

Translated extract from

Martin Baltscheit
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verboten wurde!
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Martin Baltscheit
Major Dux or The Day When Music Was Banned!
As experienced and described by Bartholomew Bob

Translated by Anthea Bell

A Morning Poem

7.45 a.m.

Dustbin men slam dustbins down on steps early in the morning. Postmen deliver mail in the middle of the night. Children are sent out to play in the yard as soon as they get up. Not to mention the birds who have been defending their territory since sunrise. Normally I call my friends somewhere around noon, I yawn down the phone and ask, “Hey, what kind of day is it today?” That’s how a writer lives; he can work and sleep as long as he likes. Except on days like this, when he begins by laying carpet on the stairs, nailing up letter-boxes and giving the children speech-balloons to talk in. After that he sits down at his desk and writes a poem about the silence.

Bartholomew Bob

First Bar

IT WAS A MONDAY MORNING. The birds were singing so noisily you might have thought they’d built their nests under my bed. I called my cat.

– Cat!?

Instantly all was silent as the grave, although I didn't have a cat at all. I hate cats. Always slinking about, sitting around, looking thoughtfully out of the window and watching the world go by. And then they expect to be fed for their trouble, with meat that's already been caught and carefully cooked by someone else. But I didn't like this, it reminded me too much of something else I didn't like. I looked out of the window, and it was as if the electric plug had been pulled out. No rubbish being taken away, no postman, the children must all be sitting in front of the TV. The tram was standing on the corner, not moving. People were walking around, but you couldn't hear them. Only my head was buzzing. It was probably thinking. A faint sound, admittedly, not much louder than the breath of a sleeping fly, but I wasn't asleep, I was lying there awake. I thought there must be something badly wrong with my hearing, and switched on the radio.

– The time is nine o'clock. Here is the news. It has just been reported that the Minister for Sound and Acoustics has banned music. Unfortunately that means we don't know what to broadcast, so this programme is now closing down.

Then the radio was silent too.

No sound, not even a hiss. I went to my desk. Music banned? By the Minister? The Minister was a friend of mine. Alwin Schmidt. Alwin would never ban music. He loved music, he was a musician himself, not as good as Chester Brown, once our local child prodigy, but Alwin could whistle any song as if he'd composed it himself. I went to the phone and called him.

There was no dialling tone and no ring tone either. All the same, someone came to the phone and whispered:

– Ministry of Sound and Acoustics, how can I help you?

I kept it short: The Minister, please!

– I'm sorry, the old Minister's been fired and the new Minister is busy. He has just banned music. Would you like not to try again on any account?

She hung up. Well, well, had they banned ordinary good manners too? Had I missed a coup d'état? I hadn't read any newspapers for the last three years, and (how can I put it?) the world was still there. But banning music – what good did that do anyone? On the other hand, what business was it of mine? Most music was bad anyway. I searched around for my slippers and looked under the bed. There were seven sparrows there, trembling.

– Hey, relax, I said. I don't have a cat.

The sparrows went on trembling.

– Don't you feel like twittering?

They I remembered that they weren't allowed to.

There was a knock on the door. I put on my slippers, made my way over to the door and wondered whether knocking was percussion and thus music. Because if so I could have shouted: stay where you are or I shoot! Ha, ha! I thought I was very funny. As soon as I opened the door a little man with a guitar case rushed in. He closed the door behind him and slid down to the floor with his back to it, as if to keep someone from following him. He was out of breath, sweating freely, and he looked like Bambi just after the hunter takes aim at his mother and Then he suddenly jumped up and raced around my apartment looking for somewhere to hide. When he saw the sparrows under the bed he crawled under it too, to join them. I leaned forward, very slowly. The belt of my dressing gown was dangling like a life-saving rope. I was just going to ask whether he'd found what he was looking for when he started babbling.

– They're after me! I have to hide! They want to lock me up!

Oh wow, I thought, three things at once.

– Lock you up? Who wants to lock you up?

– The Major.

He breathed the name as quietly as he could.

– Major Dux has seized power and banned music! And I'm a musician, you see!

– I'm in luck, then, I said, grinning. Because guess what, I'm a writer, and so long as words are still allowed ...

– Don't you understand? Music's banned!"

He looked at me as if I couldn't speak straight.

– Listen, I have an appointment with my publisher coming up, and I have to get ready. A lot depends on it, not just for me but for a hundred thousand readers, and ...

– Music!

He was shouting. I'd have to take my time over this.

– Listen, friend, there are no trams running this morning. Are trams musicians too, or is it just a power cut?

He shook his head. Looked like he thought I was right round the bend.

– But they can't run! Driving along, braking, wheels squealing. That's the music of the street. All banned. We're finished! I tried to make light of it again.

– Well, too bad, but so long as it's not a criminal offence ... Anyway, who is this Major Dux? What a name! He crawled out from under the bed until his mouth was very close to my ear. I'd feared as much. A musician could hardly help it. The sparrows flew up on his head and I listened to his song about the Major. It went something like this:

Music sends Major Dux just mad, dancing doesn't make him glad, the Major won't hear any trill or quaver, melody never can win his favour. Cruel and nasty, he likes us to cower, his tears are as cold as vinegar's sour.

Then came the refrain:

Major Dux hates every note, hates every trill from a singer's throat, he hasn't a friend dead or alive because he thinks nothing of swing and jive ...

I was about to interrupt, but the sparrows were enjoying the song.

Major Dux won't have jokes or art, Major Dux has no heart. Too few teeth, too much scheming, malice enough to have you screaming. Young musician or real old stager, there's no defence against the Major.

The sparrows hopped around him in excitement . They wanted to hear the song again. I reminded them of my hungry cat and asked the musician:

– But if he’s so horrible, why are you singing such a happy song?

– I’m a happy musician, he said very unhappily indeed, and he was about to go on. However, I grabbed him by the collar, hauled him out from under the bed and pushed him out of the door. He shouted:

– They’ll shut me up today, someone else tomorrow, and the day after that you’ll be in trouble! I knew a good answer to that:

– Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you, that’s what I always say! So I gave him a kick, losing my slipper in the process, cursed and shut the door. I wrote my good answer down in my notebook right away. Never trouble trouble till trouble troubles you ...

The desk was pleased to see me:

– That’s enough time wasted, let’s get down to work.

My publisher had asked me for an idea. So far I hadn’t thought one up. Normally there are stories just waiting around every corner, you put out your hand to pick them up, take them home with you, eat and drink and let them tell themselves. Then you write it all down, and when the book’s finished you send the stories back out into the street, where they get read and live a long life. But I hadn’t reached that point yet. It was all quiet outside, plenty of peace for writing, what did I have to lose? I leafed through my rhyming dictionary in search of inspiration. Lose, choose, shoes. My shoes were worn out. No money for new shoes, no idea for a story. I put on my best suit to go out to my meeting. Maybe I’d stumble over an idea on the way.

Second Bar

THE MUSIC BAN WAS TAKING EFFECT. There wasn’t a busker in sight, although today of all days I had a little spare change in my pocket. A few layabouts were sitting on a bench down by the station, drinking.

They weren't singing or shouting. They were just drunk and peaceful, they looked almost cute. Brave new world, I thought, and I went down to the Underground. The Underground could have been the Major's own invention. After all, an underground train doesn't make any noise up on the surface. That was probably why they were still running. So there was still one place where the little musician could have gone to hide.

Oh, never mind him, he'll be all right, I thought as I waited. The information display said a train was due in two minutes' time. I stood around whistling a little tune. There was a good echo down here, and anyway it was high time I broke the new rules. The train came in. It was almost empty. Two men were sitting there in silence, staring at their reflections in the windows. I sat down on one of the shabby seats, and the regular beat of the wheels on the rails went quite well with the little tune I was whistling.

– Hey, you! Stop that.

It was the man at the far end of the carriage. At first I thought he'd noticed me hesitating while I was still looking for the right way to finish the second part of the refrain. I pointed a finger at myself, miming did he mean me? No reaction, so I went on whistling. I improved the tune by taking it a semi-tone up. That was it!

– You there!

It sounded like an order.

– No whistling in the Underground.

Fancy that, I thought, and I went on whistling. Who'd have thought he could hear me all the way over there?

– Hey, I said no whistling in the Underground.

He stood up. Maybe it was time for him to get out. Anyway, he stood up. He was red in the face, and as the train swung into the next station he made his way along the poles in the carriage hand over hand, like an overweight ape. The train braked, the doors hissed, but he didn't get off the train! Now I knew he was looking for trouble, so I helped him out.

– But my dear sir, I'm not whistling at all.

– You were, though.

The stranger puffed air out through his lips in a faint imitation of my whistling. His own whistling was politically correct, so to speak, and no judge would find him guilty for it. What a bonehead! I grinned.

– No, no, I said. I didn't do it like that, I did it like this.

And I whistled as loud as I could. He flinched back, spreading his arms incredulously, and looked at the other passenger. The doors hissed, the train moved on.

– Did you hear that? He went and did it again.

The way he said it, heads were going to roll. I wondered whose they'd be. I knew I'd better get my blow in first, and decided on boxing his big ears with both my hands. I was sure those ears were sensitive.

– Either you stop it at once or I'll call the Sound Police! The Acoustic Squad! The Atonal Special Unit! Three things again. That scared me, so instead of hitting him I just whistled a bit more. The lunatic grabbed me. I saw the whites of his eyes, the black hole of his throat, but I didn't see red because I'd closed my eyes by the time he roared:

– We'll teach you and your sort a lesson!

I wondered if he wasn't breaking the permitted acoustic barrier, and what did he mean by my sort anyway? The sassy sort, the sort who answered back, or the sort who couldn't defend themselves, and what kind of a lesson? I called for the conductor.

– Conductor! Help! Conductor!

I still had the situation under control, but then Baboon-Face took a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and tried gagging me with it.

– Help! Help!

At last the other passenger got to his feet.

– You don't need help, you need punishment.

Then they took my legs and tried tying me to the seat. But I kicked out, twisted like an eel, got a couple of metres away and pulled the communication cord. All my life I'd wondered whether those things really worked. I was in luck; the wheels stopped, sparks sprayed like fireworks on New Year's Eve, and the nasty smell of burnt brake-discs came sooner than I'd expected. The two apes fell over each other, the

train stopped, I opened one of the doors as fast as possible and jumped out. Once outside the train I ran straight ahead, which thinking about it later was rather stupid, but I didn't have much practice at escaping along tunnels. For a while the headlights of the train shone on me, but round the next curve the blackness of the tunnel swallowed me up. I went more slowly, putting out my hands in search of something to hold, stumbled over the sleepers on the tracks, ran into a wall in the darkness, made my way along it, and wished I was at home with the sparrows. But I wasn't at home. I was blind and totally breathless, and I heard the train beginning to move again behind me. I needed somewhere to hide! The rough walls grazed my hands, soft as they were from working at a desk. I heard the engine, I felt the tracks shaking slightly very close to me. The train would flatten me into a sheet of paper, white with red stripes. I felt sick. The light was already snaking along the cable on the opposite wall. There was a niche on the other side of the tracks! The noise of the train was everywhere. The headlights were dazzling. I leaped across the rails and I was in the middle of an earthquake. I could see the train passengers behind the lighted windows, and the red-faced man had a message for me.

We'll get you yet!

The Major will bring

all this noise to an end!

Then the train went away and took the light with it.

Third Bar

IT'S NEVER DAY IN A TUNNEL. And fear can always find new friends in the dark. The pictures come of their own accord. I'd heard of monsters in the garbage, mutated spiders, even fat crocodiles living in the sewers. Just don't move, keep your breathing shallow. I decided to sit quietly in a corner rather than run into the arms of the undead. What was

I to do? Wait for rescue, or hope the moon might rise down here? It was silent as the grave or more so, and a warm, bad-smelling wind was trying to find its way out. What a ghastly day. I hadn't liked it from the moment I got up. I found a lighter in my tobacco pouch and lit up the tunnel as well as I could. My little light showed only a few metres of the semi-circular arch, just enough to tell me that it branched. There was another tunnel! There were no trains near, so I got up and walked a few steps.

The second tunnel was wider, with room to walk beside the tracks. I used the lighter only now and then, to save the fuel in it. I crawled through the darkness like a worm. Then I bumped into some kind of a pillar or box, and my lighter fell into the darkness. I heard it clatter once or twice, and then it was gone. This would be a good time to stop smoking, I thought, but I was already looking forward to my first cigarette if I ever saw the sun again. My hands felt the tracks, the sleepers and the rivets. Everything was covered with sticky dust, and the surface of the tracks was rusty. There could be plenty of reasons for the dust, only one for the rust – this was a siding.

If you don't know where to go, the way you choose doesn't matter, I thought, sitting there and beginning to freeze. I turned up the collar of my jacket. They were sure to look for me. My friends, my cat, the little man, the seven sparrows and all who'd made friends with me in the course of their lives. They'd come and find this siding, they'd hug me and they'd say:

– Why are you running away from home?

I didn't believe in miracles and I certainly didn't believe in an old friend inviting me to a cup of tea down here. After a terribly lonely minute or so, during which I aged ten years, I heard footsteps. They were stumbling along the tunnel. Light flickered over the ground. A one-eyed tapeworm? A tunnel-sized grub? I kept my cool and reasoned. Snakes don't walk on two legs, rats don't wear shoes, and did you ever hear of a woodlouse with a flashlight of its own?

– Who's there?

The light found my face.

– Hey, it's me! An old friend. Would you like a cup of tea?"

You should never forget where you are. Right now I was a writer in my own story, so a little coincidence could do no harm.

– Old friend? What kind of old friend?

– Alwin! Alwin Schmidt! Former Minister of Sound and Acoustics. He slapped me on the back.

– When you're up to your neck in the water you'd better not hang your head, he said, laughing. I sang the praises of true friendship, and Alwin said it depended on the friends. And he didn't really have a cup of tea on him, that was just a manner of speaking in the Underground. I thought he sounded confused.

– The Underground, Bob, he said, is black and impenetrable. It's our only chance of escaping discovery. A secret you don't know yourself is best kept that way. He *was* confused. Then he went on.

Since just before nine this morning, he said, he'd been in the Underground, because above ground they'd fired him for no reason. Now he was figuring out his plans and aims. His spirits weren't very high, but he had plenty of ideas, we needed sounds and music back again, voices and songs, rhythm and jazz. Oh yeah!

I nodded.

– Sounds good, old friend, can we sing that too?

He laughed again.

– Yes, but there aren't enough of us for a choir. There's no one to be found down here. The Major has them all under his control, and as for us ... we have nothing but this flashlight.

– What's the matter with it?

– The battery's run down.

He wasn't laughing any more.

– We're in a hole, I said. Without a miracle this story won't turn out well.

– I'm afraid not, said Alwin, and he sighed in the darkness.

Fourth Bar

I WOULDN'T LIKE YOU TO THINK I MADE THIS UP, but at that very moment, right when we were in the deepest despair, a door opened opposite us. Yellow light traced a triangle in the darkness. Then a rather large rat appeared. Contrary to what you might expect, the rat wore elegant Italian shoes, a suit without any creases, and a flower in its buttonhole.

– *Keep swinging*, called the rat as it disappeared along the tunnel. Alwin and I reached the door before it closed again and stumbled down a flight of steps. I didn't like the way they went even further down, but I did like the way it was getting lighter.

What can I say? Up above they were muffling the world in cotton wool, down here they were partying! After the steps, which led to what you might call the underground of the Underground, we came to a rather smoky place, a kind of furnace room. And furnace was the word, because it was hot down here. I saw horned beetles in expensive cashmere coats, and a centipede in leggings was winding its way past the tables carrying a tray of drinks fit for the Devil's birthday. Worms with their hair combed back were trying to cheat at poker, and three bluebottles, hats pulled well down over their faces, were propping up the bar and watching the eight-armed spider behind it squeeze four glasses of juice from a blood-orange. Alwin and I were the only humans here, and when they spotted us the band stopped playing. The blind mole at the piano was the last to stop. Except for the mole, they were all looking us. No doubt about it, we weren't welcome. We'd gate-crashed a secret club without any invitation! There'd be a notice somewhere saying **no human beings**, and we'd failed to spot it. A stocky bulldog came towards us step by step, bow-legged, face like a boxing glove. The closer the dog came the smaller it looked, but its canine teeth grew like towers from a muzzle that knew no enemies – only victims.

- So?

That was all the

**the bulldog said, just,
- So?**

Slobber was dripping from its chops. I had no idea what it wanted.

– *What's the password?*

No one said a thing. The spider held up a glass in one of her hands and a cocktail shaker in another, a bottle of Duke Ellington in the third, soda water in the fourth, half a lemon in the fifth, and in the other three hands she held the threads by which she was hanging from the ceiling. No one moved except the bulldog. Its teeth came dangerously close to my calf. I shrugged my shoulders. Maybe it was Major Dux, or ...

– *Keep swinging*, said Alwin.

For a moment time stood still, and all eyes spelled out the password. Aha! Then Pavlov barked:

– *Keep swinging!*

And everyone called:

*Keep swinging! Keep swinging! Keep
swinging! Keep swinging! Keep
swinging ! Keep swinging ! Keep
swinging ! Keep swinging ! Keep swinging!*

Alwin had guessed the password right. The centipede moved on, the cocktail spider poured more drinks, an oily-looking larva took our coats and put them on the coat stand. Music played on, everyone smiled at us, and a pretty little mouse asked where we'd like to sit. Alwin and I found two places by the bar and listened to the mole at the piano singing a song about a famous trumpeter. **Chester Brown**. Down here in the Underground everyone knew his story. At the early age of seven Chester was already playing the trumpet at funerals, weddings, and all the local parties. His grandfather Louis sold his old banjo to pay for Chester's first instrument. That wasn't too bad for Louis, he had arthritis in his fingers anyway. His wife said it came of smoking, but Grandfather Louis said it came of reading, and everyone laughed and said he couldn't read at all,

and he said he could read with his arse since he was a little tiddler. Louis wasn't exactly refined, but Chester Brown his grandson was, he played the most refined music for two thousand kilometres around. I've written this song about Chester down from memory:

Chester Brown it is his name, the man was once a hero, his trumpeting could wake the lame with hearing powers of zero. Madness and genius are allied, as once the poet wrote, so hear what Chester when he tried could play, hear every note.

Then came the chorus, and the percussionist, a woodpecker with whirring wings, sang the second part:

In his lungs he had a cloud, his fingers were greased lightning, his cheeks held air to play so loud that it was almost frightening. The music it was dynamite, indeed andantophonic. Chester played so clear and bright, it really was a tonic.

SOLO!

A toad with his cheeks puffed out played the trumpet solo. The audience nodded knowingly, fur and feathers rocked to the music, and a pair of hare's ears waving like little flags stuck up above the crowd. The guests in the cellar loved the toad. A chameleon came over all spotty. There was shouting, there were roars of approval, and twelve fruit-flies flung themselves into the orange juice in transports of delight. After the solo, the audience showed its appreciation loudly. The mole sang another verse of the song, but I've forgotten it. Then there was a second solo, chorus, hysterical applause. The mole rose from the piano stool, laid his claw-like fingers on the piano, and bowed three ways to the audience. Then he pointed to the musicians: the woodpecker, the beaver, and of course the toad who was mopping the sweat from his brow with a white cloth.

A brief interval on stage. Time for a drink. The ex-Minister and I ordered a Flatfoot Floogy, which the cocktail spider prepared for us within seconds.

– Tell me, I said, sucking from three straws and looking at Alwin, did you know about this cellar?

My friend was leaning on the bar. He looked at the wall beside the platform, where dozens of posters were stuck up.

– Well, yes, he said, we often came down here for lunch. No idea just what they cook, but the food's good.

– So you knew the password?

Alwin laughed and winked at me.

– I was Minister of Sound and Acoustics.

– But you didn't know about the underground entrance!

– They've moved it. Just as a precaution. You never know.

I was surprised to see how quickly my Floogy had gone down, and ordered another.

– And where are your people now?

Alwin shrugged.

– Going along with whoever pays them. Maybe overdoing it a bit.

He turned again, nodded to the spider and ordered a Take Five. That was a cocktail with five extra shots added. The spider set to work, and I studied the big picture behind the bar. A trumpeter with his instrument. Chester in his prime. No one had heard anything about him for thirty years. Perhaps he'd simply grown old and lost his hearing or his teeth, which is just about as disastrous for a trumpeter.