

The Music of the Goddess:

A myth and a true story

Inspired by the life and music of Clara Reisenberg Rockmore

By

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Characters:

Apollo - Greek god of the sun, grown old and haggard

Electria - newly crowned goddess of electricity

Clara Reisenberg - dark-haired Russian immigrant, age 16

Glitch - new trickster god of the 20th century

Leon Theremin - Russian inventor, age 31

Time:

!927

Setting:

An apartment in New York City, and the heavens above it.

In a modest New York apartment, CLARA REISENBERG takes a violin out of the case. She looks at some sheet music on the stand in front of her, then gingerly picks up the bow. Looks at it.

CLARA
Play through the pain, Clara. It's too important.

She starts playing. The music is exquisite, but her face alternates between sublime trance and shooting pain.

Above her in the heavens, the god APOLLO listens contentedly, casually waving his hand along with the music. The goddess ELECTRIA enters, views Apollo with smug satisfaction.

ELECTRIA
Considering my handiwork, Sun God?

APOLLO
Stringed instruments are my invention, thanks.

ELECTRIA
I meant how this room's lit at night.

APOLLO
(pretending to be bored) Oh. That.

ELECTRIA
No more do poor musicians, bleary-eyed,
Squint through the darkness seeking faint relief
From candlelight's sad flame to read their staves
And measures, for I have defeated Night.
Like chained Prometheus, I stole your fire,
Imprisoned it inside a ball of glass,
And hung it from the living room ceiling
Of ev'ry last apartment in Brooklyn!
Each family now has their own small sun,
And all promptly pay electric bills
Can be their own Apollo, day or night.
I've freed them from your rise and from your set.
Behold, a Golden Age is on its way!

In her apartment, Clara suddenly breaks of her playing, face contorted in pain. She grasps her bow arm, massaging it while choking back tears.

In the heavens, Apollo beholds Electria for a moment, then bursts out laughing. Electria grows indignant.

APOLLO
(laughing)
You upstart goddesses are all the same.

You get a couple million worshippers
 Relying on your gifts, and start to think
 That you are all that and a bag of chips!

ELECTRIA

What?!

APOLLO

New poetic phrase I'm working on.
 It should catch on a few decades from now.
 And that's what you've been missing, by the way.
 You bring light to a street corner, a room,
 But do your beams illuminate men's thoughts,
 Transform them into melodies or words?
 And does your shining move them, make them sing?
 I am the god of poetry and music -
 The blazing forth in fiery chariot
 Across the sky each morn, that's really just
 My day job. So until you penetrate
 The darkness that enshrouds the human heart,
 You don't have all that much to brag about.

Clara looks at the bow in her hand,
 takes a few deep breaths.

ELECTRIA

I have inspired music.

APOLLO

You don't say?

Clara tentatively starts to play again.

ELECTRIA

This decade, a young man harnessed my pow'r
 Within an instrument that switches tones
 Depending on how close you are to it.

APOLLO

I've heard of him. A scientist.

ELECTRIA

So what?

APOLLO

A scientist can make a lot of noise.
 But music? You need artists to do that.

Clara drops her bow in agony and
 crumples to the floor in tears. Apollo
 points down to Clara.

APOLLO

Do you see her? Name's Clara Reisenberg.
 A friend of your young scientist, turns out.
 Accepted into Russia's finest school
 Of music at age four, so small that she
 Auditioned standing on a tabletop.
 Her fam'ly fled the Revolution's fires,
 Spent four years wandering the borderlands,
 And got here so malnourished that her hands
 Were crippled with arthritis, so that now
 At sixteen she can barely hold her bow.

An artist for whom music has been life,
Destroyed to think the music now must end.

ELECTRIA
And that is why you're here - to heal her?

APOLLO
No.
I came to listen to her one last time.

Clara summons up some strength, wipes
the tears from her eyes, grabs the
nearby telephone and dials.

ELECTRIA
And what is this your artist's doing now?

APOLLO
She's cancelling her orchestra debut.

CLARA
Leopold? It's Clara. Not well ... No, it gets worse, every
day harder and harder ...

ELECTRIA
So you're the god of music? Prove it, then!
Give her a miracle.

APOLLO
That's not my style.

CLARA
No, it's no use postponing ...

ELECTRIA
Of course, you left that to us young upstarts,
Who've quietly transformed a century
Under your very noses! And guess what?
We've no intention of giving it back.

CLARA
(blurting it out)
Leopold, I can't play! My arm can't keep up with the music in
my head anymore ... you said yourself the violin is just a
vessel. The true instrument is the body, (verging on tears)
and mine is broken.

Suddenly the lights in Clara's
apartment go out.

CLARA
Leopold? Leopold, are you there?

She hangs up the phone, and leaves the
darkened room in tears.

APOLLO
Is that your version of a miracle?
To cut off power to the poor girl's home?

ELECTRIA
 (confused)
 But ... I didn't ...

APOLLO
 (laughs)
 No artists, no real music, no control.
 Your handiwork is quite impressive! Ha!

Apollo exits laughing. The trickster
 god GLITCH suddenly appears behind
 Electria.

GLITCH
 I thought your handiwork was expressive.
 But maybe that's just me.

Electria turns to him, furious.

ELECTRIA
 You!? Here?!

GLITCH
 Of course!
 The great god Glitch at your most humble service.

Electria grabs him by the scruff of the
 neck.

ELECTRIA
 You flout my pow'r before Apollo's gaze
 And dare to call this mockery service?!

GLITCH
 Not mockery, O Queen of Blinking Lights!
 I blew that building's fuse to bring you praise!

ELECTRIA
 Stop talking nonsense!

GLITCH
 Nonsense is a must
 For understanding human beings, sire.
 A strange and needy species, they don't see
 Just how much they rely upon a thing
 Until that thing stops functioning for them.
 You say I mock you, but without my pranks,
 They'd take your gifts for granted, and forget
 There ever was a time they went without.

ELECTRIA
 Is that so, trickster? Shall we test it out?
 I'll scatter all your particles across
 The wide reaches of space, then wait and see
 How much I miss you when you're fin'lly gone.

GLITCH
 You could do that, but then you'll never learn
 Apollo's secret.

She stops, examines Glitch closely.

ELECTRIA
What secret is that?

GLITCH
The way to inspire music. Simple trick.
But one you'll never find out on your own.

ELECTRIA
Oh no? Why not?

GLITCH
Because it goes against
All that you know about how power works.
To which devices do you grant your gifts?

ELECTRIA
Those that deserve it - orderly machines
Designed and then assembled with great care
According to sound principles and laws.

GLITCH
That's why you don't inspire musicians, sire.
They work a little diff'rently than that.

ELECTRIA
I have inspired music, at least once!
Did you not hear the Futurists? I thought
Their songs were lovely.

GLITCH
Ev'rybody else
Thought that their songs were noise - odd little sounds
Made by well oiled men with slicked back hair
And brains that moved like swift conveyor belts.
Ingenious, crafty men, no doubt, and yet
Entirely devoid of that one trait
Apollo looks for in musicians' hearts.

ELECTRIA
What trait is that?

GLITCH
He calls it Brokenness.
Apollo seeks the scarred, the dispossessed,
Cracked vessels with such flaws in their design,
They do not fit the world's sharp grooves and gears.
Those who cannot express themselves within
The normal channels of society
So all of their confusion, pain and joy
Just surge and surge inside until they feel
As though their very circuits will combust.
It's then, and only then, Apollo carves
Within their souls the channel called music,
And through that channel, their energy flows
In ways the god himself could not have guessed.

ELECTRIA
A thing that works because it's broken?! No!
It goes against all reason and all sense!

GLITCH
And therefore is entirely human.

ELECTRIA
 (thoughtful)
 This very night, I did behold a girl
 So flawed even Apollo could not find
 A further use for her. But if I could -
 (turning on Glitch)
 Do not deceive me, Glitch, or there shall be
 Dire consequences.

GLITCH
 But if I speak truth?

ELECTRIA
 (begrudgingly)
 Then play your tricks with no more fear of me.

GLITCH
 A most excellent wager, and quite fair.

ELECTRIA
 Tomorrow. For you sake, she had better prove responsive.

Electria exits, with Glitch following
 behind her.

SCENE 2: CLARA'S APARTMENT/THE HEAVENS - DAY

Clara lies on the sofa, depressed.
 Offstage, someone knocks on her door
 insistently. Clara doesn't get up.

LEON
 (offstage, thick Russian
 accent)
 Clara! Clara, I know you are in. Leopold tells me everything.

Clara sighs.

LEON
 (offstage)
 Clara, please open door.

No response from Clara. Beat.

LEON
 (offstage)
 I bring surprise. Something for amusing you.

Clara looks intrigued, but thinks twice
 about it, and stays put.

LEON
 (offstage)
 You will not open door for that? Fine. I will annoy neighbors
 with it instead.

Clara gives in, and opens the door,
 revealing LEON THEREMIN, a tall, lanky
 man with ramrod posture, slicked hair
 and a pencil mustache.

CLARA
Leon, you are very sweet, but I'm not in the mood today.

LEON
You think you are not, but for this, you are.

He rolls in a cabinet on wheels with a large antenna sticking out of the top and a metal loop protruding out the side. Clara can't help but be a little curious. Meanwhile, Electria and Glitch appear in the heavens, watching.

CLARA
What is it? Some new kind of radio?

LEON
No! The instrument we were speaking of. At the fair, yes?

CLARA
An instrument for what?

LEON
For what? For music!

CLARA
Music? Leon, really. That thing?

She walks around the contraption, inspecting it.

CLARA
How do you play it? Keys, or strings? Are they inside the cabinet?

LEON
(grins, excited)
No keys, no strings, only magnetism! Here, I show you.

He goes to plug in the machine.

CLARA
Be careful. The electricity has been acting up lately.

Electria glares at Glitch, who beams with pride. Leon plugs in the machine, then turns it on. Electria starts to sing.

LEON
Give me your hand.

She does. He brings it toward the machine.

LEON
Closer.

Electria's tone changes as their hands get closer.

And away.
LEON

He draws their hands back, and the tone goes back up the scale.

LEON
You see? No strings. No bow. Nothing between you and the music.

He points to the antenna.

LEON
This is pitch.

He brings her other hand closer to the loop on the side of the machine, and Electria grows quieter.

LEON
And this is volume.

Clara is delighted.

CLARA
It's - it's like playing the air! And such an ethereal sound.

Leon lets go of her hands, and Clara starts experimenting on her own.

CLARA
So ... to play a rest, you'd have to ...

She grabs hold of the 'volume' loop. Electria stops singing. She smiles at Leon, then removes her hand, and the sound starts again.

CLARA
And ... could you get some vibrato out of it?

She tries some small movements with her left hand. Only the volume fluctuates.

CLARA
Oh - but it would be with the other hand!

She turns to Leon, excited.

CLARA
How many octaves does it have?

LEON
This one, three. But I am working on five, maybe six.

She looks back at the machine.

CLARA
No bow to hold one specific way. Nothing between me and the music. Leon, I think I can make this contraption sing. What do you call it?

LEON
I call it "Ether Wave Instrument", but company making them
wants to name it after me.

CLARA
The Leon?!

Leon laughs.

LEON
My last name. The "theremin".

She looks at him.

CLARA
Hmm. I like it. Can I keep this one? I'll need to practice.

They start to walk off, full of
excitement.

LEON
For now, yes. But I have many ideas for improvements. You
tell me what you need, I make it happen.

Leon and Clara exit talking.

ELECTRIA
How does a new-made trickster god like you
Possess Apollo's holiest secrets?

GLITCH
They also are the secrets of mankind.
And I'm the lord of sparks and star-crossed wires,
Blown fuses, and erratic circuitry.
I turn mistakes into a source of pow'r.
Of all the newborn technologic gods,
I am the one made most in man's image.

ELECTRIA
What future then do you foresee for my
Musician, now that I have one?

GLITCH
Let's see.

Glitch descends into Clara's apartment,
looks around. He sees a clock on a
table next to her couch, and winds the
hands forward.

GLITCH
Perfectionism keeps her off the stage
For years as she learns how to tame this beast,
Be master of it, make it sing and sigh.
Then, when she steps into the light again,
First of her kind, most see a novelty.
But those who truly listen will declare
Her genius to an unsuspecting world.

In short, she will make music out of air,
 Be championed by those with ears to hear,
 Ignored within the greater marketplace,
 And worshipped on the fringe, but none of this
 Will matter to her, since she does not play
 For them.

ELECTRIA

She's found a channel for her soul,
 Through which her energy can surge and shine.

Glitch nods. An announcer's voice is
 suddenly heard.

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE

Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome to New York City's Town
 Hall, Miss Clara Rockmore on her theremin.

Applause as Clara appears in a
 beautiful evening gown circa 1938. She
 bows to the crowd, then begins to
 passionately play Rachmaninoff's
 'Vocalise' (there is a beautiful
 recording of this available). In the
 heavens, Apollo enters, looks down on
 her with surprise.

ELECTRIA

Considering my handiwork, sun god?

APOLLO

But that's impossible. What - what is that?

ELECTRIA

A true artist bringing my voice to life.

APOLLO

But how?! It's just a gadget, yet she plays
 Upon it like it is a part of her.

ELECTRIA

I told you I'd perform great miracles.
 I told you that I could transform the -

Suddenly the lights go out and the
 music abruptly stops.

ELECTRIA

(angrily)

Glitch!

GLITCH

Did we or did we not have a deal, sire?

ELECTRIA

(sighs)
 Right. Well, carry on.

GLITCH

And one, two, three.

He claps his hands. Lights come up.
Curtain call.