

A Bassoon Lite, Please

By Alan Goodman
Los Angeles, California

Bassoon Lessons

I had a person come to me for bassoon lessons once. That was some time ago. He was a sincere young man, eager to participate in the joys of making music with other like-minded souls.

I listened to his enthusiastic request to enter upon a lifetime of devotion at the religious altar of Bassoonism.

"Why?" I asked him.

"Why what?" he responded.

"Yes." I said.

"Pardon me?" he offered.

"Certainly." I encouraged him.

"What did you say?" he asked sensibly.

"Not yet." I smiled encouragingly.

The young man confessed to being confused by our short conversation. I thanked him for his attention, charged him twenty-four dollars and ninety-nine cents, and bade him come back the following week at the same time for his second lesson. I encouraged him to bring a bassoon at that time.

The following week I responded to the knock at my front door. The same young man stood in my doorway, bassoon case in hand.

Wasting no time I led him into the kitchen.

"Coffee?" I asked him.

"No thank you." He replied.

"Ketchup with your eggs?" I inquired.

"I already ate breakfast." He informed me.

"No ketchup, I take it." I told him.

"I came for a bassoon lesson." He sounded a bit impatient.

I shrugged at his zealotry, and led him into the studio. It was only his second lesson. He was a beginner. I showed him how to put his bassoon together. We discussed the angle the bocal should come out of the bassoon, and the meaning of life. When I felt confident that he was getting the hang of the meaning of life, I charged him seven dollars and thirty-six cents, had him pack up, and sent him home.

He appeared at my door for the third week in a row. He was a determined young man.

"Vibrato." I said.

"What?" The young man looked puzzled.

"Expressive." I assured him.

"Fingerings." He announced.

"Later." I told him.

He put the bassoon together without any help from me, and angled the bocal just right. I gave him a reed and showed him the fingering for middle 'C'. When he could play middle 'C' with some assurance, I led him with his bassoon out to the garage. I backed my car out into the street and had him sit with the bassoon in the passenger's seat.

I drove him down a dirt road with potholes while he tried to sustain a middle 'C'. We did this for a half-hour. I was getting low on gas by the time I drove back into my garage.

"Vibrato." I said.

"Vibrato." He said looking a little green around the edges.

I instructed him to practice his vibrato at different speeds and to this end, provided him with a map of several roads in his neighborhood with potholes at varying intervals. I charged him eight dollars and twenty-two cents ... plus my gas costs. I sent the young man home.

The following week the young man appeared at my house for a lesson. We went immediately to the studio without any of the preliminary conversation. I sat him down with the bassoon and tested his preparedness with vibrato. The young man played a sustained middle 'C'. I sat next to him.

"Elm Street." I called out.

His vibrato became very fast.

"Main Street." I instructed him.

The vibrator was slow and smooth.

"The Old Road down by the Mill." I exhorted him.

His middle 'C' shook and bounced this way and that.

I smiled. The young man had practiced diligently. I warned him against practicing vibrato in the newer cars with smoother suspension, as this tended to negate the purpose of practice. I assigned him pages one through fifty in the Weissenborn Beginner's Study Book, and paid him ten dollars and ten cents for showing up.

Right on time one week later the young man showed up at my doorstep.

"Hi." I said.

"Where?" he responded.

"Of course." I answered.

"Why?" he countered.

I simply shrugged my shoulders.

We went directly to the studio. He played pages one through fifty in the Weissenborn Beginner's Study Book. I handed him the Stadio Orchestral Studies Book and told him to memorize everything in there for the following week's lesson. He paid me eleven dollars and one cent without my even asking, and left.

The following week he didn't show up. Instead, he called on the phone to inform me that he had accepted the position of principal bassoonist in either the New York Philharmonic or the Amarillo Symphonetta ... he hadn't yet made up his mind. He thanked me for being such a positive influence in his life. He assured

me that he would never, as long as he had his bocal adjusted at the correct angle, forget the meaning of life.

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Because." He responded.

"Elm Street." I said.

"Vibrato." He assured me before hanging up the phone.

I enjoy teaching young people how to play the bassoon. I find it's just a question of communicating. The rest is easy. ♦

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The Suspect

Rumors flew like bullets. One had it that as many as ten or twelve bodies lay in shallow graves on the property. There was even one about an old Indian, come back from the past, to place a curse on the white men living on his old stomping grounds.

Police blocked off the canyon through which Bedford Creed ran. They went from house to house interviewing residents, searching for clues. Dogs were brought in to sniff for the rumored graves.

My son, on a fishing trip near my place in Wyoming, called to tell me the body of a man had been found in the creek bed on my property. All he knew was that the man, in his thirties, Caucasian, was discovered lying in the creekbed. The victim, as yet, unidentified had been dead at least a month ... maybe more. He had been shot once in the head. The police suspected foul play.

That was all I knew at the time at the time I received a call at my home in Los Angeles, from the Police in Bedford, Wyoming.

I affected a casual, even indifferent tone. This was easier said than done. The truth be known, I'd contemplated murder any number of times at work. I had gone so far as to daydream it down to the tiniest detail. If you believe that it's the

thought that counts, then I had a lot to hide ... a lot. I was nervous, maybe more nervous than I should have been.

The cop at the other end of the line in Bedford didn't offer much in the way of information. I guess he wanted to see if I slipped up by blurting out some pertinent facts about the case not yet available to the general public. It was possible I was a suspect. After all, the body WAS discovered on my property.

I was known to my neighbors as a resident of Los Angeles. They watched the TV and read the papers. They knew the score. Los Angeles ... hotbed of drive-by murders, big city malcontents, and wild-eyed, orange-haired musicians. It didn't help me when the neighbors described what I did for a living to the police. They told the police that I was a musician.

I claimed to play something no one in those parts had ever heard of. None of them could remember what it was, exactly. One remembered the name of the thing sounding like saloon, or maybe, balloon. Anyway, one thing he was sure of, it had an "oon" in it somewhere. The neighbors apparently forgot the many afternoons I spent in their living rooms getting acquainted, explaining in detail how I played a

bassoon in the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. Not that it would have made any difference to the cops.

Folks couldn't believe that someone played for a living. It seemed mighty odd. They figured that most grown men had to work to make ends meet. Someone thought I played this "oon" thing with an outfit calling themselves "L.A. Phil's Harmonicats". He suggested that the police call this guy, Phil, in L.A. and see if my story panned out.

Well, if that's the way the cookie was crumbling, I could handle it. It didn't really matter to me, the innocent man, suspected. I answered questions from the Bedford Police on my guard, but like I said, casual ... indifferent.

"Now, Mr. Goodman." The cop sounded tired, "do you have any information which might help us to identify the body found on your property this past week ... or any reason you can think of that it was in your creekbed?"

"No sir, I don't." I came back with a snappy, concise answer I hoped would dispel any lingering doubts about my innocence in their minds.

The cop waited a second before continuing his line of questioning. "Did you notice any suspicious looking activity in the area around the creek within the last couple of weeks?"

"Look officer, I haven't even been up to my place in Wyoming since the end of June!" A little self righteous indignation carried my alibi over the wire to Bedford.

I heard the cop's voice again. It came through a bit softer than before.

"I see. I see," he said.

I wasn't sure what he could see, but it didn't sound any too reassuring to me.

His voice returned, stronger, searching, "Well, did you notice any unusual activity when you were here in June?"

"No sir. Nothing at all." I responded.

I could tell he was conferring with someone else. I heard muffled voices as if he held his hand over the receiver.

"Mr. Goodman," he asked coming back to me, "do you know anyone who is prone to violence, someone who you may have fought or argued with ... maybe someone who may have threatened you recently?"

"Well, er, a ...?" It had started up from my chest as another snappy answer. Somewhere between the breastbone and the Adams apple the words got stuck, caught like flies in a web. I knew immediately that I had lost any initiative in the game of cat and mouse.

"Mr. Goodman. Should I repeat this last question for you?" The cop had suddenly turned into Detective Columbo.

I could picture him seated at the other end of the phone, wearing a ratty, old raincoat. He was moving in for the kill, the unlit stub of a twenty-five cent cigar protruding from clenched teeth.

"Well officer ..." I hesitated imperceptibly, "to be perfectly honest, there were some threats from this guy I know."

Columbo's interest perked up considerably. "I see. I see. What is this gentleman's name?"

"Well officer, he's the conductor," I blurted out.

"Conductor?" The cop paused. He was puzzling something out in his mind ... "Mr. Goodman, would you spell that name for me please?"

"Sure officer. 'C.O.N.D.U.C.T.O.R.'" I spelled it out slowly so he would be sure to get it right.

"Now Mr. Goodman. This guy," here the cop paused, maybe for dramatic effect, maybe to give me more rope to hang myself. "... this guy, 'Conductor', could you describe the threats perpetrated upon your person by this individual?"

"Sure, glad to." I rushed in with my complaint. "Let's see ... I can recall this time, not too long ago, when he accused me, in front of my colleagues, of rushing him, and having a very sharp instrument."

The cop had a hard time containing his excitement. "I see. I see. Now we're getting somewhere. Give me a minute. I'm writing this all down ... Hmmmmm."

His voice drifted over the wire as he repeated our conversation for his report, "...Goodman recalls attacking man called 'Conductor' in a sudden rush, wielding very sharp instrument ... many witnesses."

Again his voice became garbled as he placed his hand over the receiver while conferring with someone in the Bedford Station.

When his voice reappeared, he sounded like he was reading. "I think I should advise you, Mr. Goodman, that you might wish to confer with an attorney before we proceed any further ..."

I interrupted him in mid sentence. I was indignant, and just blurted it out, "For what officer?? For what?? For being accused of rushing, and playing sharp? Just because the guy was waving a big stick, he thought he could get away with bullying..."

It was the cop's turn to interrupt me, "Hold it! Hold it, Mr. Goodman. Are you claiming that this guy, 'Conductor', threatened you first, with a stick?"

"Yeah! Damned right he did!" My voice began to sound out of control, but still, I rushed ahead to get my frustration all out in the open. "I told you officer, the guy was a bully. He got sore because most people didn't even pay much attention to him. It was not only me, he was always telling everyone what to do, and when they could do it. What goes around, comes around!"

"Please, Mr. Goodman. Slow down. I can't write that fast..." The cop was talking to himself again, "...suspect accuses man called 'Conductor' of threatening several persons with long stick over period of time."

The cop turned his attention from his report back to me. "Now, did this guy, 'Conductor', go by any other name you know of?"

I was on a roll. Finally someone in a position of authority was getting the facts down on abuse of power by conductors. Finally someone was getting a picture of what orchestral musicians had to put up with every day of their lives.

"Well, officer," I offered, "sometimes I called him 'Maestro', we all did at times."

The cop was writing again.

"My Straw," he repeated slowly to himself.

"OK, got that." He continued in a louder voice, "Now, Mr. Goodman, think very carefully before answering my next question, and please remember, if at any time you wish to confer with your attorney, you may do so. Also, you have the right to remain silent..."

The cop read me my rights before he continued his line of questioning.

"Mr. Goodman," he asked, "did this guy, 'Conductor', alias 'My Straw', with which you had this violent relationship ... did he have a tattoo of a tarantula on his right forearm? Did he wear two gold earrings in each ear, and did he have a knife scar running down his left cheek?"

"Are you kidding me?" I shouted into the phone. I was shocked by his description of the conductor.

"Look officer," I quickly explained, "the conductor was simply an intolerable pain, a bully. No way was he a walking advertisement for the 'Hell's Angels!'"

There was a pause in the conversation. No one said anything for several long seconds. When the cop spoke, he seemed mildly disappointed, maybe a little weary.

"I see ... I see." He sighed into the phone, "well ... Mr. Goodman, I want to thank you for your time. You've been very helpful, but I don't think your guy, 'Conductor', is the man we found up here in Bedford Creek. If we have anymore questions, we'll call you, but I think we have everything we need ... and one word of advice, Mr. Goodman. Stay away from this 'Conductor' character. He sounds like trouble."

The cop hung up. How do you figure it? I had so much more to tell him. He was a cop in need of clues and I had plenty of clues to give him. We needed each other. I wanted a chance to explain to him the abuse conductor's inflicted on orchestral musicians.

I thought I might call the cop back in Bedford and have him write out a warrant. A crime was being committed. I had the evidence, a smoking gun, and he had the obligation to pursue perpetrators. There were stories I wanted to tell him. Conductor stories. I had evidence ... pictures of the wounded, schedules, testimonials from musicians around the world. I had it all.

I thought, at the very least, the cops should put out an all points bulletin. Any conductor caught crossing the state line into Wyoming would be made to conduct a radio in front of crowds of one adulating fan or less.

Then suddenly ... from deep down inside me, I knew it was just a pipe dream. I had to face the facts. The cops weren't really interested.

The reality of the situation was that no orchestra conductor would ever be caught dead in Wyoming ...

... let along be found floating down a creek in Bedford. ❖