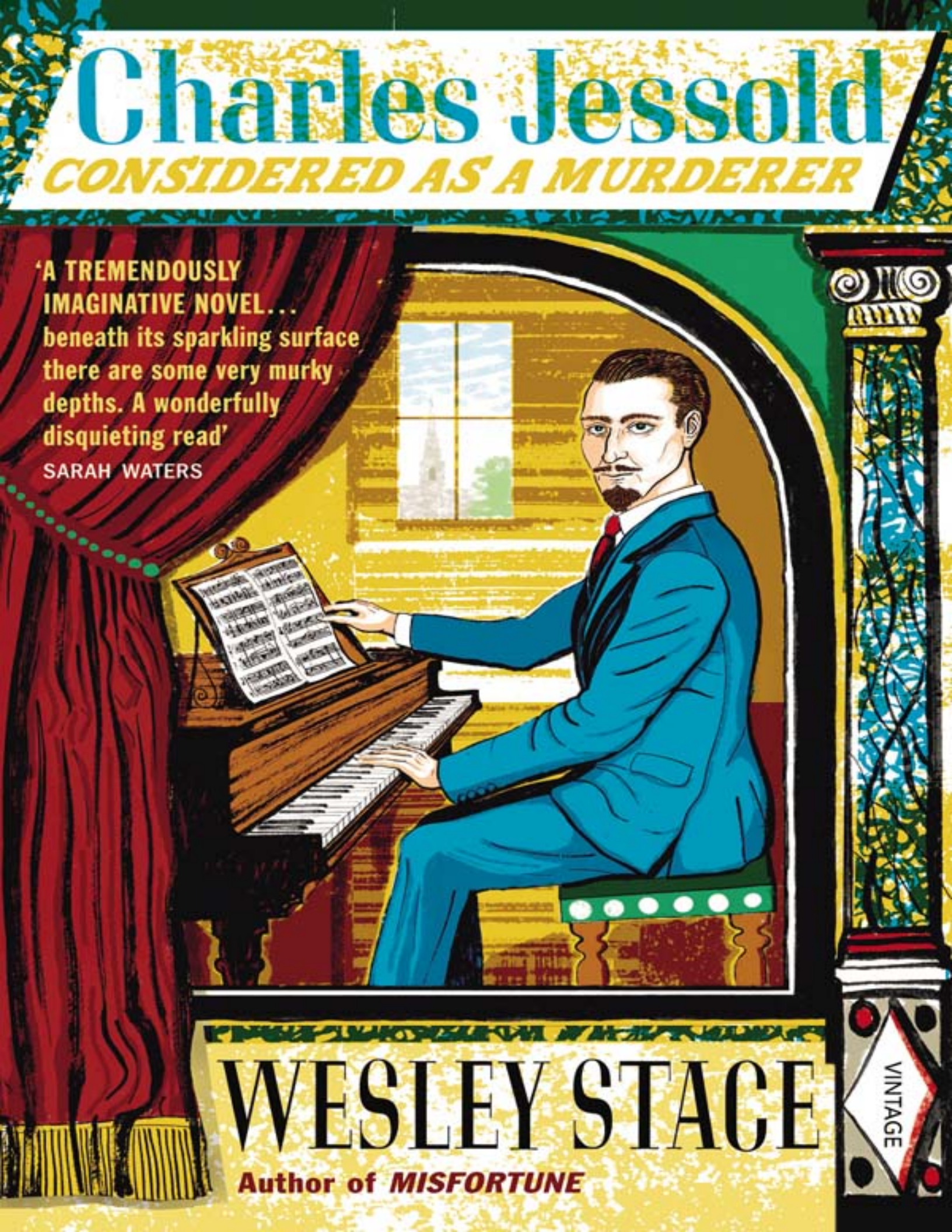
Charles Jessold
CONSIDERED AS A MURDERER

'A TREMENDOUSLY IMAGINATIVE NOVEL... beneath its sparkling surface there are some very murky depths. A wonderfully disquieting read'
SARAH WATERS



WESLEY STACE

Author of *MISFORTUNE*

VINTAGE

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About the Book

The night before brilliant but erratic composer Charles Jessold's opera – about a betrayed husband who murders his wife and her lover – is due to open, Jessold is found dead, having apparently murdered his wife and her lover. Leslie Shepherd, music critic and Jessold's collaborator on the opera, reflects on the scandalous affair in a dazzling, passionate and witty novel about the dangerous relationship between artist and critic.

About the Author

Wesley Stace is the author of two critically acclaimed novels, the international bestseller *Misfortune* (2005) and *by George* (2007). Stace is also a musician who, under the name John Wesley Harding, has released 15 albums.

ALSO BY WESLEY STACE

Misfortune

by George

For Abbey

WESLEY STACE

Charles Jessold, Considered as a Murderer

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Passionate subjects must be dealt with in cold blood.

Hector Berlioz

The World, 24 June 1923

KENSINGTON TRIPLE TRAGEDY COMPOSER KILLS HIS WIFE, ANOTHER, COMMITS SUICIDE

OPERA WILL NOT OPEN

A double murder followed by the suicide of the perpetrator has taken place in a cul-de-sac off Kensington High Street. Jealousy is the principal motive for the crime.

The police were summoned at two o'clock yesterday morning, when witnesses at Cadogan Mansions in Drapery Street were startled by the report of a revolver. Constable Williams, forcing the door open, found the body of the composer Charles Jessold, aged 35 years, holding a bloodstained five-chambered revolver, which he had discharged into his jaw. On the bed lay the bodies of his wife, mezzo soprano Victoria London, 30, and Edward Manville, 40, a married man. The Jessolds' two-month-old baby was found awake in his crib.

Police reported that the administration of fatal doses of arsenic was the cause of death of Miss London and Mr Manville, raising the possibility that Jessold watched their death-agonies before taking his own life, therefore making the tragedy threefold.

Earlier in the evening, all three had attended a dress rehearsal of the composer's first opera, *Little Musgrave*, which was to be given its premiere by the English Opera Company in two days. At the private party that followed, Charles Jessold was seen in heated argument with Mr Manville, who subsequently departed with Miss London for

the Jessolds' Kensington home where they relieved the nurse who was caring for the Jessolds' infant son.

Jessold had been drinking heavily and numerous witnesses reported that his behaviour was erratic. He told an intimate that his wife had stated her intention to end the marriage, retaining custody of the child.

Regardless of the composer's death, gruesome parallels between this triple domestic tragedy and Jessold's opera *Little Musgrave*, in which Lord Barnard murders his wife and her lover, ensure that the EOC has no choice but to cancel the production. It is expected that *The Magic Flute*, under the baton of Sir Arnold Bentham, will take its place in the repertory this season.

Charles Jessold was best known for the string quartet composed while he was captive at the Badenstein internment camp. Among his other compositions were *The Soda Syphon Symphony*, the tone poem *Séance*, the *Folk-Song Oratorio*, and his popular suite *Shandyisms*. In 1918, he was the first recipient of the Composers Guild's Young Composer of the Year award.

The musical critic of this newspaper, a sometime collaborator of the composer, Leslie Shepherd, blamed Jessold's alcoholism and obsessive nature, declaring the murders an unnecessary tragedy, one that would inevitably tarnish the composer's legacy.

As The World *noted, I was both witness to the events at the party and Jessold's collaborator. As such, I gave my statement to the police at Kensington on 25 June. (I had expected to spend that day anticipating the premiere of* Little Musgrave, *but I found myself instead in a one-windowed interrogation room.) This brief, uninspiring experience persuaded me to gather my memories of the composer: to flesh him out, as it were, as I knew him.*

I was not to become Jessold's official biographer until many years later, but when the commission came, I was glad of this albeit partial narrative, written when events were fresh in my mind and my memory was at its best. Perhaps if everyone the composer knew had done half as much, we'd have a more complete picture of a man who allowed each of his magic circle access to a mere fragment of him. At the time, however, most people were happy to forget his very existence.

I gave this personal memoir to the police, in case it might be of use. What they made of it I have no idea: perhaps I should have enclosed a stamped addressed envelope so they could notify me of receipt. Perhaps it arrived too late. I now imagine my typed pages at rest in a dusty folder in a far-flung filing cabinet: 'Closed Cases Archive – J'.

But I wrote it primarily for myself, to set the record straight, to tell the story I knew, to clear my mind. That I also gave it to the police was certainly to the advantage of all.

I offer it here, as is, without further remark. The rest of the story comes later.

1

Charles Jessold, As I Knew Him

The public must sometimes be imposed upon, for it considers itself the composer’s equal as soon as things are made too easy for it.

Robert Schumann

1

I MET CHARLES Jessold, the murderer, on 21 May 1910, the day after King Edward’s funeral. We were guests at a Hatton Manor Saturday-to-Monday, and it was on that very first evening that I had occasion to tell of Carlo Gesualdo, the composer whose story made such a lasting impression.

I had just entered the room, a quick inventory of which revealed: three composers (one of note, two of naught), a conductor, and a miscellany of vicars, musical scholars and enthusiasts; not to mention Cedric Mount (our most esteemed member) and of course Antic Jackson who, despite arriving on the same late train from town, had managed to beat me downstairs. I was, as ever, the token musical critic.

The only stranger was a young man standing over the piano. In impeccably creased grey flannels and gaudily striped tie, he was our junior by some years. His face, a pick-and-mix assortment, conformed to no classical ideal. His forehead was too broad and his lips too mean for his fleshy cheeks, although the ever-glimmering smile at their left corner gave an impression of geniality. His thick black hair was slicked lavishly with pomade.

His eyes, later described as devilish, were nothing of the kind; rather they were beady, though being a lucid emerald

green, not unattractively so. In conversation, they spoke directly to you, a somewhat unnerving compliment that turned a stranger into a confidant whether he cared to be or not. When it was Jessold's turn to listen, those eyes never strayed from yours. To avoid his gaze, one sought refuge in the perfectly straight line from the top of his nose to the cusp of the chin that he was later to disguise with a goatee (interpreted as *Mephistophelean*, of course). Above his eyes, that pale billboard of forehead advertised his every flicker of emotion.

This newcomer leaned in rapt attention, back arched to a stylised forty-five degrees, his elbow on the lid of the piano, hand to his chin, thumb tucked under: a remarkably self-conscious pose. I found myself wondering whether he was perhaps used to being observed. He certainly 'lit up' a room. Any producer worth his salt would have plucked him from a crowd.

I realised that someone was playing the piano only when he stopped. The pianist, Mark Wallington, rose and with a sweep of the hand surrendered his stool to the young man, whose mask of deliberation disappeared into a broad smile that bared unruly teeth dominated by handsomely vampirical incisors. He raised his hands, as if to demonstrate that there was nothing up his sleeves, and played what he had just heard to an astonishing degree of accuracy. The performance, brought off with some relish, was greeted by applause from a group by the fireside.

'The arrangement and harmonisations to boot!' proclaimed St John Smith à la ringmaster. 'Will anyone else try to stump him?' The young man bowed. Not so self-conscious after all; just youthful, serious, in the spotlight.

I called casually to our host, the fifteenth Viscount Hatton, who met my eyes with a raised finger implying that I was far more interesting than whatever minor obstacles stood in his path. He was known as 'Sandy' for his sun-

freckled, desert complexion, though all he knew of the Sahara was a bunker at Sunningdale.

'You're like a *German verb*, Leslie,' he said when he finally materialised. A calculated insult. 'Always last.'

'But *just* on time, and like a French adjective, agreeable.' I waved a vague finger towards the young man: 'Who's the performing seal?'

'Now now.'

'Can he balance a red ball on his nose?'

'Probably.' Sandy surveyed his domain with satisfaction. Jackson and I were the last pieces in his weekend's jigsaw. 'A pleasure, Leslie.' I bowed. 'Ah,' he said with an approving smile at the cabal in question. 'A reprise of the star turn.'

Again a somewhat tuneless original was rendered; again the young man duplicated it, as though the first player had printed a piano roll and he merely pedalled it through. It seemed the Memory Man had reached the climax of his act.

'I didn't know there was to be a music-hall turn in addition to our fishing expedition,' I said pianissimo as we broadcast smiles about us.

'A mere trifle. The *pièce de résistance* is yet to come.'

'Oh, I *am* disappointed.'

'I believe he was something of an … *infant prodigy*.' He savoured the words for my benefit.

'Played *Three Blind Mice* in all keys by the age of four? Wrote his first sonata *in utero*?'

'Very possibly. But his days of prodigiousness are done. He is unhappily studying composition under Kemp at St Christopher's, Cambridge …'

Kemp's was a name I was known to pooh-pooh at every opportunity, so I instead indicated the wunderkind's tie. 'Are those Kit's colours?'

'No, I believe that may be the tie of …' he paused for comic effect … 'the Four Towns Music Festival in Kent. There's a mother, I am told, to whom he is very loyal, and

she has him work as accompanist at that august provincial gala. Jessold may not strictly be from the top drawer, dear Shepherd, but I saw a young man of promise.'

'*You* invited him.' I thought we had been speaking of an interloper, an extraneous other making up numbers in the back of someone's Bentley. Sandy waved away my apology.

'He is going down this year, and when Kemp asked me to speak to the University Madrigal Society I unavoidably met Jessold, its president.' The keen madrigalist was currently attacking a bit of ragtime with venom, pounding the keys into submission.

'What's he got against the piano?'

'His touch is a little agricultural, probably years of banging out "Poor Wandering One" for the daughters of the local clergy, but then Jessold has no pretensions to be a concert pianist.'

'Eureka! He has pretensions to be a composer?'

'Yes.'

'He angled for an invitation to mingle with the great and the good?'

'Far from it. Kemp can't speak highly enough of him. So I convinced Jessold that the one that got away was lurking here in the Lower Thames. And lo! There he sits! The very image of the young composer, earnestly ingratiating himself to the crowd as a child seeks to please his parents. He'll get over that. I have yet to hear any work.'

St John extricated himself from the knot around the piano. 'Racket rather sets my teeth on edge,' he said with a grimace. 'It's so desperately jaunty. Youth must, I dare say.'

Sandy slipped off his signet ring, tinkling the side of his champagne flute. Glasses of Oeil de Perdrix were raised towards him in toast. 'Hatton welcomes you. I welcome you. Tomorrow we work; tonight we play. But first, I know Jessold, new of this parish, has been diverting some of you. We'll let the boy take a breather … but I'd like to make him sing once more for his supper. Freddie, to the piano.'

Fat Frederic Desalles was so cruelly camouflaged by his jacket that his head appeared to be peeking from behind the cushions of the sofa. He struggled to attention and made his way to the piano. We held our breath nervously on the stool's behalf. Landing was achieved.

'I am here.' He played a little something that he intended us to imagine effortlessly thrown off, but even this little doodle bore the tragic hallmarks of his many other failures. Some thought Freddie's sole qualifications to be a composer were that he believed in God and his name sounded foreign; but he could *Handel* a religious theme as well as any man in Britain. 'At your service!'

'Jessold, make yourself scarce,' commanded Sandy.

The butler escorted Jessold from the room. I looked at the young man as he left; he glanced over his shoulder, catching me, as it were, red-handed. A departing star knows there is always someone looking.

'When they are at a suitable distance,' Sandy continued, 'I will ask Freddie to play a melody, of say four or five lines, unknown to Jessold. Perhaps one you might like to improvise for us now, maestro; perhaps a little something from your redoubtable arsenal.'

No one could doubt the size of Desalles' arsenal. Drinks, pale and pink, were replenished as he sketched his rough draft. It was typically Desallesean (there is certainly no such word, nor ever shall be): churchfully plain, easily ignored.

'We shall now bring Jessold back into the room.' Sandy tugged the bell pull imperiously. 'And you, Freddie, will play him the first half of your melody. But no more than that.'

On his return, the young man again assumed that study of trance-like meditation as he refined the music's possibilities in his mind. Desalles ended his rendition on a suspended D minor, an appropriately haunting chord for this demonstration of Cecilian clairvoyance. Jessold did not move. He was not yet ready.

‘Once more, Freddie, please,’ asked Sandy.

This time, when Desalles reached that inconclusive D, Jessold took his place, played the first three lines, and elided effortlessly into the next two, melodically twinned, if not identically harmonised, with Frederic’s originals. We’ve all heard pieces where the composer’s next thought was predictable (and Desalles was not the most unconventional), but this was something quite apart. Jessold, alert to every possible melodic path, had narrowed it down to one: this one. It was more akin to the reduction of a mathematical equation.

His final flourish was a plagal chord of amen that parodied Desalles’ *Messiah* complex. No one clapped more enthusiastically than Freddie himself. I willingly joined in, delighted that the boy had none of the fear of self-expression endemic in those schooled in composition. One marvelled at the strength of character that had escaped unscathed from Kemp’s clutches!

‘Rather better than the prototype,’ I muttered.

‘Ask him how he does it,’ said Sandy as the bell rang for dinner.

The first toast was to the departed king; the second, to the new George. I had feared that the funeral and its surrounding sea of dark blue serge might spell the postponement of our weekend’s pleasure, but our party was of sterner stuff.

My reward for years of uninterrupted friendship with our host was a seat next to the man of the moment who boasted the unseasonable glow of a cross-country runner on a freezing December morning, with babyish skin that seemed ruddy with overly zealous shaving. A tureen hovered to my left as a ghostly consommé, complete with

ectoplasm, was ladled into my bowl. I introduced myself to Jessold by name.

'Of *The World*?' he asked without a semiquaver rest.

I nodded, flattered. 'I know you only as Jessold.'

'*Charles* Jessold.'

A smile, perhaps a little reptilian, slid across my face. '*Charles* Jessold?'

'I hope you are not going to ask me if I am *the* Charles Jessold, for I am almost certainly not.' There was a forthrightness about him: nothing ungracious or rudely done, but he spoke his mind. 'I am a composer, but I have yet to trouble the critics with anything worth their ink.'

'I look forward to the imposition. Does anyone remark on your name?'

'Never. Jessold is rare, apparently, almost extinct in Britain except in parts of Suffolk.'

'No. It is the two names in tandem … not merely *Jessold*.' He looked at me uncomprehending. 'Together they put me in mind of a composer. You have perhaps never heard of Carlo Gesualdo?' His expression did not change. 'Being the president of a madrigal society, and being a *Charles Jessold*, you ought.'

'Well, I already feel an etymological kinship with him.'

'Ha! Have a care, Jessold. His is not a name to take in vain.'

As I installed myself to tell Gesualdo's remarkable story, I uttered the composer's name as a bold headline.

'Carlo Gesualdo!' hooted Forbes, our pet literarian, eavesdropping. Forbes and I enjoyed a cantankerous relationship, taking nothing personally: we were used to riding against one another. 'Carlo Gesualdo! Beware of the Shepherd, young Jessold. Behind his public face, that of an unassuming, if violently nationalist, musical scribe, lurks a ridiculous antiquarian. Inky-fingered goeth he, under a layer of dust, slicing through the musty cobwebs of our musical history as he may.' All good-natured, no doubt, but

I did not care to be the butt of his chaffing when I had such a story to tell. I turned back to my food, mindful not to give an impression of pique. On blundered Forbes, undaunted: ‘Whatever made you think of that ghoulish character, Shepherd? The *vaguest* coincidence of two names? Please spare our young friend that Halloween horror. At least while he’s eating.’

I had barely noticed the arrival of the *chaud-froid*, a Hatton favourite. The promise of conversation had withered like Klingsor’s garden so I took a momentary, dignified vow of silence, content to postpone my revelations. Sandy had referred to Jessold’s promise. I had scoffed, but I could feel it too.

Talk fell to the next day’s expedition. It might have seemed to the unenlightened ear that, with our boasts of previous successes and our territorial disputes, we were preparing for a day’s fox hunting. The drawing of straws followed, and, as if by providence (I assume no human agency would answer to it), I was paired with Jessold. My partner said he hoped our excursion might provide the opportunity to hear more of his namesake. Gratifyingly, Sandy had overheard.

‘No one,’ roared our host, ‘will be kept from telling a story at Hatton, particularly one with as much potential as Gesualdo’s. Not even by a naysayer of your stature, Forbes!’ Forbes raised a hand of apologetic submission. ‘We shall take our port next to a roaring fire and Leslie Shepherd will tell his tale. And if the story isn’t up to snuff, we shall burn him.’

I have always been rather admired as a raconteur. I like to inject drama into my tale and I am no stranger to exaggeration, to bending the truth so the story goes as it ought to. There are elements of truth (for example) to the

tale I tell of the night that the insufferable Kenneth Smart allowed me to stand with him on his podium, but it wasn't quite like being a second in a duel, nor did I narrowly avoid having my eye poked out. I can eke that story out for many a round, depending on how many tangential conducting anecdotes the occasion inspires.

When I tell a story, it remains told. But with Gesualdo, I am straitjacketed by *facts*. His tale is so bizarre, so sensational that the truth needs no embellishment. Little was known of him at this time. Keiner's Leipzig dissertation was still a full four years away; there was almost nothing in English, and he went completely unmentioned even in *Grove*. I'd first taken note of the composer during my researches for an intended slim volume to be called *Curiosities of Music*. His story demanded magnification from a footnoted tit-bit to an entire chapter. My *Curiosities* went unpublished (this is no place to air my grievances with the publisher), but that night, as I told his tale, I was quoting from an unwritten book in its pristine state of Platonic perfection.

The room had settled. The floor was mine. A blanket of smoke, from hearth and pipe combined, laid itself wreath-like around us. The enveloping smell was tobacco and Mr Penhaligon's Hamman Bouquet.

'Gentlemen, my text today is Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: musician, madrigalist … and murderer.'

'Murderer?' asked Sandy, perking up. 'I should warn faint hearts that on the last occasion we gathered Shepherd regaled us with the unsavoury tale of Frantisek Kotzwara, the Czech composer, who offered a London prostitute two shillings to castrate him …'

I cleared my throat. 'Act one, scene one. The setting, eponymous: Gesualdo, a remote *comune* in the province of Avellino, sixty miles from Naples. The landscape is undulant, exuberantly green; houses cluster hilltops as if volcanically spewed. We find ourselves not only in a kind of

heaven, but surprisingly near hell itself: Virgil's famous "Mouth of Hell where Agony and Vengeful Remorse made their beds; where pallid Disease and erm, miserable … er, tum-tum-titty-tum-tum". I've been, and it certainly smells devilishly sulphurous.

'The year is 1566. Born to Fabrizio Gesualdo and Geronima Borromeo, the second of four children, named for his uncle Carlo Borromeo (canonised in 1610), a son: Carlo Gesualdo.'

'An almost exact contemporary of Shakespeare,' interjected Forbes, daring me to rise above his trademark ostinato.

'As a boy, the young Carlo, second son rather than heir, led a relatively carefree life. His father was a well-known patron of the arts with an academy of musicians at his disposal. This cultured atmosphere so fired the young man's imagination that he became a virtuoso on various instruments, publishing his first composition at the age of nineteen. But in 1584 Luigi, his elder brother, died unexpectedly, and with him, Carlo's carefree youth: the responsibility for the Gesualdo line and ultimately the running of the estate, now fell on him. It was time to become a man.

'He chose as his wife his first cousin Maria d'Avalos – considered a great Renaissance beauty, though the portrait I saw in San Domenico Maggiore does not support this. Tastes change. Although only twenty-four, she'd already been twice married: one of her previous husbands had died of an excess of connubial bliss!'

'Oh, fie!' cried Sanderson, the Oxford medievalist. 'You're making this up!'

'He isn't,' said Forbes glumly. 'No more than he concocted Kotzwara.'

'Their wedding took place in the very church where hangs her portly portrait, opposite the Palace of San Severo in Naples, a building that witnessed both the formal

beginning and abrupt end of their relationship. This union was almost immediately blessed with a son.

'However, and here's where we reach the nub of the matter, Maria d'Avalos began an affair with Don Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria. As Anatole France coyly puts it: "She did lead him to her chamber instantly, and did there refuse him naught of all he was fain to have of her."'

'He wrote in French, and you can't blame him for the translation,' interrupted Jessold, waving a reckless glass of hock. Anybody expecting this young newcomer to be cowed by our august company would have been disappointed.

'She sang her duet with the Don a full two years, until the affair was exposed by Gesualdo's uncle, another Don: Don Giulio. Did he expose it out of sympathy for his nephew? No! This great beauty had rebuffed his approaches and his motive was revenge. Carafa wisely decided to end the liaison, but Maria, using her great skills in classical rhetoric,' I cleared my throat, 'managed to persuade him otherwise.

'However, the affair was brought to a brutal full stop in the Palace of San Severo. It was a warm October night in 1590; the trap, involving the changing and removal of locks, was cunningly laid. Carlo left, supposedly on an overnight hunting trip, only to return two and a half hours later to catch the couple "in flagrante delicto di fragrante peccato", *refusing each other naught of all they were fain etc.*, in which state the lovers were viciously murdered. Gesualdo was heard to cry: "Kill that scoundrel along with this harlot!" A servant witnessed him turn back into the room to stab his wife again, to be sure that she was dead.

'Donna Maria was found in bed with her throat cut, wounds "in her belly and especially in those parts which most ought to be kept honest"; Carafa, the victim of a frenzied attack, was wearing, bizarrely, a woman's nightdress …'

'Bad form!' said Sandy.

‘Covered himself with the first thing that came to hand,’ suggested Jessold, as though he had often been in the same situation. When eyes turned in his direction, he threw up his hands: ‘Wouldn’t *you*? I would.’

‘Even the floor beneath his body bore marks of this fierce attack. The bloody instruments of murder were found in Gesualdo’s room.’

I paused.

‘Shocking,’ interjected Sandy. ‘I’m talking about you, Shepherd. Is a single word of this true?’

‘Every word.’

‘Then, encore!’

‘More? How’s this? Gesualdo displayed the corpses on the stairs outside the palace, beneath a placard explaining their slaughter. A passing San Domenican monk despoiled the cadaver of Donna Maria.’

‘Marvellous!’ Jackson called from the buffet.

‘Unfortunately, this lurid postscript was later discredited.’

‘But tell us,’ Jackson entreated, ‘how Gesualdo was brought to account for his crimes.’

‘Incredibly, to the modern mind, Gesualdo was never brought to trial. Adultery was just cause for murder. More than just cause: when a husband was faced with his wife’s adultery, murder was something of a social imperative. He surrendered himself to the viceroy in Naples who counselled flight. Gesualdo returned to his home town, unpunished.’

The tale had enchanted the whole room. Even Forbes, the only person who seemed to have any prior knowledge of the facts, had been subdued.

‘But there he lived in mortal fear of retribution at the hands of Maria’s family. In a moment of Shakespearean panic, he scythed down the woods around his hilltop castle so he might see the approach of possible avengers for seven miles in any direction. A number of poems

commemorated the sensational events, one notably by Tasso.'

'Recite!' came the cry. I was in my stride now. The story had cast its spell on me too. My unwritten book was never more perfect than at this moment.

'I can't. I admit defeat. But here's another choice morsel: the paternity of Gesualdo's second son was thrown into question. Legend, *unfounded* –'

'Legend is always unfounded.' Forbes was back.

'– has it that Gesualdo "swung the infant around in his cradle until the breath left his body". He sat the child in a swing in the courtyard of his palace where his house choir sang madrigals until the child expired. Guilt and remorse pursued him for the rest of his life, as did fear of eternal damnation. Though the law chose not to punish him, he knew himself a murderer. But so much for Gesualdo the murderer; I know that the gentlemen of the jury ask of Gesualdo the musician …'

'No. More murder!' I'd never seen St John so exercised.

'The musician and the murderer are entwined. Some argue that the murders freed his artistic soul; others that it was his exposure to the rich artistic atmosphere of the Este court in Ferrara, where Gesualdo journeyed for his second marriage. Obviously the first story is more suggestive. But whatever the cause, it was during the next two years that he composed some of the most boldly inventive, complex, idiosyncratic vocal music of the Renaissance.'

'Bit of an afterthought, isn't it?' pondered Sandy. 'But well played, Gesualdo.'

'His *second* marriage?' asked Jackson. 'Who was prevailed upon to marry an uxoricide?' Such a tale is a litmus test for character: Jackson was something of a male suffragette.

'A good question, for this second marriage was similarly doomed, the unfortunate woman forced to return to Ferrara to escape repeated abuse.

‘In his later years, Gesualdo turned in consolation to the composition of sacred music as he readied his soul for judgement. The music (I crib from better authorities than I) is a direct outcome of the tragedies of his life, a pure dramatisation of his extreme emotions: pitching this way and that, always on the verge of collapse, ignoring all known rules of tempo, and employing radically inventive harmony that would not sound acceptable again until … well … now.’

‘And not even now,’ said Forbes, suddenly a sneering musicologist. ‘The notes are completely wrong; deranged out-of-tuneness from the mind of an assassin.’

‘And what happened to him?’ pleaded Jessold, ignoring Forbes as I wished. ‘How did he end?’

‘Gesualdo died in isolation at his castle in 1613, a tortured debilitated man, “afflicted by a vast horde of demons”. He took increasingly desperate cures (powders, to name one, supposedly extracted from the horns of unicorns) for various chronic complaints, including asthma and constipation. He demanded regular beatings from young male servants. His death, when finally it came, came quickly, two weeks after that of his first son by Maria d’Avalos, Emmanuele, who was killed in a fall from a horse.’

I closed an invisible book and announced in conclusion: ‘Carlo Gesualdo left no heirs.’

There was silence.

‘Absolutely sensational,’ said Sandy, standing to lead the applause. ‘Do you do children’s parties?’

‘But we need more,’ said Jessold, banging the arm of his chair to punctuate his demands. ‘We must hear the music.’ His petulance was good-humoured, but I imagined he had quite a temper. He’d certainly drunk his fill.

‘Let’s,’ said Jackson. ‘I knew nothing of the man.’

‘We can’t. I have none. Besides, I am embarrassed to admit that my interest is more that of the oologist on the

trail of a rare egg: I'm not so interested in the bird's song.'

'Very disappointing. Is there more to his story?' asked Jessold, his voice muffled by the glass at his mouth. He appeared to be trying to talk and drink simultaneously. Our evening was drawing to a close.

'Oh, there is *much* more. To start with, I have had translated the actual police reports: fascinating, both psychologically and forensically. Not to mention a revelation that, one might say, beggars all that has gone before, involving love potions, demons, witchcraft, further adulterous liaisons and, best of all, the Spanish Inquisition. But, though I could whisper it in the confessional, I would literally blush to tell it in polite society. So, gentlemen, I bid you goodnight. I sincerely hope you all sleep a little less easily in your beds tonight.'

I bowed.

The unnecessary plate of tongue sandwiches, laid out on the dresser in case one grew peckish in the night, was usually undisturbed, crusts politely curling, by morning. Tonight, however, I had the appetite for a solitary midnight feast. Gazing at the underside of the canopy, surrounded by crumbs, I pictured tomorrow.

I was no stranger at Hatton. Westward went we weekend refugees, invariably weary after a succession of late nights, by train, by motor, two by two, each accompanied by a massive Noah's Ark trunk, so heavy it might house two of all our worldly belongings. Some even elected to bring valet and horse. What drew us to Hatton, to a man, was the music: Hatton heaved with song. Oh, of course the leaves of the trees whispered melodiously on their branches in the breeze, the birds sang their full-throated warble &c &c. Hatton was certainly music waiting

to be programmed. But the music for which we gathered wasn't imaginary; it was real music, English music.

During his many leisure hours, Sandy, a minor composer whose private income saved him the indignity of making a living through his art, had discovered that his patch of the Lower Thames was as fertile for the natural singing voice of our people as the riverbanks were for rushes. There were other country houses where our welcome was as bountiful, but none where the songs sang themselves to us. Here the fish seemed to leap out of the stream, willingly impaling themselves on our hooks, whole shoals of them. One weekend, we collected between us no less than one hundred and fifty. Classic fisher man's braggadocio? No. Some we even threw back in.

Though we all converged in the same cause, our motives were manifold. Antic's enthusiasm was purely William, Cobbett or Morris. Recording the words was an act of mercy, for these songs were no longer heard on the streets of London. Then there was Forbes, bane of my leisure hours, who waxed lyrical about *unrestrained idiom*, delighting in the contorted language and grammar of the 'texts' – the 'dromedary' that unexpectedly popped up in one ballad wasn't an aberrant English camel, rather it was the echo of another song's 'dimmy darey', which could easily be traced back to the original 'timid hare'; Sanderson, the Oxford medievalist who *verily* and *forsooth*-ed about the influence of the Gawain poet, and the echoes of Middle English in every alliteration; the aloof, controversial and celebrated Cedric Mount, who collected many melodies, which he cavalierly subjected to his own 'enthusiastic improvement' before publication; and many a composer, either in hot pursuit of inspiration or modestly content to act as a conduit for the songs' further expression. Sandy, truth be told, was the least enchanted with the whole enterprise. For him, the Saturday-to-Monday party was the thing: the impenetrable calculus of

its seating charts and room arrangements, its unpredictable weather and lingering guests. His dear mother gone, there was no stint left on his generosity, and he never ran short or bored of his own largesse.

There were other houses, scattered through the counties, which boasted their own particular attractions; tennis parties, picnic luncheons, butterfly nets and croquet tournaments. But at Hatton, music was the thing. It was the perfect time, the *locus classicus*; the halcyon days of the great Folk-Song Revival, just a few years after Cecil Sharp had unlatched his window in Hambridge, Somerset, and heard his host's gardener singing 'The Seeds of Love':

> I sowed the seeds of love
> I sowed them in the springtime
> Gathered them up in the morning so soon
> While small birds sweetly sing

As though the Harlequin God felt the point required emphasis, the singer's name was John England.

Jessold and I set out the next morning at the break of day, hoping to steal a march on more competitive friends, ceding to them the devilled kidneys and sliced ptarmigan. We had songs to catch.

Some chose to travel by actual horse, but this was altogether too manly, too rural, too fraught with peril for me, so I had suggested we lay claim to two of the old boneshakers always in plentiful supply.

It was an appropriately May-ish May morning. I could offer more specific details but the songs do it quite as well:

> 'Twas in the pleasant month of May
> In the springtime of the year