

Le Maître sans Marteau (1955)

cantate populaire

pour deux récitants, solistes, chœur geek
et non précisées ensemble instrumental

by David Jason Snow

Make up the music as you go along. I suggest underpinning the narration with a continuous up-tempo jazz waltz vamp on drums and walking bass, with atonal chord comping on piano. Or whatever. Just keep it soft so we can hear the words.

1re partie: Avant “L’artisanat fourrure”

Chorus: Did you ever stop and wonder
who the music’s really for,
why the music’s such a bore,
Why no one is listening anymore?

Brain-rot is the latest rage,
mindless music for a mindless age.
Your head’s asleep,
emotions freeze,
brain turns into cottage cheese.

Do you ever stop to ponder
who this situation means?
Who needs people
when you got machines?

Munchkins in the music schools
are hacking out the music rules,
rules you need for advanced degrees
in turning minds into cottage cheese.

They sit and talk their munchkin words
and drop their notes like little birds,
skimpy little music turds,
the Music of the Future.

Nobody cares, the glory’s faded.
Their heads and ears are constipated.
Maybe they are over-rated
but don’t let on.

2e partie: “Petite peau de solitude”

Narrator 1: This is the saga of Winton Flash,
Narrator 2: the musician who wouldn't die.
Chorus: Winton Flash!
Narrator 1: When Winton was just a little nip, music was already dead.
Narrator 2: Well, not exactly dead, but out of style, which is about as good as dead.
Narrator 1: Emotions were out of style too, for that matter.
Narrator 2: If you wanted a meaningful experience, you could just plug electrodes into
your head and flip a switch, no muss,
Narrator 1: no fuss. That way you got the aesthetic buzz without wasting precious
time,
Narrator 2: and you could do it over and over again and still get the same effect,
Narrator 1: just like television. So anyway, if you wanted music, there were machines
for that.
Narrator 2: They didn't always used to be machines,
Narrator 1: they used to be people
Narrator 2: until they got famous and rich enough to coat their bodies in Teflon,
Narrator 1: and sell their vital organs for profit. Back to our story
Narrator 2: Early on in life, Winton showed signs of precocious talent.

[LOUD BANGING NOISES.]

Father: What the hell is that?
Mother: Little bastard's banging his head against the wall again. Cut it out!

[MOTHER SMACKS WINTON.]

Winton: Waahhhhhh!
Narrator 1: Seizing upon the lucrative possibilities inherent in the situation, his
parents immediately contact a local booking agent.
Agent: Yeah, what can he do?
Father: He bangs his head against the wall.
Agent: Lot's of kids do that.
Father: But in rhythm. Go ahead, bang your head. Bang your head, damn it.

[FATHER SMACKS WINTON.]

Bang your head when I tell you, you little shit.

Winton: Waahhhhhh!

Narrator 1: A career is launched!

Narrator 2: Winton tours the states and brings pubescent teenagers to their knees, banging their heads on the floor.

Narrator 1: A stint in Europe, and trendy jet-setters take to plastic day-glo paddles for kinky head-smashing soirees.

Narrator 2: On a State Department tour of the Chinese People's Republic, the traditional obeisance is replaced by faddish cranial collision.

Narrator 1: Through it all, Winton maintains objective distance between purely artistic ambitions and his commercial commitments.

Winton: My head hurts.

Narrator 2: But it isn't long before public fascination with the prodigy wears thin, and a desperate struggle to maintain public acceptance begins.

[CHORUS SNORES LOUDLY.]

Jaded fan 1: What's he doing now?

Jaded fan 2: Flaying his scalp.

Jaded fan 1: [YAWNS.] Oh.

Narrator 1: Winton is sucked into a vortex of despair as audiences abandon him in droves to new fads and crazes, like:

Narrator 2: amputee disco,

Narrator 1: trans-species line-dancing,

Narrator 2: recreational epilepsy.

Narrator 1: A has-been by the age of three, Winton seeks professional counseling.

Therapist: You tell me your mother hated you, your father despised you, your agent loathed you, and now your only solace, your public, has abandoned you. You may be asking yourself, "What is there of enduring value in my life?" Well, Winton, you have art. Your art.

Narrator 2: Yes, Winton had his art. And with the lonely determination that is the mark of the artist, he threw himself into his work with ferocious energy. Winton Flash vowed to become a composer.

Chorus: [Applaud, and *ad lib* variously:]

Ooh.

Aah.

A composer, exceptional!

Bravo.

Molto bene.

[etc.]

Narrator 1: Not many people were writing music in those days.

Narrator 2: If you wanted to write music, there were dark vaults hundreds of feet underground where absolutely nobody could see or hear you.

Narrator 1: And if you got this special license, you could sit in this cold, dark vault all day long and struggle with notes.

Narrator 2: I mean, really struggle.

Narrator 1: I mean, these guys would agonize for days over one lousy note because it had to be the right one,

Narrator 2: because if it wasn't the right one, the whole thing would suck.

Narrator 1: I mean, there was no point in writing it down at all if it wasn't the right one because it wouldn't go good.

Narrator 2: See what I mean?

Narrator 1: So anyway these guys would get together occasionally and show each other how good the notes would go together and get their rocks off this way.

Narrator 2: Nobody ever listened to what they wrote, but that was beside the point.

Narrator 1: And it was all too hard to play anyway. But you had to have a license to do this because it was a very difficult job, and you couldn't let just any schmuck push notes around like that, you had to have a license to show that you knew what it was all about.

Narrator 2: So Winton enrolled in a special school to get a composing license.

Narrator 1: The place gave him the willies:

Narrator 2: dark, cobwebby corners,

Narrator 1: dim, smoky corridors that led nowhere in the gloom,

Narrator 2: and the faint pervading stink of something dead.

Narrator 1: It was most unpleasant.

Narrator 2: And then there was the inscrutable Herr Doktor Schimmel.

Schimmel: Zo, you vant to be a composer, eh? Vell, you hef to write masterpieces hier, ve will only accept masterpieces. Writink music is not a bowl of cherries, it is a colossal pain in ze ass. If you are hafink fun, you are not writink music, you are writink junk. Junk is fun, music is sufferink. Ve haf got to hear ze sufferink in efery note. First of all, you must write only vun note at a time. Zen you must justify vhy you chose zat note and not anozer note, and vunce you haf satisfied us sufficiently zat you haf made ze right choice, zen you may write anozer. It is a painful process.

Narrator 1: Winton's period of adjustment *was* painful. There were endless classes, lectures, seminars, pro-seminars, discussion groups, colloquia, meetings, conferences, conventions...

Narrator 2: Most of the time everyone wore earmuffs and carried around tweezers and magnifying glasses, because when they all alone, and safe, and sure that absolutely no one could see or hear them, they would crawl into their underground vaults, close the door tight, and by the light of one miserable little candle they would take their tweezers and pick up a tiny, tiny, tiny pencil. And with this tiny, tiny pencil they would scrunch up real close to the paper, and straining their eyes with all the focus and concentration they could muster, they would write one, tiny, tiny note. That's all, just one tiny note. Sometimes it would take hours. Sometimes it would take days, but it was never easy. Writing masterpieces is a very difficult thing to do, and it takes a lot of sweat. Winton had to be very careful, because he knew that although nobody ever listened to music, if he ever intentionally wrote a wrong note, the entire foundation of civilization was threatened. So he tried very, very hard to do things the right way. He

would check his charts, and take his magnifying glass, and with his composing tweezers move notes in to positions as carefully as he could.

Narrator 1: But time and time again Schimmel ranked him out.

Schimmel: You shtupit peon, you! Zis is not profound, zis is not greatness! Zis is junk, you are hafink fun! You are not here to enchoy yourzelf, you are here to create art. You are panzering to ze masses and zeir “boogie-voogie.” I do not vant “boogie-voogie” here, I vant perfection. Go!

Narrator 2: Whatever notes Winton chose, they almost never seemed to be the right ones. He began to get the feeling that he would never comprehend the profundity of music, but merely enjoy it, like an ignorant slob.

Occasionally he stumbled across a few good notes, but was repeatedly called to task for not being able to explain them.

Schimmel: Vat do you mean, “It sounds goot?” And deaf fool could spout such trivialities. Ve are concerned vit ze specific contextual significance and moment-to-moment continuities uf pre-established invertallic hierarchies, obviously. Ve dunt gif a rat’s ass about your bourgeois impressions.

Narrator 1: It looked like Winton was incapable of composing a masterpiece,

Narrator 2: or even recognizing one if it hit him in the face,

Narrator 1: and the pressure was taking it’s toll.

Narrators 1-2: The boy needed a release.

Pervert: In his bed late one night, Winton crawled under the covers with a flashlight, took a crayon, and in a fit of wonton lust, scrawled big, wrong notes all over his sheets. The spectacle filled him with a mixture of disgust and naughty delight.

Narrator 2: But he burned the sheets before his harmonic ejaculations were discovered.

Narrator 1: Winton began a steady decline from the realm of high culture. He took to smoking record vinyl and reading Billboard magazine.

Narrator 2: He would leave arbitrary pitch collections out where people could trip over them, and give bloody noses to musicologists in arguments over unsubstantiated hypotheses.

Narrator 1: He would interrupt deep and penetrating discussions with comments like,

Chorus: "Where'd the melody go?

Narrator 2: and,

Chorus: "Name that tune!"

Narrator 1: Such behavior could not go unchallenged.

Narrator 2: He finally got canned.

Schimmel: You do not deserve a composing license! You are a superficial hack, a fraud, a fake, a tunester, a Burt Bacharach. Ve don't like your kind, go home! Become a plumber, do somezink useful, but don't write music!

Narrator 1: Winter plunged still further into degradation and bad taste. He initiated a one-man anti-pollution campaign against composers, and bought up the best seats at concerts for derelict alcoholics.

Narrator 2: But he finally got thrown in the slammer for placing small compositions in plastic bags and selling them to kids on the street. The charge:

Narrator 1: Artistic endeavor without a license.

Narrator 2: Winton eluded the law and went underground, collection about himself a band of guerilla musicians with whom he rehearsed in secret for years. taking refuge against the thickening tide of mysterious yellow sludge that was beginning to ooze under the doors of all major social institutions.

Narrator 1: In their underground laboratories the developed and perfected a potent new secret weapon aimed against the entrenched and corrupt musical regime:

Chorus: The Waldwarf-Hysteria Campaign 2000 Orchestra!

Narrator 2: When at last the age was ripe for revolution, troops were mobilized and a siege was laid against the Old School. An ultimatum was delivered to their door:

Chorus: Hang it up in there, or we'll blow your pants off!

Schimmel: Yeah, you and who else, you tone-deaf eater of sheep excrement? You untutored organ-grinder, you! Vhy don't you go back to Tin Pan Alley where you cam from, eh? You movie-house hack! You overblown marching band arranger! You compromising, Arthur Fiedler, son-of-a-

disco-dancer phony-baloney! Who do you think you are, anyway? Vhat gives you the right....

Chorus: Fire!

3e partie: “Belle salle de bain et accessoires”

[EXTENDED FREE IMPROVISATION.]

4e partie: Après "l'artisanat fourrure"

Narrator 1: Much to everyone's surprise, when the smoke cleared, nobody was hurt,

Narrator 2: although in the heat of battle, some of the composers were stripped naked by the crazy force of the orchestra.

Narrator 1: Nevertheless, the walls of the school had come tumbling down,

Narrator 2: and sunlight streamed in where before all was dark and obscure.

Winton: And that damned stink was gone, too.

Schimmel: Vinton, I shtill loathe your feeble und undisciplined musicalische Dreckhaufen. But I'm glad you flattened that crummy building, I vas gettink claustrophobic in dere. I can shtrech mine arms out now, do mine Pilates. Vun und two und tree und zetz!

Chorus: Vun und two und tree und zetz!

Narrator 1: Winton never did get a composing license,

Narrator 2: But he never seemed to care very much either.

Narrator 1: Winton remained convinced to his dying day that music,

Narrator 2: like all of life's necessary ecstasies,

Narrator 1: is a gift.

Narrator 2: A gift.

Chorus: A gift!

Narrator 1: For the gifted,

Narrator 2: and ungifted alike.

Schimmel: Vun und two und tree und...

All: Zetz!

END