

From the Trenches, II

The Joys of Busking, or Down and Out in Bonn and Brussels

That vagabond recorder player who catches your ear in a European town square just might be an emeritus professor of chemistry from Virginia Tech.

Ray Dessy

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“For what they are worth I want to give my opinions about the life of a London busker. When one comes to think of it, it is strange that some people in a great modern city should spend their waking hours playing recorders in hot dens underground. The question I am raising is why this life goes on — what purpose it serves, and who wants it to continue, and why. I am not taking the merely rebellious, faineant, attitude. I am trying to consider the social significance of a busker’s life.”

George Orwell
Down and Out in Paris and London (adapted)

It all began a decade ago in a sweep of synchronicity of the sort that occasionally overtakes us. A Friday morning lecture at Imperial College was followed by a furtive exit, a trip to the Early Music Shop, and the acquisition of a new alto recorder. On Saturday afternoon, we two new friends were at King’s Cross Station waiting for a train to Stevenage, the environs of Smith-Kline’s Research labs at Bletchley Park — a unique lab in an old manor house complete with resident ghost and a 300-year-old arboretum. But our informant had mangled the train schedule, and there were 90 minutes to wait. The July day was warm, the station hot and noisy, and the pillars at the front inviting. Setting down my carry-on luggage with its removable backpack straps and spreading my coat out on the sidewalk at my feet, I tootled away on well-remembered Baroque pieces. Enthusiasm waned as the temperature rose, and a segue to the blues began. The music became intoxicating, and I returned to awareness to find a few coins thrown onto my coat. Fascinating — the

hotter the music, the greater the shower of coins. Before the train left I was richer by some 20 pounds, and I had become a busker.

The name perhaps derives from the boots that certain actors wore that distinguished their role in early plays. Busking is part of the European culture and has found a home in some American cities. It’s fun for the player and the audience, and it has some unique rewards. Since that first time you might have found me in the main pedestrian mall in central Frankfurt, along the museum mile in Bonn, in the Freie Strasse in Basel, or all over the streets of Brussels during Jazz Festival weekend.

For a professional who earns his bread by lecturing to audiences that know his work, the butter is busking — an anonymous activity whose success depends solely on pleasing an audience that doesn’t know who you are, and doesn’t care. The listeners are rekindling the lost memories of town fairs and squares where jugglers and musicians performed, and competed, for a few proffered coins. For a few hours you, too, can escape your own identity and be part of a free, festive crowd.

It is an environment quite different from your usual consort. Sometimes a license is needed. Certainly respect the sound radius of other buskers, particularly if you don’t speak the local language well. Don’t try to compete at close distances with someone who is technically superior or who has a repertoire that is more attractive. It’s essential to match the wants and needs of the audience, not just play your own preferences. Older audiences will enjoy well-known Baroque pieces, but younger audiences may require the blues, jazz, or something even harder. Old favorites go well, and songs from the

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turn of the century bring back memories to certain age groups and can keep your audience from drifting away. That is the key; when the audience starts to fidget, that's the time to switch it.

Selecting a venue is an art. It must be legal, you have to be able to assemble a crowd without blocking traffic, and you have to be heard. The recorder, for instance, doesn't have much dynamic range, and its sound level is low compared to a full piano-accordion. Find a good hard-surfaced backdrop, or, even better, a small shallow alcove that can help with acoustic projection. Be patient

when you start; it takes a while to get an audience to stop, look, and listen. Saturdays are the best time, when folks are out walking and relaxing. Subway tunnels are acoustically interesting, but the people streaming by have other things on their mind. Outdoor pedestrian malls, nearby museums and cultural centers, or train stations where people have to wait are all good. You'll be sharing your audience with many other interesting artists: accordionists performing Bach organ music, flutists marching to military music with a tape accompaniment, and

violinists switching from classics to czardas.

Talking tactfully with other performers is an educational experience; you may meet frustrated music students, ardent amateurs, a surprising number of professionals, and often the unique eccentric. Many augment their living this way, and you are the stranger. Respect, diplomacy, and clear conveyance of a common interest will open new doors. You and the audience will have fun in music together. You have the unique experience of carrying away a satisfaction that is yours alone. □