



The Man in the Brown Shoes

(more from David's adventures in London ...)

This week and next, let's have another couple of episodes that pick up the thread of the story of my year in London after dropping out of university. In one of the previous episodes (story #64), I told about how I was making quite good money by busking in front of the Royal Festival Hall, one of London's largest concert venues, and I also mentioned that this busking 'job' would lead to a chance for a real indoor performance.

One day I was merrily playing one of my études to the people on the plaza in front of the hall, when I became aware of a man standing quite close and watching me intently. I looked at him while continuing to play, and was surprised to see that it was a friend from Canada, a french horn player I had known for some years. After I finished my piece, we chatted for a while; it turned out that he too had come over to London to seek musical 'fame and fortune'. We compared notes on our experiences, and he mentioned that he was doing some part-time work with an amateur orchestra that occasionally hired extra musicians to fill some vacant spots in their ranks. He gave me the contact information of their director, and suggested that I get in touch with the man; perhaps I too could get some work there.

I needed no further encouragement, and soon made a call on the conductor, of course taking my flute with me. The man received me politely, but explained that they had no need of another flute player, as the positions were all filled. But he did ask me to play something for him anyway - perhaps he was being polite, I'm not sure. I got out my flute and played a little bit from one of the showy pieces that I used when busking. I say 'played a little bit', because he didn't let me continue for long; he stopped me after a minute or two, and then - to my complete astonishment - offered me a position in an upcoming concert, not as a member of the orchestra, but as guest soloist. I of course immediately accepted the offer, and we made the arrangements.

I walked on air all the way home - here I was, after only a couple of months in London, booked to play a Mozart flute concerto with a real live symphony orchestra. It wasn't one of the top professional orchestras of course, but that didn't bother me one bit. It was a wonderful opportunity!

On the day of the rehearsal for the concert, I felt a bit uneasy about meeting my Canadian friend again. This busker had suddenly been 'promoted' to concert soloist, and there my friend was, in the ranks of the horn players. But he was completely gracious about it, and wished me well in the performance.

Ah yes, the performance ... I guess I should tell you about the performance. But before I do, I should mention something about my clothes. On the evening when I met my friend while busking, I was wearing a pair of worn polyester brown slacks, a shabby sports coat with patches on the elbows, and some kind of brown loafers. On the day when I met the conductor, I was wearing those same clothes. On the rehearsal day I wore the same thing. You see, these were the only clothes I had ... I had a couple of shirts to change every now and then, and of course some underwear. But for outer clothes, that was it. And, I had no idea at all that the situation should be different. I simply had no clothes 'sense' at all.

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So on the evening of the concert, I arrived at the hall ready for my appearance, wearing ... yes, exactly the same clothes. When the conductor - in his bow tie and tails - realized that I had no other clothes, and intended to walk on stage like that, his demeanour changed instantly. He didn't panic; he didn't try and cancel the concert, but simply turned away. He never spoke another word to me.

After a couple of orchestra numbers the time for my concerto arrived, and at the appropriate moment, I walked out on stage with my flute. The orchestra members wore tails or long black gowns, the audience was dressed as they should be, and the star soloist appeared ... in a patched sport coat, brown polyester slacks and scuffed brown loafers.

We played the Mozart in what can perhaps be best described as a strangled silence. The orchestra played well, and I think I played well too, but at the end of our performance there was nothing but the merest smattering of applause for a few seconds.

Backstage at the end of the concert, I was a bit unsure of what would happen next. I had previously heard that there was to be a get-together at a nearby pub, but nobody spoke to me, nobody looked at me. The room gradually emptied, and after a while, I too picked up my case, headed out the door, and made my way home to my tiny room.

Life's lessons ...

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