

The Sound-Sweep

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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By midnight Madame Gioconda's headache had become intense. All day the derelict walls and ceiling of the sound stage had reverberated with the endless din of traffic accelerating across the mid-town flyover which arched fifty feet above the studio's roof, a frenzied hypermanic babel of jostling horns, shrilling tyres, plunging brakes and engines that hammered down the empty corridors and stairways to the sound stage on the second floor, making the faded air feel leaden and angry.

Exhausting but at least impersonal, these sounds Madame Gioconda could bear. At dusk, however, when the flyover quietened, they were overlaid by the mysterious clapping of her phantoms, the sourceless applause that rustled down on to the stage from the darkness around her. At first a few scattered ripples from the front rows, it soon spread to the entire auditorium, mounting to a tumultuous ovation in which she suddenly detected a note of sarcasm, a single shout of derision that drove a spear of pain through her forehead, followed by an uproar of boos and catcalls that filled the tortured air, driving her away towards her couch where she lay gasping helplessly until Mangon arrived at midnight, hurrying on to the stage with his sonovac.

Understanding her, he first concentrated on sweeping the walls and ceiling clean, draining away the heavy depressing under-layer of traffic noises. Carefully he ran the long snout of the sonovac over the ancient scenic flats (relics of her previous roles at the Metropolitan Opera House) which screened in Madame Gioconda's make-shift home—the great collapsing Byzantine bed (Othello) mounted against the microphone turret; the huge framed mirrors with their peeling silver-screen (Orpheus) stacked in one corner by the bandstand; the stove (Trovatore) set up on the programme director's podium; the gilt-trimmed dressing table and wardrobe (Figaro) stuffed with newspaper and magazine cuttings. He swept them methodically, moving the sonovac's nozzle in long strokes, drawing out the dead residues of sound that had accumulated during the day.

By the time he finished the air was clear again, the atmosphere lightened, its overtones of fatigue and irritation dissipated. Gradually Madame Gioconda recovered. Sitting up weakly, she smiled wanly at Mangon. Mangon grinned back encouragingly, slipped the kettle on to the stove for Russian tea, sweetened by the usual phenobarbitone chaser, switched off the sonovac and indicated to her that he was going outside to empty it.

Down in the alley behind the studio he clipped the sonovac on to the intake manifold of the sound truck. The vacuum drained in a few seconds, but he waited a discretionary two or three minutes before returning, keeping up the pretence that Madame Gioconda's phantom audience was real. Of course the cylinder was always empty, containing only the usual daily detritus—the sounds of a door slam, a partition collapsing somewhere or the kettle whistling, a grunt or two, and later, when the headaches began, Madame Gioconda's pitiful moanings. The riotous applause, which would have lifted the roof off the Met, let alone a small radio station, the jeers and hoots of derision were, he knew, quite imaginary, figments of

Madame Gioconda's world of fantasy, phantoms from the past of a once great prima donna who had been dropped by her public and had retreated into her imagination, each evening conjuring up a blissful dream of being once again applauded by a full house at the Metropolitan, a dream that guilt and resentment turned sour by midnight, inverting it into a nightmare of fiasco and failure.

Why she should torment herself was difficult to understand, but at least the nightmare kept Madame Gioconda just this side of sanity and Mangon, who revered and loved Madame Gioconda, would have been the last person in the world to disillusion her. Each evening, when he finished his calls for the day, he would drive his sound truck all the way over from the West Side to the abandoned radio station under the flyover at the deserted end of F Street, go through the pretence of sweeping Madame Gioconda's apartment on the stage of studio 2, charging no fee, make tea and listen to her reminiscences and plans for revenge, then see her asleep and tiptoe out, a wry but pleased smile on his youthful face.

He had been calling on Madame Gioconda for nearly a year, but what his precise role was in relation to her he had not yet decided. Oddly enough, although he was more or less indispensable now to the effective operation of her fantasy world she showed little personal interest or affection for Mangon, but he assumed that this indifference was merely part of the autocratic personality of a world-famous prima donna, particularly one very conscious of the tradition, now alas meaningless, Melba—Callas—Gioconda. To serve at all was the privilege. In time, perhaps, Madame Gioconda might accord him some sign of favour.

Without him, certainly, her prognosis would have been poor. Lately the headaches had become more menacing, as she insisted that the applause was growing stormier, the boos and catcalls more vicious. Whatever the psychic mechanism generating the fantasy system, Mangon realized that ultimately she would need him at the studio all day, holding back the enveloping tides of nightmare and insanity with sham passes of the sonovac. Then, perhaps, when the dream crumbled, he would regret having helped her to delude herself. With luck though she might achieve her ambition of making a comeback. She had told him something of her scheme—a serpentine mixture of blackmail and bribery—and privately Mangon hoped to launch a plot of his own to return her to popularity. By now she had unfortunately reached the point where success alone could save her from disaster.

She was sitting up when he returned, propped back on an enormous gold lam cushion, the single lamp at the foot of the couch throwing a semicircle of light on to the great flats which divided the sound stage from the auditorium. These were all from her last operatic role—The Medium—and represented a complete interior of the old spiritualist's seance chamber, the one coherent feature in Madame Gioconda's present existence. Surrounded by fragments from a dozen roles, even Madame Gioconda herself, Mangon reflected, seemed compounded of several separate identities. A tall regal figure, with full shapely shoulders and massive ribcage, she had a large handsome face topped by a magnificent coiffure of rich blue-black hair—the exact prototype of the classical diva. She must have been almost fifty, yet her soft creamy complexion and small features were those of a child. The eyes, however, belied her. Large and watchful, slashed with mascara, they regarded the world around her balefully, narrowing even as Mangon approached.

Her teeth too were bad, stained by tobacco and cheap cocaine. When she was roused, and her full violet lips curled with rage, revealing the blackened hulks of her dentures and the acid flickering tongue, her mouth looked like a very vent of hell. Altogether she was a formidable woman.

As Mangon brought her tea she heaved herself up and made room for him by her feet among the debris of beads, loose diary pages, horoscopes and jewelled address books that littered the couch. Mangon sat down, surreptitiously noting the time (his first calls were at 9.30 the next morning and loss of sleep deadened his acute hearing), and prepared himself to listen to her for half an hour.

Suddenly she flinched, shrank back into the cushion and gestured agitatedly in the direction of the darkened bandstand.

„They're still clapping!“ she shrieked. „For God's sake sweep them away, they're driving me insane. Oooohh...“ she rasped theatrically, „over there, quickly...!“

Mangon leapt to his feet. He hurried over to the bandstand and carefully focused his ears on the tiers of seats and plywood music stands. They were all immaculately clean, well below the threshold at which embedded sounds began to radiate detectable echoes. He turned to the corner walls and ceiling. Listening very carefully he could just hear seven muted pads, the dull echoes of his footsteps across the floor. They faded and vanished, followed by a low thrashing noise like blurred radio static—in fact Madame Gioconda's present tantrum. Mangon could almost distinguish the individual words, but repetition muffled them.

Madame Gioconda was still writhing about on the couch, evidently not to be easily placated, so Mangon climbed down off the stage and made his way through the auditorium to where he had left his sonovac by the door. The power lead was outside in the truck but he was sure Madame Gioconda would fail to notice.

For five minutes he worked away industriously, pretending to sweep the bandstand again, then put down the sonovac and returned to the couch.

Madame Gioconda emerged from the cushion, sounded the air carefully with two or three slow turns of the head, and smiled at him.

„Thank you, Mangon,“ she said silkily, her eyes watching him thoughtfully. „You've saved me again from my assassins. They've become so cunning recently, they can even hide from you.“

Mangon smiled ruefully to himself at this last remark. So he had been a little too perfunctory earlier on; Madame Gioconda was keeping him up to the mark.

However, she seemed genuinely grateful. „Mangon, my dear,“ she reflected as she remade her face in the mirror of an enormous compact, painting on magnificent green eyes like a cobra's, „what would I do without you? How can I ever repay you for looking after me?“

The questions, whatever their sinister undertones (had he detected them, Mangon would have been deeply shocked) were purely rhetorical, and all their conversations for that matter entirely one-sided. For Mangon was a mute. From the age of three, when his mother had savagely punched him in the throat to stop him crying, he had been stone dumb, his vocal cords irreparably damaged. In all their endless exchanges of midnight confidences, Mangon had contributed not a single spoken word.

His muteness, naturally, was part of the attraction he felt for Madame Gioconda. Both of them in a sense had lost their voices, he to a cruel mother, she

to a fickle and unfaithful public. This bound them together, gave them a shared sense of life's injustice, though Mangon, like all innocents, viewed his misfortune without rancour. Both, too, were social outcasts. Rescued from his degenerate parents when he was four, Mangon had been brought up in a succession of state institutions, a solitary wounded child. His one talent had been his remarkable auditory powers, and at fourteen he was apprenticed to the Metropolitan Sonic Disposal Service. Regarded as little better than garbage collectors, the sound-sweeps were an outcast group of illiterates, mutes (the city authorities preferred these—their discretion could be relied upon) and social cripples who lived in a chain of isolated shacks on the edge of an old explosives plant in the sand dunes to the north of the city which served as the sonic dump.

Mangon had made no friends among the sound-sweeps, and Madame Gioconda was the first person in his life with whom he had been intimately involved. Apart from the pleasure of being able to help her, a considerable factor in Mangon's devotion was that until her decline she had represented (as to all mutes) the most painful possible reminder of his own voiceless condition, and that now he could at last come to terms with years of unconscious resentment.

This soon done, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to serving Madame Gioconda.

Inhaling moodily on a black cigarette clamped into a long jade holder, she was outlining her plans for a comeback. These had been maturing for several months and involved nothing less than persuading Hector LeGrande, chairman-in-chief of Video City, the huge corporation that transmitted a dozen TV and radio channels, into providing her with a complete series of television spectaculars. Built around Madame Gioconda and lavishly dressed and orchestrated, they would spearhead the international revival of classical opera that was her unfading dream.

„La Scala, Covent Garden, the Met—what are they now?“ she demanded angrily. „Bowling alleys! Can you believe, Mangon, that in those immortal theatres where I created my Tosca, my Butterfly, my Brunnhilde, they now have—“ she spat out a gust of smoke „—beer and skittles!“

Mangon shook his head sympathetically. He pulled a pencil from his breast-pocket and on the wrist-pad stitched to his left sleeve wrote: Mr LeGrande?

Madame Gioconda read the note, let it fall to the floor.

„Hector? Those lawyers poison him. He's surrounded by them, I think they steal all my telegrams to him. Of course Hector had a complete breakdown on the spectaculars. Imagine, Mangon, what a scoop for him, a sensation! (The great Gioconda will appear on television!) Not just some moronic bubblegum girl, but the Gioconda in person.“

Exhausted by this vision Madame Gioconda sank back into her cushion, blowing smoke limply through the holder.

Mangon wrote: Contract?

Madame Gioconda frowned at the note, then pierced it with the glowing end of her cigarette.

„I am having a new contract drawn up. Not for the mere 300,000 I was prepared to take at first, not even 500,000. For each show I shall now demand precisely one million dollars. Nothing less! Hector will have to pay for ignoring me. Anyway, think of the publicity value of such a figure. Only a star could think of such vulgar

extravagance. If he's short of cash he can sack all those lawyers. Or devalue the dollar, I don't mind."

Madame Gioconda hooted with pleasure at the prospect. Mangon nodded, then scribbled another message.

Be practical.

Madame Gioconda ground out her cigarette. „You think I'm raving, don't you, Mangon? (Fantastic dreams, million-dollar contracts, poor old fool.) But let me assure you that Hector will be only too eager to sign the contract. And I don't intend to rely solely on his good judgement as an impresario.“ She smirked archly to herself.

What else?

Madame Gioconda peered round the darkened stage, then lowered her eyes.

„You see, Mangon, Hector and I are very old friends. You know what I mean, of course?“ She waited for Mangon, who had swept out a thousand honeymoon hotel suites, to nod and then continued: „How well I remember that first season at Bayreuth, when Hector and I...“

Mangon stared unhappily at his feet as Madame Gioconda outlined this latest venture into blackmail. Certainly she and LeGrande had been intimate friends—the cuttings scattered around the stage testified frankly to this. In fact, were it not for the small monthly cheque which LeGrande sent Madame Gioconda she would long previously have disintegrated. To turn on him and threaten ancient scandal (LeGrande was shortly to enter politics) was not only grotesque but extremely dangerous, for LeGrande was ruthless and unsentimental. Years earlier he had used Madame Gioconda as a stepping-stone, reaping all the publicity he could from their affair, then abruptly kicking her away.

Mangon fretted. A solution to her predicament was hard to find. Brought about through no fault of her own, Madame Gioconda's decline was all the harder to bear. Since the introduction a few years earlier of ultrasonic music, the human voice indeed, audible music of any type—had gone completely out of fashion. Ultrasonic music, employing a vastly greater range of octaves, chords and chromatic scales than are audible by the human ear, provided a direct neural link between the sound stream and the auditory lobes, generating an apparently sourceless sensation of harmony, rhythm, cadence and melody uncontaminated by the noise and vibration of audible music. The re-scoring of the classical repertoire allowed the ultrasonic audience the best of both worlds. The majestic rhythms of Beethoven, the popular melodies of Tchaikovsky, the complex fugal elaborations of Bach, the abstract images of Schoenberg—all these were raised in frequency above the threshold of conscious audibility. Not only did they become inaudible, but the original works were re-scored for the much wider range of the ultrasonic orchestra, became richer in texture, more profound in theme, more sensitive, tender or lyrical as the ultrasonic arranger chose.

The first casualty in this change-over was the human voice. This alone of all instruments could not be re-scored, because its sounds were produced by non-mechanical means which the neurophonic engineer could never hope, or bother, to duplicate.

The earliest ultrasonic recordings had met with resistance, even ridicule. Radio programmes consisting of nothing but silence interrupted at halfhour intervals by

commercial breaks seemed absurd. But gradually the public discovered that the silence was golden, that after leaving the radio switched to an ultrasonic channel for an hour or so a pleasant atmosphere of rhythm and melody seemed to generate itself spontaneously around them. When an announcer suddenly stated that an ultrasonic version of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony or Tchaikovsky's Pathétique had just been played the listener identified the real source.

A second advantage of ultrasonic music was that its frequencies were so high they left no resonating residues in solid structures, and consequently there was no need to call in the sound-sweep. After an audible performance of most symphonic music, walls and furniture throbbed for days with disintegrating residues that made the air seem leaden and tumid, an entire room virtually uninhabitable.

An immediate result was the swift collapse of all but a few symphony orchestras and opera companies. Concert halls and opera houses closed overnight. In the age of noise the tranquillizing balms of silence began to be rediscovered.

But the final triumph of ultrasonic music had come with a second development—the short-playing record, spinning at 900 r.p.m., which condensed the 45 minutes of a Beethoven symphony to 20 seconds of playing time, the three hours of a Wagner opera to little more than two minutes. Compact and cheap, SP records sacrificed nothing to brevity. One 30-second SP record delivered as much neurophonic pleasure as a natural length recording, but with deeper penetration, greater total impact.

Ultrasonic SP records swept all others off the market. Sonic LP records became museum pieces—only a crank would choose to listen to an audible full-length version of Siegfried or the Barber of Seville when he could have both wrapped up inaudibly inside the same five-minute package and appreciate their full musical value.

The heyday of Madame Gioconda was over. Unceremoniously left on the shelf, she had managed to survive for a few months vocalizing on radio commercials. Soon these too went ultrasonic. In a despairing act of revenge she bought out the radio station which fired her and made her home on one of the sound stages. Over the years the station became derelict and forgotten, its windows smashed, neon portico collapsing, aerials rusting. The huge eight-lane flyover built across it sealed it conclusively into the past.

Now Madame Gioconda proposed to win her way back at stiletto-point.

Mangon watched her impassively as she ranted on nastily in a cloud of purple cigarette smoke, a large seedy witch. The phenobarbitone was making her drowsy and her threats and ultimatums were becoming disjointed.

„...memoirs too, don't forget, Hector. Frank exposure, no holds barred. I mean... damn, have to get a ghost. Hotel de Paris at Monte, lots of pictures. Oh yes, I kept the photographs.“ She grubbed about on the couch, came up with a crumpled soap coupon and a supermarket pay slip. „Wait till those lawyers see them. Hector—“ Suddenly she broke off, stared glassily at Mangon and sagged back.

Mangon waited until she was finally asleep, stood up and peered closely at her. She looked forlorn and desperate. He watched her reverently for a moment, then tiptoed to the rheostat mounted on the control panel behind the couch, damped down the lamp at Madame Gioconda's feet and left the stage.

He sealed the auditorium doors behind him, made his way down to the foyer and stepped out, sad but at the same time oddly exhilarated, into the cool midnight air. At last he accepted that he would have to act swiftly if he was to save Madame Gioconda.

2

Driving his sound truck into the city shortly after nine the next morning, Mangon decided to postpone his first call the weird Neo-Corbusier Episcopalian Oratory sandwiched among the office blocks in the downtown financial sector and instead turned west on Mainway and across the park towards the white-faced apartment batteries which reared up above the trees and lakes along the north side.

The Oratory was a difficult and laborious job that would take him three hours of concentrated effort. The Dean had recently imported some rare thirteenth-century pediments from the Church of St Francis at Assisi, beautiful sonic matrices rich with seven centuries of Gregorian chant, overlaid by the timeless tolling of the Angelus. Mounted into the altar they emanated an atmosphere resonant with litany and devotion, a mellow, deeply textured hymn that silently evoked the most sublime images of prayer and meditation.

But at 50,000 dollars each they also represented a terrifying hazard to the clumsy sound-sweep. Only two years earlier the entire north transept of Rheims Cathedral, rose window intact, purchased for a record 1,000,000 dollars and re-erected in the new Cathedral of St Joseph at San Diego, had been drained of its priceless heritage of tonal inlays by a squad of illiterate sound-sweeps who had misread their instructions and accidentally swept the wrong wall.

Even the most conscientious sound-sweep was limited by his skill, and Mangon, with his auditory super-sensitivity, was greatly in demand for his ability to sweep selectively, draining from the walls of the Oratory all extraneous and discordant noises—coughing, crying, the clatter of coins and mumble of prayer—leaving behind the chorales and liturgical chants which enhanced their devotional overtones. His skill alone would lengthen the life of the Assisi pediments by twenty years; without him they would soon become contaminated by the miscellaneous traffic of the congregation. Consequently he had no fears that the Dean would complain if he failed to appear as usual that morning.

Halfway along the north side of the park he swung off into the forecourt of a huge forty-storey apartment block, a glittering white cliff ribbed by jutting balconies. Most of the apartments were Superlux duplexes occupied by showbusiness people. No one was about, but as Mangon entered the hallway, sonovac in one hand, the marble walls and columns buzzed softly with the echoing chatter of guests leaving parties four or five hours earlier.

In the elevator the residues were clearer—confident male tones, the sharp wheedling of querulous wives, soft negatives of amatory blondes, punctuated by countless repetitions of „dahling“. Mangon ignored the echoes, which were almost inaudible, a dim insect hum. He grinned to himself as he rode up to the penthouse

apartment; if Madame Gioconda had known his destination she would have strangled him on the spot.

Ray Alto, doyen of the ultrasonic composers and the man more than any other responsible for Madame Gioconda's decline, was one of Mangon's regular calls. Usually Mangon swept his apartment once a week, calling at three in the afternoon. Today, however, he wanted to make sure of finding Alto before he left for Video City, where he was a director of programme music.

The houseboy let him in. He crossed the hall and made his way down the black glass staircase into the sunken lounge. Wide studio windows revealed an elegant panorama of park and mid-town skyscrapers.

A white-slacked young man sitting on one of the long slab sofas—Paul Merrill, Alto's arranger—waved him back.

„Mangon, hold on to your dive breaks. I'm really on reheat this morning.“ He twirled the ultrasonic trumpet he was playing, a tangle of stops and valves from which half a dozen leads trailed off across the cushions to a cathode tube and tone generator at the other end of the sofa.

Mangon sat down quietly and Merrill clamped the mouthpiece to his lips. Watching the ray tube intently, where he could check the shape of the ultrasonic notes, he launched into a brisk allegretto sequence, then quickened and flicked out a series of brilliant arpeggios, stripping off high P and Q notes that danced across the cathode screen like frantic eels, fantastic glissandos that raced up twenty octaves in as many seconds, each note distinct and symmetrically exact, tripping off the tone generator in turn so that escalators of electronic chords interweaved the original scale, a multichannel melodic stream that crowded the cathode screen with exquisite, flickering patterns. The whole thing was inaudible, but the air around Mangon felt vibrant and accelerated, charged with gaiety and sparkle, and he applauded generously when Merrill threw off a final dashing riff.

„Flight of the Bumble Bee,“ Merrill told him. He tossed the trumpet aside and switched off the cathode tube. He lay back and savoured the glistening air for a moment. „Well, how are things?“

Just then the door from one of the bedrooms opened and Ray Alto appeared, a tall, thoughtful man of about forty, with thinning blonde hair, wearing pale sunglasses over cool eyes.

„Hello, Mangon,“ he said, running a hand over Mangon's head. „You're early today. Full programme?“ Mangon nodded. „Don't let it get you down.“ Alto picked a dictaphone off one of the end tables, carried it over to an armchair. „Noise, noise, noise—the greatest single disease-vector of civilization. The whole world's rotting with it, yet all they can afford is a few people like Mangon fooling around with sonovacs. It's hard to believe that only a few years ago people completely failed to realize that sound left any residues.“

„Are we any better?“ Merrill asked. „This month's Transonics claims that eventually unswept sonic resonances will build up to a critical point where they'll literally start shaking buildings apart. The entire city will come down like Jericho.“

„Babel,“ Alto corrected. „Okay, now, let's shut up. We'll be gone soon, Mangon. Buy him a drink, would you, Paul.“

Merrill brought Mangon a coke from the bar, then wandered off. Alto flipped on the dictaphone, began to speak steadily into it. „Memo 7: Betty, when does the

copyright on Stravinsky lapse? Memo 8: Betty, file melody for projected nocturne: L, L sharp, BB, Y flat, Q, VT, L, L sharp. Memo 9: Paul, the bottom three octaves of the ultratuba are within the audible spectrum of the canine ear—congrats on that SP of the Anvil Chorus last night; about three million dogs thought the roof had fallen in on them. Memo 10: Betty—“ He broke off, put down the microphone. „Mangon, you look worried.“

Mangon, who had been lost in reverie, pulled himself together and shook his head.

„Working too hard?“ Alto pressed. He scrutinized Mangon suspiciously. „Are you still sitting up all night with that Gioconda woman?“

Embarrassed, Mangon lowered his eyes. His relationship with Alto was, obliquely, almost as close as that with Madame Gioconda. Although Alto was brusque and often irritable with Mangon, he took a sincere interest in his welfare. Possibly Mangon’s muteness reminded him of the misanthropic motives behind his hatred of noise, made him feel indirectly responsible for the act of violence Mangon’s mother had committed. Also, one artist to another, he respected Mangon’s phenomenal auditory sensitivity.

„She’ll exhaust you, Mangon, believe me.“ Alto knew how much the personal contact meant to Mangon and hesitated to be over-critical. „There’s nothing you can do for her. Offering her sympathy merely fans her hopes for a come-back. She hasn’t a chance.“

Mangon frowned, wrote quickly on his wrist-pad: She WILL sing again!

Alto read the note pensively. Then, in a harder voice, he said: „She’s using you for her own purposes, Mangon. At present you satisfy one whim of hers—the neurotic headaches and fantasy applause. God forbid what the next whim might be.“

She is a great artist.

„She was,“ Alto pointed out. „No more, though, sad as it is. I’m afraid that the times change.“

Annoyed by this, Mangon gritted his teeth and tore off another sheet.

Entertainment, perhaps. Art, No!

Alto accepted the rebuke silently; he reproved himself as much as Mangon did for selling out to Video City. In his four years there his output of original ultrasonic music consisted of little more than one nearly finished symphony aptly titled Opus Zero—shortly to receive its first performance, a few nocturnes and one quartet. Most of his energies went into programme music, prestige numbers for spectacles and a mass of straight transcriptions of the classical repertoire. The last he particularly despised, fit work for Paul Merrill, but not for a responsible composer.

He added the sheet to the two in his left hand and asked: „Have you ever heard Madame Gioconda sing?“

Mangon’s answer came back scornfully: No! But you have. Please describe.

Alto laughed shortly, tore up his sheets and walked across to the window.

„All right, Mangon, you’ve made your point. You’re carrying a torch for art, doing your duty to one of the few perfect things the world has ever produced. I hope you’re equal to the responsibility. La Gioconda might be quite a handful. Do you know that at one time the doors of Covent Garden, La Scala and the Met were

closed to her? They said Callas had temperament, but she was a girl guide compared with Gioconda. Tell me, how is she? Eating enough?"

Mangon held up his coke bottle.

„Snow? That’s tough. But how does she afford it?“ He glanced at his watch. „Dammit, I’ve got to leave. Clean this place out thoroughly, will you. It gives me a headache just listening to myself think.“

He started to pick up the dictaphone but Mangon was scribbling rapidly on his pad.

Give Madame Gioconda a job.

Alto read the note, then gave it back to Mangon, puzzled. „Where? In this apartment?“ Mangon shook his head. „Do you mean at V.C.? Singing?“

When Mangon began to nod vigorously he looked up at the ceiling with a despairing groan. „For heaven’s sake, Mangon, the last vocalist sang at Video City over ten years ago. No audience would stand for it. If I even suggested such an idea they’d tear my contract into a thousand pieces.“ He shuddered, only half-playfully. „I don’t know about you, Mangon, but I’ve got my ulcer to support.“

He made his way to the staircase, but Mangon intercepted him, pencil flashing across the wrist-pad.

Please. Madame Gioconda will start blackmail soon. She is desperate.

Must sing again. Could arrange make-believe programme in research studios. Closed circuit.

Alto folded the note carefully, left the dictaphone on the staircase and walked slowly back to the window.

„This blackmail. Are you absolutely sure? Who, though, do you know?“ Mangon nodded, but looked away. „Okay, I won’t press you. LeGrande, probably, eh?“ Mangon turned round in surprise, then gave an elaborate parody of a shrug.

„Hector LeGrande. Obvious guess. But there are no secrets there, it’s all on open file. I suppose she’s just threatening to make enough of an exhibition of herself to block his governorship.“ Alto pursed his lips. He loathed LeGrande, not merely for having bribed him into a way of life he could never renounce, but also because, once having exploited his weakness, LeGrande never hesitated to remind Alto of it, treating him and his music with contempt. If Madame Gioconda’s blackmail had the slightest hope of success he would have been only too happy, but he knew LeGrande would destroy her, probably take Mangon too.

Suddenly he felt a paradoxical sense of loyalty for Madame Gioconda. He looked at Mangon, waiting patiently, big spaniel eyes wide with hope.

„The idea of a closed circuit programme is insane. Even if we went to all the trouble of staging it she wouldn’t be satisfied. She doesn’t want to sing, she wants to be a star. It’s the trappings of stardom she misses—the cheering galleries, the piles of bouquets, the green room parties. I could arrange a half-hour session on closed circuit with some trainee technicians—a few straight selections from Tosca and Butterfly, say, with even a sonic piano accompaniment, I’d be glad to play it myself—but I can’t provide the gossip columns and theatre reviews. What would happen when she found out?“

She wants to SING.

Alto reached out and patted Mangon on the shoulder. „Good for you. All right, then, I’ll think about it. God knows how we’d arrange it. We’d have to tell her that

she'll be making a surprise guest appearance on one of the big shows that'll explain the absence of any programme announcement and we'll be able to keep her in an isolated studio. Stress the importance of surprise, to prevent her from contacting the newspapers... Where are you going?"

Mangon reached the staircase, picked up the dictaphone and returned to Alto with it. He grinned happily, his jaw working wildly as he struggled to speak. Strangled sounds quavered in his throat.

Touched, Alto turned away from him and sat down. „Okay, Mangon,“ he snapped brusquely, „you can get on with your job. Remember, I haven't promised anything.“ He flicked on the dictaphone, then began: „Memo 11: Ray..."

3

It was just after four o'clock when Mangon braked the sound truck in the alley behind the derelict station. Overhead the traffic hammered along the flyover, dinning down on to the cobbled walls. He had been trying to finish his rounds early enough to bring Madame Gioconda the big news before her headaches began. He had swept out the Oratory in an hour, whirled through a couple of movie theatres, the Museum of Abstract Art, and a dozen private calls in half his usual time, driven by his almost overwhelming joy at having won a promise of help from Ray Alto.

He ran through the foyer, already fumbling at his wrist-pad. For the first time in many years he really regretted his muteness, his inability to tell Madame Gioconda orally of his triumph that morning.

Studio 2 was in darkness, the rows of seats and litter of old programmes and ice-cream cartons reflected dimly in the single light masked by the tall flats. His feet slipped in some shattered plaster fallen from the ceiling and he was out of breath when he clambered up on to the stage and swung round the nearest flat.

Madame Gioconda had gone!

The stage was deserted, the couch a rumpled mess, a clutter of cold saucepans on the stove. The wardrobe door was open, dresses wrenched outwards off their hangers.

For a moment Mangon panicked, unable to visualize why she should have left, immediately assuming that she had discovered his plot with Alto.

Then he realized that never before had he visited the studio until midnight at the earliest, and that Madame Gioconda had merely gone out to the supermarket. He smiled at his own stupidity and sat down on the couch to wait for her, sighing with relief.

As vivid as if they had been daubed in letters ten feet deep, the words leapt out from the walls, nearly deafening him with their force.

„You grotesque old witch, you must be insane! You ever threaten me again and I'll have you destroyed! LISTEN, you pathetic—“ Mangon spun round helplessly, trying to screen his ears. The words must have been hurled out in a paroxysm of abuse, they were only an hour old, vicious sonic scars slashed across the immaculately swept walls.

His first thought was to rush out for the sonovac and sweep the walls clear before Madame Gioconda returned. Then it dawned on him that she had already heard the original of the echoes—in the background he could just detect the muffled rhythms and intonations of her voice.

All too exactly, he could identify the man's voice.

He had heard it many times before, raging in the same ruthless tirades, when deputizing for one of the sound-sweeps, he had swept out the main boardroom at Video City.

Hector LeGrande! So Madame Gioconda had been more desperate than he thought.

The bottom drawer of the dressing table lay on the floor, its contents upended. Propped against the mirror was an old silver portrait frame, dull and verdigrised, some cotton wool and a tin of cleansing fluid next to it. The photograph was one of LeGrande, taken twenty years earlier. She must have known LeGrande was coming and had searched out the old portrait, probably regretting the threat of blackmail.

But the sentiment had not been shared.

Mangon walked round the stage, his heart knotting with rage, filling his ears with LeGrande's taunts. He picked up the portrait, pressed it between his palms, and suddenly smashed it across the edge of the dressing table.

„Mangon!“

The cry riveted him to the air. He dropped what was left of the frame, saw Madame Gioconda step quietly from behind one of the flats.

„Mangon, please,“ she protested gently. „You frighten me.“ She sidled past him towards the bed, dismantling an enormous purple hat. „And do clean up all that glass, or I shall cut my feet.“

She spoke drowsily and moved in a relaxed, sluggish way that Mangon first assumed indicated acute shock. Then she drew from her handbag six white vials and lined them up carefully on the bedside table. These were her favourite confectionery—so LeGrande had sweetened the pill with another cheque. Mangon began to scoop the glass together with his feet, at the same time trying to collect his wits. The sounds of LeGrande's abuse dinned the air, and he broke away and ran off to fetch the sonovac.

Madame Gioconda was sitting on the edge of the bed when he returned, dreamily dusting a small bottle of bourbon which had followed the cocaine vials out of the handbag. She hummed to herself melodically and stroked one of the feathers in her hat.

„Mangon,“ she called when he had almost finished. „Come here.“

Mangon put down the sonovac and went across to her.

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly very steady. „Mangon, why did you break Hector's picture?“ She held up a piece of the frame. „Tell me.“

Mangon hesitated, then scribbled on his pad: I am sorry. I adore you very much. He said such foul things to you.

Madame Gioconda glanced at the note, then gazed back thoughtfully at Mangon. „Were you hiding here when Hector came?“

Mangon shook his head categorically. He started to write on his pad but Madame Gioconda restrained him.

„That’s all right, dear. I thought not.“ She looked around the stage for a moment, listening carefully. „Mangon, when you came in could you hear what Mr LeGrande said?“

Mangon nodded. His eyes flickered to the obscene phrases on the walls and he began to frown. He still felt LeGrande’s presence and his attempt to humiliate Madame Gioconda.

Madame Gioconda pointed around them. „And you can actually hear what he said even now? How remarkable. Mangon, you have a wondrous talent.“

I am sorry you have to suffer so much.

Madame Gioconda smiled at this. „We all have our crosses to bear. I have a feeling you maybe able to lighten mine considerably.“ She patted the bed beside her. „Do sit down, you must be tired.“ When he was settled she went on, „I’m very interested, Mangon. Do you mean you can distinguish entire phrases and sentences in the sounds you sweep? You can hear complete conversations hours after they have taken place?“

Something about Madame Gioconda’s curiosity made Mangon hesitate. His talent, so far as he knew, was unique, and he was not so naïve as to fail to appreciate its potentialities. It had developed in his late adolescence and so far he had resisted any temptation to abuse it. He had never revealed the talent to anyone, knowing that if he did his days as a sound-sweeper would be over.

Madame Gioconda was watching him, an expectant smile on her lips. Her thoughts, of course, were solely of revenge. Mangon listened again to the walls, focused on the abuse screaming out into the air.

Not complete conversations. Long fragments, up to twenty syllables.

Depending on resonances and matrix. Tell no one. I will help you have revenge on LeGrande.

Madame Gioconda squeezed Mangon’s hand. She was about to reach for the bourbon bottle when Mangon suddenly remembered the point of his visit. He leapt off the bed and started frantically scribbling on his wrist-pad.

He tore off the first sheet and pressed it into her startled hands, then filled three more, describing his encounter with the musical director at V. C., the latter’s interest in Madame Gioconda and the conditional promise to arrange her guest appearance. In view of LeGrande’s hostility he stressed the need for absolute secrecy.

He waited happily while Madame Gioconda read quickly through the notes, tracing out Mangon’s child-like script with a long scarlet fingernail. When she finished he nodded his head rapidly and gestured triumphantly in the air.

Bemused, Madame Gioconda gazed uncomprehendingly at the notes. Then she reached out and pulled Mangon to her, taking his big faun-like head in her jewelled hands and pressing it to her lap.

„My dear child, how much I need you. You must never leave me now.

As she stroked Mangon’s hair her eyes roved questingly around the walls.

The miracle happened shortly before eleven o’clock the next morning.

After breakfast, sprawled across Madame Gioconda’s bed with her scrapbooks, an old gramophone salvaged by Mangon from one of the studios playing operatic selections, they had decided to drive out to the stockades—the sound-sweeps left for the city at nine and they would be able to examine the sonic dumps

unmolested. Having spent so much time with Madame Gioconda and immersed himself so deeply in her world, Mangon was eager now to introduce Madame Gioconda to his. The stockades, bleak though they might be, were all he had to show her.

For Mangon, Madame Gioconda had now become the entire universe, a source of certainty and wonder as potent as the sun. Behind him his past life fell away like the discarded chrysalis of a brilliant butterfly, the grey years of his childhood at the orphanage dissolving into the magical kaleidoscope that revolved around him. As she talked and murmured affectionately to him, the drab flats and props in the studio seemed as brightly coloured and meaningful as the landscape of a mescaline fantasy, the air tingling with a thousand vivid echoes of her voice.

They set off down F Street at ten, soon left behind the dingy warehouses and abandoned tenements that had enclosed Madame Gioconda for so long. Squeezed together in the driving-cab of the sound truck they looked an incongruous pair—the gangling Mangon, in zip-fronted yellow plastic jacket and yellow peaked cap, at the wheel, dwarfed by the vast flamboyant Madame Gioconda, wearing a parrot-green cartwheel hat and veil, her huge creamy breast glittering with pearls, gold stars and jewelled crescents, a small selection of the orders that had showered upon her in her heyday.

She had breakfasted well, on one of the vials and a tooth-glass of bourbon. As they left the city she gazed out amiably at the fields stretching away from the highway, and trilled out a light recitative from Figaro.

Mangon listened to her happily, glad to see her in such good form. Determined to spend every possible minute with Madame Gioconda, he had decided to abandon his calls for the day, if not for the next week and month. With her he at last felt completely secure. The pressure of her hand and the warm swell of her shoulder made him feel confident and invigorated, all the more proud that he was able to help her back to fame.

He tapped on the windshield as they swung off the highway on to the narrow dirt track that led towards the stockades. Here and there among the dunes they could see the low ruined outbuildings of the old explosives plant, the white galvanized iron roof of one of the sound-sweep's cabins. Desolate and unfrequented, the dunes ran on for miles. They passed the remains of a gateway that had collapsed to one side of the road; originally a continuous fence ringed the stockade, but no one had any reason for wanting to penetrate it. A place of strange echoes and festering silences, overhung by a gloomy miasma of a million compacted sounds, it remained remote and haunted, the graveyard of countless private babels.

The first of the sonic dumps appeared two or three hundred yards away on their right. This was reserved for aircraft sounds swept from the city's streets and municipal buildings, and was a tightly packed collection of sound-absorbent baffles covering several acres. The baffles were slightly larger than those in the other stockades; twenty feet high and fifteen wide, each supported by heavy wooden props, they faced each other in a random labyrinth of alleyways, like a store lot of advertisement hoardings. Only the top two or three feet were visible above the dunes, but the charged air hit Mangon like a hammer, a pounding niagara of airliners blaring down the glideway, the piercing whistle of jets

jockeying at take-off, the ceaseless mind-sapping roar that hangs like a vast umbrella over any metropolitan complex.

All around, odd sounds shaken loose from the stockades were beginning to reach them. Over the entire area, fed from the dumps below, hung an unbroken phonic high, invisible but nonetheless as tangible and menacing as an enormous black thundercloud. Occasionally, when super-saturation was reached after one of the summer holiday periods, the sonic pressure fields would split and discharge, venting back into the stockades a nightmarish cataract of noise, raining on to the sound-sweeps not only the howling of cats and dogs, but the multi-lunged tumult of cars, express trains, fairgrounds and aircraft, the cacophonous concrete of civilization.

To Mangon the sounds reaching them, though scaled higher in the register, were still distinct, but Madame Gioconda could hear nothing and felt only an overpowering sense of depression and irritation. The air seemed to grate and rasp. Mangon noticed her beginning to frown and hold her hand to her forehead. He wound up his window and indicated to her to do the same. He switched on the sonovac mounted under the dashboard and let it drain the discordancies out of the sealed cabin.

Madame Gioconda relaxed in the sudden blissful silence. A little further on, when they passed another stockade set closer to the road, she turned to Mangon and began to say something to him.

Suddenly she jerked violently in alarm, her hat toppling. Her voice had frozen! Her mouth and lips moved frantically, but no sounds emerged. For a moment she was paralysed. Clutching her throat desperately, she filled her lungs and screamed.

A faint squeak piped out of her cavernous throat, and Mangon swung round in alarm to see her gibbering apoplectically, pointing helplessly to her throat.

He stared at her bewildered, then doubled over the wheel in a convulsion of silent laughter, slapping his thigh and thumping the dashboard. He pointed to the sonovac, then reached down and turned up the volume.

„...aaauuuoooh,“ Madame Gioconda heard herself groan. She grasped her hat and secured it. „Mangon, what a dirty trick, you should have warned me.“

Mangon grinned. The discordant sounds coming from the stockades began to fill the cabin again, and he turned down the volume. Gleefully, he scribbled on his wrist-pad: Now you know what it is like!

Madame Gioconda opened her mouth to reply, then stopped in time, hiccuped and took his arm affectionately.

4

Mangon slowed down as they approached a side road. Two hundred yards away on their left a small pink-washed cabin stood on a dune overlooking one of the stockades. They drove up to it, turned into a circular concrete apron below the cabin and backed up against one of the unloading bays, a battery of red-painted hydrants equipped with manifold gauges and release pipes running off into the

stockade. This was only twenty feet away at its nearest point, a forest of door-shaped baffles facing each other in winding corridors, like a set from a surrealist film.

As she climbed down from the truck Madame Gioconda expected the same massive wave of depression and overload that she had felt from the stockade of aircraft noises, but instead the air seemed brittle and frenetic, darting with sudden flashes of tension and exhilaration.

As they walked up to the cabin Mangon explained: Party noises—company for me.

The twenty or thirty baffles nearest the cabin he reserved for those screening him from the miscellaneous chatter that filled the rest of the stockade. When he woke in the mornings he would listen to the laughter and small talk, enjoy the gossip and wisecracks as much as if he had been at the parties himself.

The cabin was a single room with a large window overlooking the stockade, well insulated from the hubbub below. Madame Gioconda showed only a cursory interest in Mangon's meagre belongings, and after a few general remarks came to the point and went over to the window. She opened it slightly, listened experimentally to the stream of atmospheric shifts that crowded past her.

She pointed to the cabin on the far side of the stockade. „Mangon, whose is that?“

Gallagher's. My partner. He sweeps City Hall, University, V.C., big mansions on 5th and A. Working now.

Madame Gioconda nodded and surveyed the stockade with interest. „How fascinating. It's like a zoo. All that talk, talk, talk. And you can hear it all.“ She snapped back her bracelets with swift decisive flicks of the wrist.

Mangon sat down on the bed. The cabin seemed small and dingy, and he was saddened by Madame Gioconda's disinterest. Having brought her all the way out to the dumps he wondered how he was going to keep her amused. Fortunately the stockade intrigued her. When she suggested a stroll through it he was only too glad to oblige.

Down at the unloading bay he demonstrated how he emptied the tanker, clipping the exhaust leads to the hydrant, regulating the pressure through the manifold and then pumping the sound away into the stockade.

Most of the stockade was in a continuous state of uproar, sounding something like a crowd in a football stadium, and as he led her out among the baffles he picked their way carefully through the quieter aisles. Around them voices chattered and whined fretfully, fragments of conversation drifted aimlessly over the air. Somewhere a woman pleaded in thin nervous tones, a man grumbled to himself, another swore angrily, a baby bellowed. Behind it all was the steady background murmur of countless TV programmes, the easy patter of announcers, the endless monotones of race-track commentators, the shrieking audiences of quiz shows, all pitched an octave up the scale so that they sounded an eerie parody of themselves.

A shot rang out in the next aisle, followed by screams and shouting. Although she heard nothing, the pressure pulse made Madame Gioconda stop.

„Mangon, wait. Don't be in so much of a hurry. Tell me what they're saying.“

Mangon selected a baffle and listened carefully. The sounds appeared to come from an apartment over a launderette. A battery of washing machines chuntered to themselves, a cash register slammed interminably, there was a dim almost sub-threshold echo of 60-cycle hum from an SP recordplayer.

He shook his head, waved Madame Gioconda on.

„Mangon, what did they say?“ she pestered him. He stopped again, sharpened his ears and waited. This time he was more lucky, an overemotional female voice was gasping „...but if he finds you here he'll kill you, he'll kill us both, what shall we do...“ He started to scribble down this outpouring, Madame Gioconda craning breathlessly over his shoulder, then recognized its source and screwed up the note.

„Mangon, for heaven's sake, what was it? Don't throw it away! Tell me!“ She tried to climb under the wooden superstructure of the baffle to recover the note, but Mangon restrained her and quickly scribbled another message.

Adam and Eve. Sorry.

„What, the film? Oh, how ridiculous! Well, come on, try again.“

Eager to make amends, Mangon picked the next baffle, one of a group serving the staff married quarters of the University. Always a difficult job to keep clean, he struck paydirt almost at once.

„...my God, there's Bartok all over the place, that damned Steiner woman, I'll swear she's sleeping with her...“

Mangon took it all down, passing the sheets to Madame Gioconda as soon as he covered them. Squinting hard at his crabbed handwriting, she gobbled them eagerly, disappointed when, after half a dozen, he lost the thread and stopped.

„Go on, Mangon, what's the matter?“ She let the notes fall to the ground. „Difficult, isn't it. We'll have to teach you shorthand.“

They reached the baffles Mangon had just filled from the previous day's rounds. Listening carefully he heard Paul Merrill's voice: „...month's Transonics claims that... the entire city will come down like Jericho.“

He wondered if he could persuade Madame Gioconda to wait for fifteen minutes, when he would be able to repeat a few carefully edited fragments from Alto's promise to arrange her guest appearance, but she seemed eager to move deeper into the stockade.

„You said your friend Gallagher sweeps out Video City, Mangon. Where would that be?“

Hector LeGrande. Of course, Mangon realized, why had he been so obtuse. This was the chance to pay the man back.

He pointed to an area a few aisles away. They climbed between the baffles, Mangon helping Madame Gioconda over the beams and props, steering her full skirt and wide hat brim away from splinters and rusted metalwork.

The task of finding LeGrande was simple. Even before the baffles were in sight Mangon could hear the hard, unyielding bite of the tycoon's voice, dominating every other sound from the Video City area. Gallagher in fact swept only the senior dozen or so executive suites at V.C., chiefly to relieve their occupants of the distasteful echoes of LeGrande's voice.

Mangon steered their way among these, searching for LeGrande's master suite, where anything of a really confidential nature took place.

There were about twenty baffles, throwing off an unending chorus of „Yes, H.L.“, „Thanks, H.L.“, „Brilliant, H.L.“ Two or three seemed strangely quiet, and he drew Madame Gioconda over to them.

This was LeGrande with his personal secretary and PA. He took out his pencil and focused carefully.

„...of Third National Bank, transfer two million to private holding and threaten claim for stock depreciation... redraft escape clauses, including non-liability purchase benefits...“

Madame Gioconda tapped his arm but he gestured her away. Most of the baffle appeared to be taken up by dubious financial dealings, but nothing that would really hurt LeGrande if revealed.

Then he heard—

„...Bermuda Hilton. Private Island, with anchorage, have the beach cleaned up, last time the water was full of fish... I don't care, poison them, hang some nets out... Imogene will fly in from Idlewild as Mrs Edna Burgess, warn Customs to stay away...“

„...call Cartiers, something for the Contessa, 17 carats say, ceiling of ten thousand. No, make it eight thousand...“

„...hat-check girl at the Tropicabana. Usual dossier...“

Mangon scribbled furiously, but LeGrande was speaking at rapid dictation speed and he could get down only a few fragments. Madame Gioconda barely deciphered his handwriting, and became more and more frustrated as her appetite was whetted. Finally she flung away the notes in a fury of exasperation.

„This is absurd, you're missing everything!“ she cried. She pounded on one of the baffles, then broke down and began to sob angrily. „Oh God, God, God, how ridiculous! Help me, I'm going insane...“

Mangon hurried across to her, put his arms round her shoulders to support her. She pushed him away irritably, railing at herself to discharge her impatience. „It's useless, Mangon, it's stupid of me, I was a fool—“

„STOP!“

The cry split the air like the blade of a guillotine.

They both straightened, stared at each other blankly. Mangon put his fingers slowly to his lips, then reached out tremulously and put his hands in Madame Gioconda's. Somewhere within him a tremendous tension had begun to dissolve.

„Stop,“ he said again in a rough but quiet voice. „Don't cry. I'll help you.“

Madame Gioconda gaped at him with amazement. Then she let out a tremendous whoop of triumph.

„Mangon, you can talk! You've got your voice back! It's absolutely astounding! Say something, quickly, for heaven's sake!“

Mangon felt his mouth again, ran his fingers rapidly over his throat. He began to tremble with excitement, his face brightened, he jumped up and down like a child.

„I can talk,“ he repeated wonderingly. His voice was gruff, then seesawed into a treble. „I can talk,“ he said louder, controlling its pitch. „I can talk, I can talk, I can talk!“ He flung his head back, let out an ear-shattering shout. „I CAN TALK! HEAR ME!“ He ripped the wrist-pad off his sleeve, hurled it away over the baffles.

Madame Gioconda backed away, laughing agreeably. „We can hear you, Mangon. Dear me, how sweet.“ She watched Mangon thoughtfully as he cavorted happily in the narrow interval between the aisles. „Now don't tire yourself out or you'll lose it again.“

Mangon danced over to her, seized her shoulders and squeezed them tightly. He suddenly realized that he knew no diminutive or Christian name for her.

„Madame Gioconda,“ he said earnestly, stumbling over the syllables, the words that were so simple yet so enormously complex to pronounce. „You gave me back my voice. Anything you want—“ He broke off, stuttering happily, laughing through his tears. Suddenly he buried his head in her shoulder, exhausted by his discovery, and cried gratefully, „It's a wonderful voice.“

Madame Gioconda steadied him maternally. „Yes, Mangon,“ she said, her eyes on the discarded notes lying in the dust. „You've got a wonderful voice, all right.“ Sotto voce, she added: „But your hearing is even more wonderful.“

* * * * *

Paul Merrill switched off the SP player, sat down on the arm of the sofa and watched Mangon quizzically.

„Strange. You know, my guess is that it was psychosomatic.“

Mangon grinned. „Psychosemantic,“ he repeated, garbling the word half-deliberately. „Clever. You can do amazing things with words. They help to crystallize the truth.“

Merrill groaned playfully. „God, you sit there, you drink your coke, you philosophize. Don't you realize you're supposed to stand quietly in a corner, positively dumb with gratitude? Now you're even ramming your puns down my throat. Never mind, tell me again how it happened.“

„Once a pun a time—“ Mangon ducked the magazine Merrill flung at him, let out a loud „Ole!“

For the last two weeks he had been en****te.

Every day he and Madame Gioconda followed the same routine; after breakfast at the studio they drove out to the stockade, spent two or three hours compiling their confidential file on LeGrande, lunched at the cabin and then drove back to the city, Mangon going off on his rounds while Madame Gioconda slept until he returned shortly before midnight. For Mangon their existence was idyllic; not only was he rediscovering himself in terms of the complex spectra and patterns of speech—a completely new category of existence—but at the same time his relationship with Madame Gioconda revealed areas of sympathy, affection and understanding that he had never previously seen. If he sometimes felt that he was too preoccupied with his side of their relationship and the extraordinary benefits it had brought him, at least Madame Gioconda had been equally well served. Her headaches and mysterious phantoms had gone, she had cleaned up the studio and begun to salvage a little dignity and selfconfidence, which made her single-minded sense of ambition seem less obsessive. Psychologically, she needed Mangon less now than he needed her, and he was sensible to restrain his high spirits and give her plenty of attention. During the first week Mangon's incessant chatter had been rather wearing, and once, on their way to the stockade, she had

switched on the sonovac in the driving-cab and left Mangon mouthing silently at the air like a stranded fish. He had taken the hint.

„What about the sound-sweeping?“ Merrill asked. „Will you give it up?“

Mangon shrugged. „It’s my talent, but living at the stockade, let in at back doors, cleaning up the verbal garbage it’s a degraded job. I want to help Madame Gioconda. She will need a secretary when she starts to go on tour.“

Merrill shook his head warily. „You’re awfully sure there’s going to be a sonic revival, Mangon. Every sign is against it.“

„They have not heard Madame Gioconda sing. Believe me, I know the power and wonder of the human voice. Ultrasonic music is great for atmosphere, but it has no content. It can’t express ideas, only emotions.“

„What happened to that closed circuit programme you and Ray were going to put on for her?“

„It—fell through,“ Mangon lied. The circuits Madame Gioconda would perform on would be open to the world. He had told them nothing of the visits to the stockade, of his power to read the baffles, of the accumulating file on LeGrande. Soon Madame Gioconda would strike.

Above them in the hallway a door slammed, someone stormed through into the apartment in a tempest, kicking a chair against a wall. It was Alto. He raced down the staircase into the lounge, jaw tense, fingers flexing angrily.

„Paul, don’t interrupt me until I’ve finished,“ he snapped, racing past without looking at them. „You’ll be out of a job but I warn you, if you don’t back me up one hundred per cent I’ll shoot you. That goes for you too, Mangon, I need you in on this.“ He whirled over to the window, bolted out the traffic noises below, then swung back and watched them steadily, feet planted firmly in the carpet. For the first time in the three years Mangon had known him he looked aggressive and confident.

„Headline,“ he announced. „The Gioconda is to sing again! Incredible and terrifying though the prospect may seem, exactly two weeks from now the live, uncensored voice of the Gioconda will go out coast to coast on all three V.C. radio channels. Surprised, Mangon? It’s no secret, they’re printing the bills right now. Eight-thirty to nine-thirty, right up on the peak, even if they have to give the time away.“

Merrill sat forward. „Bully for her. If LeGrande wants to drive the whole ship into the ground, why worry?“

Alto punched the sofa viciously. „Because you and I are going to be on board! Didn’t you hear me? Eight-thirty, a fortnight today! We have a programme on then. Well, guess who our guest star is?“

Merrill struggled to make sense of this. „Wait a minute, Ray. You mean she’s actually going to appear—she’s going to sing—in the middle of Opus Zero?“ Alto nodded grimly. Merrill threw up his hands and slumped back. „It’s crazy, she can’t. Who says she will?“

„Who do you think? The great LeGrande.“ Alto turned to Mangon. „She must have raked up some real dirt to frighten him into this. I can hardly believe it.“

„But why on Opus Zero?“ Merrill pressed. „Let’s switch the premiere to the week after.“

„Paul, you're missing the point. Let me fill you in. Sometime yesterday Madame Gioconda paid a private call on LeGrande. Something she told him persuaded him that it would be absolutely wonderful for her to have a whole hour to herself on one of the feature music programmes, singing a few old-fashioned songs from the old-fashioned shows, with a full-scale ultrasonic backing. Eager to give her a completely free hand he even asked her which of the regular programmes she'd like. Well, as the last show she appeared on ten years ago was cancelled to make way for Ray Alto's Total Symphony you can guess which one she picked.“

Merrill nodded. „It all fits together. We're broadcasting from the concert studio. A single ultrasonic symphony, no station breaks, not even a commentary. Your first world premiere in three years. There'll be a big invited audience. White tie, something like the old days. Revenge is sweet.“ He shook his head sadly. „Hell, all that work.“

Alto snapped: „Don't worry, it won't be wasted. Why should we pay the bill for LeGrande? This symphony is the one piece of serious music I've written since I joined V.C. and it isn't going to be ruined.“ He went over to Mangon, sat down next to him. „This afternoon I went down to the rehearsal studios. They'd found an ancient sonic grand somewhere and one of the old-timers was accompanying her. Mangon, it's ten years since she sang last. If she'd practised for two or three hours a day she might have preserved her voice, but you sweep her radio station, you know she hasn't sung a note. She's an old woman now. What time alone hasn't done to her, cocaine and self-pity have.“ He paused, watching Mangon searchingly. „I hate to say it, Mangon, but it sounded like a cat being strangled.“

You lie, Mangon thought icily. You are simply so ignorant, your taste in music is so debased, that you are unable to recognize real genius when you see it. He looked at Alto with contempt, sorry for the man, with his absurd silent symphonies. He felt like shouting: I know what silence is! The voice of the Gioconda is a stream of gold, molten and pure, she will find it again as I found mine. However, something about Alto's manner warned him to wait.

He said: „I understand.“ Then: „What do you want me to do?“

Alto patted him on the shoulder. „Good boy. Believe me, you'll be helping her in the long run. What I propose will save all of us from looking foolish. We've got to stand up to LeGrande, even if it means a one-way ticket out of V.C. Okay, Paul?“ Merrill nodded firmly and he went on: „Orchestra will continue as scheduled. According to the programme Madame Gioconda will be singing to an accompaniment by Opus Zero, but that means nothing and there'll be no connection at any point. In fact she won't turn up until the night itself. She'll stand well down-stage on a special platform, and the only microphone will be an aerial about twenty feet diagonally above her. It will be live—but her voice will never reach it. Because you, Mangon, will be in the cue-box directly in front of her, with the most powerful sonovac we can lay our hands on. As soon as she opens her mouth you'll let her have it. She'll be at least ten feet away from you so she'll hear herself and won't suspect what is happening.“

„What about the audience?“ Merrill asked.

„They'll be listening to my symphony, enjoying a neurophonic experience of sufficient beauty and power, I hope, to distract them from the sight of a blowzy prima donna gesturing to herself in a cocaine fog. They'll probably think she's

conducting. Remember, they may be expecting her to sing but how many people still know what the word really means? Most of them will assume it's ultrasonic."

„And LeGrande?"

„He'll be in Bermuda. Business conference."

5

Madame Gioconda was sitting before her dressing-table mirror, painting on a face like a Halloween mask. Beside her the gramophone played scratchy sonic selections from Traviata. The stage was still a disorganized jumble, but there was now an air of purpose about it.

Making his way through the flats, Mangon walked up to her quietly and kissed her bare shoulder. She stood up with a flourish, an enormous monument of a woman in a magnificent black silk dress sparkling with thousands of sequins.

„Thank you, Mangon," she sang out when he complimented her. She swirled off to a hat-box on the bed, pulled out a huge peacock feather and stabbed it into her hair.

Mangon had come round at six, several hours before usual; over the past two days he had felt increasingly uneasy. He was convinced that Alto was in error, and yet logic was firmly on his side. Could Madame Gioconda's voice have preserved itself? Her spoken voice, unless she was being particularly sweet, was harsh and uneven, recently even more so. He assumed that with only a week to her performance nervousness was making her irritable.

Again she was going out, as she had done almost every night. With whom, she never explained; probably to the theatre restaurants, to renew contacts with agents and managers. He would have liked to go with her, but he felt out of place on this plane of Madame Gioconda's existence.

„Mangon, I won't be back until very late," she warned him. „You look rather tired and pasty. You'd better go home and get some sleep."

Mangon noticed he was still wearing his yellow peaked cap. Unconsciously he must already have known he would not be spending the night there.

„Do you want to go to the stockade tomorrow?" he asked.

„Hmmmh... I don't think so. It gives me rather a headache. Let's leave it for a day or two."

She turned on him with a tremendous smile, her eyes glittering with sudden affection.

„Goodbye, Mangon, it's been wonderful to see you." She bent down and pressed her cheek maternally to his, engulfing him in a heady wave of powder and perfume. In an instant all his doubts and worries evaporated, he looked forward to seeing her the next day, certain that they would spend the future together.

For half an hour after she had gone he wandered around the deserted sound stage, going through his memories. Then he made his way out to the alley and drove back to the stockade.

As the day of Madame Gioconda's performance drew closer Mangon's anxieties mounted. Twice he had been down to the concert studio at Video City, had

rehearsed with Alto his entry beneath the stage to the cue-box, a small compartment off the corridor used by the electronics engineers. They had checked the power points, borrowed a sonovac from the services section—a heavy duty model used for shielding VIPs and commentators at airports—and mounted its nozzle in the cue-hood.

Alto stood on the platform erected for Madame Gioconda, shouted at the top of his voice at Merrill sitting in the third row of the stalls.

„Hear anything?“ he called afterwards.

Merrill shook his head. „Nothing, no vibration at all.“

Down below Mangon flicked the release toggle, vented a longdrawn-out „Fiivvveeee!... Foouuurrr!... Threeeee!... Twooooo! Onnnnee...“

„Good enough,“ Alto decided. Chicago-style, they hid the sonovac in a triple-bass case, stored it in Alto’s office.

„Do you want to hear her sing, Mangon?“ Alto asked. „She should be rehearsing now.“

Mangon hesitated, then declined.

„It’s tragic that she’s unable to realize the truth herself,“ Alto commented. „Her mind must be fixed fifteen or twenty years in the past, when she sang her greatest roles at La Scala. That’s the voice she hears, the voice she’ll probably always hear.“

Mangon pondered this. Once he tried to ask Madame Gioconda how her practice sessions were going, but she was moving into a different zone and answered with some grandiose remark. He was seeing less and less of her, whenever he visited the station she was either about to go out or else tired and eager to be rid of him. Their trips to the stockade had ceased. All this he accepted as inevitable; after the performance, he assured himself, after her triumph, she would come back to him.

He noticed, however, that he was beginning to stutter.

On the final afternoon, a few hours before the performance that evening, Mangon drove down to F Street for what was to be the last time. He had not seen Madame Gioconda the previous day and he wanted to be with her and give her any encouragement she needed.

As he turned into the alley he was surprised to see two large removal vans parked outside the station entrance. Four or five men were carrying out pieces of furniture and the great scenic flats from the sound stage.

Mangon ran over to them. One of the vans was full; he recognized all Madame Gioconda’s possessions—the rococo wardrobe and dressing table, the couch, the huge Desdemona bed, up-ended and wrapped in corrugated paper—as he looked at it he felt that a section of himself had been torn from him and rammed away callously. In the bright daylight the peeling threadbare flats had lost all illusion of reality; with them Mangon’s whole relationship with Madame Gioconda seemed to have been dismantled.

The last of the workmen came out with a gold cushion under his arm, tossed it into the second van. The foreman sealed the doors and waved on the driver. wh... where are you going?’ Mangon asked him urgently.

The foreman looked him up and down. „You’re the sweeper, are you?“ He jerked a thumb towards the station. „The old girl said there was a message for you in there. Couldn’t see one myself.“

Mangon left him and ran into the foyer and up the stairway towards Studio 2. The removers had torn down the blinds and a grey light was flooding into the dusty auditorium. Without the flats the stage looked exposed and derelict.

He raced down the aisle, wondering why Madame Gioconda had decided to leave without telling him.

The stage had been stripped. The music stands had been kicked over, the stove lay on its side with two or three old pans around it, underfoot there was a miscellaneous litter of paper, ash and empty vials.

Mangon searched around for the message, probably pinned to one of the partitions.

Then he heard it screaming at him from the walls, violent and concise.

„GO AWAY YOU UGLY CHILD! NEVER TRY TO SEE ME AGAIN!“

He shrank back, involuntarily tried to shout as the walls seemed to fall in on him, but his throat had frozen.

As he entered the corridor below the stage shortly before eight-twenty, Mangon could hear the sounds of the audience arriving and making their way to their seats. The studio was almost full, a hubbub of well-heeled chatter. Lights flashed on and off in the corridor, and oblique atmospheric shifts cut through the air as the players on the stage tuned their instruments.

Mangon slid past the technicians manning the neurophonic rigs which supplied the orchestra, trying to make the enormous triple-bass case as inconspicuous as possible. They were all busy checking the relays and circuits, and he reached the cue-box and slipped through the door unnoticed.

The box was almost in darkness, a few rays of coloured light filtering through the pink and white petals of the chrysanthemums stacked over the hood. He bolted the door, then opened the case, lifted out the sonovac and clipped the snout into the canister. Leaning forward, with his hands he pushed a small aperture among the flowers.

Directly in front of him he could see a velvet-lined platform, equipped with a white metal rail to the centre of which a large floral ribbon had been tied. Beyond was the orchestra, disposed in a semicircle, each of the twenty members sitting at a small box-like desk on which rested his instrument, tone generator and cathode tube. They were all present, and the light reflected from the ray screens threw a vivid phosphorescent glow on to the silver wall behind them.

Mangon propped the nozzle of the sonovac into the aperture, bent down, plugged in the lead and switched on.

Just before eight-twenty-five someone stepped across the platform and paused in front of the cue-hood. Mangon crouched back, watching the patent leather shoes and black trousers move near the nozzle.

„Mangon!“ he heard Alto snap. He craned forward, saw Alto eyeing him. Mangon waved to him and Alto nodded slowly, at the same time smiling to someone in the audience, then turned on his heel and took his place in the orchestra.

At eight-thirty a sequence of red and green lights signalled the start of the programme. The audience quietened, waiting while an announcer in an off-stage booth introduced the programme.

A compère appeared on stage, standing behind the cue-hood, and addressed the audience. Mangon sat quietly on the small wooden seat fastened to the wall,

staring blankly at the canister of the sonovac. There was a round of applause, and a steady green light shone downwards through the flowers. The air in the cue-box began to sweeten, a cool motionless breeze eddied vertically around him as a rhythmic ultrasonic pressure wave pulsed past. It relaxed the confined dimensions of the box, with a strange mesmeric echo that held his attention. Somewhere in his mind he realized that the symphony had started, but he was too distracted to pull himself together and listen to it consciously.

Suddenly, through the gap between the flowers and the sonovac nozzle, he saw a large white mass shifting about on the platform. He slipped off the seat and peered up.

Madame Gioconda had taken her place on the platform. Seen from below she seemed enormous, a towering cataract of glistening white satin that swept down to her feet. Her arms were folded loosely in front of her, fingers flashing with blue and white stones. He could only just glimpse her face, the terrifying witch-like mask turned in profile as she waited for some off-stage signal.

Mangon mobilized himself, slid his hand down to the trigger of the sonovac. He waited, feeling the steady subliminal music of Alto's symphony swell massively within him, its tempo accelerating. Presumably Madame Gioconda's arranger was waiting for a climax at which to introduce her first aria.

Abruptly Madame Gioconda looked forward at the audience and took a short step to the rail. Her hands parted and opened palms upward, her head moved back, her bare shoulders swelled.

The wave front pulsing through the cue-box stopped, then soared off in a continuous unbroken crescendo. At the same time Madame Gioconda thrust her head out, her throat muscles contracted powerfully.

As the sound burst from her throat Mangon's finger locked rigidly against the trigger guard. An instant later, before he could think, a shattering blast of sound ripped through his ears, followed by a slightly higher note that appeared to strike a hidden ridge half-way along its path, wavered slightly, then recovered and sped on, like an express train crossing lines.

Mangon listened to her numbly, hands gripping the barrel of the sonovac. The voice exploded in his brain, flooding every nexus of cells with its violence. It was grotesque, an insane parody of a classical soprano. Harmony, purity, cadence had gone. Rough and cracked, it jerked sharply from one high note to a lower, its breath intervals uncontrolled, sudden precipices of gasping silence which plunged through the volcanic torrent, dividing it into a loosely connected sequence of bravura passages.

He barely recognized what she was singing: the Toreador song from Carmen. Why she had picked this he could not imagine. Unable to reach its higher notes she fell back on the swinging rhythm of the refrain, hammering out the rolling phrases with tosses of her head. After a dozen bars her pace slackened, she slipped into an extempore humming, then broke out of this into a final climactic assault.

Appalled, Mangon watched as two or three members of the orchestra stood up and disappeared into the wings. The others had stopped playing, were switching off their instruments and conferring with each other. The audience was obviously

restive; Mangon could hear individual voices in the intervals when Madame Gioconda refilled her lungs.

Behind him someone hammered on the door. Startled, Mangon nearly tripped across the sonovac. Then he bent down and wrenched the plug out of its socket. Snapping open the two catches beneath the chassis of the sonovac, he pulled off the canister to reveal the valves, amplifier and generator. He slipped his fingers carefully through the leads and coils, seized them as firmly as he could and ripped them out with a single motion. Tearing his nails, he stripped the printed circuit off the bottom of the chassis and crushed it between his hands.

Satisfied, he dropped the sonovac to the floor, listened for a moment to the caterwauling above, which was now being drowned by the mounting vocal opposition of the audience, then unlatched the door.

Paul Merrill, his bow tie askew, burst in. He gaped blankly at Mangon, at the blood dripping from his fingers and the smashed sonovac on the floor.

He seized Mangon by the shoulders, shook him roughly. „Mangon, are you crazy? What are you trying to do?“

Mangon attempted to say something, but his voice had died. He pulled himself away from Merrill, pushed past into the corridor.

Merrill shouted after him. „Mangon, help me fix this! Where are you going?“ He got down on his knees, started trying to piece the sonovac together.

From the wings Mangon briefly watched the scene on the stage.

Madame Gioconda was still singing, her voice completely inaudible in the uproar from the auditorium. Half the audience were on their feet, shouting towards the stage and apparently remonstrating with the studio officials. All but a few members of the orchestra had left their instruments, these sitting on their desks and watching Madame Gioconda in amazement.

The programme director, Alto and one of the compères stood in front of her, banging on the rail and trying to attract her attention. But Madame Gioconda failed to notice them. Head back, eyes on the brilliant ceiling lights, hands gesturing majestically, she soared along the private causeways of sound that poured unrelentingly from her throat, a great white angel of discord on her homeward flight.

Mangon watched her sadly, then slipped away through the stage-hands pressing around him. As he left the theatre by the stage door a small crowd was gathering by the main entrance. He flicked away the blood from his fingers, then bound his handkerchief round them.

He walked down the side street to where the sound truck was parked, climbed into the cab and sat still for a few minutes looking out at the bright evening lights in the bars and shopfronts.

Opening the dashboard locker, he hunted through it and pulled out an old wrist-pad, clipped it into his sleeve.

In his ears the sounds of Madame Gioconda singing echoed like an insane banshee.

He switched on the sonovac under the dashboard, turned it full on, then started the engine and drove off into the night.



