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Breaking every rule every music student was taught: Schickele (left) performing with singer Archie Worley

## Classical Trash

P.D.Q. Bach at Carnegie Hall  
BY KYLE GANN

**W**alking home from a downtown bakery with a marzipan bassoon he had special-ordered, Professor Peter Schickele, of the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople, slipped on a piece of paper on the sidewalk and fell, crushing the bassoon. Curiosity compelled him, of course, to look at the piece of paper, which, quite predictably, turned out to be yet another original manuscript by the mythical subject of the professor's voluminous researches, P.D.Q. Bach (1807-1742). A set of four lieder in search of a world premiere, P.D.Q.'s *Four Next to Last Songs* was the pretext for yet another offering of P.D.Q. Bach at Carnegie Hall and added Franz Schubert to the growing list of hapless composers (from W.F. Bach and Mozart to Copland and Glass) pilloried beneath the all-embracing persona of the Classical Era's most celebrated incompetent.

John Zorn calls Carl Stalling, who was responsible for the Warner Bros. cartoon music, the true father figure for the avant-garde, but my candidate is Schickele. When I first heard his (or rather P.D.Q. Bach's) music on WRR radio in Dallas when I was 14, it was, beyond its nightmarish qualities, the music I had dreamed of. It was my first exposure to collage, bitonality, musical satire, orchestral surrealism. Because I became familiar with Schickele's "Unbegun" symphony long before I heard the Brahms Second and the other pieces it parodied, I didn't get the jokes so much as I discovered a bizarre melodic stream of consciousness. And what was most wonderful about the music was that it was not *only* funny, but that the melodies had a memorably skewed logic. Pity me if you will, but I can say that P.D.Q. Bach's *Concerto for Horn and Hardart* played a part in the formation of my aesthetics.

Some 17 years later I heard my first P.D.Q. Bach concert out in Chicago and was disappointed that, by then, Schickele had reduced so much of his musicologically mischievous humor to slapstick. He must have been playing to yokels then, though, for he didn't pull any punches for his 1998 Carnegie Hall crowd. To translate Schubert's *Erlkönig* as *The Oil Baron* and claim that he wrote the only song cycle ever written about antifreeze—*Die Winterizer*—are not very good jokes, but they do require an audience that knows the repertoire. Likewise, when, in the middle of his piano-and-orchestra prelude to *Einstein on the Fritz*, he began chanting on a low pitch the formula "Koy-hotsti-totsi," the

laughter gave the reassuring impression that Philip Glass's *Koyaanisqatsi* is a cultural reference widely known enough to riff on.

*Einstein on the Fritz* measures the depth of what Schickele can get away with. A musicologist could point out that minimalism has precedents in earlier styles, and a musical humorist could cleverly take Glass to task for his clichés. But Schickele's *Einstein*, brimming with every doodle, syncopation, and arpeggio Glass has overused over the years, turns out to be based on the harmonic progression of J.S. Bach's C Major Prelude from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and thus makes both points at once and in profound detail. Same went for P.D.Q.'s *Blaues Gras* (Bluegrass) Cantata. Lots of Downtown style-mixers have fused classical and vernacular idioms, but it took Schickele, under the indulged cover of a bad composer's persona, to boldly mix guitar, banjo, and mandolin in with quotations from the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in a way that capitalized on the differences while also making the similarities obvious.

The *Four Next to Last Songs* were fairly credible Schubert imitations, humorous primarily in the texts, which were couched in a dialect between German and English that Schickele called "Deunglish." (The title is a takeoff on Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. Actually, several years ago a Strauss song written *after* the *Four Last Songs* was found—this is true—so they too should really be called *Die Vier Penultimate Lieder*.) To Schickele's accompaniment, tenor Archie Worley eloquently sang punch lines such as "Dein keister ist grass" and "Mein namen ist Verklarung, but you can call me Tod." Some of the humor sank even lower. In *Blaues Gras* Schickele noted his use of a new kind of harmonica for which you don't have to worry about finding the right hole, you just blow: the Harmonica Lowinsky. To the ensuing groans he threatened, "Remember, I can take more of this than you can."

Beneath such drivel is buried the true genius of Peter Schickele. It popped up in moments like that in *Blaues Gras* where, in a melody cadencing on the notes B-C, the harmony was B major-C major instead of the stylistically predictable V-I. Beneath his veneer of white-trash musicology, Schickele breaks every rule every music student was ever taught, and tries out all those tempting, almost-plausible harmonic progressions that are forbidden in music school and then, later in life, equally forbidden in serious composition. He's publicly lamented that his more highbrow music isn't well known—I admit I haven't heard any of it in years. But he shouldn't harbor regrets, for in P.D.Q. Bach he has single-handedly mapped a musical universe that everyone knew was there and no one else had the guts (not simply the bad taste) to explore. **V**