

FRITZ SCHNITZLER AND THE EAR TUNER

A true story for children aged four
to ninety-four

By Robert Miller

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It was the coldest day of January in the year nineteen hundred and two. The puddles were frozen solid, and the earth was as hard as granite. In Tübingen, everything was just cold and grey. The ground was grey and the sky was grey. Frost clothed the trees and the pavements, and it hung in the air like a ghost. It was everywhere and nowhere.

But . . . in the icy, misty air a few people were taking a walk this Saturday afternoon. Fritz Schnitzler, who was just eight, was out for a walk with his Grandpa. He was having fun, sliding on the frozen puddles, and shaking frost from the trees onto his grandpa's head. He was warmly dressed, with warm woolen mittens, but he had forgotten to wear his hat. His Grandfather did not need a hat, because his head was all covered with grey and white hair, which stuck out in all directions.

Suddenly Fritz said to his grandpa "My ears are Tingling!"

"Tingling are they? Let me see" said old man Schnitzler. He put his head next to Fritz, ear-to-ear. Grandpa's whiskers tickled, and he smelt of tobacco.

"You're right!" said old man Schnitzler "They are tingling! I can hear them too!"

They walked on for a bit. Then, from across the street, they heard another sound: “Plinkety plink-plonk”, as a slim lady with medium-sized ears passed by.

Fritz thought “That’s really cool!”.

Then a big fat man, walking very fast, and with really big ears overtook them, and as he passed they heard a deeper sound “Bing, bang, bong, boom!”

Then several children passed, kicking a ball, and they heard “ting-a-ling-a-ling.” Soon, everybody’s ears were tingling, except grandpa’s, which were well hidden in his forest of hair.

Fritz and his grandpa had just reached the front door of their house, when suddenly they heard “Klonkety klonkle bonk”, and what should they see but an ear bouncing on to the pavement, and rolling like a wheel towards them. It stopped rolling, and fell over on to its side with a little thud, ending up on the ground at Fritz’s feet. It seemed to have fallen off the head of a young man, who was going past at high speed on a bicycle, whistling loudly as he went. Fritz called after him to stop, but he was going too fast, and didn’t hear, perhaps because he was whistling, perhaps because he had lost an ear.

“Hey, grandad!” said Fritz, all excited, pointing at the ear, lying on the ground “Can I have it, grandad?”

“Why not? Finders are keepers, don’t they say?” said his grandpa. So Fritz picked up the ear and they went indoors.

When they got indoors Fritz looked at the ear he had picked up. It was quite hard, frozen solid. But there was a warm fire blazing in their front room. Fritz warmed the ear up in front of the fire and

soon it started to thaw out. When it was properly warmed up, he put the ear to his own ear. Very faintly, he thought he could hear something, like the roaring of waves at the seashore.

That night it got colder and colder outside. Fritz huddled shivering in his bed, thinking of the discovery he had made. Late in the evening, under his bedroom window, there were lots of voices outside the house, and some students singing, but Fritz fell asleep eventually.

On Sunday morning after breakfast, as the church bells rang out across Tübingen, he went outside to look around. It looked somehow different from the day before. Then he saw why it was different:

There were several ears lying frozen on the ground, on the pavements and in the street corners. He started to pick them up and collect them. There were big ears and little ears, smooth ones and hairy ones, and they were of all sorts of different shapes and sizes. Three of them had ear-rings attached, one of which was very hairy. After half an hour of scouring round the streets he had a paper bag full of twenty five frozen ears. There were fourteen right ears and eleven left ears, including one matching pair, which he had found a few yards from each other in one of the city squares.

That afternoon he sat in front of the fire, carefully thawing out all the ears, and then putting them to his own ear, one-by-one. From each one, he heard a quiet roaring sound, like voices heard from a distant crowd. Each one seemed to Fritz to make a slightly different sound. He strained his own ears to catch what the voices were saying, but they were too indistinct to make out anything clearly. He

wrapped them all up carefully in cotton wool before he went to bed that evening. But before he went to bed he showed them to his grandpa. Fritz wasn't sure that grandpa would be pleased to see the collection of so many ears.

“Well”, said grandpa Schnitzler, scratching his head and twisting his whiskers “it's quite a good collection. . . best I've seen for years . . .but there'll be a lot of people missing their ears tomorrow morning, I'll be bound. You ought to try to find out who they belong to, and let them have them back.”

Then, he thought for a long moment, and said: “Why don't you put an advertisement in the newspaper – the ‘lost and found’ section, you know.”

Fritz thought about this as he fell asleep.

The following morning he went to school very early. It was still freezing, but not as cold as over the weekend. At the bottom of his school bag, he carefully packed his collection of ears, in their paper bag, and made sure that he told no-one about them. After school, he made his way to the offices of the local newspaper the “Schwabische Tagblatt”.

Inside the office a nice lady was there to answer his questions.

Fritz explained, a bit nervously “I'm Fritz Schnitzler. I've got a lot of ears.”

The lady looked a bit puzzled. “A lot? You've only got two, haven't you?”

Fritz paused, and swallowed hard, then explained in more detail “You know, it was very cold over the weekend, like, and a lot of people lost their ears, like. I collected them up on Sunday morning and I

want to give them back, like. I'm sure they must be missing them."

Fritz opened his package and showed the lady the ears, wrapped in cotton wool.

The lady in the newspaper office smiled in understanding, and said, "That's very good of you. That often happens at this time of the year. How many have you got?"

"Twenty five. My grandad said I could put an advert in the 'lost-and-found' column of the newspaper. Can you help me?"

"Twenty five! – that's rather a lot. I don't think we can describe them all in the 'lost-and-found' column . . .it would be far too expensive . . . and if we just say 'twenty five ears found in Tübingen on Saturday night' no-one would know which ear belonged to which person. I've a much better idea."

She smiled as she said this. "There's a very clever professor who lives up the hill, who is a specialist in ears. He's sure to know what to do. I can give you his address, and you could write to him."

"Yes, I could" said Fritz hesitantly, uncertain what this would lead to.

The newspaper lady rummaged in a filing cabinet for a while, and then came back with a little slip of paper.

"This is him" she said as she showed the slip of paper to Fritz. It was a little card saying, in beautiful copper-plate handwriting"

*"Herr Professor Doctor Ludwig-Maximilian
Breitkopf-Schmetterling,*

*(late of Vienna; past President ISET),
Consultant Ear Tuner,
72 Philosopher's Avenue,
Tübingen."*

Fritz studied the card. "That's awesome" he said; and then he asked "What does 'ISET' mean?"

"I'm not sure" said the lady from the newspaper office, "but why don't you write down the address, and send him a message. Then you might find out what 'ISET' stands for. . . .and I'm sure he'll be able to help you find the owners for all those ears".

Carefully, Fritz wrote down the address of the clever professor. As he prepared to leave the office, the lady said: "Wrap those ears up again, now, and keep them nice and warm. Write him a letter – best hand-writing now . . .Then wait a few days. He'll get in touch with you soon, for sure." Fritz did as he was told and went back home.

That evening Fritz composed a letter and, underneath his own address, he wrote it out as carefully as he could.

"Dear Professor,

The lady in the newspaper office gave me your address. Last Saturday night, it was very frosty, and a lot of people lost their ears in the streets near where I live. I collected them up on Sunday morning, and I want to give them back to their owners. But I don't know how to find who all the ears belong to. Can you help me?"

Yours truly,

Fritz Schnitzler”

On Tuesday morning, after school he posted the letter, and for the next few days he waited, full of expectation, for a reply. On Friday, when he came home from school there was an important-looking letter waiting for him. Apart from his name – Herr Fritz Schnitzler – there were the same mysterious letters on the envelope: “ISET”. Fritz tore open the letter impatiently, and there, at the head of the letter, was the explanation of those letters: “Professor Doctor Ludwig-Maximilian Breitkopf-Schmetterling, Past President of the International Society of Ear Tuners.”

Underneath, the professor had written, in a wild scarcely-legible scrawl, the following:

Dear Fritz,

Thank you for your letter. I will be in my laboratory on Saturday morning. Would you like to call on me here at 11.30? If you bring all the ears you have collected we can examine them, and check them out on my new equipment. We should be able to match them with other ears I have on my files.

Yours sincerely

Ludy Breitkopf

That evening Fritz studied the street map of Tübingen to find out how to get to Philosopher's Avenue. The following morning he set off through the frosty streets with his precious package of ears. He found the street, and then found number 72, walked up a short flight of steps and rung the bell. There was a shuffling behind the door, which opened to reveal Mrs Schmetterling, hovering and smiling. She never stood still, was moving back and forth all the time, and her elbows flapped up and down. Fritz thought she might suddenly start flying like a little bird.

"Are you Fritz Schnitzler? You must have come to see Ludy Breilkopf, I think, haven't you?"

She showed Fritz through the house, to the professor's office and laboratory at the back of the house. The professor was sitting at his desk, and he stood up and shook hands with Fritz.

"Come on in" he said. He was short, and a bit stiff in his movements. His head was mainly bald. He peered sharply at Fritz through one pair of spectacles, and he had two other spare pairs for other purposes, perched up on his bald head.

"S-so" he said with a bit of a stutter: "You've p-picked up a collection of ears on the f-frosty m-morning last week. L-let's have a l-look at them."

Fritz opened his little parcel and showed the professor all his ears.

"Very interesting" he said as he carefully studied the ears. "This one for instance" he picked up one of the hairy ones. "I'm sure I know who that b-belongs to. We'll check it out in a moment".

At that moment the door bell rang again, and soon Mrs Schmetterling showed a young woman into the

office. "Ah, Mrs Wagner . . .come to c-collect your ears, have you?. Nothing really wrong with them." Here, the professor handed her a little parcel, with her ears carefully wrapped up inside. "But they'd serve you b-better if you rub them each night with this p-powder." The professor picked a small bottle from one of his shelves. "Ah yes" he said " 'M-mozart p-powder' . . . bought a batch of this powder f-fifteen years ago in a tiny little shop in Vienna. They say they d-dig it up in a little mine in the side of one of the mountains near S-salzburg. . . supplies Ear T-tuners all round the worldlittle packages sent off to C-California, Japan, anywhere you want. It's really great. N-never f-f-fails. T-t-try it and see".

After Mrs Wagner left they got to work on Fritz's collection of ears.

"Let's get the equipment running" said the professor, leading the way from his office to the laboratory next door. On the wall of the laboratory Fritz noticed an elegant document in a picture frame. It said: "My mission: to hear every person as they hear themselves."

Fritz read this with amazement, and burst out to the professor "Don't all people hear themselves the same way, like?"

"Oh no! Just w-wait until I get the m-machine running, and I'll show you."

"The machine" occupied most of the laboratory. It had a lot of wheels and wires, a large horn, and, at the centre, a little nozzle, projecting out a little. The professor turned a switch at the wall, and there was a faint whirring sound as the large machine warmed up.

“This new m-machine makes my job so much easier” he said. “In the days before the electricity c-came, I had such a job tuning people’s ears . . .but now it’s so much easier”. Then a little light came on to say that the machine had warmed up.

“Let’s t-try this one” said the professor, picking one of the ears out of Fritz’s package. Carefully he attached the ear to the projecting nozzle, and pressed another switch. From the horn there was a curious warbling sound, like one of the pigeons in the town square.

“Ah yes!” said Ludy Breitkopf, “I’d recognize that anywhere! That’s Mrs Metzger from B-butcher Street. Just let me check in my files.” He went over to a big filing cabinet next to the machine, searched for a while, and came back with a little plastic disc. Then he put it onto another curious machine, and set it spinning. Out from the horn came exactly the same warbling sound.

“That s-settles that one!” said the professor. He took the ear off the machine, wrapped it up nicely, labeled a large envelope, and put the ear into it.

“I’ll write a letter to her this afternoon” said the professor.

When the next ear was attached to the machine, it gave a sort of faint song, but indistinct, and mournful. “I think I know who that b-belongs to, but he doesn’t seem to be very happy.” Ludy checked in the filing cabinet, and found a disk that made a similar sound, but much clearer and more cheerful. The professor took a small vial from his shelf, containing a mysterious oil. Then he moistened a little leather pad with the oil which he tipped out

of the vial. He detached the ear from the machine, and very carefully rubbed the oil all over the ear. Fritz looked at the label on the vial. It said, in tiny handwriting "Elixir of Rossini". Then he re-attached the ear to the machine and tried again. What a difference! It sang loud, clear and true.

"She'll be g-glad to get that ear back, for sure" said the professor, "but she'll be glad its been t-tuned up even more".

The next ear made a very loud and very rude noise, about half way between a pig snuffling and a trombone. Mrs Schmetterling burst in through the door of the laboratory "Ludy, whatever are you up to in there? You'll be giving young Fritz Schnitzler bad ideas."

Ludy Breitkopf laughed, and said to her "That's not me; that's Günter G-Grodd, - he always was a loud-mouthed youth. I'll help him to grow up."

The professor swung round another arm of the big machine, so that another nozzle fitted into the ear. Then he turned a switch and there was a melodious humming sound, mixed with the raucous noise coming from Günter Grodd's ear. Over a period of about minute, the raucous sound gradually changed its character, until it sounded more like the cooing of a dove.

"That sounds a b-bit more civilized" said Ludy. "His mother won't believe what's happened to him; might not even recognize him."

When they connected the next ear, they heard a loud voice which never stopped talking, talking, talking . . .about politics, the economy, the budget, the trade unions and so on. The longer it went on the louder the voice became, and the more

difficult it seemed to be to interrupt it. In the end Ludy Breitkopf turned the machine off.

“That’s the only way to stop p-people like that” he said decisively. He rummaged in his files and found a disk and set it playing. It matched perfectly.

“Yes, as I thought, it’s Helmut Schröder from Reutlingen. He never stops t-talking, and always about p-politics. But I know how to d-deal with him.” There was a cunning smile on his face. He turned the machine on again, and flicked another switch. A smooth, gentle tenor voice could be heard, singing a romantic love song. Then Ludy switched Helmut Schröder’s ear on again. For a minute or two there was a terrible racket, a combination of a political speech and the love song . . .but gradually Helmut’s voice became more melodious, until in the end the two voices sounded together like a perfectly-blended duet for tenor and bass voices.

Then there was a dainty little ear which sounded more like a mouse squeaking. Ludy soon found who it was, a young woman called Sophie Spätzler.

“Another person from Reutlingen” said Ludy, looking at the address on the disc, as he put it back in his files. “But we need to give her a bit more confidence”. So he sounded in Sophie’s ear a rich melodious soprano voice, and soon they were singing beautifully together.

So, for the next hour and a half they worked through the twenty-five ears. During that time they found the owner of the ear which had fallen from the cyclist, that first frosty morning: It was from

Walter Baum, who was learning to play the flute. In the end, at one o'clock, there were just three ears left to be identified, including the hairy one with an ear ring, and the matching pair. The professor had no record of ears like these three.

"How are we going to find who they belong to?" said Fritz.

"I'll show you" said the professor. "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"No" said Fritz.

"Come back here at half-past two, and well go on an expedition."

After lunch, Fritz was back prompt at half-past two. There, in front of the professor's house was an amazing vehicle, with an engineer winding the crank handle to make it start. The professor was coming down the steps, wrapped in a thick fur coat, and greeted Fritz.

"How do you like my new motor car? He said.

"Far out!" said Fritz. It was one of the first motor cars that had been seen in Tübingen.

The engine burst into activity, and the motor car started to tremble all over. Fritz noticed that, on the back seat was part of the big machine, and the horn, which was sticking out of the window. The professor got into the driver's seat and opened the passenger door for Fritz. There was a loud series of explosions from the exhaust, and the vehicle was set in motion. So for the next hour, the vehicle drove slowly round all the streets of Tübingen. Every few minutes, they would stop, with the engine ticking over, at street corners and in the squares, and then the professor would touch a few switches. Out from

the horn, loud and clear would come the sound of one or other of the three ears, which the professor had attached to the machine. After half an hour, when they were playing the sound from the hairy ear with an ear ring, there was a sudden shout from the front door of one of the nearby houses. A muscular young man with leather trousers, and only one ear burst out "That's my ear! I've been missing it for a week! How d'y know it was mine?"

"Bit of modern science."

"Jee, thanks, sir."

"At your service. D-don't mention it" said the professor graciously, as he handed the young man his missing ear.

Half an hour later, they had covered all the streets of Tübingen, and they were left with the matching pair, whose sounds no-one seemed to recognize.

"W-well" said the professor to Fritz, "Why don't you go back to the newspaper office, and ask them to put an advertisement in the newspaper"

So, that was what Fritz did. The lady at the newspaper office was very helpful, and the next Saturday, the advert appeared in the paper. Two days later Fritz received a letter from Metzingen, a small village two stops down the railway line from Tübingen. A young woman had been visiting an aunt in Tübingen, that frosty Saturday evening, and that was when she lost her ears. The next weekend Fritz took the train out to Metzingen, and presented the woman with her lost ears. She slotted them both back in place, and broke into a broad smile. Fritz felt happy to have been able to help.

Fritz got on the train back to Tübingen. The only stop before Tübingen was Reutlingen. A stout middle-aged man, arm-in-arm with a young woman, got on the train there. The train started, and then Fritz heard them singing quietly together. He looked round at them, and there they were, sitting close together, arm-in-arm, ear-to-ear. Their voices seemed vaguely familiar, and so did the songs they were singing.

He heard the man whisper: "You sound so beautiful!", and the young woman replied "So do you. How you have changed!". Then he knew who they were: Helmut Schröder and Sophie Spätzler, both delighting in the sounds from their newly-tuned ears.

As Fritz went back home from the station, the sun was setting in the frosty air over Tübingen. Fritz thought: "Its really cool being an ear-tuner. When I grow up, I want to be an ear-tuner too!"