

Man Swallows God

A screen at the rear shows a train, moving left to right. In front of the audience, and presumably inside the train, are two bench seats, facing each other. On one side is a couple, Frank and Unity, and on the other, Heinrich.

Frank So you don't think you've achieved enough?
Heinrich That's what I believe.
Unity And what does your wife say about that?
Heinrich Athena says I can be anything I like. It's all a matter of faith.
Frank I join her there. Faith moves mountains, as we know.
Unity Faith built this railroad.
Frank (humorously) With some money, my dear.
Unity Money's only a form of faith. One printer gives us Bibles, another gives us banknotes.
Frank (affectionately) See what I mean? How could I fail, with Unity behind me?
Unity I'm in advance, sometimes.
Frank Darling, you're in advance all the time. Only time you drop back is to pick me up. (to Heinrich) I couldn't build a building without my wife.
Heinrich You're to be envied, then.
Frank And so are you. Your partner (gesturing towards the empty seat) makes you as strong as me. Unity will tell you, because she knows.

Unity Women have stronger spirits than men, but men go further, because they're scared. Once a woman has given a man what he needs to overcome fear, he can go to the end of the universe, and bring back spiritual things!

Heinrich is silent, so Frank fills in for him.

Frank You've made that true for me!

The stage grows dark.

Frank Tunnel.

Unity Sit quietly, and see what's there when we're back in the light.

Early in the time of darkness, there is a searing sound, as if some of the music is being torn away. (This is the death of Athena, whom we never see.) When the light returns, Frank and Unity have disappeared, and there is a different train moving in the opposite direction.

Heinrich It's a journey with only one end. Life is simple now. (He thinks.) Athena. You've gone to God, leaving me alone. I'll end in his arms, like you. Why must I keep moving? There's no resting place on earth. My mind craves stillness, but this train takes me on.

He's quiet again, and we hear the sounds of the train, then a family of four comes into his compartment – Samuel, Oriana, and their children, Jake and Jess.

Samuel Good morning sir. Sorry to break in. Nearly all the compartments are full.

Heinrich You're welcome. Just got on?

Oriana On the train, yes, but we were up before the sun. The station's a long way from our home.

Heinrich Did a neighbour drive you to the station?

Samuel A bus, sir. There's plenty of cars where we live, but not many willing to drive people like us.

Heinrich I'm sorry to hear it. God's wishes are clear.

Oriana Not to everybody, they aren't. Are you a preacher sir?

Heinrich I'm a man of music, but I can't write the music I want to write.

Oriana Can you hear that music in your mind, sir?

Heinrich It's out of reach. But only by a little way. It's close ...

Samuel Would you like us to pray with you sir? We could ask God to bring it closer, so you could write it down ...

Heinrich God knows what I aspire to. He'll give me my moment when he thinks it right.

Oriana What you say is true sir. We were married nine years before these children came. We longed for them, then God decided we were ready. We filled with love

when they came, and I saw that God had been right to make us wait.

Heinrich Strange, is it not? We strive, and struggle, to be what we want to be, but if we accept ourselves, then the spirit grows in us, and makes us change.

Samuel I'd say you're ready, sir. The spirit's very close ...

The stage grows dark again.

Heinrich Tunnel ...

When the stage grows light again, the screen is showing pictures of Manhattan's towers, spearing into the sky. Samuel, Oriana and the children have disappeared, and Heinrich is standing at one side of the stage, awestruck by the city.

Heinrich Man has swallowed the god who made him, and built a city rising up to heaven. I keep my eyes on the ground. (He apologises to people rushing past.) Pardon. Excuse me, my apologies ... oh ...

He steps back, pressing himself against a wall, and finds himself close to a street vendor.

Vendor Dolls for your children sir. Made in Russia. See? You open up the big one, there's a smaller one inside. You pull that one apart ... there's *another* one. Guess what ...

Heinrich ... the third one's got a fourth inside, there's a fifth in that, and a sixth ...

Vendor You know about it. Tell me, have you ever tried to make a set of these? It's not an easy thing to do.

Heinrich Have you ever thought about the way your life's constructed? Every day's got another behind it, you wake at sunrise and there it is, ready to be used.

Vendor I see you're a thinker, sir. Like to buy the dolls? You could put them on your desk to stimulate your thoughts ...

Heinrich You need them to stimulate yours. I've got the problem in my mind.

Vendor (tiring of him) It's getting dark, sir. Time to say goodnight?

Heinrich Where will we be tomorrow?

Vendor In my case, right here!

It grows dark, and when it's light again, the screen shows a picture of a passenger jet with, of course, a couple of rows of seats facing the front of the plane. A black hostess (Oriana can be recycled for this new role) is offering newspapers to the passengers.

Hostess Tribune sir?

Heinrich I think the news is in another place.

Hostess You could be right sir. Where d'you think that place is?

Heinrich I think maybe it's inside my head.

Hostess Could be so. Trouble is, we can't see in. You have to show us! (beaming)

Heinrich That's something I don't know how to do.

Hostess (giving him a paper) See what the world's been doing, the last twenty four hours. Might give you some ideas!

Heinrich (anxiously) Where are you going?

Hostess Down the aisle with these papers, sir. I'll be back before you're on page two.

She disappears.

Heinrich (desperately) I'm on page two thousand and two, and I'm none the wiser! What sort of fool am I?

There's another black man sitting beside Heinrich, and he's a recycled version of Samuel, whom we met before.

Leroy There's something troubling you, my friend. Let's hear what it is. (Heinrich looks silly, and ashamed.) Don't hold back. Give voice to whatever's in your mind.

Heinrich (still holding back) Ooohh ...

Leroy You know what you want to say. I can see it in your eyes. Would it help if you ... (he pauses) ... go on, sing!

Heinrich sings, in an exalted, resonant, tenor voice. He appears possessed, as if he doesn't know what he's singing, or where it comes from.

Heinrich *And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying which had been told them*

concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. (1)

Hostess (returning) My goodness gracious! Where's that coming from?

Leroy He's tapped into the skies outside. We're halfway to heaven, in this plane!

Heinrich (resuming) *But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* (2)

Hostess (amazed) Sir!

Leroy You taking us all the way now sir, or've we gotta go down to earth again, after that glimpse you gave us?

Heinrich I don't know how to go on ...

Hostess You got this far, there must be a way to go higher.

Leroy When we get to Boston, sir, you stay with me and my family. I want you to show us how to go on, when you work it out.

Captain (over the public address system) Captain speaking. We've just begun our descent. Conditions on the ground, cold. Lots of ice and snow. But the forecast is for warmer weather. So maybe there's going to be a turn around. And thanks for flying with us.

Heinrich Cloud. (The plane drops into gloomy cloud. The stage grows dark, but Heinrich's voice can still be heard.) *And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.* (3)

As the gloom of the cloud recedes, the screen tells us that we are in a market, and close to Heinrich is a man we met before, when he was selling Russian dolls. For now, we'll call him Ivan. He begins to sing.

Ivan *Did she send you?
Or have you enchanted me?
I would dearly like to know
Whether she sent you.*

*Be that as it may –
I accept my fate.
What I sought is found.
I do not ask how it came about.* (4)

Heinrich (amazed) So! That's what became of music!

Ivan Music's always changing. Nobody ever has it on his own.

Heinrich But it's got to come from somewhere, and I'd love to find the source.

Ivan It's inside us, but it's no good looking, it comes out of a different place every time.

Heinrich You really think that?

Ivan You tell me what you were singing yesterday. It's not what you're singing today.

Heinrich But it ought to be.

Ivan Ought to be! What's the good of that? Things ought to be, but they aren't. Everyone knows that.

Heinrich I'm going to show you you're wrong. Here's what I was singing yesterday ...

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

Ivan Yes?

Heinrich tries again, and nothing comes.

Ivan Give us a whistle, mate. Imagine I'm a dog!

Heinrich tries again, and this time the connection with the spiritual is made.

Heinrich *Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall you see him: lo, I have told you.* (5)

People drift on, putting up stalls, carrying boxes and trays of fruit. They look curiously at Heinrich, and he looks awkwardly at them, for he knows he must seem strange.

Ivan He likes to sing.

Russ One of your mob, Ivan?

Ivan One of us. That's how I prefer to say it.

Liz Do we have to be tarred with the same brush as you?

Ivan There's no escaping it, darling. We mightn't sing the same songs, but it's something we all do.

Liz Every time I hear da spirit
Movin' in my heart, I'm afraid ...

Heinrich You're right to be fearful. We don't know what's happening to us.

Ivan What's the problem? You feel a bit funny, you stop singing.

Liz It's not like that, once the Lord's got hold of you.

Heinrich You've been taken over by something that's more than yourself.

Ivan Just the same as getting a market ready. All the stuff pouring in ...

And this describes the scene, with many people coming and going, bringing things, carrying them, wheeling them in. There are vans and trolleys, bringing all the riches of the earth – fruit, vegetables, rolls of cloth, milk, meat and cheese ...

Heinrich There's no song to equal this ...

Liz Oh yes there is. (She takes a step back, puts a hand on her hip, and opens her throat.) All God's chillun got wings!

Ivan *A posthorn sounds from the road.*

Why do you leap so wildly, my heart?

The post brings no letter for you.

Why then do you strain so strangely, my heart?

I know – the post comes from the town

Where I once had a sweetheart I dearly loved, my heart! (6)

A market official comes up, a man called Stanley, whom we met before when he was Leroy.

Stanley (to Ivan) Great day!

Ivan They're all great days, unless we mess'em up.

Stanley You busy?

Ivan Busy singing!

Stanley Oh! (He gives the impression that if he starts them, they'll never stop.)

Heinrich It's that other world, it's so close.

Stanley (a little sarcastically) Right under our noses, so we can't see it. God damn!

Heinrich God bless!

Ivan Leave the old bugger out of it. Just let me sing ...
*Through the woods, in and out,
 One rhyme alone shall stand today:
 The one I love, the maid of the mill, is mine!
 Mine! (7)*

Heinrich That's this world. There's another.

Liz Every time I feel da spirit
 Movin' in my heart, I'm afraid.

Heinrich There's no need to be afraid. (Again, the exalted music comes out of him.) *And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him. (3)*

Stanley Nobody gonna do any work here today. I'm goin' home.

Liz You back that truck in here, you unload all that stuff I'm gonna sell.

Stanley Oh, you want it, eh? Ivan, he don't want it.

Ivan Who told you that? Bring that truck in so we can unload.

Stanley Doin' a day's work after all, are we?

Liz We need to eat, we need to work.

Heinrich We need to sing ...

Ivan Course we do, only, it comes second.

Heinrich That's what I've been, all my life. The man with his priorities wrong. They tell me.

Stanley There's room for all sorts in this world, I guess.

Liz You give me a hand, Heinrich. Everything Stanley gives us, we lay it out here.

Ivan You'd better give me a hand too, Heinrich. We can sing our hearts out when we've earned a feed tonight.

Heinrich We should all be useful in this world. (He helps Liz and Ivan for a minute, but it's obvious that his mind is elsewhere; then he sings again.) *And in that region there were shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them ... (1)*

Liz The angel said, for goodness sake have a look at what you're doing ...

Ivan The angel said, the ones you want them to pick up go down the front, and the ones you want to keep because they're tempting to the eye, they go at the back ...

Stanley And if the angel had been listening to all the advice you're getting, Heinrich, he would certainly have said ...

Liz What would he have said, Stanley?

Ivan He'd have said, keep singing!

Stanley He'd have said, when you can't sing, the world's got the better of you. He'd have said ...

Liz What would he have said, Stanley?

Ivan I told you, he'd have said, keep singing!

Heinrich (triumphantly) *And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.* (3)

Stanley You stick with us, Heinrich. You need us ...

Liz ... to feed you, and look after you when you're sick ...

Ivan ... and make sure nobody grabs your wallet ...

Stanley ... and keep you warm, and protect your voice ...

Liz ... so that song of yours goes round the world ...

Ivan ... for everyone to hear ...

Stanley ... because they've got to hear it ...

Liz ... because the world's not finished till there's music ...

Ivan ... and the best part of music is to sing ...

Heinrich Join me then!

All four *Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you while he was yet in Galilee, saying, The Son of Man must be delivered into*

the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. (8)

(1) from *Die Historie der Geburt Jesu Christi* (The Christmas Story), by Heinrich Schutz, Dresden, 1664

(2) as above

(3) as above

(4) from 'A Grateful Address to the Mill-Stream', *Die Schone Mullerin* (The Fair Maid of the Mill), by Franz Schubert

(5) The Young Man in the Sepulchre, from *Auferstehungshistorie* (The Resurrection Story), by Heinrich Schutz, Dresden, 1623

(6) from *Die Winterreise* (The Winter's Journey), by Franz Schubert

(7) from 'Mine', *Die Schone Mullerin* (The Fair Maid of the Mill), by Franz Schubert

(8) The Two Men in the Sepulchre, from *Auferstehungshistorie* (The Resurrection Story), by Heinrich Schutz