

A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Pass the Vinegar

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

In these London stories I have written about seeing the sights, about food, even about taking baths, but very little about studying flute! The fact of the matter is, I really wasn't doing any 'studying' at all. I was playing for a half-hour or so many evenings at my 'job' outside the Royal Festival Hall, but other than that, was making no progress in my flute career. Looking back on that year now, I realize that it really wasn't much more than an extended holiday - day after carefree day, tramping around that gloriously interesting city, seeing what there was to see, and wondering what would be around the next corner ...

'Around a corner' one day, I was having a meal in a small cafe, and noticed a young schoolgirl and her father who were sitting near me - she was carrying a flute case. I spoke to them, learning that he was picking her up from her flute lesson, and we chatted about flute playing for a while. It turned out that he was a professional tool-maker, and in his spare time was thinking about how he might be able to build a flute for his daughter. This was of course hugely interesting for me, as I too had many ideas about how the flute could be improved, so we arranged that I would pay a visit to their home, out in Weybridge in Surrey.

What an amazing day I spent with him! He had mentioned that he was a tool maker, but I now learned that he was part of the team of craftsmen working on the Concorde supersonic airliner, which was at that time under development. He took me through the factory, and we even went inside the shell of one of the aircraft that was being built at that moment - I was astonished at how tiny it was compared to the 747 I had flown to England in (that too, was brand new at the time).

After the quick tour, we went out to his 'shed' where he had his own collection of tools, and started to 'talk flute'. I spoke about some of my ideas for how a head joint should be built, and he said "All right, let's build one!" And there, right in front of my eyes, within the space of just a couple of hours, he built a head joint for my flute. On his lathe he cut a piece of steel to the shape I described, used this to form the tube of the head joint, then hammered metal into shape for the other components. Once it was basically assembled, I tested it, and he made adjustments based on my comments. It was astonishing to watch!

It would be stretching the truth if I told you that my future life was decided that afternoon in that workshop, but there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that what I saw there made a deep impression on me - a craftsman totally in command of his tools, working smoothly, quickly, and extremely efficiently, to produce something beautiful.

Today - many many years after that afternoon in the toolmaker's shed - I sit here on a sunny autumn morning in Tokyo, and in the next room is a pile of 120 of my woodblock prints being pressed and dried as the final step in their production. I have spent the last two weeks working on them, morning 'till night, and they are now finished and ready to be sent out to the waiting collectors.

I am not yet a 'craftsman totally in command of his tools', and perhaps I never will be; only time will tell. But if I brought away from my year in London nothing other than the memory of that afternoon spent together with that wonderfully skilled craftsman, the year would still have been well spent.

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I have had no contact with him in the intervening years, and indeed no longer even remember his name, but I will never forget the lesson he taught me that day.

Thank you sir!

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