

LENNY: The cat that shook an orchestra

Jessica Duchen

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PART 2

The orchestra meeting was a sombre matter. Before Lenny had been unleashed on the resident rodents, nobody had known the extent of the hall's mouse colony. After some complex calculations, based on the average number of mice slaughtered by Lenny per hour, it appeared that the little furry creatures probably outnumbered by several thousand the inhabitants of Singewood itself.

“Who brought that cat?” Andy demanded.

The eyes of the Singewood Symphony Orchestra turned as one upon Jackie and Paul.

“We tried only to help,” Jackie declared.

“Nice try,” said Andy, “but unless there's a major reversal by tomorrow, the health and safety exec will shut down the hall due to the evidence of infestation...”

The orchestra didn't yet have a system to punish its players for bringing in killer felines, but the hostility in the fusty old green room was palpable. Paul fumed. The orchestra's resentment apparently stemmed not from the hall's condition – decrepit, under-funded, badly managed and full of vermin – but from the audacity of one player who'd dared to say so, and another who'd dared to take some action. Perhaps they'd both have to leave. Perhaps they could form a string quartet...going on the road with Jackie didn't sound so bad...but how would he feed Felix, pay the mortgage, give Vanessa her monthly dosh, if he lost his job?

A shock rebounded through the room: Stefan Bach was there, fixing them all with those cold, dinosaur eyes. “Hallo, friends,” he declared. “May I be allowed to offer my help.”

It wasn't a question but an order. Andy hurried over and exchanged quiet words with the conductor. Then he cleared his throat. “Thank you, everyone. Coffee time. Paul and Jackie, please stay.”

“Not Mr Brown,” barked Bach. “Just Miss Dzekroszalewski.”

The maestro watched the musicians drifting out of the room. Jackie stayed motionless. Ginger cat hairs lingered on the black sweater that covered her magnificent breasts. Funny how the few words of Polish he'd learned over sixty years ago still came back to him. Jackie's face with its Slavic cheekbones reminded him intensely of that time, a terrible era, yet one that even now could induce irresistible nostalgia. Pain twanged along his left arm. He breathed deeply. Keep it under control. Don't give in.

“*Dziękuję, Panna Dzekroszalewski,*” he said. She blinked, unimpressed. Her eyes could be as cold as his. “Now, my dear.” The maestro lapsed into English. “Your job may be in danger, and that of your fiddler friend. Maybe I can help you.”

“Maestro,” said Jackie, “could be I can also help you. If you do not mind Lenny, would you like to come to my house for drink?”

The council’s decision over whether to close down the hall was due by the end of the day. The crisis had invaded the whole orchestra. The brass headed for a riverside pub to drown their sorrows. A smattering of strings, including Cath, put in calls to the Early Bird orchestra, touting for vibrato-free work. Paul, phoning Felix, told him that everything was fine. The general director, meanwhile, sat in his office with his head in his hands. But Franco, the handsome Italian leader, made a unilateral decision.

“Is-a that-a the office-a of Madama McPhee-a?” he demanded on the phone, exaggerating his accent. Soon the mayor herself was speaking to him. He explained his mission and requested an urgent meeting. There was a pause. “Say that again?” came Fay McPhee’s husky, enthralled voice.

Nobody was quite sure what happened when Franco went to see the mayor. But at 5.29pm, the general director’s telephone rang. The official sounded flustered. “Despite protests from health and safety,” he reported, “the mayor has personally intervened to request that tomorrow’s concert should proceed. After that, we’ll have to see.”

The general director thanked him, then pulled a bottle out of his locked cabinet and took a long, grateful swig.

As for Stefan Bach, leaving Jackie’s apartment, he moved as if lost in another world. Kev, the fourth double-bassist, cycling by with his instrument on his back, spotted him and slammed on the brakes. “Maestro?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, yes, my friend. Yes, yes. We see each other tomorrow for the concert.” Bach shook his head and glided on, tears in his hard blue eyes.

Friday: the atmosphere was building. Frantic practising could be heard across Singewood. The Frank Bridge’s kitchen bustled with extra catering for the occasion. A press conference had tempted in three journalists from London – a record number. Bastardo was pleased to find Fay McPhee in a state of considerable excitement, though puzzled that she wouldn’t let him into her bedroom, claiming that the cleaner hadn’t been.

“My masterpiece contains every element of physical desire transformed into audible art,” he told her.

“Oh, darling, I’m sure it does,” she replied. “I’m particularly looking forward to the violin solo in the slow movement.”

“But what will happen to us after tonight?” Cath demanded, backstage, where Paul was digging in his violin case for Felix’s ticket. The boy was hovering beside him, still in school uniform. Paul hoped the Bastardo wouldn’t put him off music for life – but Vanessa had been typically intransigent when Paul tried to bargain. He’d had no choice but to put Felix in the audience.

A door opened; Felix flung himself down the corridor, yelling “Jackie!”

“Hello, little man,” Jackie beamed, hugging him. “So you are leestening tonight?”

“Oh yes,” Felix said eagerly. “Daddy said it’s going to be really, really nasty! Jackie, did your cat really kill all those mice?”

An awkward silence fell around them.

“What happens after tonight?” Paul said quietly, answering Cath’s unhelpful question. “Cath, we don’t know.”

“But what do we *do*?”

Paul took a dry-cleaning bill out of his pocket and placed it in her viola case. “We do the best we can,” he said. “We play like the consummate professionals we are, and we make the most of life while we’ve bloody got it.”

“Oh, aren’t we Mister Sanctimonious?” Cath glared.

Paul was beginning to think Felix was right. What on earth had he seen in her? She might be blonde, with gorgeous legs; but Jackie was so much *nicer*.

“While you’re being so holy,” Cath added, “perhaps you should know that Maestro Bach was seen in a taxi with Jackie yesterday afternoon. And Kev saw him, several hours later, wandering around near Jackie’s place looking, as he put it, ‘spent’. His word, not mine.”

“Maestro Bach?” Paul echoed. Since the Lenny incident, he’d thought of himself and Jackie as partners in crime; ostracised, they could still rely on one another. Inexplicably, though not together, they were *together*. Could it be true that she had sold herself to save her job?

Paul glanced at Felix, who was cautiously plucking at the harp, tapping the xylophone and staring, fascinated, at the intricate coiling that was Pete’s big brass horn.

Pete-the-horn was feeling relaxed after a few beers, which he’d swallowed ahead of the concert to prove how disgusted he was by the whole shebang. He looked down at the small boy pulling faces into the bell’s distorting reflections. Despite himself, he smiled.

“Ten minutes, please!” Andy called.

“See you later, mate,” Paul said to Felix, who grinned at him, then made for the auditorium.

Bach strode past them from the conductor’s room. Paul watched him. The last thing he saw before the platform doors opened was Jackie’s adorable face alight with affection, triumph or both as she ran up to Bach and threw her arms round him; Bach stooped to kiss her tenderly on the forehead. Paul turned away and picked up his fiddle. It was only when he saw that she preferred an octogenarian despot that he understood he had grown to love her.

On the podium, Bach navigated Bastardo’s work as if it were the easiest piece ever written. He no longer cared. His body seemed possessed by some veiled spirit of lightness and joy. He saw his orchestra as if from a great distance: Franco giving those extra leading signs he always gave while imagining that Bach hadn’t noticed; Pete-the-horn splitting every other note, though nobody could hear him tonight; Cath, the viola section’s sweet-and-sour blonde; Paul, sawing valiantly at the back of the firsts; and, so close that he could almost reach out and touch her, Joanna Dzekroszalewszki leading the cellos. He’d never known her real name was Joanna. But that was only the start of what he’d learned during their intimate afternoon.

The half-empty hall greeted *Sin Phonier* with a plethora of responses. The mayor and her claque of friends stamped, stood and cheered. Some neo-romantic saboteurs stood and booed. The majority of the audience, perplexed, looked at its friends and shook its grey heads. Bastardo bounced down to the stage, acknowledging the lukewarm

applause as if, en masse, the whole population of Singewood had declared undying love for him. He insisted on kissing Bach on both cheeks. Bach, recoiling slightly, glimpsed the leader winking into the audience. And Franco's wink was returned – by Fay McPhee. As the maestro watched, the mayor lifted one thumb. Franco's smile broadened and he bowed low, his hand against his romantic heart.

The all-Wagner second half would start with the Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde*, but for now the players left the stage and surged as one towards the spring water fountain.

Paul made his way through the throng towards Jackie. "How could you?" he hissed.

"I do not expect your thanks for saving both our jobs."

"Nothing's worth it. Not that. Not bloody schtupping bloody Bach!"

"That's what you believe?" She looked quizzically at him, head on one side. "You think so little of me, dear friend. You don't know nothing. Why you think I'm here? Why you think I want to play in this orchestra?"

But before she could elaborate, Felix trotted towards them. "Dad," he called, "can I go to the loo before the Liebesthing?" Felix always used the backstage loos. Paul waved him on; when he looked round, Jackie had vanished.

Near the cloakrooms, Pete-the-horn was tackling some last-minute Wagnerian hooting. Felix, drawing near, watched, listened, and stood stock still.

"What's that?" he asked.

"French horn. Like it?" said Pete.

Felix nodded.

"Here. Have a go." Pete wiped down the mouthpiece – Paul hoped it didn't taste of beer – and handed the instrument to the awestruck child. He showed Felix how to hold it, how to put one hand into the bell and how to form his lips into something resembling the right shape. "There. Have a good blow."

Felix blew. The sound began as a hesitant raspberry; then flowered into a real note, strong and sure.

"Good lad! Hard to get a noise out of this ruddy thing first go," Pete remarked.

Paul took in the unlikely spectacle of the loathed Pete coming over all avuncular with his son.

"Pete," cried Felix, "will you teach me how to play the horn? I mean, like, real lessons? It's the most wonderful sound in the whole world!"

Pete and Paul looked at one another over Felix's head for two very long seconds. Paul took a deep breath at last. "Fine by me," he said, forcing himself to hold out a hand.

"My pleasure." Pete's grasp around Paul's was firm and honest. Their eyes met; and, at last, smiled.

"On stage please, everyone!" Andy called.

In the shadows beside the stage, Bach waited, Jackie's hand clasped in both of his. "This performance," he said, "I dedicate to you."

He took the podium. He always shook before conducting Wagner. His heart thumped in his chest. His forehead was cold with sweat. Pain lurched through him. Ignore it. Keep going. He raised his quaking arms and Jackie, eyes fixed on him, led in the cellos. The immortal phrase settled onto that horrifying, magnificent Tristan chord. Pain choked him.

He wouldn't stop, not now. Nothing had ever got the better of him until today. In Jackie's eyes he saw other eyes, eyes from Warsaw: the long-remembered eyes of his first true love. And soon, as the Liebestod gathered pace, he and the orchestra were as one, all their differences forgotten, lifting the music to the heavens.

The pain had gone, though the stage now looked vertical. He noticed the shock in Jackie's face, the fright in Franco's, a gasp from the audience. Above him, the light was brightening. He closed his eyes.

"Grandfather, no!" Jackie cried as she dropped her cello and flew towards him. But Bach was beyond it all. Cradled in the arms of the grandchild he'd never known, Stefan Bach let himself fly out with the music towards the light.