



Out to Lunch

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

This week and next, we'll have another couple of episodes continuing the thread of the story of my year in London after dropping out of university.

London has always been a wonderful mecca for music performances. No matter what sort of music is involved, or who the performer or group is, sooner or later they 'play' this town. There are so many venues, and concert series, and festivals, that it is utterly impossible to keep track of what is going on, and browsing the event guide publications can be an exercise in frustration - there are always so many interesting things scheduled. My interest in those days was pretty much confined to London's famous (and excellent) symphony orchestras, but one day I saw a notice of an upcoming concert by the Stan Kenton Orchestra, which piqued my interest.

Now although in these stories I have written about the times I played in jazz orchestras or in a hotel dance band, those experiences all took place in the years following my return from England to Canada. At the time I was in London, my focus was still on classical flute playing; I had no experience of any other kind of music at all. No *playing* experience, that is. I had certainly *heard* other types of music. My father had purchased one of the earliest stereo sets on the market in the late '50s, and he had a decent little collection of LP records. These discs of course reflected his personal taste in music, and as his early working life had been as a dance orchestra musician in England, you can easily guess what sort of thing he was listening to. I can't remember the names of all the bands that were represented in his collection, but I do remember that Stan Kenton represented far and away the largest portion.

Kenton in those days was creating what might be described as 'musician's music' - very progressive, sometimes quite dissonant, and not 'easy listening' at all. My dad loved it, and although I have no specific recollection of watching him put records onto the player, it is clear that the 'background track' to my early life was provided by Stan Kenton and his orchestra.

So I picked up a ticket to the concert, and on the evening, settled into my seat in the large, completely packed hall, to enjoy the music. The first music we heard - standard procedure in those days - was 'God Save the Queen', done in brassy dissonant Kenton style, and the audience stood up to listen to it, also standard procedure. I remained seated.

This might be a bit difficult to explain. That kind of 'protest' is not something I would do now, but I was young, and adamant that I would not 'compromise my ideals' - in this case the thought that 'monarchy is a bad thing'. I wasn't obnoxious about it, and made no disrespectful moves, intending to simply sit quietly in my seat until the tune was finished, as one does when (say) surrounded by people making a prayer. The idea is to allow them freedom to 'worship' as they wish, but to remain quietly apart from their obeisance.

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Unfortunately, the man directly behind me was of a different feeling. He leant down and shouted something in my ear. I couldn't tell what he was saying, but simply sat quietly and ignored it. But he was insistent, presumably wanting me to stand up, and wouldn't give up. And a moment later, he struck the back of my head. This set off a commotion in the area, with a number of other people now chiming in. Some also yelled at me, but others were supportive, "Leave him alone ..."

I tried to shrink down in my seat invisibly, really not wanting to cause any trouble, but now even more firm in my resolve not to stand up. Luckily for me, God Save the Queen is very short, and some seconds later the kerfuffle was over, although he bent over and swore at me as he sat down. For the duration of the concert there was no further escalation of hostilities, but he certainly seemed to take pleasure in continually stretching or crossing his legs, making sure that the back of my seat was heavily bumped every time he did so. I thus paid the price for my small act of social protest.

When telling this story to somebody many years later, they immediately challenged me, "But if you are so much against having a monarchy, why then did you accept that invitation to the Imperial Palace to take part in the New Year Poetry Ceremony a few years ago?"

Now that's a very good question, but I see that - how unfortunate! - we have run out of space today ...

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