

Musical Treasure Chest #13

As we have reached the 13th MTC, perhaps a bit of levity is called for. I would have never dreamed 13 weeks ago (early April) that we would still be in sort of a paralyzed position. Of course in hindsight, any other outcome, would seem ludicrous given the seriousness of COVID 19, but I think we were all optimistic that life would return to normal much sooner. As orchestras, opera companies and Broadway shut down until at least the beginning of 2021, reality sets in. And, of course, the hiatus may be even longer. But resilience is the key to life, and we will find a way to bloom even in this situation.

Over my many years of performing and of the ensemble's existence there is the occasional and unexpected situation that has occurred while performing that is truly humorous (perhaps not at the moment), if simultaneously unfortunate. Some are as simple as bringing the wrong music to a job or misunderstanding a repeat scheme in performance. Others have a bit more of a story. Inevitably over the years accidents happen, whether preventable or not. I thought today I would share with you some of the behind-the-scenes "surprises."

Instrument malfunction can happen from broken strings to more serious issues. And, printed music mishaps can occur too. So many brides want to have outdoor weddings, which can be a recipe for disaster when it's windy. I have watched the varnish bubble on my violin from the hot sun at an outdoor ceremony, while incessantly playing the Pachelbel Canon as a late bride does not process down the aisle. Similarly I have seen my flutist inhale bugs at these same "idyllic" outdoor festivities. And I have argued with a bride that, no, the Beethoven Piano Concerto No 3 doesn't work well in a transcription for string trio.

We do enjoy playing weddings, but they are surprisingly high pressure, as there is little rehearsal and many uncontrollable elements, from tardy brides to crazed wedding planners. We have had overzealous photographers who intrude into the group while we are playing and drunken guests who have lost their sense of social distance (before corona virus) and bump into us (and worse). We try to persevere

and actually, particularly in the ceremony, we care a lot about doing our best. This is an extremely important day for the wedding couple, and we want to enhance it and contribute a musical performance that is meaningful and beautiful for them, even if they don't actually hear it until they watch the video.

Improvising officiants often add chaos for the musicians to the ceremony. Waiting patiently for our cue while they extemporize, we suddenly realize they are done, with no semblance of what we have been told were the concluding words, and we have to scramble to jump in. Other times it's the reverse and they mistakenly say our cue before meaning to. I will never forget a wedding where we played after our cue for the recessional was stated with great clarity. As we started the Mendelssohn Wedding March the officiant frantically waved us to stop and said to the audience that we were just a little too eager to walk the couple down the aisle. He apologized later.

Then there are the weddings where someone in the family has a musician they want to perform along with the professional musicians, usually a vocalist. Sometimes it works out alright. We can be quite flexible and accommodating and improvise when needed. But occasionally one of these family musical members is not as "billed" and the outcome can be disastrous. My most vivid memory of one of these family musicians was many years ago, when the bride-to-be said that her husband-to-be's uncle was a member of the Puerto Rico Symphony (a good orchestra) and that he was to play the solo part to Vivaldi's Spring with us during the ceremony. I set up a rehearsal with him immediately before the ceremony (as he was flying in from the island). As soon as he started to play, I knew we were in for trouble. He didn't play in the Symphony, but in a dance band. He didn't read music and just played excerpts from the Seasons by ear. Oh my....there was really no way to salvage that one.

But one wedding more than any other in all my nearly forty years of playing really "takes the cake." About 20 years ago Musicians of Ma'alwyck was asked to play a very big wedding over in the Berkshires. Scheduled at The Mount (Edith Wharton's gorgeous estate in Lenox, MA), this was to be an elaborate affair. We were hired to play not only for the ceremony and reception (where there would be five separate tents for different types of guests, with five different musical offerings), but also for

the bride and her attendants' dressing and makeup preparation. As you can tell the guest list was large and affluent (who can afford five tents of guests and music for dressing). The wedding date was for late September, with the ceremony to be held outdoors in the garden of the Mount. A wedding planner and music director had been hired in addition to the five musical ensembles of different genres.

The day was not auspicious. As the weather can be in late September in the Berkshires, it was rainy, windy and a bit chilly. We were the first group to play as we "entertained" the bride and her party as they primped. I am not sure they even heard us (there was much wine and champagne). Then we moved outside for the ceremony. With the temperature at about 55 degrees and a light drizzle, none of us in the group was at all happy—it is simply not possible to play in these conditions. Our contract stated that we needed covering in case of bad weather, and some of the groomsmen held umbrellas over us. The ceremony contained perhaps every ritual that could be included, with multiple readings, blessings, candle lightings (not really possible with the weather), hand tyings, and finally (and to be a great and beautiful surprise) the release from a big cloth of butterflies. The temperature was so cold that the butterflies were dazed and just dropped to the ground when the cloth was opened. Perhaps that was an omen.

As we moved from the ceremony site to the reception tents the players were supposed to take a break and eat our dinners (as we were hired to play for many hours at the reception). The caterers seemed most surprised, but brought us something to eat. After the short break we set up in tent No 1, which was the classical music tent. Despite the wedding planners and the music director, nothing was well thought out. No real spot had been set aside for us in the tent, and certainly no lighting. The caterer unhappily moved a table and made a space for us and set up several candelabras to attempt to illuminate the music. As the guests began to enter, we started playing. Before the end of the first half of the first piece I had stuck my bow into the flame of one of the candles ruining the hair in the upper half of my bow. From that point on, I could only play in the lower half, which is quite physically uncomfortable.

The guests, even in the "classical music tent," were raucous and noisy and paid us no attention, though we had been assigned a detailed and extensive play list.

When it was time to take our break at the end of the first hour, the wedding planner tried to insist that we continue playing. We ended up playing way beyond our contracted time. When our portion of the job finally concluded, we were exhausted and truly relieved it was over. We all decompressed in the parking lot, wondering if it was really worth it to accept work like this. But the night was not quite yet finished. As we drove our separate ways one of the musicians called to tell me she was quite sick with food poisoning. Turns out we had been fed the leftovers from the rehearsal dinner the night before.

It may seem impossible, but we have laughed many times about this gig. I think to purge both you and me of this episode, let's listen to music of Mendelssohn, just not the wedding march!

I love **Mendelssohn**'s chamber music and want to share with you some repertory you perhaps don't know. While Mendelssohn's quartets, piano trios and his octet are frequently performed, his string quintets are less so. These pieces, with a second viola, are absolute masterpieces. The first is from the early 1830s and the second (to which I am including a link) is from the end of his life 1845. It is an exuberant, virtuosic piece that is exciting and beautiful to hear.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDEd6o6uwAI>