

A Bassoon Lite, Please

Double Bassoon-Napped

By Alan Goodman
Saugus, California

In the late afternoon of Friday, May 6, 2000 a contra bassoon was taken from the backstage area of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. It was located the following day in the Los Angeles Opera Company's underground storage room. The several critical contra bassoon solos for the Philharmonic's evening performance of May 6th had to be played on a bassoon. An errand boy from the Los Angeles Opera had mistaken the contra bassoon case for the portable piano keyboard he had been instructed to place in storage. Herein are the gruesome details of that villainous'contra-bassoon-napping.'

I knew Mollenhauer Ginzberg when he still went by the name, Low Contra Bob. That was before agents of the arch-musical-rival Los Angeles Opera Company kidnapped him from the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

"The experience changed my life forever," Ginzberg told me when I caught up with him in Dave's Double Reed Deli.

We sat at a table across from each other. I had heard rumors about the contra-bassoon-napping, the missed concert, the recriminations, the ransom exchange – and finally, Ginzberg's years of struggle to regain self-esteem through Double Bassoon Psychotherapy.

"What's good here?" I asked, checking out the menu, a four-sheet affair listing everything from poor intonation blintzes to kosher dill alternate fingerings.

"I like the corned reed on rye," he said. "Although, I should go lighter because of my diet."

"You've been dieting?" I asked, interested to find out all I could about Ginzberg.

"Oh yeah," he said. "I've lost twenty five pounds in the last year." He pulled a photo out of his pocket and pushed it across the table at me.

I could hardly believe my eyes. The svelte looking bassoon sitting in front of me was half the size of his former self.

"Pheeew," I whistled, softly. "Unbelievable. You were a real 'tubbo' my friend, double your present size."

"Well, I was big," he said. "That's for sure. But you have to bulk up to contra-bassoon your way through life. You don't get down in the subterranean 'lowest notes in the orchestra' mode when you have only nine feet of tubing."

I studied the picture. Ginzberg in his contra

days must have gone fifty, maybe sixty pounds. He showed so much tubing in the photo he could have easily provided plumbing for the Playboy Mansion, with a couple of feet to spare.

"Man," I said, handing the photograph back to him, "that's obese. How much tubing did you have in those days?"

"Oh, I'd say somewhere around eighteen feet," he said. "Although I also had a low A extension which added even two feet more."

The waitress interrupted us. Ginzberg ordered light – cottage cheese bocals with a slice of whisper key. I went for the corned reed on rye with a C sharp soda.

"I'll get right to it," I said, looking Ginzberg in the eye to demonstrate my utter and complete sincerity. "Nilhillist Movie Studios heard about your kidnapping and sent me over to see if the story had enough to it to warrant a screen play treatment and possibly, a movie deal."

Ginzberg, jaws unhinged to accommodate a heaping spoonful of cottage cheese bocal, raised his eyebrows so high they disappeared up into his low B Flat key.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"The whole thing," I said. "From the minute you were abducted to the dramatic ransom exchange."

Ginzberg put the cottage cheese bocals back on the plate where they sat untouched for the next hour. As he spoke, I envisioned the story unfolding on the flickering big screen.

"I was nervous that morning," he began. "I remember that distinctly because when I get nervous my keys rattle and my reed refuses to flap like a tossed pancake key hitting a hot skillet. I had some big solos scheduled for the evening concert."

"Was this with the Los Angeles Philharmonic?" I asked.

"Yes," Ginzberg replied. "We had a famous guest conductor, Sir Diamond Tattle, a terrific conductor. My big solo was in a piece by Ravel, 'L'enfant et les sortileges.' Maybe you've heard of it?"

"No, but I can see the part played by Jack Nicholson – sinister, menacing, threats of untold violence, maybe volcanic ash covering Paris..."

Ginzberg interrupted, "it's a piece of touching humor based on a young boy's toys coming to life. I had an important part to play, way down low and all alone."

"I was hoping for something more violent," I explained, "say, a shootout on stage between the musicians and the composer. Young boys with toys don't sell on the big screen."

"It gets better," he promised. "I was lying in my sarcophagus backstage."

Suddenly Ginzberg began to shake. He reached into his pocket for two white tablets, which he swallowed in one quick gulp.

"Nerves," he said, sheepishly. "Just the thought of lying in that sarcophagus gives me the shakes. Changing my name from Low Contra Bob, losing weight, therapy – none of it helps me forget that damned sarcophagus."

"I know how you feel," I told him, "My first marriage was like that."

"Then, about four o'clock in the afternoon," Ginzberg continued, "I felt myself being lifted up in the sarcophagus and carried off. I tried to fart out a bellicose blast of contra-puntal conflagration, but my reed was dry as a bone stored in cotton in a desert wind on a hot day amidst low humidity desiccated by..."

"I get the picture," I cut in. "It was dry."

"Right," Ginzberg said. "Dry as last week's cheese sandwich on white toast, dry as winter leaves on the driveway, dry as..."

"In other words," I interrupted, "too dry for you to cry out for help."

"Hey," Ginzberg cut in. "Are you sure someone hasn't already tipped you off about the details of this story?"

"No, no." I reassured him. "It just that these contra-bassoon-nappings all follow a similar pattern."

"Who do you see playing me in the movie?" he asked.

"Maybe the Goodyear Blimp," I said.

That seemed to please Ginzberg. Even though he was down to the girth of a single bassoon I sensed he missed the life of being the sumo wrestler of the woodwind section.

"Well," he said, "there I was, lying in my sarcophagus as the contra-bassoon-napper carried me down several flights of stairs– down, down." Ginzberg narrowed his eyes at this point in the story to let the horror sink in of being dragged lower than any Mollenhauer Contra had ever been before. "Then a jolt from being dropped – and silence."

"Perfect," I interjected. "Silence is a good time in the movie to slip out to the lobby for a box of popcorn. Every movie requires a lull in the action for popcorn."

Ginzberg ignored me, too engrossed in his personal tragedy to consider a popcorn break.

"I was low," he said. "Very low. Through the keyhole of my sarcophagus I could see a sign on a wall that said, 'Extremely Low A. Do Not Activate Until The Fat Lady Sings.'"

"Sometimes while I'm in the lobby buying popcorn," I explained to Ginzberg, "I also like to pick up a box of bon-bons. You ever do that?"

Ginzberg ignored my question.

"Immediately, I knew I had been abducted by the fiendish Los Angeles Opera," he said. "The singing Fat Lady warning sign was a dead giveaway. Symphony orchestras have Low Contra Bobs, operas have Fat Ladies."

I told Ginzberg that popcorn with bon-bons requires a large soda to quench a large thirst.

"That's when I passed out," Ginzberg said. "The authorities explained what had happened later at the investigation."

"That's perfect," I said, delighted. "That gives me just enough time to get from the lobby with the popcorn, bon-bons and soda back to my seat without missing anything of importance in the movie version."

Mollenhauer Ginzberg looked disgusted.

"I'm in my sarcophagus passed out, reed too dry to burp, snatched from stage left, unable to make my grand entrance for that evening's concert and you're stuffing your face with food in the lobby?" Ginzberg asked, indignantly.

"Oh, no," I assured him. "I'm bringing the goodies back to my seat so I can stuff my face in the theater. I wouldn't want to miss one exciting action packed second of this adventure. So what happened next?"

"Well," he said, reassured, "came the concert, I was nowhere to be found. I was missing from my usual resting place backstage. With all the musicians onstage awaiting my glorious entry, I lay entombed six floors underground. My cries from the basement went unheard. My life passed before me. My lowest notes passed behind me. The concert went on without me..."

"It looked bad," I added, helpfully.

"Bad as a stuck B flat key before a solo," Ginzberg recited, eyes glazing over, "bad as a reed dropped in a toilet before a concert, bad as bugs in the keys on an outdoor concert in July, bad as..."

I put a twenty-dollar bill on the table and stood up.

"A great story, sweetheart," I said. "Great story. Can't wait to get back to the studio heads to pitch this."

"Bad as having my name misspelled in the orchestra program," Ginzberg intoned, "bad as being replaced in a contra solo by a mere bassoon, bad as..."

"Loved the popcorn, too," I added.

"Bad as no one in the audience noticing that I was missing in action..." he droned on.

"Wonderful, just wonderful, powerful, moving stuff," I said moving towards the front door.

"Bad as enduring all the crummy Low Contra Bob jokes, bad as..."

"Great stuff!" I said, backing out the door. "Don't call us, we'll call you."

"Bad as being ransomed for a lousy portable Casio keyboard," Ginzberg hollered after me, as I hurried out onto Hollywood and Vine. ❖

A Bassoon Lite, Please

YamaHeckaPuchaFoxaMossaKronaWolfaMollaSelma Bassoon

Four billion notes. That's a lot of mileage, even for an old bassoon. For a ten-year-old model it's way over Blue Book. That was my problem, of course. I was salivating at the thought of trading in my 1990 model bassoon for a brand spanking new one.

"Just look at these babies," I said to my wife.

We were following our usual Sunday evening routine. She was busily at work in the kitchen preparing dinners to freeze for the following week, baking cookies, bread and damned near anything else that promised to smell too good to keep my hands off for very long. With all that busyness in the kitchen someone had to kick back, relax, have a fermented beverage in hand, read the paper, and generally uphold the necessity of relaxing. That was my job.

"Just what babies are you talking about?" she asked, replacing one tray of cookies in the oven with another.

"These new model bassoons. Look, here's one guaranteed tuned at the factory. And it comes with two dozen extra keys for which no notes have yet been invented, flashing lights to warn off oncoming conductors and a state of the art suspension-system-seat-strap to cushion the shock of wrong notes."

"Get your hands off those cookies," she admonished me. "You've already eaten enough to spoil your appetite. Your waistline is starting to disappear."

"It's not me that's eating the cookies, it's my evil twin."

She looked up from a counter filled with aromatic baked goods in time to see the last of two raisin oatmeal cookies disappear down the maw of Evil Al. I smiled sweetly choosing to ignore the gluttony of my evil sibling.

"You know," I said, "I think I'll drive the old bassoon down to Harry Huckster's Bassoon Dealership and see what he's offering in the way of a trade-in."

"The last time you told me that you came home with a bassoon you swore was the last word in the art of musical perfection. If you already own musical perfection why do you need to see Harry Huckster?"

"Sometimes perfection is not what it's cracked up to be," I said. "Besides I'm just going down there to look. No harm in looking, is there?"

She stood opposite me across the counter and gave me the stare that every married man hates like the plague. I call it the 'Truth Ray,' a laser beam that penetrates a man's innermost sanctum – the place where he hides his excuses to avoid chores and reasons to constantly acquire new toys.

"There's no harm in looking," she said, adjusting the 'Truth Ray' to a spot harboring ulterior motives. "Just don't come home with any surprises."

Harry Huckster's name remains on the sign over the main showroom even though Harry sold out to a large international bassoon conglomerate several years ago. Many of the old time sales people are still working there. The continuity gives some reassurance to the public that hucksters are still plying their trade unabated.

"Hello, can I help you?"

The salesman's nameplate said Sid Slick.

"Err, no," I said. "I'm just looking."

"Plenty to look at," Mr. Sid Slick smiled, waving his arm broadly over the showroom full of bright, shiny, late model bassoons. "What exactly are you looking for?"

"Well," I hedged, "I've been driving a Yamaha now for several years and it's getting kind of old looking."

"Yamaha," Slick repeated. "A nice little instrument, if you are satisfied playing in the slow lane." He looked me straight in the eye and winked. "And you don't seem like the kind of man who is satisfied with the slow lane."

"Err, well," I said, feeling the urgings of Evil Al.

"I guess that's why I'm here. I'm interested in something shiny, something bigger, something that just blows by clarinets, violins, conductors and anything else that clogs up the sonic-boom-right-of-way."

"I thought so," Sid Slick said. "I could tell right away you were a man among men."

"Well, shucks," I said, listening to the whisperings again. "I'm just trying to do my part in the ever expanding loudness of the orchestra. My Yamaha has a sweet tone and good intonation, but tone and intonation are simply not enough for my needs anymore. I'm interested in power, volume, pickup, speed, and sex appeal."

Sid Slick placed his hand on my shoulder. "You've come to the right place. No man of your ambitions should be left in the slow lane of bassooning – not when your raucous destiny requires a mere expenditure of forty-thousand-dollars. Let me show you this model that combines all the torque, horsepower, and gas consumption of every bassoon ever made. We call it the YamaHeckaPuchaFogaMossa-KronaWolfaMollaSelma Bassoon for short. I won't bother you with the full name, but as you can see this instrument is big enough that we can get the full name on there without even any overlapping."

Before I could count the price of the thing on my fingers Slick slid into the driver's seat of the bassoon and turned the ignition.

"Whadda think?" he hollered over the twin vortex, high input, energized fuel injected, turbo charged sixteen-cylinder behemoth.

"It seems a little loud," I hollered back.

Slick cupped his hands to my ear. "That's because it's not warmed up yet."

"How long before it warms up?" I hollered.

"Oh, probably sometime after the overture," he shrugged. "I'd say by the first movement of the symphony, at least. You want to be sure to stop every fifty measures to refill the gas tank. A big instrument like this takes a lot of gas."

I covered my ears and staggered out of the showroom. Sid Slick followed me. The relative quiet was a relief.

"That your bassoon parked there?" Slick nodded in the direction of the old Yamaha.

"Yeah," I said. "What do you think I can get on a trade-in?"

He walked over to the instrument and kicked the boot cap. It popped off and rolled to my feet.

"Not too sturdy is it?" he said without looking up.

I picked the cap up and put it in my pocket.

"Well," he said tugging at his double chin. "I'll

give you a hundred bucks for it. That's more than I'm authorized to offer, but I like you. You're my kind of guy and I'd like to see you in something that suits your style."

"Gee," I said. "Forty-thousand-dollars minus a hundred-dollar trade in leaves thirty-nine-thousand-nine-hundred-dollars."

"No sweat there," he assured me. "If your credit is half as bad as most bassoonists we can get you financing at only nine percent. And don't forget our incentive plan – the first tuning after a thousand notes or ten symphonies, whichever comes first is free. For nine-hundred and fifty bucks a month you can be fulfilled."

I thought of driving a new bassoon into my driveway and presenting my wife with a present of a nine-hundred and fifty dollar a month payment for the rest of our lives. The bootcap in my pocket reminded me that it was time to beat a hasty retreat.

"Well, I'll have to talk to my wife first. I'll let you know."

I turned quickly and hurried towards my parked Yamaha before Sid Slick could block my path. I could hear him coming up behind.

"Waitup," he called out. "Let's talk some more. We can work something out."

I was about to get into the Yamaha and slam the pancake key in the guy's face when I heard a familiar voice.

"Ahh, forget him, Sid. I'm the man you want to deal with. That YamaHeckaPuchaFogaMossa-KronaWolfaMollaSelma Bassoon is just what I've been looking for. Let's go inside and work something out."

The next Sunday evening I was busily relaxing while my wife held down the fort in the kitchen. She kept looking at me with some concern.

"Al," she said. "Is everything all right?"

"Sure," I said, looking up from the sports page. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you haven't eaten one cookie tonight."

"Oh, that's because my evil twin has left for good."

"Your evil twin? What in the world are you talking about?"

"My evil twin, Evil Al. He's the guy who sneaks all the cookies. Seems he bought a new bassoon last week and couldn't make any of the payments. They hauled him off to jail. Can't say my waistline misses him."

When my wife looked at me like I might be losing my mind, I knew I had to take drastic measures to reassure her.

"Well, I am kind of hungry," I said. "Maybe I'll have a few cookies – just for old time sake." ❖