

6-19-05

Dear Oisin,

Here I am on the train to the black forest. This particular one will take me only as far as Mainz. From there I'll take a train to Mannheim, from Mannheim to Offenburg, and from Offenburg to Wolfach. At Wolfach, I have to catch a taxi to a little town in the mountains called Oberwolfach, where the mathematical research institute is located. Although I'll just be changing trains there, I'm glad to be stopping at Mainz because that city is also mentioned in a nice poem by Heine.

The old, evil songs,  
The dreams, angry and bad,  
Let us bury them now.  
Bring a large sarcophagus.

I'll put many things inside,  
Though what, I won't tell you just yet.  
The sarcophagus must be bigger  
Than the wine barrel in Heidelberg.

And bring a funeral bier,  
And thick, strong boards.  
They must also be longer  
Than the bridge in Mainz.

Bring me also twelve giants.  
They have to be even stronger  
Than the great Christopher  
In the cathedral at Cologne on the Rhine.

They must carry the sarcophagus  
And drop it into the sea.

Because such a big sarcophagus  
Deserves a big grave.

Do you know why the sarcophagus  
Must be so big and heavy?  
Because I'm burying with it  
All my love and pain.



*Mainz in the 19th century*

I think of this poem often because of its reference to Christopher in the Cologne cathedral. I guess there must have been a long bridge in Mainz at some point. It's at the point where the river Rhine meets the river Main, so there is much association with water anyways. As I understand it, Mainz was the site of a sizeable Celtic and then Roman settlement. It's also known as the city where

Mr. Gutenberg was born, who went on to make the movable type that made printing books easy. It was because of this timely invention that Mr. Luther was able to spread his ideas so quickly across Germany, so they say.



*Movable type*

In the story of this poem, Mr. Heine is exaggerating a bit, as usual. Like the poem where he is sitting in the fisherman's hut by the sea, he thinks of love as connected to great pain and wants to bury it in the sea. The German word used for the vessel 'Sarg' normally just means 'coffin'. But it's obviously related to the word 'sarcophagus', so that's what I used, just for (your) fun. Aha, the train is already making a stop in Koblenz, a city near the rock where Lorelei used to sit. As we come into the station, I can see the little town center with many pretty spires rising up and the colorful facades of old buildings looking like a Viennese postcard.



*Koblenz*

Some people are filing in right now and looking for their seats. At the station in Bonn, I noticed for the first time a quite conspicuous sign with nice diagrams of the different kinds of trains. It showed the location of each car according to number, and where on the platform you should wait for which car. So haraboji and I could have avoided that funny surprise last time if we had just bothered to read the instructions. We are now leaving Koblenz. Diagonally across from me, a cheerful group of ladies have taken their places in one of those four-seat configurations that have a table in the middle. They are eating snacks out of little plastic bags and chatting merrily. Meanwhile, the train is continuing south down the west bank of the Rhine.



*Rhine*

I have a good view of the opposite side, of the rolling green hills, the willows and poplars near the water, sometimes scattered and sometimes in long rows. Right now, I am looking at a white castle perched on a hilltop that looks like a simplified version of the Neuschwanstein we read about, built by King Ludwig of Bavaria. There is a tall tower rising out of the castle keep and smaller ones going around the fortification, topped with grey conical caps. As we go, I see many beaches along the shore where people are fishing. Most of the little villages we pass look very gay and dainty, each built around a pretty church with a slender steeple. The water is flowing very gently, disturbed only occasionally by large industrial vessels, and then smaller ferries carrying tourists. I can see people in shorts and

sun-hats sitting on the deck and drinking something. The sky is completely clear today, bright almost like Arizona. Just now, the landscape became considerably more hilly. One of these hills is supposed to be the one that had Lorelei, but I really can't tell which just by looking. By the way, I found out that there are really many Lorelei poems besides the ones I know well by Mr. Heine and Mr. Eichendorff. I recently read a very sad one by Mr. Clemens Brentano which I'll translate for you sometime. Mr. Brentano is one the men who collected those folk poems named after the boy with the magic horn. We heard together the song about the skeleton army from that collection, set to music by Mr. Mahler. Right now, as the train makes a sweeping turn with the flow of the river, I see an especially white village in the shadow of a dark green mountain. (The hills have become taller in the meanwhile, and more massive. So they deserve to be described differently.) About halfway up the steep slope, I can see the ruins of a fortress. It looks much more medieval than the previous one. There were, in fact, many castles that we passed already, but I couldn't describe them all to you. There's a square one now coming into view with a thick cylindrical tower rising out of its south side. This one has especially intricate battlements. We just passed a rocky hill that had the definite look of the Lorelei that I have seen in photographs. But it's hard to know for certain.



I've been looking out and contemplating the scenery for a few minutes. In the middle of the river there is a small island, and remarkably, nearly the whole surface area is taken up by a church with a black segmented dome. The water nearly reaches to the feet of its pillars. It's hard not to wonder who would have built a church there, and who uses it, because it appears to be in quite good shape and in current use, even though the island must certainly get flooded now and then.

Since we're right on the Rhine, I can't help reminding you that this used to be part of the borders of the Roman Empire. The side I'm on had Roman garrisons, while the other side was populated by Germanic tribes like the Teutoni and the Suebi. The border was always unstable, however, as they tend to be even in modern times, and emperors like Marcus Aurelius spent a good deal of time waging war against the Germans and fortifying the boundaries of the empire. Aurelius was a very philosophical emperor, but he still made a lot of war. Historians these days do like to think about the complex interactions between Germans and Romans that went considerably beyond fighting. You see,

there was also a lot of trade. The Germans sold Romans leather and food stuff, and precious stones like amber, while the Romans sold fine pottery, glassware, and metal-works. So gradually, even as they fought, the Romans and the Germans learned from each other and shared their differences. Can you imagine what it must have been like in those days, with nothing but large stretches of wilderness and forest between small settlements? The river must have looked quite different then, maybe not as peaceful, and maybe more so.



*Reconstructed Roman watchtower on the Rhine*

Because the land has become more rugged as we've progressed, the villages tend to be wedged in a valley between two mountains, with the church steeple itself looking like a tiny peak. The ladies have now opened a bottle of white wine that came out of a small icebox, looking very chilled. They are quieter now, looking out of the window as they sip their wine. Inside the train, it

is a bit warm because they haven't turned on the air-conditioning, but still not unpleasant. We will be arriving in Mainz in a few minutes. I'll see if I can spot a long bridge somewhere along the river. But I have just seven minutes in Mainz before I have to catch the train to Mannheim, so I'll be in a hurry. I'll stop writing for now since the conductor is announcing our approach to the station.

The change of trains went smoothly. I had only to walk to the other side of the platform and the train was there within a few minutes. I've heard it said before that the trains in Germany are very punctual, and that's certainly been my experience. The couple sitting in front of me is chatting in English, the man very fluent and the woman struggling a bit with the words. He sounds like he is American. This train is cooler than the previous one for some reason. We are continuing down the Rhine except we've veered somewhat westwards and the land is now quite flat. I noticed on the travel plan that the other train will be continuing all the way to Vienna. Vienna is in Austria and was a great center of music in the 18th and 19th century. That's why Beethoven went there to study when he grew to be a young man. That train must be pretty much going along the route traveled by Beethoven. I don't know how long the journey took in those days, a week, maybe two. It can't have been easy since one has to go through at least some rugged terrain. (Although not mountainous like that trip we made all the way to Italy a few years ago.) And they were traveling in horse-drawn carriages. Imagine how exciting it must have been to arrive there after a difficult journey, full of anticipation, knowing already all the wonderful things he could study in that beautiful city. I've never been to Vienna, but it is said to be very pretty. Many of its old buildings and roads are as they were

designed by royal architects and gardeners centuries ago when it was the seat of the Holy Roman Empire. It lies on the banks of the river Danube, a name that holds many romantic connotations, especially for Koreans. When they think of Vienna and the Danube, Koreans automatically imagine masked balls in sumptuous palaces and elegant waltzes flowing with the rhythm of the colorful waves in the water. The Danube was of course another border of the Roman Empire, functioning in essentially the same way for the Romans as the Rhine.

I went to the bathroom and back. The bathroom on this train is very pleasant and clean, with wood panels on its walls. I think you would have called it a 'Louis the XIVth,' according to that classification of cleanliness you came up with. Along the way I passed a young mother reading to her two children who were pressing against her on either side. I felt another twinge in my heart. But since the day I'll be home is fast approaching, my heart doesn't feel so bad anymore. We've left the Rhine now. The train is going across wide fields with patches of cultivated crops in various shades and just clusters of trees here and there.

I think Beethoven arrived in Vienna just a short while after Mozart had died. It didn't take too long for him to start impressing everyone with his beautiful sonatas for the piano and his heroic symphonies. He also made money by teaching music to children of the Viennese nobility, such as the archduke Rudolf, the youngest brother of the emperor. On the whole, Beethoven had a pretty easy time in Vienna and grew to be a comfortable old man, in spite of the problems he had with his hearing. All over Europe people wanted to hear his music and he received commissions from as far away as the London philharmonic society. Some people say

he would have been even more popular if Napoleon and his wars were not keeping everybody so busy. So his life was quite different from that of Mozart. Mozart, remember, died very young (at 35) and was quite poor towards the later part of his life. Even though he had been widely acclaimed as a musical prodigy when he was young, somehow his friendship with the noble folks of Vienna soured. He eventually became very poor and was buried in a pauper's grave whose location is unknown to this day. Beethoven's funeral, on the other hand, was attended by twenty thousand people including all the powerful leaders of the city. One of the torch-bearers at Beethoven's funeral was Mr. Franz Schubert, whom we've spoken of before. He was a Viennese composer who died at an even younger age than Mozart (31) and was maybe even poorer. But he still had time to compose some of the most beautiful songs the world has ever heard. His songs, therefore, are what he is most known for, even though he did also write many nice pieces for the piano and for the orchestra and many wonderful string quartets. Oops, we're coming into Mannheim now where I have to change again. More in a little while.



*Schubert's grave in Vienna*

Here I am now, sitting on a bench in the Mannheim Hauptbahnhof. The train for Offenburg stops in the same place where the previous train dropped me off, so I just have to sit here and wait. From the little I could see as we approached, Mannheim appears to be a more modern and industrial town than the ones I've mentioned so far. From where I sit, the most conspicuous sight is a gleaming high-rise in the shape of a triangular column made entirely out of blue glass. A lady is sitting on the bench next to mine with her feet propped up on her suitcase. She is dozing off.

If you look into the pile of CD's, you might be able to find a collection of songs sung by a lady named Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. That was one of my first CD's, bought in New Haven, Connecticut, when CD's were still relatively new on the market. This was a short while after I had come to the US to study. The shop where I bought it was one of those old-fashioned stores that are becoming increasingly harder to find, owned by an old man, Mr. Cutler, who really loved music. He was a thin man with neatly combed white hair and mustache, almost always dressed in a tidy blue-grey sweater with buttons along the front. He evidently loved Ms. Schwarzkopf's singing. I still remember the smile on his face almost turning into tears as he gushed forth his enthusiasm for that CD from behind the counter. Well, he wasn't exaggerating. About half of the songs there are by Mozart, and the other half by Schubert, so it's very easy to compare how the musical conception of a song changed during the short interval of time between the two composer's lives. No one doubts that Mozart wrote wonderful music, but it does appear that he never quite thought through what would be involved in weaving a fabric of music into a short poem. As always, the

music is nice in itself. It becomes sad when the text is sad, and bouncy when the words describe a pretty flower blooming on a sunny spring day. But strangely enough, Mozart doesn't go much farther than that. Perhaps one exception to that is the song 'Evening Sentiment' that appears on that CD. After a batch of Mozart's songs, I think the first Schubert song on the CD is called 'Im Fruehling (In the spring)'. It is almost a shock, and not because the song is at all loud, as the piano starts playing the prelude and then the voice pitches in with the words 'I sit quietly on the slope of the hill and the heavens are so clear.' It's almost like staring at a two-dimensional painting gradually acquiring depth, vaguely, as in a dream, before you realize that it has transformed itself into an actual hill with clouds above and a bed of flowers fragrant in the warm sun. In fact, as you listen to that song, it feels like you could put your hand forward to reach right in and feel the warm spring air hovering over the meadow.

I was interrupted in the middle of that previous line because the train arrived. An old lady was standing beside me on the platform and asked for help in loading her bags. It turned into a situation very much like that funny scene with haraboji because she was quite unsure about the location of her car. Once inside, we again had to struggle through a crowd to find her seat. In a way it was rather absurd because I ended up having to ask an attendant for help with the location even though the lady was the one who was fluent in German. It was just one more reminder that many more people need help than we usually realize. We had chatted for a minute waiting for the train, so I assumed she had a clear grasp of the situation. I was later reminded of halmoni who is quite frail and could indeed use help often, even when she is in Korea. The old lady is from Switzerland. Her

hometown is Bern. The moment I remarked that it must be very pretty there, her face lit up as she described to me the nice old-fashioned buildings and the flowering heath on the mountain slopes this time of the year.



*Bern*

Her husband has been in Mannheim for some time because of his work and suffers terribly from homesickness. The word she used several times sounds very nice in German, 'Heimweh.' When I mentioned that I was Korean (the first guess is usually Japanese), she spoke very enthusiastically about a Korean living near Mannheim named Kwon, a singer with a wonderfully deep voice. (The word in German is 'Saenger', also sounding very nice.) This train is going to Zuerich, the largest city in Switzerland. Many Koreans dream of traveling to Switzerland and beholding the Alps. As I helped her into her seat, the lady looked very concerned about the train starting up. It was then I realized that she didn't know I was on the same train. I reassured her, wished her a safe journey, and made my way to my assigned position. Even though I made reservations for seats on each of the trains, people seemed not always to pay them attention. Another lady was in my seat and had fallen asleep.

But that was alright because I could simply sit down in the seat across the aisle.

Back briefly to Mr. Schubert. Part of the reason his songs are so striking is because he takes the piano part very seriously. People sometimes say this is what makes an `art song', that is, a song that involves the kind of difficult work that would earn it a place in the museum if it were a painting. If you listen carefully to that spring song, you'll find the piano setting a rich, highly-textured tone and background for the entire piece on which the voice glides along. In the Erlking, the frantic beat of the piano conspires with the dramatic melody to keep us on edge from the beginning to the end. In the linden-tree, the fluttering melody can really make you long to rest your weary heart in the shade of a friendly tree, growing in a distant home. It is sometimes thought that this elaborate, full-hearted way of constructing a song has a lot to do with romanticism. The poetry of romanticism, they say, was in much deeper touch with the throngs of the human heart than what had come before, so composers like Schubert could read it and tap into the same source of dark and sublime energy. It is hard to say, of course, what really makes a beautiful song possible. If we were sure about that process then we would already be teaching machines how to write songs! But it is true that Mr. Schubert lived right in the middle of cultural turmoil when the streets of a vibrant city like Vienna were simply brimming with romantic ideas. This went together with political turmoil as the old order of kings, emperors, and the aristocracy in Europe was struggling with the prospect of a very uncertain future. The wonderful and violent ideas of freedom and equality set loose by the French revolution were reverberating through the corridors of the continent, and Napoleon was destroying old

institutions right and left. Mr. Marx and serious discussions about communism were already not very far in the future at that point. (The lady next to me is up now. She is speaking with her friends about the pretty hills that have emerged just now from the horizon. She is comparing them with the mountains around Zuerich, using frequently the word 'Wunderschoen', wondrously beautiful.) By all accounts, Mr. Schubert was a very good-natured person all of the time. He loved performing for his friends, and giving them samples of the songs that kept pouring forth throughout his short life, around 600 in all. His friends wrote of him also as timid and shy. He was, perhaps as a consequence, not so good with practical affairs, such as having his music performed in the right places and appreciated by influential people, or finding good publishers for his songs. He had tremendous respect for Beethoven, but was not nearly so famous. These days, when his music is much better known and loved all over the world, we can see that his unassuming personality was hiding a heart full of despair and longing, and deep, true love for the world around him. Here maybe I am agreeing with Mr. Heine. His deep love of the world certainly appears to have caused Mr. Schubert some pain. He expresses these things in ways that are different from Mozart, and different again from Beethoven. My writing about it certainly cannot help you feel the difference, so I won't really try. I love singing those songs but I've never been able to properly play the piano part that goes with them. So when you get very good at the piano, we can try together.

Quite some time has passed since I wrote the lines above. In the meanwhile, the train came into Offenburg. At the station, I met several other mathematicians bound for the same institute, and we got on the little train for Wolfach together. Among others, there were Takeshi Saito from Japan, Amnon

Besser and Udi De Shalit from Israel, and Jan Nekovar from Paris. The scenery was very pleasant again as we came into the mountains. A clear stream was sparkling in the sun next to the tracks all the way. After we arrived in Wolfach I called us a taxi, and we drove up the mountain road and arrived at the institute late in the afternoon. At the institute I also met Tony Scholl from England and his wife Gulsin Onay. It was very nice to see her again. She was the Turkish pianist that kindly performed for the people at Kias in 2001, in that little restaurant run by the business school. Right away she asked about you, how old you were now and how big. As I sit here typing, I hear her again in the distance practicing difficult pieces on the piano in the library. It's quite a treat to be hearing music like this at a mathematical conference. I hope she keeps practicing through the week. I will write to you more later about the institute and its environs. But this has turned into a very long letter. I need to go to bed soon, to prepare for another busy day tomorrow.

Good night Mr. O.

Mr. D.



*Black Forest*