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Peter Schickele, P.D.Q. Bach **Star Tribune • April 12, 2015**

Birthday bash for P.D.Q. Bach (Peter Schickele)

BY MICHAEL ANTHONY

There's an old saying favored by comedians: "Death is easy, comedy is hard." This wise thought probably dates back at least to the comedy clubs of ancient Athens, where young laugh-a-minute Plato and his crew used to try out new material on Open Megaphone Night.

Comedy is still hard, and in the context of music, it's also rare. We've all heard funny songs, but take away the lyrics and they're no longer funny. How often is the music itself amusing? Spike Jones, the zany bandleader of the '40s and '50s, wrote music that made people laugh, as did Carl Stalling, the chief composer for Warner Bros. animated cartoons.

Without doubt, however, the music world's chief laugh-meister the past 50 years has been Peter Schickele, the creator of P.D.Q. Bach, the last and least of J.S. Bach's 20-odd children, or, as Schickele describes him, "a pimple on the face of music."

While P.D.Q. Bach became an industry, with constant touring and 17 albums (four of them Grammy winners), Schickele has managed to sustain a lesser-known parallel career as a "serious" composer of works for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensemble as well as film and television scores.

The novelty of the 80th "Birthday Bash" in honor of Schickele that VocalEssence presented to an enthusiastic capacity crowd at Ted Mann Concert Hall Friday night was that both sides of Schickele's engaging musical personality were addressed, the "serious" side in the first half and the "less serious" in the second. Schickele, who walks with a cane these days but remains a vital presence, sat at the edge of the stage and commented on the music as it was played.

As this clever program suggested, these two worlds of Schickele's often overlap. A witty piece played in the first half, a snappy tango version of the famous opening chords of Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde" titled "Last Tango in Bayreuth," might have been a product of the fertile but twisted brain of P.D.Q. Bach, had he lived in the late 19th century.

Conversely, the dozens of pieces that Schickele has written in the guise of P.D.Q. are obviously "serious" in that they're the work of a skilled and sophisticated craftsman. The big pieces that concluded the program — the Grand Serenade for an Awful Lot of Winds and Percussion and the Birthday Ode to 'Big Daddy' Bach" - are full of sly tricks: unexpected accents, big build-ups to a squeak and surprising interpolations, like "Swanee River" emerging out of mysterious chords.

Philip Brunelle, who put the program together and presided over the concert, had the smart idea of engaging not only his own two Vocalessence choruses but the excellent University of Minnesota Wind Ensemble and its director, Craig Kirchoff, which meant a number of Schickele's seldom-heard wind ensemble pieces could be played. Charles Kemper was the adroit piano soloist in Schickele's droll, rather French-sounding Concerto for Piano and Chorus.

Schickele, whose actual birthday is July 17, no longer makes an entrance swinging from a rope onto the stage, like Tarzan, as he did once at Northrop Auditorium. But he still composes. He told the audience he's working on a piano concerto. As Friday's concert demonstrated, his music has wit and charm and above all a generosity of spirit that is rare these days.

Peter Schickele
Outer Banks Sentinel • April 1, 2010

Schickele and P.D.Q., as Jekyll and Hyde, at the Forum

BY PETER HUMMERS



PETER HUMMERS | SENTINEL STAFF

From left, Prof. Peter Schickele, Michele Eaton and Brian Dougherty at the Outer Banks Forum Saturday.

The noted P.D.Q. Bach "scholar*," Professor Peter Schickele, shared some of his findings with a delighted Outer Banks Forum audience at the First Flight High School Saturday evening.

P.D.Q. Bach (1807-1742?), the "last and least offspring" of Johann Sebastian Bach, has been called a "pimple on the face of music," "the worst musician ever to have trod organ pedals" and other things not quite so complimentary.

The indefatigable Professor Schickele is constantly discovering new musical outrages committed by the the "most dangerous musician since Nero" (he actually discovered one during the performance - under the lectern onstage) and is unafraid to commit them in public.

He was joined in his life's work this evening by soprano Michele Eaton, tenor Brian Dougherty and long-suffering stage manager William Walters.

The "Jekyll and Hyde" appellation referred to the structure of the performance. The first half of the evening was dedicated to P.D.Q.'s music; the second to Schickele's own compositions of advanced modern music, which ranged from the whimsical to the seriously beautiful.

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Throughout, Schickele handled instrumental chores, mostly pianistical, although P.D.Q.'s *Shepherd on the Rocks, With a Twist* featured two instruments invented by Bach, the tromboon (a cross between a trombone and a bassoon, combining all the disadvantages of both in one easy-to-schlep instrument) and the lasso d'amore. Schickele also sang; several performances featured three-voice a capella arrangements.

The Bach offerings included Four Next-to-Last Songs such as "Gretchen am Spincycle," about the relationship between God and a young maiden doing her laundry, and "Es war ein dark und shtormy Night."

Shepherd on the Rocks, With a Twist was terrific and horrific; the tromboon was easily as scary as the bagpipe, which was originally, of course, designed to intimidate Scotland's enemies on the battlefield.

Much of the audience, including this reviewer, was delirious during the first half of the evening. Some of the humor depended on a knowledge of classical music and letters (Johann Schiller was in the habit of frequently borrowing money from his girlfriend, so much so that he ultimately wrote a poem about what he "owed to Joy"), but much was in the more accessible vein of the Marx Brothers. During Prof. Schickele's keyboard antics, almost all that stood in the way of his channeling Chico Marx was his neglecting to "shoot" keys with his index finger, although he did, by playing in mid-air to the right of the keyboard, play some notes that were "too high-pitched for humans to hear."

Apres-intermezzo, Prof. Schickele played some of his own brilliant music, no fooling around. Well, not too much fooling around, although he has a soft spot for rounds and canons ("Row, row, row your boat"), much as a writer might enjoy limericks. Many of these were sung a capella and combined sparkling music with comparable wordplay.

He performed his art song "Dear, If You Change," with soprano Eaton, a lovely setting of an anonymous Elizabethan lyric. The piano accompaniment carried just the hint of dischord, giving the effect of a slightly subdued Charles Ives song, and Eaton rode along expertly, her pure voice lending a final touch of poignancy.

Prof. Schickele said, "You know what they say about the sixties: if you can remember them, you weren't there. I don't remember writing this song," before playing "Blue Window (in My Mind)," which phrase, he said, definitely marked it as a sixties song.

As to the fooling around, the singers did perform three rounds by P.D.Q., including "P.D.Q. 3-Step Crab Dinner" and "The Mule," based on the lyric "The mule he has two legs behind, and two he has before. You get behind before you find what the two behind be for."

The Professor's own *Two For the Road* included "Songs From Shakespeare" rendered in modern musical idioms (idia?) like boogie woogie, rap and doo-wop, and which could have come from Frank Zappa's *Ruben and the Jets* album, but with the immortal Bard as lyricist. Like everything else during the evening, it represented a sort of unified field theory of music and wit.

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*Some have gone so far as to suggest that P.D.Q. Bach is entirely a figment of Prof. Schickele's fevered imagination. He said he was just as real as the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy and other such upstanding citizens.

Peter Hummers covers local entertainment on Outer Banks Onstage. Reviews are archived there and are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License.

Peter Schickele
Nashville Scene • March 11, 2009

Peter Schickele steps outside his P.D.Q. Bach persona for Blair premiere

BY RUSSELL JOHNSTON

In case you know Peter Schickele only through his zany satirical persona P.D.Q. Bach, let's get one thing straight up front: His woodwind quintet *A Year in The Catskills*, commissioned by the Blair School of Music and receiving its world premiere there on Monday, is *not* a work of comedy.

Still reading? Good, because "not comedy" certainly needn't mean "dour" or "humorless," as is clear in talking with the ebullient composer. Blair approached Schickele about writing the quintet not because of his reputation as a popular entertainer, but on the strength of his substantial catalog of serious works—and Schickele can say "my serious works" with a straight face, since he's just drawing a snobbery-free contrast with the "silly" side of his résumé.

The Blair Commissions Series is a long-term project, announced in 2005, to sponsor new works by major composers. Blair faculty ensembles and soloists make a commitment to keep the pieces in active performing repertoire, sparing the music from the too-common fate of complete dormancy after a premiere. The program also creates a chance for some of Blair's top performers to forge relationships with leading composers.

Blair is not alone in its high estimation of Schickele. His many commissions include works for the St. Louis Symphony and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. In 1997, Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax premiered a set of "New Goldberg Variations" (after J.S. Bach) by Schickele and five other composers. Besides his four Grammys for comedy, Schickele won a classical Grammy in 2000 for an album of brass music.

And about this P.D.Q. Bach fellow, if you've not had the pleasure: In a long-running series of concerts, recordings and one hilarious biography, "Professor Schickele" has presented mock-musicological researches into the fictional "last and least" of J.S. Bach's children, unearthing music for left-handed sewer flute and such pieces as *The Short-Tempered Clavier and Other Dysfunctional Works*.

Schickele's concert music is warm and lyrical in tone, good-natured even in its more dissonant moments. The inspiration of his Juilliard mentor Roy Harris is often evident in a musical vocabulary encompassing many American idioms but also grounded in the European classical tradition. A measure of eclecticism is unsurprising, given the diversity of Schickele's experience—he has, for instance, written a jazz piece for string quartet.

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But he emphasizes the importance of stylistic integration. Too often, he suggests in a wide-ranging phone conversation, attempts to bring jazz or popular styles into concert music create stylistic juxtaposition rather than true blending.

"I try to let those influences in," Schickele says, "but I never want the audience to feel as if they're hearing an arrangement."

The composer describes his new quintet as highly varied, ranging from pastoral fantasy to lament to fast jazz. He toyed with the idea of calling the work a concerto despite the absence of orchestra, since many passages feature one instrument as soloist against the rest of the ensemble. One movement is inspired by Bach (the real one), drawing on ideas still flowing after he finished his *New Goldberg Variations*.

"You would never mistake this for Bach, though," Schickele adds, citing frequent shifts in meter, texture and tempo. He speaks excitedly about a moment in the second movement when three instruments imitate each other a single beat apart. "It's one of my favorite textures," he enthuses. In the up-tempo finale he creates a jazz feel, using the bassoon and horn to imitate a string bass.

Schickele's multifaceted career could populate several impressive résumés. His concert music composition has been a constant, and in addition to creating *P.D.Q. Bach*, he's hosted the late lamented public radio program *Schickele Mix*, written arrangements for folk singers including Joan Baez, and scored several films, including delightful animated versions of the Maurice Sendak classics *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen*.

Schickele was a childhood fan of Spike Jones, whose farcical versions of pop songs and light classics were popular in the '40s and '50s. In retrospect, he says, one lesson of Jones' great band was that "the better played it is, the funnier it is." Hitting the right wrong notes takes skill too. "The trick," Schickele says, "is to make it seem easy."

As a composition student at Juilliard, Schickele teamed up in 1959 with conductor Jorge Mester to present a humorous concert, beginning an annual tradition. That persisted until 1965, when Schickele finally booked Town Hall for a public show. Vanguard Records released an album of the concert, and the career of *P.D.Q. Bach* was underway. "I had no idea I would still be doing this a half-century later," Schickele says, laughing.

Though it took a while before his comedy concerts became a money-making proposition, the composer now seems grateful to his comic alter-ego: for sustaining him, for giving him time to write other music, and no doubt for just being a whole lot of fun. Today he finds himself in an enviable position as an artist and composer: connecting with audiences familiar enough with "serious" music to get the jokes, but not too stuffy to laugh at them.

Peter Schickele, P.D.Q. Bach
New York Times • December 29, 2005

Hitting the Lowest Notes from Bach the Lesser

BY ALLAN KOZINN

Forty years ago, when college-age classical music fans decided that Baroque was hot and began snapping up the works of long-forgotten composers as fast as musicologists could rediscover them, Peter Schickele saw a market niche that had eluded everyone else. For Mr. Schickele, a 30-year-old composer only five years out of Juilliard (and back there to teach), musicology and the business of discovering antique composers had comic possibilities.

Drawing on a talent for parody that went back to his childhood, when he and his brother assembled a "Sanka" Cantata, after a fully caffeinated Bach work, Mr. Schickele invented P. D. Q. Bach, an 18th- and early 19th-century composer with a sterling pedigree (he was supposedly the last of J. S. Bach's many children) and no redeeming musicality. To present and explain P. D. Q. to the world, Mr. Schickele gave himself a new persona: as Prof. Peter Schickele of the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople, he is the world's sole authority on P. D. Q. Bach, and the "discoverer" of what has grown into a huge repertory of bizarrely named and even more oddly written works.

P. D. Q. Bach has become a durable industry, and Mr. Schickele's annual concerts have become ornaments of the holiday season as well. This year's run, which opened at Peter Norton Symphony Space on Tuesday evening, is a 40th-anniversary retrospective (or "retrogressive," as Mr. Schickele puts it), with classics like "My Bonnie Lass She Smelleth" and the "Liebeslieder Polkas" (S. 2/4) offered alongside more recent catalogue entries like the Allegretto Gabinetto for Plumber and Keyboarder (S. 2nd Door on the Left).

The trademarks of a traditional P. D. Q. Bach evening were all in place. The program book includes an air-sickness bag, stamped "For Use In Case of Cultural Discomfort." William Walters, the stage manager, was ritually hissed whenever he ventured out from the wings and Mr. Schickele, in a disheveled tuxedo and work boots, made a belated and suitably labor-intensive entry from the balcony. It wasn't quite swinging to the stage on a rope, as he did in the early days, but as he told the audience: "Hey, give me a break. I'm 70."

The show itself is part topical comedy and part warped-musicology lecture, wrapped around the music of P. D. Q., the building blocks of which are the musical equivalent of the puns that drive the faux-lectures. They offer something for everyone: the musically trained will hear all the errors that music-theory teachers warn against, and general listeners will hear familiar themes juxtaposed with reckless abandon.

To describe the music in any detail would be to give away Mr. Schickele's jokes, but suffice to say that only at a P. D. Q. concert can you hear a string quartet - "The Moose" (S. Y2K) - in which fragments of Beethoven, Stephen Foster, Shostakovich and Rossini (as well as a few jazz cadences) jostle for the spotlight, or vocal settings, like those of the "Liebeslieder Polkas," in which such outrageous liberties are taken with famous texts.

Mr. Schickele's roster of fine musicians included Margaret Kampmeier and Elizabeth DiFelice, pianists; the Canticum Novum Singers, conducted by Harold Rosenbaum; the Armadillo Quartet and the American Serpent Players, as well as a handful of vocal soloists, all of whom contributed straight-facedly as Mr. Schickele made an art of tomfoolery.