The Music of Erich Zann (Plus Vocab)

by H.P. Lovecraft

Welcome everyone. Today we are going to explore one of the most chilling and atmospheric short stories ever written. It is called The Music of Erich Zann by H. P. Lovecraft. This is a tale of cosmic horror wrapped in mystery and strange music. We will walk through the entire story slowly and clearly. Along the way I will explain important vocabulary words that make the writing feel so eerie and old-fashioned. I will also point out interesting grammar structures that advanced English learners can study and use themselves. Let us begin.

The narrator starts by telling us something very strange. He says I have studied every map of the city with obsessive care yet I have never again located the Rue d’Auseil. Obsessive means extremely focused almost in an unhealthy way like someone who cannot stop thinking about one thing. The narrator cannot find this street again even though he has looked everywhere.

He explains these were not just recent maps. Street names change over time so he looked at very old records too. He even walked through every possible quarter of the city that might match the place he remembers. Quarter here means a district or neighborhood. Despite all this effort it is humiliating to admit he still cannot find the house the street or even the neighborhood. Humiliating means deeply embarrassing.

This place is where during the final broke months of my life as a metaphysics student at the university I heard the music of Erich Zann. Metaphysics is the

branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of reality existence and the universe. Broke means having no money. The narrator was very poor back then.

He is not surprised his memory is fractured. Fractured means broken or damaged here talking about his mind because his physical and mental health were seriously wrecked while he lived on that street. Wrecked means ruined or destroyed. He never brought any friends or acquaintances there. Acquaintances are people you know but not very closely.

What makes this truly unsettling is that the street was only a half-hour walk from the university. It had features so unusual that anyone who had been there would remember them forever. Yet he has never met a single person who claims to have seen the Rue d'Auseil. Unsettling means disturbing or making you feel uneasy.

Now he describes how to reach it. The street lay beyond a dark river lined with steep grim warehouses. Grim means dark gloomy and unpleasant. Their windows were filthy and blind meaning dirty and without life like empty eyes. A heavy bridge of blackened stone crossed the river. Blackened means darkened by age soot or fire.

It was always shadowy along that river as though factory smoke blocked the sun permanently. Shadowy means full of shadows dark and dim. The water carried vile smells I have never encountered anywhere else. Vile means extremely unpleasant disgusting. Odors means smells. He thinks those unique smells might one day help him locate it because he would recognize them instantly.

Past the bridge came narrow cobbled streets with tram rails. Cobbled means paved with cobblestones rounded stones. Then the climb began gentle at first but becoming unbelievably steep by the time it reached the Rue d'Auseil. He says he

has never seen another street so narrow and precipitously inclined. Precipitously means very steeply almost like falling off a cliff.

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. Ivy is a climbing plant with green leaves. The pavement was uneven stone slabs here cobblestones there bare dirt elsewhere with patches of sickly gray-green weeds pushing through. Uneven means not smooth or level. Sickly means unhealthy-looking.

The houses were tall sharply peaked impossibly ancient and leaning crazily in every direction forward backward sideways. Peaked means having pointed roofs. Ancient means extremely old. Leaning crazily means tilting wildly as if drunk or mad.

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. Rickety means shaky unstable likely to fall apart.

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. Reserve means not showing emotions being quiet and distant.

He has no idea how he ended up living on such a street. He was not himself when he moved in. He had been bouncing between one miserable lodging after another always thrown out for non-payment until he finally stumbled on that decaying building on the Rue d’Auseil run by the paralyzed landlord Blandot. Lodging means a place to rent and live. Decaying means falling apart rotting. Paralyzed means

unable to move parts of the body.

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. Eerie means strange and frightening in a supernatural way. Garret means a small attic room right under the roof usually for poor people.

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. Viol is an old string instrument like a violin. Mute means unable to speak.

Zann insisted on playing late into the night after work which was why he chose 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. Captivated means completely fascinated unable to look away. Unearthly means not from this world strange and otherworldly.

I do not know much about music but I was sure none of his chords or progressions resembled anything I had ever heard. Chords are groups of notes played together. Progressions are sequences of chords. 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. Intercepted means stopped him on purpose to talk.

I told him I would 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. Hunched means bent over. Grotesque means ugly and twisted in a strange way. Satyr-like refers to a mythical creature half man half goat wild and strange.

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. Neglected means not taken care of.

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. Grimy means very dirty. 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. Plastered means covered with smooth wall material. Cobwebs are spider webs.

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. Moth-eaten means damaged by moths full of holes.

For over an hour he held me spellbound with melodies I had never heard before pieces that must have been his own creations. Spellbound means unable to move fascinated completely.

I cannot describe them precisely I am no musician but they had the structure of a fugue with recurring themes of haunting beauty. Fugue is a complex musical form where themes repeat and weave together. Haunting means beautiful but sad and unforgettable in a ghostly way.

What struck me most was that none of the strange otherworldly notes I had overheard from below were present that night. I remembered those eerie tones clearly I had 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 had 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 had heard the previous night to jog his memory. Quirk means strange habit. Bars means short sections of music. Jog his memory means help him remember.

But I stopped almost immediately. When he recognized the tune his face twisted into an expression I cannot 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. Tormented means suffering greatly. Wistful means sadly thoughtful.

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 could not tolerate anyone touching anything in his room.

He had not 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 would not

reach me. He offered to cover the extra rent.

As I puzzled out his terrible French I felt more sympathetic. Sympathetic means feeling understanding and sorry for someone. 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 did not 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 did not 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. Nagging means persistent annoying. Glittering means shining sparkling. Spires are tall pointed tops of buildings like church towers.

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. Eavesdrop means listen secretly.

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 was not 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. Unnerved means made nervous and afraid. Swelled means grew louder and fuller. Symphonic means like a full orchestra.

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. Frenzied means wildly excited out of control. Gaunt means very thin and bony from suffering. Furtive means secretive trying to avoid being noticed.

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 had 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 had listened secretly at the door.

Words cannot capture that night’s performance. It was more horrifying than anything I had overheard because now I could see his face pure raw fear driving

every note.

He was not creating music he was making noise trying to drown something out or keep something at bay.

I could not 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 had 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. Bacchantes are wild female followers of the god Bacchus in myths.

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 had not 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 am 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.

Now let us look more closely at some of the vocabulary that makes this story so powerful. Obsessive care shows extreme almost mad attention. Precipitously inclined paints a picture of a street so steep it feels dangerous. Garret is that lonely attic room high up isolated perfect for mystery. Fugue describes complex repeating music that mirrors the story’s looping dread. Satyr-like gives Zann a mythical wild inhuman look. Furtive captures his growing secretiveness and fear. Pandemonium means total wild chaos perfect for the final scene. Abysses are bottomless voids suggesting horrors beyond our world.

Grammar in Lovecraft is often complex and builds tension. He uses long sentences with many clauses connected by commas and dashes for a breathless obsessive

feeling. For example I have studied every map of the city with obsessive care yet I have never again located the Rue d’Auseil uses yet for strong contrast.

Past perfect tense shows earlier events I had been bouncing between one miserable lodging after another until I finally stumbled on that decaying building.

Passive voice hides agents for mystery The shutter tore loose and slammed violently.

Dashes add dramatic interruptions The houses were tall sharply peaked impossibly ancient and leaning crazily in every direction forward backward sideways.

Relative clauses pack in description Its single gable window was the only spot on the street from which anyone could see over the terminating wall.

These structures make the text dense atmospheric and slow like creeping dread.

The story leaves so much unsaid. What was really beyond that window? What did Zann fear so much? That mystery is what makes it unforgettable.

Thank you for listening all the way through. If you are learning English try reading parts of the original story aloud. It helps with pronunciation flow and feeling the rhythm of horror. Until next time stay away from strange narrow streets and music that sounds too unearthly.