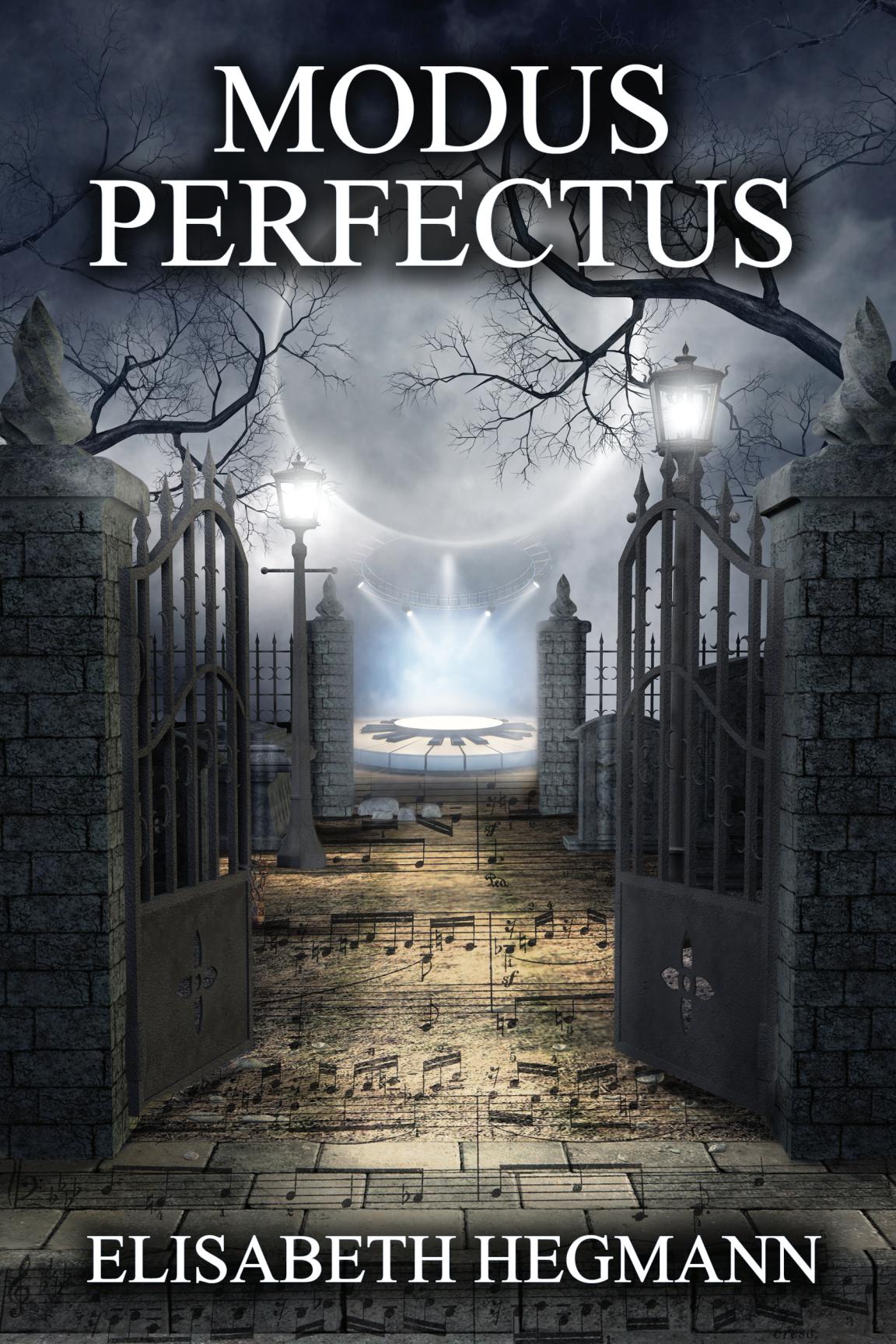


MODUS PERFECTUS



ELISABETH HEGMANN

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

FLORESTAN AND EUSEBIUS

1

Flora was more or less what Dobbs expected from the moment she slid down the mahogany banister. The girl—or was she a young woman?—came to a stop barely an inch in front of him. She was panting a little, and flushed. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and took a step back.

“You’re Dobbs,” she said in a strong voice. “The music room is this way, come on.”

She started through the hall and Dobbs tried a quick walk, then broke into a trot to keep up with her. They passed into a narrow passage with a number of paintings. One of them was of the composer Robert Schumann; his wife Clara, the pianist, was nearby. Another was a rendering of the ancient Greek myth of the Sirens, the daughters of the storm god. A conservatory to the left housed large tanks filled with seawater from the nearby cove, and a variety of plants grew above and below the surface. Though the glass doors were closed, a brackish smell filled the corridor.

Dobbs followed Flora into the next room on the right. She flopped down on a settee and stared at him without embarrassment. The late

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summer sun glared off of a French horn. Dobbs stepped to the side to get the light out of his eyes. As he did so, he spotted the young man sitting backwards on the piano bench, facing him and tapping his foot nervously on the intricate parquetry, a violin clutched in his hand. This would be Eusebius, Flora's twin, who Dobbs knew was called Zeb for short. Zeb nodded slightly, held up a hand in greeting, and walked to the far wall to rifle around for a piece of music in the filing drawers that stretched from wall to wall and from ceiling to floor. It occurred to Dobbs that the sheet music they owned equaled, and perhaps surpassed, the collection at his university.

Zeb found whatever he was looking for, set it on a music stand, and returned to the piano bench to stare at his feet.

"He'll talk eventually," Flora said. "He's just shy. I can tell he likes you, though." There was a hint of mischief in her voice and she burst out with a hearty, infectious laugh that Dobbs liked. Zeb made a face at her, but then smiled.

"Anyway," said Flora, "he wants you to look at the music."

Dobbs stepped over to the stand and as he glanced at the music, he felt a thrill. On the stand he saw his favorite Schumann piece—an obscure song no one performed anymore. Astonished, he looked at Zeb.

Zeb smiled. "My best parlor trick," he said in a soft voice, almost a whisper. "But it's a curious choice. I have to admit there are others I prefer." Despite his quiet tone, he spoke with a kind of firm resolve, and unlike Flora, his pale skin showed no flushed patches.

Dobbs took a breath to respond, but from the hall he heard a woman's high-heeled shoes on the marble floor. Zeb and Flora exchanged a look. "Here she comes," said Flora furrowing her brow.

Dobbs didn't like her tone. He had heard of Dr. Linnell of course, a household name to every family who had ordered a Human By Design child within the last few decades. Growing up, he had heard his mother criticizing Linnell to his father, saying she had abandoned Human By Design after she had helped found it. Dobbs later learned that Linnell had been asked to resign. It made no difference, since Human by Design had had to end its operations only a few months later due to increased opposition from the public. In any case, Linnell had retired and become a virtual recluse in this mansion on the Torelian coast. As her footsteps came closer in the hall outside, it struck Dobbs

how strange it was to now find himself in the same house with the person who, it could be argued, was responsible for his existence.

He tried to smile and think of the appropriate things to say, but already there she was in the doorway. Her tall, bulky frame filled it and her dark hair blotted out the sun from the conservatory across the hall. She rolled her eyes as if in permanent disgust with the world, but then, when Dobbs least expected it, she glared at him shrewdly. He tried to guess her age, but her face was so pitted with old acne scars that it made the task difficult. Dobbs admired that she didn't try to cover the damage with make-up.

"Flora!" Linnell said, though still looking at Dobbs.

Flora pretended to have great interest in a clarinet. "I'm busy, Mum. I'm looking at some music, and this clarinet needs—"

"Come and sit up here," said Linnell.

Flora stomped across the floor and sat so close to Dobbs that their legs were touching.

"And Zeb, of course it's okay for you to be a bit shy if you must," Linnell said harshly, "but why don't you at least move closer?"

Zeb dragged the piano bench across the floor with a prolonged screech.

Linnell's eyes still had not shifted away from Dobbs. She nodded slowly, and Dobbs watched her large bun of dark hair bob up and down. "Yes, she will like him just fine," she muttered to herself, as though Dobbs couldn't hear her.

He wondered who *she* was. Did she mean Flora? He felt disconcerted and nervous.

Linnell sat down on an amp across from him and her voice became sing-songy. "I wanted us to be like the Bach family, Mr. Dobbs. A large number of musical children, but I managed only these two. I decided to start with Schumann's precious demons, Florestan and Eusebius, but I never had another success; I never got to Bach." She sounded sad and weary. "As an 'up and coming' musicologist, you will find our family of great interest." She pronounced the words 'up and coming' with distaste, and made 'musicologist' sound like an unfortunate disease with no cure. Clearly she favored performers, and had the same disdain for musicology he had encountered in the university where he had just finished his degree.

When Dobbs had spoken to Linnell on the phone about this commission to write a book on Flora and Zeb, he hadn't mentioned his

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own past as a Human Design failure, which nobody needed to know, or that musicology was not his calling but his compromise, since it had been too late to become an accomplished musician and make it to the renowned musical utopia, *Modus Perfectus*.

“I want the book written from a musical perspective, which is why I have hired you,” Linnell continued. “And I would also like to stress that this is an historical opportunity.” She looked at Dobbs seriously over her glasses. To avoid her gaze, he took off his own glasses and pretended to polish them. “Zeb, why don’t you play something for Mr. Dobbs?” she said.

Zeb sighed and picked up his violin.

As he tuned, Flora leaned over to Dobbs. “This is Mum’s dramatic way of showing you we’re prodigies,” she whispered.

“How old are the two of you, anyway?”

“Nineteen.”

That surprised him. Apparently living in this isolated environment had made them naïve and childlike—they looked and seemed by their manner to be no older than fifteen.

Zeb was now ready to play and he looked at both Linnell and Dobbs with a stern hopefulness that Dobbs found endearing, but Linnell only looked away and smoothed out her severe gray skirt suit. Then he placed his bow on the strings and at once all thoughts were driven from Dobbs’s mind.

While Zeb played, it was as though all of Dobbs’s most yearned-for dreams were revealed to him for the first time, and it was possible for him to have any of them if he could only reach far enough. When Zeb finished and Flora took over at the piano, Dobbs was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of invigoration, as though all of his childhood wonder had been restored, lying just beyond an unknown horizon. But when they had finished, the reality of his prison of a career in musicology descended upon him, bearing him back down to reality. He tried to replay in his mind the essence of the music he had just heard, but was only able to conjure up a dim and ghostly recollection. He couldn’t decide whether Flora and Zeb had played known pieces, or if the music had been composed in the moment, pulled out of some previously untouched musical dimension.

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Linnell smiled gravely at Dobbs. She leaned closer to him. “Imagine them both playing at the same time,” she said, glancing at them with something like affection.

“Very talented,” agreed Dobbs, unable to find any other words. His voice was hoarse and his throat dry.

“But we will save that for another day, won’t we?” Linnell stood up and strode out of the room, the sound of her heels punctuating Dobbs’s racing thoughts. “Be here with your bags in the morning, Mr. Dobbs,” she called back from the hall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elisabeth Hegmann is a speculative fiction writer whose work has always been informed richly and powerfully by music. She grew up in a family of classically-trained dreamers and musicians, and, despite brave attempts otherwise, she has failed to understand anything about the box, let alone how to fit inside it. She has a B.A. in creative writing from IU and an MFA in fiction from NCSU.

In addition to slipstream stories, novellas, and novels, Elisabeth writes librettos for musical stage works. Her work has been published in a variety of journals, produced on regional stages, and won several small awards. She lives in her hometown of North Vernon, Indiana, where she works diligently to be worthy of the love of a dog and teaches every imaginable kind of writing to tolerant college students. For information about her current projects, visit her website eahegmann.com.

**LONELY MISFITS FACE FOES, BEASTS, AND THEIR OWN INNER DEMONS IN
SEARCH OF A MYTHICAL LAND OF MUSIC
... AND END UP FINDING THEMSELVES INSTEAD.**

... a woman in the chorus of a musical finds herself caught up in a love triangle with a ghost and helpless to stop the star's obsession.

... the wife of a famous rock star realizes that the manager intends to kill the entire band and that she can only save herself — and maybe one small boy.

... a musician finds himself involved in a puzzling stunt as a pirated radio station plays an obscure song he recorded years ago with his old bandmates.

... a competitive diver turned musicologist writes a book on genetically-engineered twin musicians and finds himself under their spell — and threatened by their powerful mother.

... an 18-year-old girl realizes that it's time to embrace her quirkiness and her dreams after the mayor of her small town hires an elderly and eccentric architect to redesign it.

... the friend of a women tries to help her get an audition for a documentary a famous actor is making about unattractive people.

... a tone-deaf woman who dislikes music finds herself pregnant at age 45 with three children who might become the saviors of music and seeks her own redemption.

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