

In the 1st Person: May 2004

NewMusicBox

Make 'em Laugh

In the Kitchen with [Peter Schickele](#) (a.k.a. P.D.Q. Bach), Manhattan
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Videotaped and transcribed by [Randy Nordschow](#)

Friends often tell me that I have no sense of humor. I don't relate to stand-up comedy, I rarely tell jokes, and I usually don't laugh at funny movies. But I love humorous anecdotes and I actually laugh out loud on an almost daily basis. Go figure. One's sense of humor is difficult to quantify.

When I was in high school I went to a P.D.Q. concert at Carnegie Hall. I didn't laugh. I didn't think it was funny. I was too busy feeling that musical experimentation was being made fun of and being trivialized. But I missed the point.

Many years later, I came to love a disc of chamber music by Peter Schickele featuring the Lark Quartet. Schickele, the perpetrator of P.D.Q. Bach, was writing music that would not have been possibly without minimalism, but which wasn't minimalism. What was it? It was hard to describe. It felt informed by so many layers of musical history, past and present, popular, classical, every thing in between.

It made me dig up some P.D.Q. Bach recordings. Listening to them with the memories of Schickele the composer still engrained in my brain gave them new meaning for me. And, upon occasion, I even laughed.

Sometimes we all take ourselves a little too seriously. Enjoy...

-FJO

Composer and Humorist

Frank J. Oteri: We've never done one of these in a kitchen before.

Peter Schickele: But a kitchen is where a lot of people spend most of their social lives. You go to a party and everyone ends up in the kitchen, so it's a good place to do it.

Frank J. Oteri: Doing this in a kitchen brings up an interesting metaphor, because in a way a composition is a recipe. We did come here to talk about the very different ingredients you use as a composer—it's almost schizophrenic if I may be so bold as to call it that—and how it all began, and this whole question of whether serious music can be funny. It's sort of an oxymoron.

Peter Schickele: Uh-huh. [*laughs*] Well of course the term serious music is a comparatively recent one. I mean, I don't think they used it the way we do in the 18th century. My mother once told me that I've been entertaining people since I was eighteen months old. I told that to one of the cellists in the [P.D.Q. Bach](#) Orchestra here in New York and she said, "What took you so long?" I'm sort of a born entertainer in that sense. Unlike many composers, I was not a child prodigy at all in term of music. I liked music when I was a kid. When I was eight years old my parents said I had to take piano lessons for one summer and if I didn't like it I could quit. I didn't like it and I quit. It wasn't until I was about twelve years old that I started to fool around on a clarinet that my mother had played in college.

Now, when I was around ten years old, which was the mid '40s, there was a very popular comedy band called [Spike Jones and the City Slickers](#). They did take-offs on the popular songs of the day, but also on some of the most popular

classics like the *Nutcracker* and *Carmen*. I became a Spike Jones freak. I spent much of my allowance money on Spike Jones records. My brother and I and our friends would sit around, particularly in the summer, lip-synching these records for each other for hours on end. Years later when I turned my own kids on to the records, I found I could still lip-synch them syllable for syllable.

During my early teenage years my brother and I put together a band that consisted of two clarinets, violin, and tom tom called Jerky Jim and his Balmy Brothers—I think you can see whom we were imitating there. So I sort of backed into music through the theatrical or comedic side of it. What happened was I started making arrangements for this dorky little band for our funny stage show—I'm sort of glad that there aren't any movies of that because it was probably much less funny than I thought it was at the time—but I also started arranging folk songs for the group that were perfectly straightforward. I was literally learning how to put notes on paper and everything. Looking back on it, that's a pattern that has remained true my whole life: just doing humorous stuff and serious stuff side by side. By the end of my freshmen year in college—I went to [Swarthmore](#) before I went to [Juilliard](#)—I knew that composing was what I wanted to do. So that schizophrenia that you referred to was sort of built in from the beginning.

Frank J. Oteri: The [description of you in the Grove dictionary](#)—the end all be all source for music history—refers to you as: American composer, arranger, and humorist. Is that accurate and fair?

Peter Schickele: That seems fair to me. I don't do much arranging now, but particularly in the late '60s I arranged for [Joan Baez](#) and [Buffy Sainte-Marie](#). I arranged some of the music for *Fantasia 2000*, a Disney thing. The composing of course for me is on two sides, but they're not as separate for me as they are for a lot of people. I have sketchbooks that are sort of my musical diary in a way. I think there are forty of them now, going back to 1960. Sometimes it will be just a chord or two measures on a page, sometimes it will be a whole movement that I wrote on the road. Once in a while there is a sketch that goes into one of those sketchbooks that I'm not sure is going to be a [Peter Schickele](#) piece or a [P.D.Q. Bach](#) discovery. I feel like they've influenced each other. But obviously anyone who has seen—even heard the albums—but certainly seen the live performances of P.D.Q. Bach knows there is a lot of spoken and visual humor in addition to the musical humor. So, that seems like a good description to me.

How to Make Music Funny

Frank J. Oteri: A lot of the [P.D.Q. Bach](#) stuff that is funny is extramusical—the titles, the stage antics—but there are also things that are sonically funny. So what makes something funny as sound? What makes something funny that's exclusively musical?

Peter Schickele: I think that's a very interesting question because at any given time I think there are very few musical humorists if you discount funny words. Even [Victor Borge](#), whom I loved, a lot of his shtick was his not getting around to playing the piano. He'd start to play and then he'd think of something more to say. With [Stan Freberg](#), much if not most of the humor was the words. It's tricky and it had a lot to do with context. One of my favorite P.D.Q. Bach pieces is the [Cantata "Blaues Gras"](#), the "Blue Grass Cantata." Part of the fun in that is the incongruity of the banjo with a Baroque orchestra, and yet the banjo is actually quite close to a Japanese instrument like the koto; it's not inherently funny in the sense that the planets go around the sun.

Frank J. Oteri: And the banjo sounds somewhat similar to a harpsichord.

Peter Schickele: That's right. A lot of it has to do with context. I have an old album, for instance, of old Japanese court music—very austere music, some of the most serious music ever written—but many Westerners when they hear that for the first time are going to laugh. [*sings and imitates Gagaku*] It sounds funny out of context if you don't know the background.

To answer your question systematically, one category is funny sounds, which we may think of sometimes as being inherently funny but it is culturally biased. For instance there's a P.D.Q. Bach instrument called the tromboon, which has a bassoon reed inserted into a trombone instead of the mouthpiece and you get a sound sort of like a sick cow in the upper register and a squadron of planes going over in the lower. It really sounds funny in a classical context, but, for instance, we all know there's jazz where they get really growly sounds not meaning to be particularly funny, just meaning to be very down and dirty. Another area of funny sounds is things you don't even associate with music like pistol shots. [Spike Jones](#) always had a pistol player in the orchestra and he also played on tuned coffee cans—they were actually cowbells. Another sound he used was breaking glass, for instance, to illustrate a word or something like that. So those are sounds we don't even think of as even having to do with music. Then another one, as you mentioned, is funny words. We'll leave

that because there's less to say about titles and lyrics. Then the other one is the humor of how the music behaves. Here again that's very culturally oriented. Many P.D.Q. Bach pieces, particularly the earlier discoveries, tended to start off being somewhat normal for awhile to sort of establish the norm before weird things start happening. There are several categories of weird things I guess. One is if all of a sudden some jazz lick comes in or some rock 'n' roll thing.

Frank J. Oteri: Something unexpected.

Peter Schickele: Right. Those particular notes wouldn't necessarily be funny in a jazz context or in a roll 'n' roll context, but they are coming after a Mozartian phrase. Then another one that you often find in P.D.Q. Bach is just taking certain compositional tendencies to an extreme. In other words, if the scale goes up, then have it go right down in a similar, not to say simple-minded sort of way. One of the things that my conductor and composer friends and I sitting around the cafeteria table at Juilliard used to do is think of great themes by great composers and just change them slightly as if they had been written by second-rate composers. [*sings a square/quantized version of a Beethoven melody*]. Instead of [*sings the same melody correctly*] which is what Beethoven did. That's very cultural, too.

Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, [*sings the beginning phrase*] you can say that's sort of simple-minded—that's the exact same rhythm and then it's sort of backwards. So here again it's sometimes borderline. Mozart is one of the few great composers to have written a whole work called *A Musical Joke*. Some of the stuff is sort of broad—for instance, everybody ends in a different key—it's a terribly dissonant chord. Now, I studied with [Vincent Persichetti](#) at Juilliard and he used to say, "That's a good chord. What's wrong with that chord? I don't see what's so funny about that chord." He knew of the incongruity, of course, but his point was it's not inherently funny. It's only funny following ordinary Mozart.

There's another place in the Mozart piece where the violinist has a cadenza, and he goes way up and gets completely lost. It just meanders around. And finally he just plucks an open string to reestablish where he is. There are a couple of places in the horns where they have obviously wrong notes written in. The reason I bring this piece up is if you're not into classical music, you wouldn't necessarily find it particularly funny, because if you don't know the norm this won't seem that strange.

Frank J. Oteri: Well, with all of this stuff, with the funny context in particular, in classical music, serious music, whatever we want to call it, this term is about music that we assume lives on and gets played again, and again, and again. A joke is sometimes only funny the first time you hear it. The "[Surprise Symphony](#)" isn't a surprise once we know when the surprise comes.

Peter Schickele: Yeah, but on the other hand there are plenty of comedians who have made albums that people listen to again and again, you know. Actually I think a sign of good humor, in certain areas anyway, is that you do enjoy it more than once. A [Henny Youngman](#) thing where you're literally just saying one-liners—A guy goes into a psychiatrist and says, "Doctor, nobody will listen to me," and the doctor says, "Next!"—a joke like that, there's not going to be much there the second time. I think that if you watch a TV show that you like, like *Seinfeld* or something, it's not just literally the gags but it's the acting and the timing that people enjoy more than once. To me, the secret ingredient in P.D.Q. Bach is that ideally the music should be fun to listen to more than once, even though you know a gag—a funny note in the trumpets or a place where it goes wha-wha-wha. Even though you know that's coming, the music itself is fun to listen to.

Frank J. Oteri: You're saying that music should be fun to listen to. You were at Juilliard at a very heady time, the early '60s. Now, you were teaching there at some point. Things have changed a great deal there now, but you were there roughly at the same time that [Steve Reich](#) and [Philip Glass](#) were there...

Peter Schickele: Yes. It was actually the late '50s that I was there as a student. Phil was a good friend. We were there together. Steve was a little bit later. I taught there in the early '60s. But the thing about Steve and Phil is, they weren't Philip Glass and Steve Reich yet. Philip was writing in a style that had nothing to do with the style he developed later.

One of the things I liked about Juilliard is that there was not a school style. There were some conservatories where there was one composer who was sort of ascendant and he was likely to have acolyte students. Juilliard was not like that. There were a lot of different styles. Nevertheless, a lot of music being done then was what you might call university avant-garde. Although beautiful music has been written using the 12-tone system, it was never my personality. I quit teaching at Juilliard in 1965 for several reasons. I had just done the first public P.D.Q. Bach concert and wanted to be free to take it on the road, but also I just wasn't comfortable in academic surroundings then. I also liked the idea of not just doing concert music. The later half of the '60s is when I did all that arranging for folk singers. I did four feature films and some shorter ones. I loved doing that—that whole thing that bothers some people about having to write something that's exactly ten and a half seconds long; I love those constrictions. I wanted to get out of the academic situation and I've never regretted that

because my own musical personality is very lyrical, open, and accessible... It's interesting. It's not that I or a lot of other composers sit down saying, "I want to write music that people will like." I'm writing music that I like. I have a rather open personality and I don't work well in the constraints of the mathematically-, or at least arithmetically-oriented, [12-tone system](#).

The Birth of P.D.Q. Bach

Frank J. Oteri: So the birth of [P.D.Q. Bach](#) ... What's so interesting about it 40 years later is how in everything you do you're sort of poking holes into everything that's wrong with how we listen to classical music as an audience. But in a way, it's sort of everything that's right as well.

Peter Schickele: People often ask if symphony orchestra musicians like P.D.Q. Bach, and they tend to overwhelmingly like it. I think one of the reasons is that they recognize it as a satire of love. Most satirists make fun of what they like, not what they don't like. [Victor Borge](#) studied to be a concert pianist and [Anna Russell](#) studied to be an opera singer. [Spike Jones](#), when rock 'n' roll came in, which he hated, couldn't do good take-offs on it. He thought it was a satire of itself and it remained for [Stan Freberg](#) to come along and do take-offs on rock 'n' roll. I think in retrospect it seems no accident that P.D.Q. Bach was a late-18th century composer, the son of [Johann Sebastian Bach](#), because Bach and [Mozart](#) are two of my favorite composers. If I were trying to do P. D. Q. [Wagner](#), or some composer whose music I like but don't have the affinity for, I would have been tired of doing it a long time ago.

The very beginning of the answer to your question actually goes back 50 years to 1953. These were the early days of home tape recorders. My brother David and I had a friend named Ernie. Ernie was a musician, played cello and horn, but he also loved technical stuff. He later became a ham radio operator. We got interested in the idea of overdubbing using two tape recorders. It will be hard for younger people to imagine this, but you didn't just push a button. You had to match the impedance of the two machines and all that sort of stuff, which was right up Ernie's alley. So one afternoon the three of us got together and recorded the first movement of the Bach [Brandenburg Concerto No. 2](#) with my brother playing all the top string parts, Ernie playing the lower string parts, and I did the solo flute, oboe, and trumpet parts, which are really high, on the bassoon two octaves lower. It sort of sounded like mud wrestling but we had a great time doing it. We decided to get together the following week and do something else again.

Meanwhile we had been listening to one of Johann Sebastian Bach's few humorous works, the [Coffee Cantata](#). And here, speaking about different kinds of humor, if you listen to this piece in German and you don't understand German, there's nothing funny about it. It's just a cantata. But it's about a father whose daughter insists on drinking coffee. I guess this was a hot issue in the 18th century. It was sort of a symbol for her not following her father's wishes, also in terms of the men she was attracted to. We had been listening to the [Coffee Cantata](#), so the next week when we got together I turned up with this piece called the "[Sanka Cantata](#)" and we recorded it. Then we decided to make it in the form of a radio broadcast. I have to emphasize that this was all just for our own fun, not thinking of any public exposure. So if this piece was a radio broadcast it had to have a composer. Bach of course had many children and many of them became composers. People who are into classical, and particularly Baroque music and 18th-century music, know about [J.C. Bach](#), [C.P.E. Bach](#), and [W.F. Bach](#), so one of the three of us said, "Well, how about P.D.Q. Bach?" Some younger people don't know that P.D.Q. was an expression from the 1920s meaning "pretty damn quick." It was the 1920s equivalent of ASAP. You'd say, get over here PDQ. So one of us said, "How about P.D.Q. Bach?" Ernie doesn't remember himself, but Ernie's mother says it was Ernie who thought of that. Which one of us thought of it is sort of lost in the mist of time. But we did the radio broadcast and sort of talked a little about this composer and where it was discovered. We gave recordings to friends and people enjoyed it and everything. For six years that was it in terms of P.D.Q. Bach.

Then in 1959, when I was a composition major at Juilliard getting my masters there, Jorge Mester, the conductor, myself and a few other people put on a humorous concert. It wasn't even a whole concert. It couldn't have been more casual. It was a Wednesday night and I'm afraid that the poor piano soloist in the first half. You know, something followed by something funny usually gets a little obliterated. But he did his half of the recital and we had the second half.

In those days there was a restaurant chain called [Horn & Hardart](#)—they had the [automats](#) where you put nickels in the slots, opened up the little door, and took your little piece of pie out. They were a fixture in New York and Philadelphia and Boston. Somebody had said to me that somebody should write a concerto for horn and Hardart. I've always thought that was one of the great ideas of Western man. So when this concert came up I spent a couple of weeks in hardware stores and toy stores with a tuning fork, because I don't have perfect pitch, looking for anything that made a pitch because my idea of the Hardart was that each note would be as different as possible from every other note. So, I'm making these pitches up, but for C you'd hit a mixing bowl—thong! Then for C# you'd blow on a Coke bottle and for D you'd pluck a

string... so as different as possible. I did all this shopping but I'm a terrible procrastinator, always put things off to the last minute, and so in the end [Phil Glass](#) actually helped me put the Hardart together and mount these things on a board so you could play them.

Much of the music was literally written overnight, the night before [the concert](#). There was another piece on the program called *The Quodlibet*, which is a musical term for pieces where melodies that were written separately are shown to be able to fit together. It's an old technique. Bach's family used to do it, finding folk songs that fit together. For an alumni thing at Juilliard years later, maybe a decade ago or so, they asked me to provide some entertainment and we did that piece in its original version. I got out the parts that were used in that concert in 1959 and each part, say if you're looking at the flute part, it goes for several lines and then the handwriting changes and goes for some more lines, and then the handwriting changes. This was before Xerox machines. I would finish a little section of the score with all the parts written on the same page and I would hand it to Philip and he'd copy this far and then he'd hand it to [Larry Widdoes](#), and he'd copy more instruments from that, and [Dick Peaslee](#) would maybe copy some others. The next afternoon, while a tiny little orchestra of volunteers was rehearsing the first movement of the Concerto for Horn and Hardart, we were sitting out in the audience copying the last movement.

In that *Quodlibet* piece, there's one place where a theme from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is combined with "Tea for Two." A very serious young violinist got up and walked out and never came back. Nothing we could do, she wasn't being paid. So she was one of the exceptions to when I said that musicians tend to get a big kick out of it.

Frank J. Oteri: What were the reactions of other composers to this music?

Peter Schickele: The only one I remember was Persichetti who enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, I remember that he had a criticism of one place where I brought an incongruous theme in and it was a repeated section and he didn't think I should have it there both times, just have it there one time. So he was thinking about it as a humorous work. I don't remember at that time but I definitely remember a composer/educator who was a head of a musical institution once asked [Jorge Mester](#), the conductor, he said, "Are you still doing this P.D.Q. Bach thing with Peter Schickele?" And Jorge said, "Yeah, isn't it great." And this man said, "No, I can't agree with you. Peter Schickele makes fun of things that some of us hold sacred." I've always wished that he said that in public because I would have used it on my posters if I could. Here again, as I say, he seems to have been the exception.

How Classical Music's Past Can Help Its Future

Frank J. Oteri: Now one of the things that I find to be one of the sublime ironies of your career and the career of [P.D.Q. Bach](#) is it's without a doubt true that P.D.Q. Bach is one of the most performed contemporary American composers. Yet ironically the persona of P.D.Q. Bach is neither contemporary nor American. I think it strikes to the heart—and I kind of want to morph this into a discussion of [Peter Schickele the composer](#)—of what's wrong with this classical music world we live in that obsessively dotes on the past, and not just the past, but Europe's past, rather than America's present.

Peter Schickele: That is certainly a subject that people have been obsessed with for at least half of a century, more than that, but it's gotten complicated. We're talking about generalizations here, and there are always exceptions to everything. For my tastes, and for many other people's tastes, that post-[Webern](#) direction that music took after the Second World War was very much associated with numbers, turning its back on any feeling of sentiment in the music, relinquishing control of the music to patterns...In other words what you did was build the machine, the little musical machine, and then it spewed out the piece. In some cases it was almost literally true that once you setup what your system was going to be the piece then wrote itself. Also, the music made a point of getting away from two things which had been basic in Western music for at least centuries, if not millennia, and that was tonality—having a feeling of a home base key—and a beat were not so much neglected but studiously avoided. That right there will alienate a lot of people, including myself.

I'll give an example: I was at a seminar in 1959 at Princeton which was very much one of the seats of this approach to composition. I remember someone talking about a study they actually did to figure out what was the least expected next note [in a series], because that was what they wanted to use. My feeling was always that the way that you do something unexpected is you do it twice the same way and the third time differently.

One thing that happened, which for my taste was unfortunate and didn't work out...What we think of as classical music has always had patrons. It was princes in the old days, or it was the church usually. They paid for it. In the second half of the 20th century in this country the university became the patron. That seems to have fostered a sort of getting lost in one's own navel, because your job wasn't dependent on how much people liked your music. It's very easy to say that a

composer like Beethoven was doing what his inner voice told him and not what people wanted to hear, and it's certainly true, but that's a continuum. Beethoven also wrote the [Moonlight Sonata](#) and the [Fifth Symphony](#), two of the most popular pieces then as well as now, that everyone wanted to hear. He didn't start out saying, "I don't care what anyone thinks." Or a better way to put it is that what he wanted to hear has something to do with what other people want to hear.

Frank J. Oteri: By the end he couldn't hear any of it anyway.

Peter Schickele: Right, a special case...But the point here is that to me it's a continuum, the business between the pure artist who won't pay any attention to what anyone else thinks, and the pure commercial person who will do anything that's going to work and make money.

It's not two boxes: serious, commercial. It's a continuum. Mozart cared how his audiences were going to react. When he went to Paris he knew that they liked a certain kind of beginning for their symphonies. So he wrote that kind of thing where everyone is in unison. There are plenty of composers who had very individual visions who nevertheless cared how the music was received. So it just got very far towards that end of the continuum, what you might call a pure artist. I think that, although it sounds a little crass to say so, that fact, that the composer's job was not contingent upon the reaction to their music except in a very sort of academic way—in other words how much could you write essays about it—meant that it became quite isolated. It's sort of typical, or at least it's happened before, that when something gets painted into a corner, what jars it loose comes out of left field. In the 18th century it was opera. In the second half of the 20th century it was [minimalism](#). It was [Phil Glass](#) and [Steve Reich](#) and [Terry Riley](#) and also somewhat the Asian-oriented composers like [Lou Harrison](#). Minimalism, which at first everybody loved to hate in the classical music world, brought back two things with a vengeance. One of them was tonality and the other was the beat.

Frank J. Oteri: One thing I find so interesting—this is a good segue into talking about your music—in listening to [that disc of the String Sextet](#) with the [Lark Quartet](#), is how I feel your music has been influenced by minimalism without actually being minimalist.

Peter Schickele: Well, I think that's happened with a lot of composers.

Frank J. Oteri: It's probably music that could not have been written had minimalism not happened, but it isn't minimalist music.

Peter Schickele: Right. I've always liked repetition, at least up to a point. Not as much as Philip's early works for instance which were really austere. I mean, solo violin going on for an hour. I'm one of those people who could easily have the end of the [Beatles' "Hey Jude"](#) go on even longer. I mean [*sings the ending melody from "Hey Jude"*], I like repetition. But you're right. Philip is certainly one of the biggest influences in my music, but I've never written a piece that really sounds like him in all ways.

One other thing that I wanted to mention about minimalism: it came in, was very austere, very stringent to a lot of people, but what it ended up doing was influencing a lot of younger composers, composers who went on like [John Adams](#) to broaden their vision very much.

Another thing that Philip, Steve, and Terry Riley brought back into music, that had gone out very much in the previous era was the composer as performer. In the old days, Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, it was taken for granted that you played your music. In some ways with Mozart in the 18th century it was a little bit like it is now. You didn't necessarily make money writing the piece, you made money touring with it. Philip not only could play, he went out with his group like a rock group. As a matter of fact, he put effort into getting his records out of the classical department, because the people who liked his music weren't the classical music people, they were college students in the beginning.

Frank J. Oteri: So to bring this to you, who are the people who like your music? Are they the classical music audience or some sort of combination?

Peter Schickele: I think a combination because certainly a lot of classical music people do like my music. As you've pointed out something like that String Sextet, for instance, there's a lot of European influence in there, very much out of a sort of Brahmsian background, even though you wouldn't mistake it for Brahms, as well as all of the American and minimalist influences. I guess there is a mixture there. Of course there are also people now who feel the post-World War II era that I was talking about is the golden era, you know. They think music has really been dumbed down now. You can't please everybody all of the time.

Frank J. Oteri: One of the big dumbing down areas that I think we'd probably all agree on is what's happened to radio. I wanted to talk about that a little bit because you've done some wonderful things on radio. Last night I was listening to that [CD that you did poking fun at classical radio](#). It was 12 or 13 years ago now but I was listening to it thinking this really is what classical radio sounds like.

Peter Schickele: Usually it's difficult to stay ahead of reality. As you know on that program that station had these rules. I don't remember them exactly, but no vocal music during office hours and no music in minor keys during the day...

Frank J. Oteri: No music written after 1914!

Peter Schickele: Right. It was actually very soon after that album came out that stations didn't want to play vocal music during office hours because people use classical music as background music and vocal music is distracting if you're working in an office or a bank. Classical music is not a part of the fabric of our culture like it was when I was young. One of the easiest ways to talk about that is ways that are not in themselves important. The opening of the [Metropolitan Opera](#) season used to be a gala social thing. You'd see the pictures the next day in the paper. That may not have anything to do with music, but it indicates who was going, and they were the people giving money to it.

In those days movie music was classically oriented. A lot of the movie composers—[Miklós Rózsa](#) and [Dimitri Tiomkin](#) who both grew up in Europe—were classically trained and wrote "serious" music—I hate that term! For two reasons: not only that it implies that jazz, rock, folk, and movie music isn't serious, but also because it implies that something is either serious or funny whereas a lot of my favorite stuff—like [Haydn](#), [Scarlatti](#), [Thelonious Monk](#), [Dizzy Gillespie](#)—is in between. Anyway, all I'm saying is that it was sort of a signpost or an indication that movie music was basically classical. Now, with the exception of John Williams, it's much more likely to be pop oriented.

Frank J. Oteri: Except now you have a few established "serious" composers writing film music like [John Corigliano](#), Philip Glass, [Tan Dun](#)...

Peter Schickele: Yeah, but very few. That's about it.

Frank J. Oteri: They're winning Oscars.

Peter Schickele: Yeah. I wrote a review for the *New York Times* of [a book](#) by [André Previn](#) about his years in Hollywood of writing for MGM. What you really realize when you read that book is people wanted you to "give me some [Richard Strauss](#)," "give me some [Debussy](#)," "give me some [Tchaikovsky](#)." Whereas in Europe [William Walton](#), [Benjamin Britten](#), [Shostakovich](#), [Prokofiev](#), [Poulenc](#), they all did movie music and people wanted *their* music. You know, they weren't asking them to write in someone else's style. That seems to me a real difference between Europe and America, though there are exceptions.

A lot of people tend to think of the symphony orchestra as a given, but it didn't exist before 1750. There's no reason why the best composers are going to want to write for it now. I mean it isn't a given. It's a particular sound that was developed gradually. What we think of as its flowering in the orchestration of a modern [Philadelphia Orchestra](#) is a late-19th-century creation.

Frank J. Oteri: So is it too late?

Peter Schickele: I don't know. I do think the one thing that has to happen and has happened is that you get other venues. When [Boulez](#) was the conductor of the [New York Philharmonic](#) they had these things called rug concerts because before the renovation of what is now called [Avery Fisher](#), then Philharmonic Hall, you could remove the seats easily. So they would remove the seats and they put rugs and pillows all over the place. The orchestra is in the middle of the floor and people were seated all around. I happened to go to one of those concerts that had some of the same repertoire on it that had been a regular subscription concert and it was fascinating to hear how much livelier the reception of the audience was at the rug concert. That affected Boulez's performance, even a repertoire item of Schumann or something was affected by the liveliness of the response. It seems amazing that this could hang on this architectural fact. When they renovated the hall you couldn't do that anymore. I've talked to people in the orchestra administration who said they want to do that, but we can't figure out where to do it. If we do it at a different place people won't come. The big organizations haven't worked that out. It may be that the symphony orchestra is just going to largely become a museum where you get to play this great music from the past. Meanwhile, certainly in the late '60s and early '70s, I think I listened to pop music more than I listened to classical music myself. It's just so exciting what was going on in it.

Merging Two Separate Compositional Streams

Frank J. Oteri: We've talked about how [P.D.Q. Bach](#) is much more frequently performed than [Peter Schickele](#). Are you happy about that? How do we get more of the non-P.D.Q. Bach music out there?

Peter Schickele: Well, you say, "Are you happy with that?" I say that I'm cool with it. *[laughs]* I've always had a long-term view. Even though P.D.Q. Bach gets played more than Peter Schickele, it's nevertheless true, I have as many Peter Schickele commissions as I can handle. I couldn't accept more than I have.

Frank J. Oteri: Is that because you're busy fulfilling P.D.Q. discoveries?

Peter Schickele: No, not in the last 10 years. No. I do very little P.D.Q. Bach. In the annual concerts that we have here in New York City I try to have at least one new thing every year, but I'm doing much, much more Peter Schickele stuff, so I really can't complain. Also, life is sad and people like to laugh, you know, in the movies as well as in anything else. Comedy is popular, so it's not a big surprise to me. Also, as I indicated by telling you my background, it's a very important to me, too.

Frank J. Oteri: You also said that some of the Schickele stuff is also funny.

Peter Schickele: Yeah, I've put in out-and-out funny stuff in serious pieces. That gets me into trouble. A horn concerto I did that features magic tricks in one movement, if it's done live he finds flowers in the horn and things.

Frank J. Oteri: That's a Schickele piece?

Peter Schickele: Yes. It's preceded by three very serious movements including a slow movement that is one of the most atmospheric things I've ever done. Then there is this magician movement. The horn player that commissioned it said, "You know these conductors tell me that it's too serious for a pops concert and too out there for a subscription concert." I mean that's one of the reasons that I like certain [Shostakovich](#) pieces a lot. He did that kind of, too. His [Fifteenth Symphony](#) is a perfectly serious piece, but you get *[sings Rossini's William Tell Overture]*.

Frank J. Oteri: It's hysterical. The first time I heard it I burst out laughing. So my last question then... Obviously if someone laughs during a P.D.Q. piece, that's kind of what they're supposed to do.

Peter Schickele: You hope they do, yeah.

Frank J. Oteri: How would you feel if somebody laughed in the middle of a Peter Schickele piece?

Peter Schickele: Well, that has happened. Actually when I am involved in a presentation of my music I like to introduce the piece verbally rather than use program notes for two reasons. One because I'm a personable person and contemporary music, for better or for worse, has gotten a lot of bad reactions in the last half-century. But also because by talking about it I can give people an indication of what kind of piece they're going to hear. You can't be hardnosed about this. You can't say, "This is a serious piece, don't laugh!" That's a downer.

Frank J. Oteri: Don't applaud between movements.

Peter Schickele: Exactly, same kind of thing. If people applaud between movements, that's fine with me. It is true that expectations play a role. I wrote a piece for John Ferrante, the countertenor I worked with for about 20 years. We did all of these P.D.Q. Bach concerts together, but we'd always wanted to do a serious piece together, I mean, me write a serious piece for him. The opportunity came up with a chamber orchestra in Philadelphia. At the premiere I introduced the piece and I just talked about the poem that I used and the pastoral feeling of it and everything like that. The piece went over beautifully and in the comments afterwards and everything I could see that people really got into it. Then it was done several years later at a concert in Brooklyn, a concert having to do with Brooklyn composers, and in addition to that piece *Iphigenia in Brooklyn*, the P.D.Q. Bach Cantata, was also on there. Particularly then, much more than even now, a lot of people didn't even know that I wrote serious music. So they saw my name there and assumed it was going to be funny. The thing is that if that's your mindset, you'll find something to laugh at, particularly with a singer. He'll do some gesture and you'll laugh. So it wasn't the whole audience, but there were a few people down front that were sort of laughing at regular gestures that John did. That goes back to the whole context thing. There are real opera singers who do gestures

that are very easy to make fun of because they're pretty out there. If I write something that has the magician movement in it, or if I write something funny in a "serious" piece, I would be sad if people didn't laugh. My analogy has always been that people accept a movie or a novel or a play that is a basically serious work with comic scenes in it. It seems like it's only in classical music, and I don't mean across the board, but it's only in the classical music world that people expect it to be funny or serious, not a mixture.