



## FUNNY CODAs

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# The Real LAST Laugh



PDQ Bach has left the building. Talk about Funny Codas!

Peter Schickele was one of the great American music comedians, parodists, radio show hosts and composers of the 20th century. When we lost the good “Professor” Schickele at the age of 88 earlier this year, it was the end of a long and monumental run as the creative mind behind PDQ Bach (1807–1742?), reputed to be the twenty-first of J.S. and Anna Magdalena Bach’s 20 children (don’t try to figure that conundrum out). Our funny, musical world has lost one of its greatest champions. Guess what? There’s a NYSSMA® connection here! Read on ...

I remember being utterly bewildered and confused when my dad arrived home with the very first album of PDQ Bach music back in 1965. I had been long exposed to some of my folks’ favorite musical humor in the form of the inimitable song parodists Tom Lehrer and Allan Sherman and, of course, the great Victor Borge, the brilliant English singer/comedienne Anna Russell, pianists/comedians Flanders and Swan and, the zany Spike Jones and his City Slickers. But PDQ Bach was a lot more

highbrow stuff for an elementary school kid who was still not so well versed with classical music (aside from all those Bugs Bunny cartoons and what was my introduction to classical music).

No, PDQ Bach’s musical humor was decidedly different, and while my parents and occasional dinner guests would howl when these records were played over coffee and dessert, I was mightily confused. “What was so funny?”, I thought. That said, it was fate and ultimately NYSSMA®, that would take me on a trajectory that would connect me to both PDQ Bach and Peter Schickele in ways I could have never imagined.

If by some chance you have not ever heard of Peter Schickele (a.k.a., PDQ Bach), you owe it to yourself to spend a few moments online acquainting yourself with “their” music. Schickele was most definitely a serious 20th century contemporary composer and a brilliant music raconteur as heard regularly on his NPR show, *Schickele Mix*, for nearly a decade back in the 1990s and rebroadcast at various times up to 2007.

### Student memories

As a young high school horn player, I had the rare privilege of studying with a NYC-based professional hornist and renowned teacher, Ralph Froelich. Mr. Froelich was a conscripted PDQ Bach “regular” and is memorialized as the horn soloist in PDQ Bach’s (Schickele’s) infamous *Concerto for Horn and Hardart* (if you don’t understand the allusion to the automat, I won’t bore you with the details). At my insistence after lessons were over, Mr. Froelich often told some very funny stories about playing on PDQ Bach live concerts.

Schickele’s annual live PDQ Bach concerts at Carnegie Hall and other amazing concert venues in NYC and around the world are legendary. The “professor” often arrived late to his concerts and I personally attended concerts where he took the stage by swinging in from the first tier box seats like Tarzan. Another time, Schickele’s longtime stage manager Bill Walters (who was fondly and predictably snickered at and jeered by

PDQ Bach audiences as he appeared onstage) announced that Schickele and his family would be late to the concert as the “professor” and his family were just up visiting the Empire State Building Observatory Deck. “He’ll be down in a minute,” I remember Walters saying about the professor’s arrival at Carnegie Hall.

This was followed by Schickele entering from the back of the hall followed in turn by someone in a King Kong ape suit being chased by several insane asylum orderlies dressed in white uniforms and carrying large predator nets, and, yes, this was all taking place in Carnegie Hall! The audience was loving every minute.

What followed was typical PDQ Bach craziness performed by some of the best freelance musicians in NYC. There were pieces like *Iphigenia in Brooklyn*, the *Unbegun Symphony*, *Schleptet in Eb Major*, the and, many more recently “unearthed” PDQ Bach discoveries.

For me, Christmas week in the 1970s with college friends in NYC became synonymous with snagging tickets to attend sold-out PDQ Bach concerts. Where else would I hear and see the amazing bassoon quartet, The Bassoonettes (NY Bassoon Quartet) playing classic Beatles tunes, or watching a guest piano soloist “corpse” on a gurney (complete with sheet over his head) wheeled up to a piano where he actually played J.S. Bach two-part inventions with the hands completely reversed on the piano keyboard? It was incredible!

### Meeting The Man

As amazing as attending PDQ Bach concerts could be, in 1999 I would finally have the opportunity to meet and talk to Peter Schickele. This was all orchestrated thanks to then NYSSMA® President Dick Rabideau and a chance PDQ Bach/Peter Schickele encounter at the winter conference that year!

Professor Peter Schickele was the 1999 NYSSMA® Winter Conference keynote speaker! I volunteered to be the good professor’s “minder” and it was the best assignment I ever had during my 30-plus years serving as NYSSMA® editor. Peter Schickele was a hoot to chat with and he was filled with stories that I still remember. Meeting and hanging out with Peter Schickele for a few hours was something I’ll never forget as he was a huge part of my musical upbringing.

In typical fashion, when it came time for his welcome

address, Peter Schickele took the stage in the Rochester Convention Hall dressed in a black tailcoat, black shirt (poorly half hanging out of his pants) but he forgot to pack his tux pants and black dress shoes so he wore faded blue jeans and an old pair of mid-calf hiking boots loosely laced up and untied. What else would you expect him to wear?

Schickele’s address to everyone in attendance was chock-filled with funny stories, but he then praised what we do as music educators. Indeed, Schickele got that right. It was a night to remember and a “coming- full-circle” moment for me and probably quite a few others who grew up listening to Schickele’s music and experiencing his humor in the guise of PDQ Bach.

Peter Schickele enjoyed a ridiculously rich and wonderful career peddling his alter ego’s musical contributions for 50 years. He will be missed by so many and, indeed, it’s only fitting that Professor Schickele/PDQ Bach are both memorialized here in Funny Codas! ||

*“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that certain je ne sais quoi. You’re looking good, see you next week.”*

–Peter Schickele (1935-2024),  
weekly sign-off from Schickele Mix

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