbres are the sound of that discovery. They sit with you in the dark and say: this is what it sounds like when, in more ways than one, the light goes out, and you are not the one who decides when it comes back. And in that darkness, you can—maybe—hear heaven itself.

V. Jerusalem, Jerusalem

The candles are fewer now. The harpsichordist has only one left, and he plays by touch as much as by sight, his fingers finding the chords the way a man finds his furniture in the dark. The gambist's face has vanished entirely into shadow. Only his bow catches the light when it moves—a thin bright line, rising and falling like a chest does when one draws breath.

Marie-Anne still has two flames beside her. They light her from below, and her face floats above the music stand like something in a painting that has not yet been finished. Her voice has changed over the course of the hour. The careful, dutiful girl who sang the opening *Aleph* is gone. What remains is something less polished and more true: a voice that has stopped trying to be beautiful and has become beautiful because it has stopped trying.

Teth.

The harpsichordist reaches over and puts out his last candle. He does not stop playing. The music continues from the dark, disembodied now, as though the instrument were playing itself.

Jod.

The gambist extinguishes his final flame. Now only Marie-Anne's two candles remain. The baroque ornamentation of the King's chambers—the gilt, the mirrors, the painted ceilings that celebrate victories already beginning to feel distant—all of it is gone. There is now only a girl, a voice, and a small circle of light. Everything else is darkness and a King sitting in it.

She blows out the penultimate candle. One left.

The last verses simply continue. Marie-Anne sings them quietly now, almost to herself, as though she has forgotten the King is there—or as though she has remembered that the Lamentations were never really addressed to any earthly sovereign.

Then the final call: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum.* Jerusalem, Jerusalem, turn back to the Lord your God. The word—*convertere*—is suspended in the dark room. Turn back. Convert. It is the word Christ's entire Passion hinges on, the same turn Louis's own life has taken: the young king who danced as Apollo, who made the sun his personal property, now sitting in a dark room being asked—by a girl, by Jeremiah, by God—to turn back. Not to what he was, but to what he has always been underneath the gold: a man who needs mercy.

The last note does not end so much as it trails off, just in the way smoke thins, until you cannot say exactly when it stopped being there.

Marie-Anne does not move. No one moves. They wait, because the silence is part of the Leçons, and you do not break it any more than unconsecrated hands would break the host. Engulfed in the silence of the room, for a few fleeting moments its occupants know no rank, no status. The fifteen-year-old girl, the nervous young gambist, the experienced harpsichordist, and the King of France—for this one held

breath they are four people who have undergone the same darkness together.

Outside, the sun has set, the thin lines of light that had stolen through the cracks are gone now. No one inside saw that it had even happened—the shutters were closed.

Inside and outside have become one darkness. It is Wednesday. Thursday will come, and Friday after that, and on each of those evenings Marie-Anne will return to this room and sing her father's music and put out the candles one by one, and the King will sit in his chair and let the dark do its work.

For now, the last candle burns on. Its light finds the face of the girl, who opens her eyes as though waking. It finds the neck of the gamba, the edge of the harpsichord's lid. It does not reach the King. He remains where he has chosen to be—in the shadow, with Jeremiah, with the ruins of Jerusalem, with the God who calls for conversion and demands to be met in the place where the light goes out.

But the candle holds. That is the thing about the Tenebrae that the darkness alone cannot tell you. The last candle is never extinguished. It is hidden, then brought back. The light is tested, never destroyed. And the beauty of what has just been sung—the beauty that still hangs in the room like smoke from the snuffed wicks—is itself a kind of proof. No music this beautiful is written in despair. It is written by someone who believes the light will return. The darkness is real, but it is not the last word. It never is.

No one speaks. The candle trembles, but holds.

VI. Dieu y pourvoira

Ten years later, in the autumn of 1711, a smallpox epidemic swept through the court. It took both of Delalande's daughters—Marie-Anne

and her younger sister Jeanne, both renowned sopranos, both trained by their father, both voices he had written music around the way a jeweler sets a stone. They died within two weeks of each other.

Louis XIV had by then seen nearly everyone around him die. His son, the Grand Dauphin, had been taken by the same disease only a month earlier. His grandson and granddaughter-in-law would follow within the year. The dynasty he had spent sixty years constructing was collapsing around him—a disease is blindly indifferent to who it takes, be it a king or a commoner.

When he received word of the two girls' deaths, the old King—who perhaps remembered a dark room, and candles, and a young voice singing—is said to have told their father:

"You have lost two daughters of great merit. I have lost Monseigneur. La Lande, we must submit to God's will."

We do not know what Delalande said in reply. But we may hope—and it is a hope befitting the man, the father, and the composer who understood that the last candle may be hidden but never put out—that he answered the only way a man of his faith could:

"Dieu y pourvoira."

God will provide.

Delalande never wrote another Leçon de Ténèbres; from that moment on, he lived in one. But even then, the candle holds. It trembles, but it holds.



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