

The Day the Music (Almost) Died

©

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“Order. Order.” Sharp raps of the gavel.

“You called this meeting, Lizzie. What’s up?”

Melisma looks pale. “I just needed a breather. Somewhere to hang out for a while, see how everyone else is doing. Me? It’s like I’m at the doctor’s office and the tongue depressor got stuck when he told me to say ‘ah.’”

There’s a noisy shifting of chairs from the back of the room. A cluster of hapless looking unfortunates stands.

“We’re F sharp minor.” The woman next to him tags his sleeve, and speaks in a stage whisper.

“Melodic.”

“F sharp *melodic* minor. We’re tired of being passed over. Every now and then someone dips in and looks around, but then they beat it. It’s like a never-ending sock-hop – taken for a short dance and dropped. Then they troll the line looking for someone better looking, or more fun.”

“Like A Major,” says one of his buddies.

“Yeah,” says the third woman over. “We’re always dumped for A major.”

Chair looks out at the unhappy sea of faces – a collection of sobbing notes and pitches, wailing accidentals, and gently weeping sharps and flats. Some sit alone, others are huddled in groups. A nattily dressed couple near the front gets to their feet.

“We’re okay, except we can’t go out alone,” says one of the duo. “We’re perfect, but only when we’re together. We’re Fifth, and these are our friends, Octave.”

A sorrowful looking twosome speaks in a whiny voice. “We’re here because it’s lonely out there – especially for us.”

“Name?” said Chair.

“We’re Minor Third.” They have big brown eyes, and are holding hands. “Every time we show up, someone cries. We never see a happy face. We’re like poster kids for a funeral parlour half the time and – ”

“The rest of the day we hang around waiting for mothers to call the kids in to dinner. It’s not much of a life.”

“At least you’ve got each other,” sighs a mournful soul a few seats over.

“Exactly,” shouts an aggressive, testy fellow. “I’d like to have a partner. D here, D natural. I’ve been trying to get on the go with G sharp for years

and she won't come handy to me. Says everytime we try to get together it turns out wrong."

"I'm sorry, D, but I just can't be in the same room as you. People hate seeing us together. They're always telling us to go to hell."

"The devil likes us. They say we're his little pets."

"Who wants to be the devil's pet? I mean, it gives you a complex." She turns to address the crowd, and begins to sob. "It's not our fault either. We're just two notes, like the rest of you."

"No offence, D, but you do grate on the nerves. Leave G sharp alone."

A conspicuous throat-clearing interrupts the discussion. A nervous twitching fellow gets to his feet.

"My problem is – actually, I'm seeing a therapist about it – I always get the short shrift."

"Name please."

"You want my full name, the name I was born with, the name my parents christened me, or ..."

"Quit the histrionics, and state your name."

"My name is hemidemisemiquaver, but everyone calls me 64. I hate it – it's a diminutive and I'm short enough. My real name has class, but everything changed a few years back when the family moved to America. Now I'm just a number. I want to get my name back but everyone laughs at me – they say my name is longer than I am. And the truth is, I *am* short. I've hardly begun when I'm over. I'm like bad sex –"

There's a shriek from the back of the room. A sleek, anorexic stick of chewing gum is on her feet.

"Give me a break. *Give me a break* –"

"Pipe down, you ornery reed. We've heard enough out of you all our lives. Give 64 a chance."

"I was saying," he turns and glares, "before *she* got up and hogged the spotlight for the thousandth time in her life, I was saying –"

Muffled sounds come from the back row as a couple of crotchets try to gag the upstart.

"I'm always running," Hemi carries on, ignoring the scuffle at the back of the room. "I'm always being rushed, pushed, chased. It's like spending your life on the lam. People can't get rid of me fast enough. Love'em and leave 'em. Toot and go."

"Hey Shorty! Shorty!" A round stocky fellow with white hair and a washed out look wobbles to his feet. "Careful what you wish for, pal. You think long is good? I'm Breve. Talk about dicking around with names – these days they just call me Whole Note. The mean spirited call me Hole.

Others call me...never mind. Anyway, you don't like flitting about? How'd you like to sit for ages in one spot without moving a muscle? Sometimes I just lie on the bottom like a dead cod. If I'm lucky, a bow arm might change direction or a tuba player gulp a breath, but for the most part? I'm just hanging on and hanging on, waiting for some maestro to get a move on. I wanna say, hey skipper, let's go, man! But he just dithers around. I'm *bored*. I never get to go anywhere – sometimes I think I'm going to expire from ennui.”

Crotchet nudges his freckled companion.

“Pretentious bore, isn't he?”

“You gotta pity a guy whose name is Hole,” says Dotted Crotchet.

“B flat over here.”

“Grievance?”

“I'm sick of being squished and pushed and pulled like I'm taffy.” B flat, a poor looking fellow, beaten up once too often by idle schoolboy trumpeters, is struggling to retain dignity. He pulls himself up to his full squat stature.

“And look at *him*, will you?” He points to a snoring mass sprawled across four seats in the back row. “Not a care in the world. Get up, lazy-bones,” he says, nudging the bundle with his foot.

Rest startles

“Eight, 2-3-4. Nine, 2-3-4. Ten...” He rubs his eyes. “What's happening?”

“You snoring layabout. You've never done an honest day's work. You lie around all day, waiting for someone to drop in.”

Rest jumps up, grabs B flat by his worn-out collar and shakes him.

“Listen, you tubby creep, how'd you like to live on permanent night shift? They call me “Rest.” What joker came up with that? I work my ass off even in my sleep. Do you know what it's like to be in the middle of a good dream or” He blushes slightly and gives a small cough of embarrassment. “Even when I have a guest over for the night ... It never stops. Bar after bar, measure after measure, sixteen 2-3, seventeen 2-3 – ”

There's a temporary distraction as some latecomers straggle in. They're an odd couple. They're walking so close together it looks like they're joined. The short woman, leading the pair, has an earring in one ear. She's limping – a pronounced and loud limp so that they traipse through the hall with a noisy caaaaaa-lunk, caaaaa-lunk.

The two curmudgeons sneer.

“Scaredy-cats – they never go out alone. They're always linked like that.”

“The short one looks like a real ornament. Name’s Grace.”

An old man rises slowly to his feet.

“I’m...ah...” He takes a hankie from his pocket and wipes his brow.

“I’m...” He blows his nose. He leans against the chair in front of him, as if age or weariness has worn him down. He tries to straighten up but can only get so far. Before he has a chance to identify himself, excited whispers travel the crowd. By the time he speaks again, the crowd is silent, expectant.

“I’m ... C,” he said. He clears his throat. “Middle C.” He stops as if the two words have cost him. The whole room is on their feet, clapping, shouting bravos and hurrahs from around the room.

“Hero!”

“Grandaddy!”

The old man, moved, tries to compose himself.

“Thank you. I’m touched, I really am, but...” He begins to sob. “I’ve had it. I’ve been run over – again. A thousand times, I’ve been banged, hit, struck. I’ve been abused and ...” He stops, lowers his head in shame. “My tormentors are *small children*. Every day I try to get up with a new attitude but ... I’m starting to lose it. I’m overworked. I need a break.”

“Oh, plllleeeeeease! The wiry stick of gum is shrieking again. “*You’re* overworked? You have the nerve –”

“Identify yourself,” Chair interrupts.

She stares at him, hostile, and snorts.

“Middle C thinks he’s overworked?”

Chair raps his gavel.

“You’ll be removed if you don’t identify yourself.”

“If you don’t recognize me, sir, you’re part of the problem, not part of the solution.”

“Your name, or leave.”

“I – am – A. A 440.” She draws herself to her sleekest and waits for the information to be absorbed. “And please do not confuse me with my sister-in-law – my *ex* sister-in-law – who hangs out with those early music wierdos. The politically correct A 438, or A 442 or whatever the hell she calls herself, the fickle, slippery tart. I am the original A 440, tried and true, pitched perfectly, perfectly pitched. Sure, steady, reliable. As a matter of fact...,” she beams and, as if she has forgotten why she’s here, she fans herself with words of praise.

“I am the alpha –”

“You’d make a better omega,” heckles Crotchet amid general guffaws.

“I am the beginning, I am indispensable, I am the most listened to note, the pitch that silences the ruffians of the orchestra. The sound of me brings calm and order to the pre-concert chaos. When I sound...”

“Your point?” snarls Dotted Crotchet from the back of the room.

“... I was saying, every time I articulate myself –”

“Sounds like a sin against the sixth commandment,” Crotchet heckles, and sniggers float around the hall.

“Every time I am articulated, the whole damn orchestra pounces on me. I never get a solo more than five seconds long. Everyone from the tuba to the piccolo to the tympani...”

The audience squirms as, to their horror, tough wiry 440 begins to weep quietly, wiping her eyes with the back of her gloved hand.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be centre stage, in a palatial hall. Gold inlaid ceilings, four tiers of balconies, full house, everyone on stage warming up, playing riffs and licks and scales and suddenly there’s silence. All ears wait for me to appear. And I appear: pure, perfect. The audience quiets its rustling, the orchestra ceases playing, the spotlight is on *me*, and within five seconds, the moment’s gone and they’re all over me blowing and blasting –” now her whole body is shaking as if shoulders could cry. “It’s like they’re trying to suffocate me.” She tries to pull herself together. “All I want is a moment to myself – a moment that lasts more than five seconds, without the whole orchestra crawling all over me. It’s like I’m being strangled, or permanently drowning. I can’t breathe, like I’m at the bottom of one of those rugby heaps.”

“Scrum.”

“*What did you call me?*”

“I said scrum. Those rugby –”

A shy shuffling fellow walks up and puts his arms around her.

“Doubleflat’s my name, D Doubleflat. You shouldn’t feel badly – you’re the star of every concert. Maybe only for a moment, but think of the glory. Cheer up 440, look at me. I’m hardly ever played and when I am, there’s always someone else trying to take the credit. Half the time people mix me up with C. They’re wrong – there’s a world of difference between C and me...”

Choruses of “Hear, hear!” erupt from clumps of Doubleflats all over the room.

“On the subject of abuse?” An odd looking quartet rises, one after the other, each one a few inches taller than the last. “Open strings here. We’re hit on by every dude at a country hoedown -- ”

“And Susuki, don’t forget Susuki.”

“Yeah. Folks, we’ve got a petition here to ban “Twinkle” from the Susuki repertoire. We’d like to pass out these arms bands, ask for your support until this matter is settled.”

The room is silent as everyone chews this over, mulling over their own grievances and hurts. G and D sit quietly in the corner, arms around each other.

The crotchets poke one another, and roll their eyes.

“They think they’re so perfect.”

An odd looking couple march in. One, half-masked by a handlebar moustache, is in full military regalia, the other, covered in soot, is dressed in overalls. They’re both wearing helmets. The first guy clicks his heels and salutes.

“Major Third here,” he says and before he can say another word, his companion turns a switch on his helmet and a beaming light blinks from his forehead.

“Minor Sixth, at your service. Or…” They giggle and switch places. “Major Sixth,” says the first and “Minor third,” says the second as they fall upon one another in helpless laughter.

About a dozen people rise noisily. They’re dressed in retro.

“We’re a tone row. We…”

“Sit down, and shut up, you bunch of serial killers.”

They turn around, reverse themselves, and walk backwards as a tiny slip of a thing quietly enters the front door. She looks almost too young to be here. She’s about five feet tall, and 90 pounds. She’s shaking like a leaf. Behind her are four little kids, dressed alike and latched on to one of those nursery school ropes.

“A delicate plant, if I ever saw one,” says Dotted Crotchet. “She’s shivering from head to toe. Maybe she’s got a cold.”

“Nah, I’ve seen her before. She’s always like that. She’s a nervous wreck.”

“Who is she?”

“Quaver. She’s a friend of mine. Hey Quaver,” he says turning to her, “get a grip. Stop that shaking now, it’s all right.” Quaver gives him an appreciative smile, but continues to shake so much her coffee spills all over Crotchet’s lap. They’re diverted by the arrival of a statuesque beauty – a tall, blond, voluptuous woman, gracious, queenly.

“What a beauty! What’s she doin’ here? What’s she gotta complain about?” Dotted Crotchet muttered.

Chair pounds the gavel repeatedly.

“Would the crotchets in the back row quit it? You’ve been grouching since the meeting began.”

The Nordic beauty rises with grace. She’s over 6 feet tall. She’s dressed in an evening gown of pale gold. Diamond earrings sparkle and drop three inches from her earlobes. Whispers and speculation about her identity travel through the crowd.

“You probably don’t recognize me,” her voice is like velvet “because I seldom appear in my rightful condition. No matter how well turned out I am – and believe me I invest time in my presentation – no matter, by the time I reach your ears, I’m a mess. I’ve been clawed at, pawed at, roughed up, smeared.”

Her tone doesn’t match the harshness of her words.

“This is how I look on my own, but I’m seldom seen in this condition.” She opens her purse and takes out a small magnifying mirror. She gives herself a look of approval, puts the mirror back and snaps the purse shut. “Not bad. It’s when others get at me that I become ... disheveled.”

“Who the hell is she?”

“Ladies and gentleman, fellow notes and pitches, I am High C.

Shouts of approval, admiring wolf whistles, calls of “wow” and “what a beauty.”

“How come we’ve never seen you before?”

“You’ve seen me all right, but you wouldn’t recognize me. Usually when I appear, I’ve been mauled, mewed, spat out, spewed. I’ve been groped, grabbed, reached, bleached. I’ve been screamed, pinched, squeaked, eked. I’ve been hissed, missed, leaked, faked. I’ve been twisted, resisted, overshot, drooped, I’ve been sagged, swooned, belted, scooped.

And suddenly the rhythm of her speech takes on a life of its own and fingers are snapping, toes tapping.

She begins to sway a little and snaps her fingers gently, lightly.

“She’s irresistible.”

Behind her, F sharp minor – the whole lot of them – begin a “bopp be bop boppa bop, bop be bop boppa bop. Chucka chucka chucka chucka, Major Sixth and Minor Third play pat-a-cake, steady as brushes on a cymbal. A 440 sways her hips seductively. Middle C and D Doubleflat, grinning slyly as if they share a private joke, offer a reliable steady drone. D and G begin: boom, **boom**, boom, **boom**, boom as mellow as tympani. Octaves flit about, floating above this one, diving below that one. The tone row turn cartwheels and stand on their heads. Slowly, the room turns into a dance hall. From the conference of depleted notes and pitches, from the bundle of weariness and cynicism, from the enervated composer’s inkwell,

comes music. Complaints, jealousies and petty grievances are forgotten, blown away, evaporated, as the souls of the notes tumble into slick rhythms, rich harmonies, soaring melodies.

Quaver is up on her feet, her quivering halted; she seems to gain self esteem and confidence and links up with two like-minded friends. The three of them, arms around each other, skip along gaily as if they were a twosome. D and G Sharp wisely stay apart. The Perfect Fifths avoid each other's personal space, as if they understand that three or four of them in one row is too much of a good thing. Minor Third force smiles, determined to change their image. The four little Semiquavers scurry around, breathless. The curmudgeons at the back find some fellow crotchets and decide on a course of positive action.

“Go tell 64, I mean Hemi, that we'll help him get his name back.”

“Everyone alright now?” asks Chair. “Remember, folks, anytime you feel hard done by, badly played, ill used, ignored or overworked, just call the Help Line, okay?”

They file out slowly, chatting, punching one another in friendly teasing, enjoying their new camaraderie and solidarity. A strike has been averted. Music is saved.