

Chanticleer Festival 2000

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6. TRAIN TIME

On the Friday before the final concert, we play in Union City, a place distinguished partly by the fact that the state line between Indiana and Ohio runs smack dab through the middle of it. The arbitrary tyranny of time zones being what it is, this means that one half of Union City is an hour earlier than the other half! The concert venue is a marvelous space which used to be a train station. As such, it stands right by the side of the railway line. As we pull into the parking lot, Elizabeth and Jenny make some facetious remark about hoping we won't have any trains coming through during the concert.

We go in and get arranged and the quartet rehearses a little. I listen for a time to check sound and then go outside, where I fall into conversation with a gentleman who is almost out of a Dickens novel, or perhaps a tale by Mark Twain. He is one of those individuals who - and quite possibly I am being conservative - appears to know the train schedule for the past twenty years. I ask him, almost in a mood of idle curiosity, whether any trains actually still come through here. "Oh sure," he says, "Mail Three comes through every night. We just have to hope it falls during the intermission."

Stunned silence from me while I gather my wits to deal with this entirely new situation. Finally, I ask him, "Well, about when does it come through?" "Oh," says he, "we never know for sure. It could be any time between 8:30 and 10 PM." And then almost with glee - but in a tone of the utmost helpfulness - he adds, "Just hope we don't have a convoy. They've been shovin' 'em through from out East in a convoy lately, and then it's apt to go on for, well, it could be fifteen minutes." "Goodness," I say, "we'll just have to deal with it," thinking, it's going to be fun breaking this to the quartet!

I chat idly with the chair of the series, a fine and energetic woman, who tells me that during the previous year they had a theatre group who, every time a train came through, would break character and burst into several choruses of "I've Been Working on the Railroad". As you will see, the Chanticleers proved to be no disgrace to this tradition of being a trouper when the trains come through.

The hall is full to bursting; its intimate lighting, together with the art on the walls, makes it look indeed like a 19th century chamber music space. It has a kind of plain elegance that makes me think of how things like Brahms must have filtered through from the East in the late nineteenth century by means of Chautauqua societies, performed by itinerant players a little bit like us. As perhaps their forebears were then, our listeners are warm and appreciative. No trains. By the time we play "Oaxaca" there is only one more tune before intermission - Agustín Lara's "Solamente una vez" - and each of us knows the others are thinking, God willing and the crick don't rise, Mail Three will hit during intermission.

But it was not to be. During the repeat of the "A" section, suddenly the unmistakable moaning sound of that train horn cuts through the air, and the pounding sound of those wheels, metal on metal. The building is shaking, our bones are shaking in our bodies. In the few bars before the "B" section, the noise becomes unbearable. Salvo makes a command decision and at the cadence

cues a VERY LONG *fermata* (pause). The train goes by ... and goes by ... and goes by ... and goes by ... and finally fades gratefully into the distance. Salvo raises his bow ... and the quartet, as if of one mind and bow, as if nothing at all had intervened, starts the recap. The audience bursts into spontaneous applause and we all smile with great glee at this utterly fantastic ensemble timing, and at Salvo's utterly inimitable style.

The same thing happens again during the Brahms which ends our program. This time we are prepared, and anyway this piece has a momentum impossible to interrupt. We just keep going, every sense alert, depending on the little we can hear and on eye contact, and pray that the train will have faded into the distance before we reach the *Sostenuto* (slow, sustained) section which precedes the galvanizing final recapitulation.

What a genius Brahms was! In every movement of this piece you hear that he does not finish anything until he is good and ready to, until he has explored every corner of the edifice that he's erecting. He creates an architecture which sustains this kind of effort: it never sounds as though he is rambling or woolgathering, everything he does has total authority. The *Sostenuto* section of this first movement is a grand example of this. He could have just barrelled right on through to the recap (repeat of the initial theme which brings the movement to a close), it would have been pretty good that way; but he chose instead to insert these few bars. They sound as though time has been suspended. Achingly tender, almost dreamy, the passage has a kind of deliberation, an inability to rush; I feel as though every single note is swelled up with yearning.

For the only time in the movement the piano, which has been such an initiator, such a rhythmic sparkplug since the very beginning, lays out, and we suddenly hear the strings alone in a grave and passionate conversation. I sit and listen and think, what a master stroke this *sostenuto* section is ... indeed it DOES powerfully sustain the momentum of the movement even though superficially it might appear to interrupt it. At its end, the cello unfurls its way up out of that rich lower register and the piano joins it, doubling its notes, and together we unfurl up and up and the rest of the quartet joins in and THERE WE ARE, with that theme that has all reasonable people out of their chairs and into each others' arms. At the very beginning of the piece that theme is like smelling the sharp alert scent of salt air without seeing the ocean. Now finally, fully developed and formed, it is an irresistible wave of great majesty and nobility that lifts us up and carries us to the end.

Elizabeth, who introduces this piece, always tells the audience that it was this same Brahms F-minor Quintet which made her realize, at the age of fifteen, that she wanted to make her life as a musician. And I, every single time we play it during these two weeks, remember how, as a baby musician in my early twenties, when I felt unmotivated and unable to muster the energy to practice well, I would listen to my treasured recording (on vinyl!) of Rubenstein and the Guarneri Quartet playing this piece, and would then go to the piano full of energy, ears wide open and spirits high, with all the weight of self-doubt fallen miraculously away.

Afterwards we have one of those ice cream urges that will not be denied. Upon being informed of this, a woman journalist who's on the Board of the concert series makes a mysterious, rapid departure after bidding us an appreciative and cordial goodbye. Upon arriving at the Huffie Dawg Café we find that she has gone there and persuaded them to stay open for a few extra minutes to satisfy the musicians' post-concert cravings.

They have, we have been informed, the absolute best ice cream in town, perhaps in four counties. And they do. Peanut butter ice cream, insanely delicious chocolate chip ice cream (which they call Moose Tracks); everything you could ask for in an ice cream parlor. Plus some delicious sounding grilled fruit sandwiches which we see on the menu and which we can only imagine, the kitchen now being closed for some hours. We hang out for a while, eating our ice cream and chatting with the owner, who worked as a suit for a multinational fast-food corporation before handing in his resignation to realize this dream of a really good little neighborhood café with the best down home food you could ask for, and with his wife as a partner in the enterprise. Replete and satisfied with Brahms and ice cream, and still giggling hysterically about Mail Three (and Four through Six, who knows?) we pile into the car and return to Chanticleer Farm.

Part 7: [PARTNERS: OBBLIGATO LINES AND JAMMING](#)