

Friday 20 January 2023

**Blow away misery on the cheap, and a tick tick tick to dance to.**

**And, A Very Happy New Year**



Dear Everyone

**Headline note:** Breakfast club is up and running. Thank you to the families that were able to commit for the term so we can secure the service. If you need it from time to time, do write to Lucy Simpson [LSimpson@spcs.london.sch.uk](mailto:LSimpson@spcs.london.sch.uk).

Most evenings, Dawn and I discuss whether we want to watch Gloom at Ten on BBC 1, or not. Mostly we do, and given the paucity of cat up tree saved by dog, triplets win lottery in syndicate and donate it all to charity (although it looks like the new King might give away his windfarm windfall), there's not much to cheer about. Hopefully some of what follows might offer a few moments of joy, assuming you like the harmonica (and metronomes). Even if you don't, some of the tunes below might persuade you otherwise.

For reasons known only to a few, Max Geldray, that great swing time harmonica player, came to mind earlier this week. Here he is, playing the interlude from an episode of the *Goon Show*, in October 1957 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gT9qiVXln4k>

The harmonica has been forgotten from the mainstream of late, but with the new age of austerity and cost saving, it could well have a comeback. No one else is suggesting this, as far as I know, so who knows, even just writing about it might start a new trend.

I'm not for a minute suggesting abandoning violin, piano, trumpet, or any other such instrument your progeny are already committed to, but as a fun pocket-sized instrument, it has many advantages.

Originally an instrument for playing folk music, and one can see why, they first appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in Vienna. The idea spread quickly, and they were soon being mass produced, were rapidly adapted, became enormously versatile and made their mark around the world.

It wasn't long before they featured in blues and blue grass and from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in rock and roll and many other genres including symphonic settings. This is a wonderful example, melancholic and beautiful.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNaxXuGCNY4>

It's no surprise that Astor Piazzolla loved the instrument, with its haunting, languid sound. Here is Willi Burger in a performance in Venezuela with the Simon Bolivar orchestra. Turn it up and slink slowly around the kitchen to this one.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSxIQImIw8Y>

And if you thought this had an echo of French café culture, we'll get there in a moment, but here is the great French harmonica player, Rachele Plas playing folksy blues instead, at speed!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsWCfgIVIdc>

Perhaps the most famous of all the harmonica players of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Larry Adler, recording with just about everyone you can think of, and moving across every musical genre. But this is, for me, the foot stomping Larry at his best with his friends Stephane Grappelli and Django Rheinhardt, in *Melancholy Baby* right at the heart of Paris in 1938.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsVNJkDdurk>

One last musical thing. In assembly today, I talked about unusual music, including a composition inspired by bird poo, and Stockhausen's Helicopter Quartet. The bird poo composition enjoyed its 10 anniversary this week. I also talked about metronomes, and Ligeti. Beethoven is thought to be the first composer to signal metronome marks, and our wonderful organist Will Fox played us out today at a speed of croquet = 80.

Here is Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique For 100 Metronomes*, which you might all like to listen to. It's not a dance tune, but as it comes to close there is something magical, almost sad about it. Do show it to your child.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAYGjmYKrl4>

And here is our SPCS Ligeti variation, completely unrehearsed, the performers followed Ligeti's instructions perfectly. And our version seems to be very much a dance tune. Ah ha, so now it all makes sense.

<https://youtu.be/PpFAniHFnc>

Best wishes

Simon