

LENNY: The cat that shook an orchestra

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PART 1

The mouse had left a circle of tiny tooth-marks through the centre of the biscuit. Paul Brown couldn't believe his eyes. With five minutes to go until the first rehearsal for the Singewood Symphony Orchestra's most crucial concert to date, he'd needed energy...

"What's that?" he asked the teenager who'd sold him the biscuits at the artists' bar.

"Not my problem, mate. I only work here."

Paul, hungry as he negotiated the first violin part of Evelio Bastardo's brand-new, seventy-minute *Sin Phonier*, decided to write a stiff letter to the hall's chief executive. Vermin in the Custard Creams? Supposing his son Felix had been with him and had eaten that biscuit?

The premiere of *Sin Phonier* might make or break the orchestra. Fay McPhee, Singewood's elected mayor, enjoyed certain perks of power, notably the freedom to seduce any exotic-accented artist of her choice. With Bastardo, she'd spent a weekend at a golfing hotel, where the Venezuelan had helped her work on her swing. Now, were the performance to please the happy pair, the SSO might win the residency at the new hall – being built with lottery money on the former Safeways car park, with plans to double as conference centre, casino and boxing ring. The SSO's current home, languishing between railway bridge and flood-prone river, meanwhile lurched from problem to crisis, the orchestra lurching with it.

Two days later, the artists' bar closed down. The musicians, arriving to rehearse with their music director, Stefan Bach, clustered round, clamouring. It seemed that the chief exec's solution to infestation was not to call Rentokil, but to shut the facility.

"Your doing, isn't it," the first horn growled at Paul. "Nosy bloody creep."

Pete-the-horn was the longest-serving member of the SSO. Pushing 70, he could no longer play properly. Nobody dared say so, not even the critics. He'd made himself so objectionable to so many conductors over the decades that some refused to work with the orchestra again. One maestro even threw a baton at him. Unfortunately, it had embedded itself in the principal second violinist's shoulder: Paul, on trial for the job. Hospitalised for a batonectomy, he'd missed his chance. Someone, feeling sorry for him, had recommended him for no.13 first fiddle instead. That was twelve years ago; since then, he'd scarcely exchanged two words with Pete-the-horn.

Vanessa dumped Felix at Paul's flat every other Friday before speeding off in her MG. Felix was eight, and Paul always treated him to football in the park, followed by too much ice-cream. They break-up had been five years ago and he still felt guilty for Felix's sake, although it was Vanessa who'd had left him for another woman. Paul tried to enjoy

his bachelordom; often Felix joined in. Last week they'd had a Very Early Christmas Party at the flat, inviting only Felix's favourites among Paul's colleagues.

"Dad," Felix said after the party, sipping cocoa, "does everybody play an instrument that looks like them? 'Cos you play the violin and you've got a long neck and a small head and Jackie plays the cello and she's..." Felix hadn't learned the words he needed. He gestured.

Paul laughed. "Come on, old chap, it's late."

"I really like Jackie," said Felix, yawning.

"Yeah. Me too."

"So why is Cath your girlfriend? She's nuts."

"Felix, Bedfordshire!" Paul clapped his hands and Felix decided that campaigning for an extra half-hour would push his luck.

"Don't you fancy starting an instrument?" Paul remarked, tucking him in. "The sooner you start, the more you'll learn."

"Maybe if I hear one I like, but I haven't really. Night-night, Dad."

Paul switched off the lamp. Behind him, his son was already asleep.

"Friends! No-o-o-o!" Hard, ice-blue eyes glared across the orchestra. Reptilian, Paul thought. Stefan Bach, who was nearly 80, was nobody's favourite at nine a.m. on a Monday morning, especially when there was no coffee.

"This music," said Bach softly, "is a great human creation. You just made it smell. Once more. Twenty-three bars after letter C." He shifted his arms in what passed for an upbeat. Fortunately, the Italian leader, Franco, had devised some signals that the others could follow.

When the break began, Andy, the orchestra manager, bounded in looking like a worried white rabbit.

"Attention, please," he shouted. "As you know, the bar's closed. So the Frank Bridge Wine Bar under the railway arches is our artists' bar until further notice, with a ten per cent reduction on beverages. Those who moonlight with the Orchestra of the Early Birds will be glad to know that decaf soya cappuccino is on the menu." A cheer went up from the back of the second violins. "Now," he added, "I must tell you that because of the, er, infestation, the Bastardo and Wagner concert may be moved, postponed, or, er cancelled."

"Andy," Franco protested, "do I not-a understand that the future of the orchestra depends on that concert?"

"Er, yes," said Andy.

The eyes of ninety-nine frightened musicians swerved towards Paul, who abruptly understood that he was about to become the scapegoat for the mouse.

In the Frank Bridge, where red chairs and green tables sat in creative clumps under the hanging plants, the orchestra's cliques couldn't congregate in their habitual formats. People had to mingle, sometimes even talk to each other. But nobody wanted to talk to Paul today. He followed Cath to the food bar.

"I want something vegetarian, wheat-free and non-dairy," Cath demanded, her eyes devouring the cakes.

"There'll be nothing left of you soon," Paul teased.

“Shut up. I’ve put on five pounds.”

“I could cook you dinner tonight.”

“I can’t. I need to practise the Bastardo.”

“Cath, relax. Nobody will know. It’s just written-out cacophony.”

“But *he*’ll know.”

“Bastardo? He’s only interested in screwing the mayor.”

“Well, Paul, *you* may not care whether this orchestra is good enough to have an actual *future*. But *I* do.” Cath shouldered him aside and flounced off.

Clutching an espresso and a toasted sandwich, he cast around for somewhere to sit. Somebody was smiling at him, waving. Of all people, Jackie Duprewski.

The young Polish principal cellist’s real name was Joanna Dzekroszalewski, but since nobody could pronounce it, she seemed happy to accept a nickname inspired by her uninhibited playing. She’d joined the orchestra six months ago. Why such a girl should have settled for Singewood when she could have taken London by storm was something that never ceased to puzzle her colleagues.

“*Dzień dobry*,” Paul said.

Jackie’s wide smile lit up the entire wine bar. “Paul, leesten. I have idea…”

Stefan Bach was poring over the Bastardo score upstairs in the Frank Bridge. He would rather have been planning his eightieth birthday celebrations; he was also aware that he should find time to see his doctor. The pains in his chest were getting beyond a joke. But Bach was not a man who readily admitted defeat.

Retirement, he was convinced, is not for conductors. Golf? Bridge? Scrabble? Why spend time playing them when you could play Grieg, Brahms and Schumann? No matter that his stamina was not its old self, nor his ability to fell his players with one glance. He’d learned human nature as a German teenage conscript in the killing fields of Warsaw, lessons that had served him well ever since while he wielded control over the cowering musicians. Orders must be obeyed and executed at all times. He had nothing if not tenacity.

Bastardo’s piece comprised seventy minutes of squeaks, squawks and howls, punctuated by an occasional toot. Its time signatures, which changed around eleven times per page, included 19/14, 20/12 and 10/66. The work, naturally, had been allocated more rehearsal than the sum of the intervening all-Schubert programme and the Wagner extracts that would form the Bastardo concert’s second half. Too much rested upon this performance: and ultimately, the whim of a flighty-headed mayor, elected for looks, not brains. Bach was getting too old for such nonsense.

And yet, watching that Polish cellist in the full flight of performance, the cello golden against her pale skin and dark hair, he always felt sixty years younger. If anybody had dared ask what kept him there, waving a failing baton over a provincial band with a threadbare future, he would never have told them the truth: while he could see Jackie every day, life was worth living.

He made his stiff-kneed way down the stairs. Nearby, Jackie was talking to the bean-pole fiddler from the back desk.

“Why don’t you come round for supper tomorrow?” he heard her say. “I want to show you something.”

Paul, he knew, had been dating the neurotic violist who wouldn't eat wheat, dairy produce or, indeed, anything much else. Bach was not a jealous man, but he liked the arrangement with the Frank Bridge. It displayed the dynamics of his orchestra in a totally new perspective.

Paul rode his bicycle to Jackie's place at around six thirty on Tuesday. Felix was at Vanessa's; he wouldn't see him until Friday, the day of the Bastardo and Wagner concert. His back ached after six hours' sweating under the blandishments of bloody Bach. He tried not to fantasise about asking Jackie to give his shoulders a good rub.

Jackie was sprinkling bacon over macaroni cheese. Her flat was small, but bright and charming; just like her.

"We eat soon," she said briskly, steering him towards the bedroom. "First, look at this."

Paul stopped dead in the doorway. On the bed reclined the biggest cat he had ever seen. Its slit eyes were even meaner than Bach's. Its ginger paws, which resembled boxing gloves, were pummelling the duvet into submission.

"This is Lenny," said Jackie. "I rescue him at Singewood Dog Sanctuary."

Paul inched forward, holding out a hand. "Here, kitty, kitty."

A hiss, a flash of orange fur and silver claws, and Paul sprang back, clutching his wrist. "Jackie, what's your point, exactly?"

"Is obvious. Problem is mice. If we don't get rid of mice, no concert. If no concert, soon no orchestra. Hall won't pay for mousekiller. So we need Lenny."

She scooped the cat up into her arms. Pressed to her ample front, Lenny began to purr like a chain saw.

"So tomorrow, when we go for Schubert concert," Jackie said, "we take Lenny."

"Now, my dear, there is something I would like to show you in the last movement." Bach had found an excuse to keep Cath behind after the Schubert rehearsal on Wednesday morning. He'd started as a violist. Not something to tell the band, because they'd make bad jokes about fish-and-chip shops. He took Cath's instrument and demonstrated a passage from the Great C Monster, as the orchestra termed it. Cath tried.

"Good girl," said Bach. "Now, there's something else I must tell you, my dear. You are not going to like this, but it's for your own good..."

Night fell; frost began to form in the fields beyond Singewood; it was time for the Schubert concert. While Paul distracted the doorkeeper with chit-chat about the likelihood of a white Christmas, Jackie slunk by, carrying a large, blanketed bundle. The artists' bar stood open, dark and drinkless. Inside it, they unlocked Lenny's outsize cat carrier. Soon Lenny was alone, with the run of the room and its inhabitants.

"Poor pussycat," remarked Jackie, tuning up, "I hope he will be OK."

While the orchestra ploughed through Schubert, Lenny kept busy. He liked to torture his prey in the most painful fashion before dispatching it to the great cheeseboard in the sky.

"Don't panic," said Paul, when he and Jackie opened the door after the performance. "All we need to do is catch him, plonk the remains of the prey in a black

sack and give the floor a wipe.” Lenny, bloated with success, wasn’t too difficult to recage. But Jackie, taking in the extent of the devastation, had turned pale jade.

“I need drink,” she gasped. “I cannot bear sight of much blood.”

“Let’s go to the Frank Bridge,” Paul suggested, concerned. “I’ll nip back, fetch the cat and clean up later.”

They crossed the road, instruments on their backs; the Frank Bridge’s doorway, blaring out ‘Silent Night’, beckoned with the aroma of seasonal mulled wine. Paul was holding Jackie’s arm to steady her.

But inside, they found themselves facing a willowy amazon wielding a wineglass. Paul didn’t even have time to speak. A second later his face was dripping with maroon liquid and his white concert shirt had turned incorrigibly pink. Hell hath no fury like a viola player scorned.

“I’ve left my briefcase backstage,” exclaimed Andy, while Paul was wiping Cath’s wine out of his eyes. “I’ll go back.”

“Andy, no...” Paul shouted, too late.

The next day, Andy called a meeting before the Bastardo rehearsal. The local paper bore the headline CAT CAUSES CONCERT HALL CHAOS.

“The curious incident of the cat in the night-time,” he announced, “has had serious repercussions...”