The Music of Erich Zann

by H.P. Lovecraft

I've studied every map of the city with obsessive care, yet I've never again located the Rue d’Auseil. These weren't just recent maps—I know street names change over time.

On the contrary, I've dug deep into the city's oldest records and personally walked every quarter that could possibly match the street I once knew as the Rue d’Auseil.

Despite all my efforts, it's humiliating to admit I still can't find the house, the street, or even the neighborhood where—during the final, broke months of my life as a metaphysics student at the university—I heard the music of Erich Zann.

I’m not surprised my memory is fractured. My physical and mental health were seriously wrecked the whole time I lived on that street, and I never brought any of my few acquaintances there.

Still, the fact that I can’t rediscover the place is both strange and deeply unsettling. It was only a half-hour walk from the university, and it had features so unusual that anyone who’d been there would remember them forever.

I’ve never met a single person who claims to have seen the Rue d’Auseil.

The street lay beyond a dark river lined with steep, grim warehouses whose windows were filthy and blind. A heavy bridge of blackened stone crossed it.

It was always shadowy along that river, as though factory smoke blocked the sun permanently. The water carried vile smells I've never encountered anywhere else—odors that might one day help me locate it, because I'd recognize them instantly.

Past the bridge came narrow, cobbled streets with tram rails. Then the climb began: gentle at first, but becoming unbelievably steep by the time it reached the Rue d'Auseil.

I've never seen another street so narrow and precipitously inclined. It was practically a cliff face—closed to all vehicles, interrupted in places by flights of stairs, and terminating at the top against a high wall overgrown with ivy.

The pavement was uneven: stone slabs here, cobblestones there, bare dirt elsewhere with patches of sickly gray-green weeds pushing through.

The houses were tall, sharply peaked, impossibly ancient, and leaning crazily in every direction— forward, backward, sideways.

Sometimes two opposite buildings both leaned toward each other so far they nearly touched overhead like an arch, blocking almost all daylight from the street below.

A few rickety footbridges connected houses across the narrow gap.

The people who lived there struck me as odd from the start. At first I thought it was their silence and reserve, but later I realized it was their extreme age.

I have no idea how I ended up living on such a street. I wasn't myself when I moved in.

I’d been bouncing between one miserable lodging after another, always thrown out for non-payment, until I finally stumbled on that decaying building on the Rue d’Auseil, run by the paralyzed landlord Blandot.

It was the third house from the top—the tallest on the entire street.

My room was on the fifth floor, the only occupied one in that part of the house. The place was nearly deserted.

The night I arrived I heard eerie music drifting down from the garret above. The next day I asked old Blandot about it.

He explained it came from an elderly German viol player—a strange, mute man named Erich Zann— who performed evenings in a low-budget theater orchestra.

Zann insisted on playing late into the night after work, which was why he’d chosen this isolated, high-up garret.

Its single gable window was the only spot on the street from which anyone could see over the terminating wall and look down the slope at the view beyond.

After that I heard Zann play every night. Though it often kept me awake, I was captivated by how unearthly his music sounded.

I don’t know much about music, but I was sure none of his chords or progressions resembled anything I’d ever heard.

I decided he must be a composer of extraordinary originality.

The more I listened, the more obsessed I became, until after about a week I made up my mind to meet him.

One night, as he was coming home from work, I intercepted him in the hallway. I told him I’d like to get to know him and sit with him while he played.

He was small, thin, hunched, dressed in worn-out clothes, with blue eyes, a grotesque satyr-like face, and almost no hair.

At my first words he looked both irritated and alarmed. But my obvious friendliness eventually softened him, and he reluctantly gestured for me to follow him up the dark, creaking attic stairs.

His room—one of only two in the steeply slanted garret—was on the west side, toward the high wall at the street’s upper end.

It felt enormous because it was so bare and neglected. The only furniture was a narrow iron bed, a grimy washstand, a small table, a large bookcase, an iron music stand, and three antique chairs.

Sheet music lay scattered across the floor in chaos. The walls were unfinished planks, probably never plastered, and thick dust and cobwebs made the space feel more abandoned than lived-in.

Clearly, Erich Zann’s real world of beauty existed somewhere far beyond this room.

He motioned for me to sit, then closed the door, slid the heavy wooden bolt, and lit a second candle to supplement the one he carried.

He took his viol from its moth-eaten cover, sat in the least uncomfortable chair, and—without using the music stand—played entirely from memory.

For over an hour he held me spellbound with melodies I’d never heard before, pieces that must have been his own creations.

I can’t describe them precisely—I’m no musician—but they had the structure of a fugue, with recurring themes of haunting beauty.

What struck me most was that none of the strange, otherworldly notes I’d overheard from below were present that night.

I remembered those eerie tones clearly—I’d even tried humming and whistling them to myself—so when he finally set down his bow I asked if he would play some of them.

The moment I made the request, his wrinkled, satyr-like face lost its calm, bored look and flashed the same mix of anger and fear I’d seen when I first spoke to him.

For a second I considered persuading him, dismissing it as the quirk of an old man, and even whistled a few bars of what I’d heard the previous night to jog his memory.

But I stopped almost immediately. When he recognized the tune, his face twisted into an expression I can’t describe, and his long, cold, bony hand shot out to cover my mouth and silence me.

At the same moment he threw a panicked glance toward the curtained window—as if dreading an intruder— though that was absurd: the garret sat high above every neighboring roof, and this window, as Blandot had told me, was the only place on the street from which one could see over the summit wall.

That glance reminded me of Blandot’s comment, and on impulse I felt a sudden urge to look out over the sweeping, dizzying view of moonlit roofs and city lights beyond the hill—something only this grumpy musician could see.

I started toward the window to pull back the drab curtains, but with even greater terror and fury than before, Zann lunged at me again, this time nodding frantically toward the door while trying to drag me there with both hands.

Now thoroughly annoyed, I told him to let go and said I was leaving immediately. His grip loosened.

Seeing my irritation, his own anger faded. He tightened his hold again—but gently this time—guided me back to a chair, then crossed to the cluttered table with a wistful expression and began writing laboriously in awkward French.

The note he eventually handed me was a plea for patience and forgiveness. He wrote that he was old, lonely, and tormented by strange fears and nervous conditions tied to his music and other things.

He had enjoyed my listening, wanted me to visit again, and asked me not to take his odd behavior personally.

But he could never play his strangest harmonies for anyone else, nor stand hearing them imitated; he also couldn’t tolerate anyone touching anything in his room.

He hadn’t realized until our hallway talk that I could hear him from below, and now asked if I would switch to a lower room where his nighttime playing wouldn’t reach me. He offered to cover the extra rent.

As I puzzled out his terrible French, I felt more sympathetic. He was suffering physically and mentally, just as I was, and my studies in metaphysics had taught me compassion.

In the quiet, a faint noise came from the window—the shutter must have rattled in the breeze—and for some reason I jumped almost as violently as Zann did.

When I finished reading, I shook his hand warmly and left as a friend. The next day Blandot moved me to a more expensive room on the third floor, between an old moneylender and a respectable upholsterer. The fourth floor was empty.

It didn’t take long to realize Zann’s earlier eagerness for my company had mostly been an act to get me to move lower.

He never invited me up, and when I visited he seemed uneasy and played without energy. This was always at night—during the day he slept and refused visitors.

My fondness for him didn’t grow, though the garret and its strange music still exerted a peculiar pull on me.

Above all, I had an intense, nagging desire to look out that window—over the wall and down the hidden slope at the glittering roofs and spires that must lie beyond.

Once, during theater hours when Zann was out, I crept up to the garret, but the door was locked.

What I did manage was to eavesdrop on his nighttime playing. At first I sneaked up to my old fifth-floor landing; later I grew bold enough to climb the final creaking stairs to the garret hall.

Standing outside his bolted door, peering at the covered keyhole, I often heard sounds that filled me with an indescribable dread—dread of something vast, mysterious, and unknowable.

The music itself wasn’t ugly; what unnerved me was how its vibrations seemed to belong to no place on this Earth, and how at times it swelled into a symphonic richness that seemed impossible for one man to produce.

Erich Zann was undeniably a genius of wild, untamed power. As weeks passed, his playing grew more frenzied, while he himself became increasingly gaunt, haunted, and furtive.

He now refused to let me in at all and avoided me on the stairs.

Then one night, while listening at the door, I heard his viol erupt into a shrieking chaos—a cacophony so overwhelming I questioned my own sanity—until a heartbreaking, wordless cry cut through it: the only sound a mute can make, born of absolute terror or agony.

I pounded on the door with no answer. I waited in the freezing dark hallway, trembling, until I heard him struggling weakly to stand, using a chair for support.

Thinking he'd fainted and was coming around, I knocked again and called my name to reassure him. I heard him stumble to the window, slam the shutter and sash shut, then lurch to the door and fumble it open.

This time his relief at seeing me was genuine; his twisted face lit up as he clutched my coat like a frightened child.

Shaking uncontrollably, he pushed me into a chair, then collapsed into another nearby, his viol and bow discarded on the floor.

For a long time he sat motionless, nodding strangely, as though straining to hear something distant and terrifying.

Eventually he seemed satisfied. He moved to the table, wrote a short note, handed it to me, then returned and began writing furiously.

The note begged me—in the name of mercy and my own curiosity—to stay put while he wrote a full account in German of the marvels and horrors that tormented

him.

I waited. His pencil raced across page after page.

Perhaps an hour later, as the pile of feverishly written sheets grew, Zann suddenly froze, struck by some invisible horror.

He stared at the curtained window, listening in dread.

I thought I heard something too—a faint, exquisitely delicate musical tone, impossibly distant, like a player in a far-off house or beyond the high wall.

On Zann the effect was devastating. He dropped his pencil, seized his viol, and launched into the most frenzied, terrifying playing I had ever heard from him—except when I'd listened secretly at the door.

Words can't capture that night's performance. It was more horrifying than anything I'd overheard because now I could see his face—pure, raw fear driving every note.

He wasn't creating music; he was making noise—trying to drown something out or keep something at bay. I couldn't guess what.

The playing became delirious, hysterical, yet never lost the mark of genius I knew he possessed. I even recognized one passage—a wild Hungarian dance popular in theaters—and realized it was the first time I'd heard him play anyone else's composition.

Louder and wilder the viol screamed. Sweat poured from him; he contorted like a frantic animal, eyes locked on the curtained window.

In his mad strains I almost saw shadowy figures—satyrs and Bacchantes—whirling through churning abysses of cloud, smoke, and lightning.

Then I thought I heard another sound: a higher, steadier note—not from the viol—calm, deliberate, mocking, drifting from somewhere far to the west.

At that moment a sudden gale rose outside, as if summoned by the chaos within. The shutter began to batter the window.

Zann’s viol rose to sounds I hadn’t thought possible. The shutter tore loose and slammed violently; the glass shattered.

Icy wind rushed in, making candles flicker and scattering Zann’s manuscript pages across the room. I looked at him—he was beyond awareness.

His eyes bulged, glassy and blind; his playing had become a mechanical frenzy no words could describe.

A powerful gust snatched the papers and hurled them toward the broken window. I lunged after them, but they vanished into the night.

Then I remembered my old longing—to look from this window, the only one that could see beyond the wall. It was pitch dark, but the city lights always shone.

I expected to see them through the storm. Instead, staring out from that high gable while candles guttered and the insane viol howled with the wind, I saw no city, no streets, no lights—only endless black space, alive with motion and music, utterly unlike anything on Earth.

Terror seized me. The wind extinguished both candles, plunging the garret into absolute darkness.

Chaos roared outside; pandemonium screamed from the viol behind me.

I stumbled backward, unable to light a match, crashing into the table, knocking over a chair, groping toward the source of that monstrous music.

Whatever forces were against me, I had to try to save us both.

Something cold brushed past me; I screamed—but the sound was swallowed by the viol.

Suddenly the bow struck me in the dark. I was close.

I reached out, touched the back of his chair, then his shoulder, shaking him to snap him out of it.

No response. The viol shrieked on without pause.

I touched his head to stop its mechanical nodding and shouted in his ear that we had to flee whatever was coming.

He gave no sign, never slowing the insane music, while strange winds seemed to whirl and howl through the black garret.

When my fingers brushed his ear I recoiled—then touched his face: ice-cold, rigid, lifeless, eyes staring uselessly into nothing.

By some miracle I found the door and the heavy bolt. I threw myself out, fleeing that dead thing in the darkness and the ever-rising fury of that cursed viol.

I raced down endless stairs through the pitch-black house, burst into the narrow, steep street of leaning buildings and steps, clattered over cobbles to the lower streets and the foul river canyon, crossed the dark bridge, and kept running until I reached the wider, normal boulevards we all know.

Those moments are burned into me. There was no wind. The moon was out. The city lights twinkled peacefully.

Despite exhaustive searches, I have never found the Rue d’Auseil again. Strangely, I’m not entirely sorry—neither for that, nor for the loss of those closely written pages, swept into unimaginable abysses, that might have explained the music of Erich Zann.