

Friedrich der Grosse: An Opera

SYNOPSIS BY APRIL LINDNER

WITH

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Based on Thomas Carlyle's *History of Friedrich II. of Prussia,*
Called Frederick the Great (1858–65)

PROEM

Excerpts from Frederick II's Mollwitz March in F Major for winds and percussion can be heard, as a series of alternating hologram images are displayed on stage, showing the Adolph Menzel's paintings *Die Tafelrunde* and *Flötenkonzert Friedrich des Großen in Sanssouci*; Christian Daniel Rauch's equestrian statue of the King in *Unter den Linden*; the Prussian iron cross; Bismarck dressed in Prussian military regalia; Kaiser Wilhelm II inspecting troops; Hitler and Hindenburg shaking hands in front of the German Garrison Church in Potsdam; an image of Hitler's bunker and a quote from Himmler relating Hitler's reading of Carlyle's *Frederick the Great* during his last days; an image of the palace of Frederick being dynamited and the statue of Frederick by Rauch being removed; the burial of Hohenzollern statues in the Bellevue gardens, 1954. In conjunction with the music and images, the voice of Winston Churchill can be heard addressing the House of Commons, 21 September 1943: "The core of Germany is Prussia. There is the source of the recurring pestilence. But we do not war with races as such. We war against tyranny, and we seek to preserve ourselves from destruction. I am convinced that the British, American, and Russian peoples who have suffered measureless waste, peril, and bloodshed twice in a quarter of

a century, through the Teutonic urge for domination, will this time take steps to put it beyond the power of Prussia or of all Germany to come at them again with pent-up vengeance and long-nurtured plans. Nazi tyranny and Prussian militarism are the two main elements in German life which must be absolutely destroyed. They must be absolutely rooted out if Europe and the world are to be spared a third and still more frightful conflict. The controversies about whether Burke was right or wrong when he said, 'I do not know the method of drawing up an indictment against a whole people,' these controversies seem to me at the present time to be sterile and academic. Here are two obvious and practical targets for us to fire at—Nazi tyranny and Prussian militarism. Let us aim every gun and let us set every man who will march in motion against them. We must not add needlessly to the weight of our task or the burden that our soldiers bear. Satellite States, suborned or overawed, may perhaps, if they can help to shorten the war, be allowed to work their passage home. But the twin roots of all our evils, Nazi tyranny and Prussian militarism, must be extirpated. Until this is achieved there are no sacrifices that we will not make and no lengths in violence to which we will not go."



ACT I, SCENE I

The Palace at Berlin

The scene opens in King Friedrich Wilhelm's "Tobacco Parliament," a dingy and smoke-infested chamber, with beer steins and pipes covering the table. A heated discussion is underway among the monarch and his advisers about the disgraceful behavior of the Crown-Prince. The royal advisors Grumkow and Seckerdorf, who are also Austrian spies, try to placate the King, who rages about his son's effeminate ways, his flute-playing, and his passion for French poetry and literature. Friedrich Wilhelm becomes increasingly gloomy as he contemplates the future of Prussia in the hands of his feckless son. The Crown Prince shows no interest in military or political matters, but instead dabbles in art, music, and dancing. The King bemoans Frederick's contempt for "barbaric" Prussia, and complains loudly about the various political and diplomatic humiliations that the country has

suffered at the hands of France, Austria, and England. Without leadership and discipline, the King asserts, Prussia is doomed to extinction. He then refers to the double marriage plot that his wife has been trying to arrange between England and Prussia. He contemptuously rejects any treaties with his brother-in-law, George II of England, recalling with disgust the scorn and condescension meted out to him by the king's ambassador. In a drunken tirade, he imitates the refined manners of the English court, and concludes by spitting on the floor.

Friedrich Wilhelm seems about to fall into one of his fits of hypochondria, and talks of abdication and retirement. Such talk alarms Grumkow and Seckerdorf, who fear that the Queen's plan to align Prussia with England will succeed, thereby upsetting the balance of power in Europe and weakening both Austria and France. Friedrich Wilhelm confides he has been worried about reports that his son has been dallying with an unsuitable young Countess who likes to dress in men's clothing. In an aside, Grumkow speculates that the Prince's interest in women is the least of the King's worries. The two advisors suggest that the King pay more attention to his son's dissolute young friends, especially a lieutenant named Katte. They reiterate their opposition to the double-marriage scheme—an alliance with England will only encourage Frederick's foppish tendencies—and urge Friedrich Wilhelm to prohibit the Queen from any further negotiations with the British royal family.

SCENE II

Outside the Walls of the Palace

The eighteen-year-old Crown Prince greets Lieutenant Katte; the two are laughing and chatting amicably. They begin to mock Friedrich Wilhelm's character and to imitate his mannerisms; there are signs of tenderness and affection between them as they engage in a duet. The two are interrupted by the arrival of Frederick's mother. She lectures him about how he should ignore his father's injunctions and aspire to a life of culture and refinement. She explains the double-marriage scheme and how important it is to her—it provides them both with a means to negate the influence of the brutish and boorish King and the Prussian military establishment. She promises Frederick that together, they will re-establish Berlin as the center of European

artistic and cultural life, where figures such as Voltaire, Maupertuis, and Bach will congregate and where the life of the mind will reign supreme.

She exhorts her son to write a letter to Princess Amelia of England, and to propose marriage to her. The Crown Prince refuses to agree and the Queen exits. Privately, he longs to escape Berlin with Katte and his sister, and to live only for art, music, and pleasure.

But Frederick's sister Wilhelmina is worried. She carries with her a letter of her own—from the Duke of Gloucester, who is in love with her. She does not love him yet, but she longs for security and respect. In an aria Wilhelmina is torn between her love of her brother and her desire to be an obedient daughter. She worries that she and Frederick will be flogged if Friedrich Wilhelm discovers that they have been arranging alliances with Britain behind his back. She fears her father's violence, and cautions Frederick against antagonizing the King by his impulsive and capricious behavior.

Frederick expresses contempt for his father and Prussia's militaristic culture. His only desires are to compose and to play music with his music instructor Quantz and his friend Katte, to read French literature, to dress in beautiful clothes, and to sing duets with his sister. He dreams of a court in which he and Wilhelmina are free to behave as they wish. He is bitter that at age fourteen he was forced to leave school, to have his locks shorn, and to join the Army. Wilhelmina cautions him, and tries to persuade him that he should at least convey the impression of being interested in "manly" pursuits, so that their father will cease his violent ways. She warns Frederick that he and Katte are being watched by Grumkow and Seckerdorf, and that the friendship has angered the King.

They quarrel. Frederick is hurt because he thinks of her as the only person in the world who is really on his side. She is sorry and begs his forgiveness. He gives it readily.

Wilhelmina exits. Frederick decides that he will comply with his mother's wishes and propose marriage to Princess Amelia. But his secret hope is that this union will enable him to leave Berlin forever, and to live in England with Katte and his sister.

SCENE III**Friedrich Wilhelm's Chambers**

The King enters, in a sour humor. The Queen unwisely mentions the double-marriage scheme and reveals that Frederick has written to Princess Amelia. This news infuriates the King, who starts chasing his son with a walking stick, threatening to beat him. When Frederick evades him, he hits Wilhelmina and knocks her down on the floor. When she recovers from the blow, Wilhelmina advises her brother to apologize for both their sakes. Frederick reluctantly approaches his father and pleads for forgiveness.

The King responds that Frederick must not really love him because if he did, then he would mend his ways and begin behaving as a true Prussian soldier. The King refuses Frederick's apology and vows that he will bend the Crown Prince to his will. The King exits. Left alone, Frederick rips the Prussian Iron Cross from his tunic, hurls it on the ground, and pledges to live only for beauty, art, love, and companionship: he then tears up the letter to Amelia, and promises to remain faithful to Wilhelmina and Katte.

**ACT II, SCENE I****Frederick's Chambers**

Frederick is taking flute lessons from his instructor, Quantz. He is dressed in a bright scarlet dressing gown with gold tags and sashes, a deliberate and outlandish parody of the Prussian military costume, and his hair is done in the French style.

The scene begins with Katte and Frederick pretending to mimic the rituals and the conversation of the "Tobacco-Parliament," with imitations of Friedrich Wilhelm, Grumkow, and Seckerdorf. The room is littered with French books and music sheets. Quantz's flute accompanies a scene of farce and revelry. Katte eventually decides to leave and informs Frederick that he will see him later that night.

Frederick continues with his lessons, but a moment later Katte rushes back in, distraught, and snatches up the books and music. The King has unexpectedly arrived. Katte grabs Quantz and pulls him into a closet for firewood; they hide there,

quaking. Frederick quickly pulls off his robe, tosses it behind a screen, and hastily pulls on his blue military coat. He pretends to seem busy with routine matters, sorting through papers on a desk. But he cannot disguise his French hairstyle, which gives him away. His father finds the robe and begins ripping it with his dagger. He then notices the copies of Voltaire's writings and music sheets stuffed under an armoire. He begins hurling the books and the sheets into the fire. Grabbing Quantz's flute lying on the music stand, he smashes it against the wall. Cursing Frederick for his deviant nature, he storms out of the room, pledging to instill "Iron" values in his son.

Katte and Quantz come out from the wood closet, contemplating in horror the burning books and manuscripts in the grate. A disconsolate Frederick pledges to leave Berlin forever.

SCENE II

Wilhelmina's Chambers

Frederick goes to see Wilhelmina, who has fallen ill from her father's mistreatment. She begs him to be patient and not to take so many risks, and to bide his time until he succeeds his father as ruler of Prussia. The Queen enters and also begs him to be patient. She has continued to work behind the King's back on the double-marriage scheme and is confident that she can make it happen.

Grumkow and Seckerdorff bring a letter from Friedrich Wilhelm that they themselves have helped to compose. In the letter the King declares that he will no longer tolerate his wife's opposition in pursuing the double-marriage scheme. Wilhelmina must choose between two Prussian officers—Weissenfels or Schwedt—and she will not be provided with a dowry. Frederick will be forbidden from marrying until he reforms himself. The King has decided that the Crown Prince will be given an army appointment in a provincial garrison, far from the temptations and decadence of Berlin.

Wilhelmina cries at the news. Frederick is astonished and outraged. The Queen is indignant. She curses Grumkow and Seckerdorf, and vows that her husband will not make her children miserable. She adamantly claims that she will persist with the double-marriage plot, but both Wilhelmina and Frederick know

that this is futile. The Queen then proposes to find a third choice for Wilhelmina, someone not as pock-marked as Weissenfels or as boring as Schwedt. She asks Wilhelmina if she knows of any potential suitors. Wilhelmina replies that she still has her heart set on the Duke of Gloucester, the only person in the world besides her brother who genuinely cares about her.

In a mood of bitter resignation, the Queen informs Grumkow and Seckerdorf that she will no longer trouble herself with their concerns and dismisses them. Wilhelmina is distraught, but Frederick assures her that he has not given up yet and that she should not either. Frederick declares to her that he is plotting to escape from Prussia with Katte to England, where they will establish a permanent home for themselves and for Wilhelmina.

SCENE IV

Wilhelmina's Chambers, Dresden

Wilhelmina, in Dresden with her father so that he may apprise the King of Poland of his plans for her, is in her chamber in the act of undressing for bed when a magnificently-dressed cavalier bursts into her bedroom. She shrieks and runs behind the screen. The cavalier laughs heartily, then sweeps off his hat, revealing himself to be Frederick, in a very ebullient mood.

He tells her that joy shall succeed their tears. He has been summoned by his father to visit a military camp at Muhlberg and knows his father mainly wants to keep an eye on him. But Frederick has a plan for escape; he has purchased a carriage and horses at Leipzig in addition to borrowing 1,000 thalers from a financier in Berlin.

The Crown-Prince has come to bid his sister farewell and tells her that he will never return. He promises that as soon as he is safely in England he will work out her deliverance, too. She begs him to renounce his plans, or at least to postpone them. She also urges him to avoid Katte's company and suspects that Grumkow and Seckerdorf have been paying household staff to report their movements and conversations.

Frederick assures her that the three of them will soon meet in a place where they will be free from the persecutions of the King. Skeptical and anxious, she continues to beg him not to do anything rash. In a final and tender parting scene,

Frederick reminds her of their dream of shaping their lives as they wished—they will live for art and music and will be safe forever from the threat of violence and intimidation.

SCENE V

Katte's Chambers

Frederick goes to tell Katte goodbye and promises to write daily. The prince gives Katte 1,000 thalers and his gray top coat, items that might prove useful in effecting their escape plan.

Katte urges him to be circumspect and to wait until the situation is favorable. Frederick promises to be prudent and the two then discuss how happy their lives will be when they are finally free. Like Wilhelmina, Katte is afraid that Frederick's impetuosity will cause their plan to fall apart. They kiss and part.



ACT III, SCENE I

The Pleasure Camp at Muhlberg

The King and Frederick arrive. The King has lured his son to Muhlberg by pretending to be conciliatory, but he then brutally beats him in front of the court. He says to the gathered dignitaries, "If my father had humiliated me the way I just humiliated him, I'd have blown his brains out, but this fellow has no honor. He snivels and takes everything I dish out."

Unable to tolerate his father's presence any longer, the prince decides to run away sooner than he had planned and in a letter informs Katte of his intentions. He pulls aside Graf von Hoym, the Saxon minister, asking, "Could not a glimpse of Leipzig be had for myself and a friend, quietly, without the fuss of passes?" Graf replies, "They are very strict about passes. Do not try it, your royal highness."

Frederick writes another letter to Katte, proposing to meet him in disguise at Sinzheim, along the homeward route, the spot where the King has planned to lodge for the night. Katte and Frederick will then mount waiting horses and slip across the hills to safety. He engages a page to get the message through to Katte, telling him, "Speed, silence, vigilance . . . and so, adieu, love!"

Grumkow and Seckerdorf, lurking outside Frederick's tent, intercept the page and seize the letter. They divulge its contents to a furious Friedrich Wilhelm. He instructs Frederick's adjutants to be vigilant and again curses his son for his perverse desires and his contempt for Prussian values.

SCENE II

The Quiet Village of Steinfurth

The scene opens near two barns. Knowing that Frederick has ordered horses to be ready for him and Katte at Sinzheim, the King announces his decision to lodge here instead of at the Inn in the village, claiming that he prefers fresh air and the absence of fuss. Frederick tries to dissuade him and fails. The King orders his son to sleep in a barn with three men guarding him; the King will sleep in the other barn. An anxious Frederick pulls aside another page, and tells him to bring the horses from Sinzheim to Steinfurth. He offers the page a substantial bribe, and tells him to wait until his trio of guards are asleep. He quietly rises and dresses, takes his money, puts on a new red coat, and slips from the barn. He lurks near a traveling carriage, waiting for the horses to be brought to him.

But Grumkow and Seckerdorf have instructed their valet to plant himself outside to keep watch. The valet awakens one of Frederick's guards, who asks the Crown-Prince what he is doing up so early. The prince has no choice but to go back inside. The page, suspecting that the plot has been discovered, panics and tries to flee on horseback. He is dragged into the King's quarters and forced to confess the plot.

The King summons Frederick's three guards and tells them it is their job to get his son safely to the prison at Wesel, or they will answer with their heads.

SCENE III

The Palace at Berlin

The King visits the queen in her apartment, and tells her that her son has been captured and is in prison.

The Queen asks if her husband intends to execute Frederick. The King shrieks that he will have all of them executed if they continue to disobey him and hatch schemes behind his back.

Wilhelmina sobs and pleads with Friedrich Wilhelm to spare her brother. The King slaps her and accuses her of being the Crown Prince's accomplice in the escape plan.

She falls to the ground to beg for mercy. He is about to kick her when the Queen gets between them. The King vows he will hang Frederick and imprison Wilhelmina forever.

Wilhelmina says, "Spare my brother and I will marry anyone you want me to."

The King appears to be thinking this prospect over. The news arrives that Katte has been apprehended and is being brought to Wesel. As he leaves, the King orders that Wilhelmina be imprisoned in her apartment and guarded by sentries.

SCENE IV

The Prison at Wesel

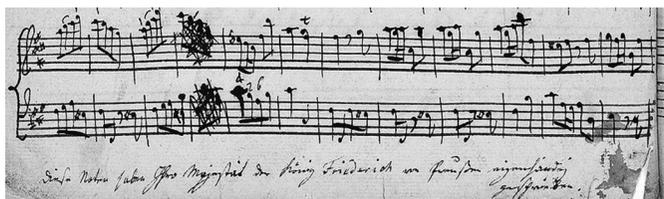
Six months after his imprisonment, sentries with bayonets keep watch over Frederick, who has been charged with desertion. He is dressed in brown prison clothes and sits in a bare stone room lit by a single candle.

A youth dressed as a girl secretly brings books into Frederick under her skirts. The prince asks him for news.

The youth reports Wilhelmina's impending marriage to a military officer who treats her with rudeness and contempt. Frederick is sorry for his part in this sad outcome. The Crown Prince also learns that the King has not slept in nights and that he wanders from room to room like a man possessed. This news gives Frederick some hope that his father's conscience will lead him to be merciful towards Katte, who has been prosecuted for treason. But the youth reluctantly tells Frederick that Katte has been tried in absentia and sentenced to death. He is to be executed that very day. The King has also ordered that Frederick must watch his friend die from his prison cell. If he attempts to close his eyes, his guards have been ordered to kill him.

Beyond the walls of Frederick's room, the noise of the crowd and the sounds of an impending execution grow louder. A sentry brings Frederick to the window and holds his head firmly in view of the scaffolding.

Frederick cries out the window, “Forgive me, my beloved Katte.” Katte extends a fond gesture of farewell to the Crown-Prince before he is beheaded. Against the backdrop of the shadow of Katte’s corpse, left on public display, Frederick bursts into a lament. He sings about how he cannot escape his father and his inheritance of brutality and despotism. Corrupted by Friedrich Wilhelm’s Prussian militarism, the Crown Prince realizes that in order to survive he must become what he despises the most: a warrior-king, a role that he swears he will play with absolute self-control, even if he secretly despises military glory. Yet he consoles himself with the thought that he will use the powerful army that his father has created to achieve his dream of beauty and art. He will show Europe that Prussia is not only a military power, but a cultural power as well. Frederick’s name will forever be identified with the greatness of his court. He looks up to see his dead friend. As the lights dim, an eighteenth-century map of central Europe, including Silesia, begins to slowly burn, to the sound of cannons and the cries of battle. Suddenly, a Prussian Iron Cross reappears and dominates the stage. The Mollwitz March can again be heard. The march and the sounds of battle dissolve into the Flute Concerto No. 2 in G-major as the Iron Cross fades from view and is replaced by a photograph of Frederick the Great’s re-interment ceremony at Sans Souci, 1991, with Chancellor Helmut Kohl in attendance, and a headline from the *New York Times*, dated 24 January 2012, appears: “Germany Permits Itself to Celebrate Prussian King.” A single drum strikes a dirge-like march. The curtain closes.



*“This Music was written by Your
Majesty the King Frederick of Prussia in his own hand”¹*

¹ Image of a flute concerto MS in Frederick’s hand published with the kind permission of Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg/Germany <www.kunstsammlungen-coburg.de>.