THE BRASS PANDEMONIUM

Published by Lindsay Johannsen at Smashwords
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National Library Of Australia Cataloguing-in-publication data:
Author: Johannsen, Lindsay Andrew
Title: The Brass Pandemonium

Cover art and design bungled by the author.

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THE BRASS PANDEMONIUM

“…A brass pandemonium?” you say. “Yeah, sure. Like to go with your lead violin.”

And, yes; I admit: pandemoniums were constructed almost entirely of wood, and different exotic woods at that. They were also relics of the past and played an important part in the early evolutionary history of the piano. I accept, too, that the idea of one being made of brass would seem, by any stretch of the imagination, an almost ludicrous notion. And yet such an instrument did actually exist.

It may even have survived, too, and as I write this be residing in a derelict barn somewhere in a backwater mountain valley, half covered in decomposing hay and with chooks nesting amid the dust and cobwebs of its nether regions. More likely, though, it will have fallen foul of a scrap metal merchant at some time and been melted down to make souvenir horse brasses for the tourist trade. Whatever the case, though, it was on
this unlikely contrivance that I learned largely to play, and it in turn, by virtue of this experience, was to play largely in my journey through life. But let me explain.

To the best of my memory, the events associated with the business of the brass pandemonium actually began somewhere around the middle of 1965. I was a just a stripling sprat of ten summers about then, beavering away at my school desk in the poison ivy and mould infested greystone classrooms of St Cuspidor’s.

Now, St Cuspidors, as you’re no doubt aware, is one of our more progressive private schools and was the first in the country to become co-educational – an event which shot it to prominence long before I was ever enrolled there. According to school legend, the change was engineered single-handedly by the School Principal of the day, in circumstances later described (in what passed then for sensationalist media) as, “highly controversial”.

This person possessed all the right qualifications and connections and, on being appointed to the position, soon became known as a genuine reformer and a jolly fine chap. Four years later, however, goal achieved and gone never to be seen again, he (she) was found to have been a highly committed, single-minded individual of the radical feminist persuasion. In disguise.

This took place long before the advent of computers etc, you understand, at a time when an Australian citizen was not obliged to carry identification of any sort; at a time when, to a large extent, one’s word was one’s bond. And, being such an upstanding chap and a sound feller to boot, her excellently forged documents were never really scrutinized – though as a member of the St Cuspidor’s Board of Executives was later heard to remark, “How were we to know? I mean her mustache was certainly genuine.”

On this particular day our Master had abruptly excused himself and left the classroom, allowing me the opportunity of demonstrating highlights from the previous weekend’s footy match. And there I was, in the aisle with my back to the door and about to show how I’d secured victory in the game’s dying minutes by taking a spectacular mark just ten metres from the goalposts, when unbeknown to me he returned.

Coincidentally, and at the same precise moment as I leapt to catch the ball, the girl at the desk behind me chose to make another entry in the ledger of our long running feud (so to speak) – she having found herself sitting thuswise to myself in every class since Grade I – and did so by extending her dainty foot a centimetre or two farther into the aisle (quite inadvertently, she later claimed).

Words can only fail to describe the ensuing chaos. Girls screamed, boys shouted, desks went crashing and chairs broke as I landed gracelessly about three rows back, books and ink spraying everywhere. (It was pens and inkwells in those days you see, and the monitor had only just during the lunch break refilled them.)

Our Master, meanwhile, stood by his desk, glaring all the while at the pandemonium with an expression of extreme disapproval. He was well accustomed to our rowdy behavior but was particularly wary of the thing residing at the back of our classroom. It was a temperamental old instrument at the best of times and given to spontaneously detuning itself – suddenly, noisily and often for no apparent reason whatever (other than being surreptitiously banged against the wall by five or six of us in his absence). In fact he seemed terrified of the thing and had, ever since its overhauling in readiness for the St Cuspidor’s speech night, protested long and loud about its being
returned there. It was almost as if he were certain of its bringing down some terrible fate upon us – in the middle of a Friday test perhaps, or during one of these little classroom contretemps.

And alas, how right he was to be proven, though this was not to happen at the hands of we eager, fresh-faced pupils. (But I digest.)

Master watched for a few moments as we set about righting desks and gathering books and broken chairs etc, but then suddenly let forth a piercing scream and sprinted from the room – never, it transpired, to be seen again (certainly by us, at any rate). Judging by the manner of his exit, we scholastic innocents quickly arrived at the conclusion that he’d be away for some time and immediately set about ransacking his desk in an effort to find the questions to next Friday’s test.

We failed to find them, but we did discover in his waste basket a scrunchled-up solicitor’s letter – *Wherein and To Wit notwithstanding any Previous Claims and Statements to the Contrary or Otherwise and Without Prejudice, the Aforesaid Appellant and Party Of The First Part Miss Rita May Bubbles (the school's junior secretary), was claiming ex parabulum that The Party Of The Second Part, Mr Bruceforth Warrington Smarm (our fleetfooted master of recent departure) was the father of her swelling, um ...

Swelling.*

As I may have intimated earlier, we never saw him again, though none of this came as a surprise to we denizens of the school desk, having noticed how increasingly tense and distracted he’d become. Later we began to wonder if we’d acted as some sort of catalyst to his crisis – not that any of us were much good at acting.

And Rita May must have remembered there was someone else after all, because this round and pimply smug-looking moon-faced young lady was soon observed being squired around by a thin and pimply smug-looking weasel-faced young man. How apt.

Meanwhile, the school’s prized pandemonium – unbeknown to all concerned and right before our very eyes – was being demolished from the inside by a thriving colony of termites, all of which caused it to violently implode one day as we gathered around it for our afternoon singing lesson, at the precise moment Mrs Perriwinkle struck the introductory chord to “Ho-ro My Nut Brown Maiden” (arguably her favourite song). As a result of this she imagined the instrument’s destruction to be *her* fault somehow. And so traumatised did it leave her that in all her remaining years she was never known to raise her hand to another pandemonium keyboard, ever again.

We choral angels were glad of the respite, however, having practised the piece solidly for months in readiness for our speech night performance. More significantly (for me at least), it also appeared to be the end of our pandemonium lessons – or would be until another could be found (if and when). And there was no replacing it with something more conventional, either. Maintaining tradition ran deep at St Cuspiders. This instrument had been gifted by the school’s founder and principal benefactor, so nothing less would do. It simply had to be a pandemonium; St Cuspiders would not be complete without one.

The search undertaken proved long and fruitless, but then – almost providentially – a pandemonium was discovered by the school’s diving master in the reef-waters off Point Calamitous. A preliminary appraisal of the instrument showed it to be essentially undamaged and in reasonable condition generally, though his assessment was brief and superficial due to the slightly inconvenient presence therein of a very large octopus.
Following this he returned to St Cuspidors and reported his find to the School Principal and together they plotted its recovery, with the salvage operation they mounted a week later on a dark and moonless night being carried out in great secrecy – after first dispossessing the sleeping octopus. The reason for their caution was the diving master’s sighting on its discovery of a small plate attached to the instrument’s front panel, the inscription on which was perfectly legible.

“Not to be removed”, it declared in elegantly engraved lettering, “from the Officer’s Wardroom of HMS Trepan”.

As a result, the first thing the pair did after stowing it in the school’s lockup shed and returning the hired crane, transport gear and marine salvage equipment, was to remove the plate which so clearly identified the instrument’s origins. Neither was keen on exposing himself to any salvage-rights issues vis-a-vis items lost from a Royal Navy man-o’-war, no matter how long ago, certainly given the possibility that the Golden Thread of British Law might even now extend to as far as them, both in distance and time.

That done and disguised, the pair revealed their prize to the country’s sole pandemonium expert, the person who once a year had so reliably tuned and fumigated their old cedar and mahogany-clad instrument. There followed a brief period of unfeigned astonishment, following which the fellow began examining its workings.

Generally speaking, he said on reappearing a little while later, it was in remarkably good condition, due mainly to the fact that the whole thing – cabinet, keyboard, frame, di-epicyclic hammer action mechanism and rotating dampers – had all been fabricated from virgin brass, much like one he’d read about somewhere, reported as being thrown overboard in an act of desperation by a British man-o’-war’s crew during colonial times. A good clean up and polish, he added brightly, a new set of strings, feathers and felts, the reciprocating toggle-cam’s timing elements recalibrated and the thing would be as good as new.

And in due course these matters were attended to, though for my money the tone and timbre of the lower octaves lacked body and mellowness, while the upper registers sounded thin.

Mrs Periwinkle was to stay on at St Cuspidors after all this, a sort of hands-off music teacher. And it was only by virtue of her patient determination and the leg irons she’d attached to the mainframe that led to my becoming known in international circles as one of the most accomplished pandemonium players ever to grace the world stage – certainly until that terrible incident at Carnegie Hall.

It was during the fourth week of my sensational sell-out concert there, I remember, when the volatile operatic prima donna, Miss Helgizee Rhinedraagen, arrived in town to perform the lead role in Mostogrosso’s production of Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*. Arrangements had been put in place for her to make a number of promotional appearances as guest artist at my own concert but, on her first night, part way through the second item, she took exception to what she believed was a misplayed note (but which was, in fact, the C sharp 3 string breaking), whereupon she threw, firstly me, then the pandemonium, bodily, into the orchestra pit, after which… But you’ll remember all this from the highly sensationalized reports that appeared in the media, of course, so there’s no point in my dredging through the whole sordid business again.
Probably the greatest part of this tragedy was the discovery in the pandemonium’s wreckage of evidence proving it to be the only one ever made by Antonio Stradivari. The existence of such an instrument is well documented in letters written to his sister, now held in the archival collections of The British Museum. In one he laments the difficulty of obtaining a particular type and quality of Lignum Vitae, the only wood dense enough and strong enough to withstand the terrible stresses posed by the strings being drawn to their proper pitch – this due to the unreliability of shipments from the South American continent.

In another he comments that, “…upon its completion and for the foreseeable future I fully intend to stick at making instruments of more manageable proportions and, to this end, am awaiting a consignment of material in that I might have a go at making a banjo.” Whether he did or not is not known, however, as no record of his doing so exists. Nor has a Stradivarius banjo ever come to light.

You will understand, of course, how because of this unfortunate and embarrassing incident I was never to play the pandemonium again – though at first I was reluctant to accept the fact and kept working toward a broadly heralded, triumphant return. I simply believed my career as the world’s leading virtuoso pandemoneist had, during a moment of critical acclaim, suffered a temporary setback. Certainly I was confident of my ultimate return to the world stage.

None of this was meant to be, however, for as time went by it became apparent, even to me, that without any fingers on my right hand my technique was no longer up to that which the more discerning and critical cognoscenti had come to expect.

Around this time, as it happened, because of my well known and highly respected palæntological and other qualifications, I was invited to join Sir Cambrian ffellows as principal consultant to his Expedition of Discovery into the Mongolian Hinterland. Following much deliberation I accepted the position, but only after a good deal of anguish and soul-searching was I finally and reluctantly able to accept the bitter truth about my musical career.

There was of course that ugly business of Miss Rhinedraagen claiming I was harassing and victimising her, and that I’d been doing so ever since our brief affair and my subsequent plunge into the woodwind section. And I should just like to state here, how it is well known to many people, including the likes of Sir Cambrian ffellows RSVP, that at the time in question I was in the Gobi Desert collecting dinosaur eggs – so it couldn’t have been moi, regardless of what she might say.

And besides, who was she to talk, after setting her bloody rottweiler onto me. That is to say, the way she was carrying on she probably would have had I been there. Which I wasn’t. Which information was relayed to me by my solicitor. By letter. The scars on my leg being occasioned by nothing more than an irate, small Mongolian horse. In Mongolia.

Eventually I moved to Central Australia and, to maintain an element of anonymity, shaved my head and grew a luxuriant beard. And here I still live in my own quiet fashion, well away from the sight of those who might think to gain by announcing my discovery to the world.

And I must say, that when I read recently of how the greatly acclaimed Diva, Miss Helgizée Rhinedraagen, had married the Sultan of Flambashistan I breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief.
I was free at last of her mad obsession! Free at last to contact Señor Dua Vanillamolto at his modest little workshop in the mountain village of San Gelatin, the only person in the world still able to make these most complex of instruments. Until now Miss Rhinedraagen’s agents would have been stationed there, watching and waiting for me night and day.

And in my heart I feel certain, that for moi, The Maestro, the Prince of the Pandemissioforte, he will grant the inestimable boon of designing and building the one thing that will again render my life complete.

Yes; a left handed pandemonium.

And in closing, dear friend of my uncle’s nephew, let me just say Eau reservoir, as the French do – until we meet again.

Trues Yourly,

Yasdlin Nesnnohaj