

Chamber Musicians of Northern California

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Musical Limericks

(From the November 2003 CMNC newsletter)

by Elizabeth Morrison

I would like to share with you an underdiscussed trait of our chamber music community: the penchant for expressing our feelings in limericks.

I can cite three examples, which is surely enough to establish any thesis.

The first is the Bennington workshop, in Vermont. Bennington has a fully developed limerick culture—there's even a book, with limericks going back decades. (I wrote a couple when I attended, only to have them rejected from the end-of-workshop limerick fest on the grounds that they weren't dirty enough.)

The second example is one of my groups which, at Michi Garrison's instigation, creates limericks to commemorate our musical forays and mishaps.

The best example, though, is my third. I possess a Xerox copy of a little book called *The Well-Tempered Limerick*, by Virginia C. Albedi. This is a set of 141 limericks on string quartet playing, and every one is a gem. Here are a few of my favorites.

Quartetto Loquacio

*Some ladies decided for fun
To play Opus Eighteen, Number one.
But they talked and sipped sherry,
Became wondrous merry,
And never got past the first run.*

Been there, done that!

Here's another good one:

Our Second Violin's Dilemma

*This gigue sends me into a swoon;
I'll be fit for psychiatry soon.
To choose I am loath
But I cannot do both—
Do I play it in time or in tune?*

I know that feeling!

This one captures the essence of our avocation:

To People on the Sidelines

*To listen is good, in a way,
But it's better to join in the fray.
Musicians agree
They hear what they see;
The audience hears what they play.*

Albedi has taken the limerick, previously thought to be the merely clever haunt of the Man from Peru and the Lady from Niger, to unsuspected depths, as in this one:

Ars Longa

*Who wrote these faint fingerings so?
Those commas where luftpausen go?
And who will read mine
When I've played my last line
And I too must lay down the bow?*

Very poignant. But imagine being in her group! Her son added this limerick to the book:

Coda

*Because of her verse and her ear
The quartet played, cringing in fear
That they'd miss the repeats
Or fall off their seats
And hear of it year after year.*

Note to a Maestro

*The string section sends its regrets.
We're tired of your raving and threats.
Rehearsal's a chore
And a tedious bore.
We're off to play Haydn quartets.*

Why We Don't Know the Last Movement of Beethoven's String Trios

*When a violin's late, we'll agree
While we're waiting, to play Opus Three.
But our late violin
Is sure to dash in
Before we can reach letter C.*

Sabotage in the Quartet Ranks

*What a mischievous mood we are in!
Our parts are unreasonably thin.
Let's pour on the heat
And nudge up the beat,
And torture the first violin.*

String Quartets are So Fattening

*Soon after we've played the last line
All thoughts turn to cheeses and wine.
I can't decide yet
About this quartet.
Do we meet to make music—or dine?*

Back to the Woodshed

*I'd worked a half morning or more
On a troublesome spot in the score.
Yet that night in quartet
You'd be willing to bet
That I never had seen it before.*

On Fingering

*Why finger the whole composition
For a lyrically lovely rendition?
In the fury of play
I damn well will stay
In that safe and secure first position.*

Sins of Omission

*They'll come back to haunt me some day
They'll force me to pay in some way.
They'll give me no peace,
No hope of release—
Those double stops I didn't play.*

A Cryptoctophile Comes Out of the Closet*

With a problem of time on our hands,

The first violinist commands.

But oh, how I hate

To hear "Seven...eight..."

When I can count only in "ands."

* A cryptoctophile is someone who secretly loves to count in eight when the beat is in four.

No Place to Hide

Oh, the Mozart quartets held no fears

In the youth of our string quartet years.

But the more that we know

The harder they grow.

Now our fiddles are sprinkled with tears.

Geriatric Special

In the scherzo we thought we had made it,

But Mrs. Brown's discords delayed it.

Inside of her eye

A speck floated by

Which she thought was a run, and she played it.

To the Timid Mice Quartet

Our lentos we play with a zesto,

In minuets we're at our besto.

But wait 'till you hear,

Though it sounds a bit queer,

Our sedate Senior Citizens' presto.