

A Bassoon Lite, Please

Laugh-A-Holic

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I made the mistake of visibly enjoying myself while playing the bassoon. It only happened once, but once was enough. Word got around that I had been seen smiling while performing a cantata by one of the Bach Boyz...probably Bach, the elder.

Next thing you know I heard ugly whispering in bassoon bars around town that I didn't appreciate the seriousness of playing the bassoon.

Up until that time it was my own little dirty secret. For years I had enjoyed playing the bassoon. I can't tell you how many close calls I had over the years...stifling smiles that tried to creep into the corners of my mouth. But now...now...all that was blown out of the water.

I knew I had no other choice but to enter the 'Humorist's Anonymous' program. Denial and subterfuge were no longer an option. My hand had been forced. It was no one's fault other than my own. In admitting openly that I enjoyed a hearty laugh...that I occasionally joked about playing the bassoon... I hoped I was taking a first small step towards healing.

I found myself in front of a small older building on the south side of town. It was made of brick...the kind of bricks you don't see much of anymore, rough, reddish brown. Maybe at one time they had been a bright red, but now they appeared in the dim light of a single bare lightbulb hanging above the front door, to be a dingy, nondescript brown.

Signs hung on the large front wooden door. The largest one said in handwritten oversized letters, 'Pity the man or woman with a sense of humor'. The sign right below it stated, 'Please leave your laugh outside...it's not funny, and it never will be!'

The surprise of the 'Humorist's Anonymous' program was that I found I wasn't alone. There were other bassoonists with the same problem. The first evening I entered into the program I joined a small group.

They were your ordinary run of individuals, some old, some young, white, black, green...every kind you might meet walking down any street, on any day, in any section of the country.

Everyone nodded greetings. Some, who had apparently been in the program for sometime, clustered together for small talk. Eventually, we sat around in a small circle. I was nervous and fidgeted in my seat. A small individual began the session.

He was small and peculiar looking. I had the

uncanny feeling that I had seen him somewhere before. While I searched the dim recesses of my mind for the memory, the little guy began to talk. The others, myself included, gave him our full attention.

"Hi. I'm Kermit," he began, "I'm a bassoon laughaholic. I always thought being green was not easy...but that was before I admitted to myself I was happy playing the bassoon ...ribbet."

The others in the circle nodded in sympathy. Some looked down at the floor in front of them and shook their heads slightly from side to side.

"I often laughed freely from the joy of music," he said, "...But, I have been in the program for several months now...ribbet...and I feel I am progressing. Lately, I feel the urge to enjoy music less and less ...ribbet, ribbet...it's hard, but I'm trying."

The bassoonists on either side of Kermit patted him on his shoulder. He sat and wept with what apparently was shame and relief. Murmurs of approval swept around the circle, before a new voice was heard.

"My name is Jack."

He was a thin man. I thought I recognized him as a formerly prominent bassoonist in some Midwestern symphony orchestra.

"I've been around for some time," he continued, "...always thought the no one cared whether I laughed or not. Frankly, I was having too good a time playing the bassoon...nimble and quick like... to give a hoot one way or the other. Then one day I bumped into an old friend..."

Jack paused, seemingly overwhelmed by what he was about to reveal to us, perfect strangers. Others in the circle leaned forward and encouraged Jack to continue. He looked into the sympathetic faces around him and appeared to gather courage.

"...well, this old friend...name of..." Jack was interrupted by a voice outside the circle.

I turned to see a short, heavyset man...a noted bassoonist...a man who I recognized as having guided many through the treacherous seas of bassoon humor to the safe shores of humorless, serious, purposefulness. Here was a man who had established a well-deserved reputation as a humorless Elmer Fudd to a world of frivolous Bugs Bunnys.

"...no names, Jack!" the famous anti-humorist growled. "We don't reveal names here."

Elmer Fudd walked off to check on the progress of the other circles, one of oboists and a smaller one of conductors. Very few conductors were laughaholics I noticed. Most apparently were blessed by Mother Nature with no humor at all. I envied their good fortune. The voice of Jack brought me back to the circle...

"...anyway, this old friend of mine set me straight...wasn't for him I would still be wasting time nimbly jumping over candlesticks, and laughing about the bassoon ..." Jack faltered, rubbing at his eyes with his fingers. Someone leaned over and handed Jack a tissue.

Jack dabbed at his eyes with the tissue. He looked up and nodded his thanks to all of us waiting patiently for him to regain his composure.

"...thanks," he murmured. "I was saying about this friend of mine... he taught me that things are serious...not meant to be funny...the bassoon is serious, intense, humorless work. I listened...and finally saw the candlelight for what it was. I opened up my heart and let 'humorouslessness' into my soul."

Jack bowed his head. We all shuffled our feet on the floor as a salute to Jack's courage. He held up his hand to stop us.

"...of course," he continued, "I haven't played a note on the bassoon since that moment. Now that I've found the way of seriousness, I avoid temptation. No, no...now I work as a mortician. I miss the bassoon, and the sheer joy of jumping over candlesticks...but I'm determined...I'm never falling back into happiness again..NEVER!"

We stood up and applauded Jack, a model for what we all strove to achieve...complete abject seriousness. Elmer Fudd came running over to our group. He was angry.

"What is going on here, people," he hollered into the group.

The other circles of people were staring at us. The conductor's group was noticeably horrified at this spontaneous outburst of happiness inspired by Jack's story of fulfilling his search for serious purpose.

Elmer Fudd clapped his hands to restore order. Chagrined by our collective lapse, we sat back in our seats. No one spoke. We all tried to look as miserable as possible. It wasn't difficult to do...what with Elmer Fudd glaring down at us like errant school children.

"People, people, people," He said shaking his head back and forth. "...people, playing the bassoon is serious business. We do not tolerate humor. Funny is not part of our repertoire. Serious...not funny. When it comes to playing the bassoon we do not laugh!!!"

One of his older disciples came up to him with a bassoon in hand. Elmer Fudd turned and took the instrument from his student. He wet his reed, put the instrument on a neck strap that hung around his neck. Carefully he placed the reed on the lead pipe of the bassoon and blew a few notes softly.

"Let me demonstrate what I mean by not funny," he said to the attentive group.

Carefully he put reed to mouth and began to play several orchestral excerpts from the bassoon's repertoire. After that he played the first movement of the Mozart Bassoon Concerto, up until the first cadenza.

We all agreed he had struck home. He had made his point. No one felt any joy at his playing whatsoever. It was a humorless, deadly serious, miserable approach to playing.

Funny was bad. Serious was good.

Thoroughly impressed, I went home and sat in a darkened room and reflected on the seriousness of it all. After several days I went out for a walk. It was a bright spring morning. The birds were singing. The air was comfortably cool. I strolled through the park where I heard a band playing in the distance. A short stroll brought me up to the bandstand where I stood with many others watching the musicians play some snappy sounding marches.

My eyes wandered through the maze of colorful costumes to the bassoon player. As the band swung into a series of Strauss Waltzes I watched as the musicians swayed to the music. The bassoonist looked around into the crowd, saw a pretty girl, winked at her, and smiled broadly before turning back to his music.

It's funny, pardon the expression, but since that day I haven't been able to bring myself to go back to Elmer Fudd's 'laugh-a-holic's' program. I know I'm weak...susceptible to the temptation of humor. I'll admit, I laugh a lot these days... and usually it doesn't bother me at all. I know being a fallen bassoon laugh-a-holic is a laughing matter, nothing to be proud of.

The only time I feel even a twinge of guilt, though, is when I pass the mortuary in town. It's dark green exterior blinks accusingly back at me. I think of Jack, inside enjoying the seriousness of being humorless...and Kermit, whose green tint looked vaguely familiar...

...But then I shrug and go on my way.

At least I learned something at the program... when it comes to humorless bassooning...some people have what it takes...and some don't.

I've come to accept that I'm just one of those who don't. ❖