

THE INSTRUMENT

The mind of man may be compared to a musical instrument with a certain range of notes, beyond which in both directions we have an infinitude of silence. John Tyndall

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us. Shakespeare*

It matters not what his name at birth really was. Once he became famous he simply changed it. For the sake of this tale let us call him Max.

Max was an nondescript ordinary person. He looked it, was of average intelligence and intellect and had a modicum of talent for his chosen profession. In other words, he was not someone who stood out in any sort of gathering. He was married to Martita who was much like him. They had no children. Their common bond was their profession. They were musicians in a nondescript, mediocre symphony orchestra located in a city that no one had ever heard of. They shared a passionate love for classical music which probably emphasized their frustration and inability to perform it adequately at their concerts. They also had a deep and abiding affection for each other.

They eked out a living. Since the orchestra was the only one in the city and thus had no competition, its audiences were large and enthusiastic enough to sustain the orchestra's musicians with a barely passable living income. Luckily the audiences had no other orchestra to compare theirs with. They had gotten used to it and were appreciative of its efforts and of the great music despite poor renditions. We all become less critical when dealing or consuming something of constant quality even when it is sub par. The musicians augmented their earnings by teaching when they were able to find students who could afford to pay them.

Max's instrument was the violin and Martita's, the cello. They were well aware of their musical limitations. In his dreams he played like Stern, or Heifitz. In hers she played like Dupré. They knew that they were mediocre musicians with hardly any prospects. Their illusions were of great help in masking their desperate situation and enabled them to take what they could out of life and each other without giving thought to the future. In other words, they were living in some limbo; until a remarkable event took place.

Max had gone out for a walk between rehearsals. He found himself in a shanty part of town with pawnshops, stores selling second hand goods and one store specializing in used musical instruments. As he later put it, he was irresistibly drawn to that place of commerce despite its shabby and seedy appearance. He entered. A small bell tinkled, informing the owner that he had a customer.

"Can I be of assistance?" He was a shabby little man with an ingratiating grin.

"I see that you have been eying my violins. I perceive that you are a man of discrimination when it comes to musical instruments. Are you, by any chance a professional musician?"

Max was taken aback by the owner's discernment. Feeling ill at ease he replied.

“Yes, I am a professional violinist with our symphony orchestra.”

“I thought I recognized you. Usually you are seated right next to the principal violinist. You see, I am an aficionado of classical music and attend nearly all of your concerts. We are cognizant that our local orchestra does not really measure up despite the excellent quality of a few of its musicians. I have long watched you play and I strongly feel that you are not being given a chance to realize your potential as a top flight concert violinist.”

“I am flattered by your comments but I have no illusions about my musical skills. At best I am a decent amateur violinist,” Max replied.

“You are too modest. Your talent has not been realized for two reasons. The first one is the poor musicianship of the other members of the orchestra including the conductor who I think can hardly read music, let alone conduct. He hides his inability by his pomposity and inflated ego. A good conductor could raise the orchestra’s musicality to a more acceptable level. The second reason is the poor quality of your violin.”

At this point Max became intrigued by the owner’s comments because at some level he shared them but was always too meek to voice his displeasure with the other members of the orchestra. However the comment about the quality of his violin made him suspect that he was about to be exposed to a sales pitch.

“You are of course entitled to your opinion about the orchestra and its conductor. We are aware of our collective abilities but we have a loyal audience that accepts us for what we are. As to my violin, you are correct. I would love to own a Strad or an Amati but I can hardly afford the one in my possession,” Max sadly exclaimed.

“The current patronage of the orchestra is due to the fact that it is the only game in town and the orchestra’s patrons have gotten used to the local band of minstrels, with all its flaws. As for the quality of your violin, I suppose you think my motive is to sell you one at a price you cannot afford. Nothing can be further from the truth. I have a violin that will more than satisfy your needs and ability. I am willing to exchange it for yours at no extra cost to you. At the very least will you try it?”

Max was nonplussed by the offer. He agreed to test the violin, whereupon the owner went to the back of the store, reappearing with a beautiful violin case which he opened, displaying a magnificent looking instrument.

“You do not have to tune it nor will ever have to. It will always retain perfect concert pitch. Also, you will never have to change its strings or the strings on the bow. However remember to always use the bow that comes with it. Go ahead and try it out,” the owner urged.

Max was awed by the apparent quality of the instrument. He picked it up and started to play. If he was awed by its appearance, he was overwhelmed by what happened next. The violin seemed to find its own way under his chin and he started with a most difficult piece, a Paganini cadenza, something in his wildest dreams, he had never considered playing. He continued with a Bach partita for solo violin, another piece requiring the virtuosity of a master. The music was extraordinarily beautiful and the sound emanating from the violin was unique in its sonority and beauty. Max could hardly contain himself. The violin seemed to read his emotions and thoughts concerning the music and translate

them into heavenly musical sounds. He was weeping with joy and awe at what had transpired.

“Sir, as you can see, I do not have my violin with me. If you are willing to wait I will go and get it and return within ten minutes.”

“I trust you. You can take this violin with you right now and return with yours at your leisure.”

“Why are you willing to part with such an unusual and astonishing violin? It must be worth far more than anyone can pay.”

With what appeared to be a diabolical grin, the owner replied. “I have an informed and vested self interest. I love music and I wish to elevate its quality in this community. I am confident you will accomplish what I desire, using this violin.”

“But why me?” Max asked. “I am sure there are others far more talented than me.”

“Perhaps! However this instrument is not for everyone. A certain love of music and sensitivity is required for the proper bond between the instrument and its user. I did my homework and you fitted the bill perfectly.”

Hardly being able to contain himself, Max dashed home, and told a disbelieving Martita what had transpired. He grabbed his old violin and returned to the store. Much to his chagrin he found it closed. Every time he returned he found it closed until he noticed a sign that the store had gone out of business with no way to contact its former owner. This was beyond his understanding but he accepted it with some vexation and apprehension.

It took him a week to demonstrate his new found virtuosity and convince the orchestra's conductor and board to allow him to perform Beethoven's violin concerto, something never before attempted by the orchestra or for that matter its conductor. After two weeks of intensive rehearsals the concert took place. Unbeknownst to anyone a leading international musical critic, who happened to be in town visiting a relative, reluctantly and at the urging of his kin attended the concert. Needless to say he was swept away. The rest is history, at least that part of it.

Within a short period of time Max became an international celebrity and was considered by all to be the leading global musician of any musical genre. Besides playing the violin he became a conductor of renown. When he conducted he insisted upon using the bow of his violin as a baton. This was viewed as an eccentric quirk on the part of a musical genius. Every orchestra he conducted achieved a musical pinnacle it had never before attained. He was never seen without his violin. It went with him everywhere.

On the surface everything seemed ideal. However there were a couple setbacks unknown to the public. For unfathomable reasons, Max was a total failure as a composer. Each composition he attempted to create was either a copy of a famous work or did not have any merit whatsoever. While he accepted the fact that his talent was in interpreting music, either as a violinist or a conductor, his inability to compose rankled.

The second and more serious problem had to do with his marriage. For the first couple of years of Max's fame, Martita basked in his reflected glory. Her musical abilities were elevated to such an extent that she became a sought after cellist. However, she insisted upon playing only with an orchestra that Max was conducting either as a soloist or as a regular member of the orchestra. His attachment to his violin and her career started to put a strain upon their marriage. One night after another successful concert she confronted Max.

"I am not even a second fiddle to your fiddle. Your obsession with your violin and musical career has left me without a husband. We have not been intimate with each other since you acquired your instrument. We once were deeply in love with each other. That seems to have fallen by the wayside. It has become impossible for me to better your musical mistress despite it being an inanimate object. I am leaving you, Max. If and when you can rearrange your priorities then perhaps we can resume our marriage. For the time being, this is a separation, not a divorce."

Martita's declaration plunged Max into a state of somber reflection and depression. He clutched his violin tightly hoping it would console him. It did not. While he realized that she was right about his obsessive behavior he had no idea what to do about it. He knew that he had taken Martita for granted and that he would miss her terribly. He also realized that there was no way he could abandon his instrument and musical career. Was his obsession a sign that something was horribly wrong with him?

He sought help. He consulted leading psychiatrists and psychologists, to no avail. They were intimidated by this musical giant and offered no real help. He talked to other leading musicians, who did not even comprehend his dilemma. He turned to new age philosophers and followers of certain oriental cults, with similar results. Finally in desperation he managed to get a meeting with a leading cleric of the church. He had never having been a religious believer, but he was frantic. This particular cleric was reputed to be an empathic, wise and saintly man. After listening to Max's tale he pondered for a number of minutes in silence and then responded.

"Max, my son, you have been the victim of a mysterious con game, one that I can describe but cannot explain. You are not the first such injured party. It is not limited to musicians but to many other areas where technology and ideas can be quite influential.

From the moment you received the violin you were under the impression that this marvelous instrument was translating your musical feelings and thoughts into music, most glorious. The truth is that the exact reverse was occurring. You were echoing the instrument's version of the music, not your own. In other words, you became the instrument, the slave. For whom or for what I do not know, although I have been seeking an answer for many years.

The clue that leads me to this conclusion is your admitted inability to compose. Does it not seem odd that a musical genius, is a complete dud when it comes to creating original music? You are limited to playing and conducting, both interpretive activities. A true genius would easily transcend these confines. History is replete with such examples."

Quite perturbed, Max could not refrain from interjecting.

“Father, why me? Why was I chosen for this cruel joke? Is it possible that you are misinterpreting what happened? If you are right, can it be corrected?”

“I do not think I am mistaken. I have come across other situations very similar to yours. As to why you were selected, I suspect that it is because of your vulnerability. All of humanity’s behavior, individually and collectively, can be and is affected by ideas and technology. At the individual level it is mostly at low intensity. The same cannot be said at the social level. There are a few, such as you, that are far, far more receptive. Perhaps you and the others are guinea pigs in some elaborate experiment. Finally, I have tried to obliterate this curse, I have failed. I do not think there is a remedy. Your only hope is that those responsible will tire of it and then remove this bane of your existence.”

“Father, you seem to have profound knowledge of this malediction. By any chance are you one of the afflicted ones and if so what was the instrument used?”

“Sadly, I too am one of you. I became an instrument of the cross.”

Jack Basuk

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