

# Variations on a Theme #11

from Rich Lynch • for SFPA 226 • written in March 2002

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## Mailing Comments – SFPA 225

### Ned Brooks

On classical music: “Several recorded performances of the *1812 Overture* have used real cannon. Whether the Rossini score actually calls for them I have no idea.” I’d guess it doesn’t, since the composer was actually Tchaikovsky. Anyway, the score does call for cannon shots – 14 of them I think – in specific places. And no doubt the composer’s intentions were for real munitions to be used, as the piece was written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before there were recording studio simulations (or even recording studios, for that matter).

On temperature measurement: “I have forgotten why Herr Doktor Fahrenheit chose 32 and 212 [as anchor points for his temperature scale].” The short answer is that he didn’t choose 32 and 212, he chose 0 and 100 – except his anchor points weren’t the freezing and boiling point of water, they were the human body’s temperature at the top end (which he didn’t get quite right) and the coldest temperature he could achieve at the low end (which he got by mixing ice, water, and ammonium chloride). On that scale, it turned out that water froze at 32 degrees and boiled at 212. It was just coincidental that the ratio of Fahrenheit degrees to Celsius degrees is 9-to-5.

On the risks of space travel: “I don’t doubt an astronaut could have died on the moon – but I think the chance of a broken leg or a heart attack was far below the well-estimated risks of equipment breakdown or a micro-meteor strike.” No doubt true. Missions to the moon were short enough in duration that you could mostly ignore things like solar flares, which would be a real potential threat on any manned mission to Mars. The biggest threat of all, I’d guess, is what you already mentioned – some kind of catastrophic equipment breakdown.

### Arthur Hlavaty

On the Hugo results at MilPhil: “The Novel Hugo offered final evidence that the gargoyles have taken over the cathedral.” Perhaps. On the other hand, you could also chalk it up to a somewhat lackluster bunch of nominees. There was no ‘sense of wonder’ science fiction novel as an alternative like, for instance, Greg Benford’s *Eater* (which was eligible but did not make the final ballot). Should we really be surprised that on a final ballot comprised mostly of fantasy novels, a fantasy novel won?

### Guy Lillian

On home construction: “Rosy recently found out that this house has aluminum wiring, which would be illegal in new construction. How much danger am I in turning on my computer.” Probably none; if there was any real fire danger, one would have happened by now. That said, it still wouldn’t hurt to have an electrician do a safety check if you have another reason someday for having one over to do some work.

On fanzine publishing: “I look forward to the next *Mimosa*! Even if you did miss 2001 with the article about Sir Arthur.” But we didn’t – *M27* was available (in *extremely* limited quantities)

before the end of 2001, even though most people didn't receive theirs until some time in January (and the non-North American copies are still in limbo somewhere as of this writing – I'm still working on tracking them down and finding out when they'll be delivered).

On fan history: "I'm not sure Julie Schwartz claims to have edited the first fanzine, or if that's a distinction others claim for him." I think it's his own, and since the term 'fanzine' didn't exist back in the 1930s, his claim was the first "true fan magazine." He could be right (his claim is for *The Time Traveler*) but it's such a grey area for what was a 'fan magazine' vs. other types of non-professional science fiction publications back then, there are others that could make the same claim. (A case could easily be made for *The Planet*, for instance.)

### **Richard Dengrove**

On postal service delays: "Anthrax stopped the mail in the D.C. area for a time." Indeed it did. I received no surface mail of any kind at work for about 2½ months, and once it finally resumed all the mail had been stamped "Sanitized" (whatever they're doing makes the envelopes very brittle). Even now the mail I get at work is delayed by well over a month; in the past few weeks I've received invites to three different Embassy holiday parties (in November and December of last year) that I missed because I didn't know about them at the time.

On romance and science fiction: "I wouldn't have read Catherine Asaro's books, having heard they had won all sorts of romance awards. ... They might not be Bodice Rippers; but they certainly would be Spacesuit Tearers?" Not all. On a sampling of one book (*Primary Inversion*, which was her first novel, in fact), I can say she can write a very interesting story with a minimal amount of romance; it's far more of an adventure story. Many of her subsequent books are in the same universe (the Skolian series), so I'm sure I'll read another. As soon as I can figure out which book is next in the series.

### **Gary Robe**

On terrorists and terrorism: "The only comfort we have is that when nutcase Richard Reid tried to light the fuse in his shoe bomb the passengers and flight attendants took him down." Luckily for us he was a nutbar, or maybe he was hoping somebody would stop him. It could easily have come out much, much worse. Think of what the outcome might have been if he'd gone into one of the airplane's lavatories and locked the door instead of trying to light the bomb where he was sitting.

### **David Schlosser**

On the WTC Twin Towers design: "I saw an analysis of the WTC that indicated that pretty much everyone who was below the crash site had time to make it out before the collapse and that almost nobody was able to make it out from at or above the crash site. So it did do something of what it was supposed to." Only somewhat. Did you see the program on The Learning Channel that analyzed the failure of the WTC towers? The use of lightweight trusses for the floor supports was singled out, as they failed more quickly than I-beams would have. And the way the trusses held the building together (they were attached to the structural outer walls of the towers with what looked like simple L-brackets) was also a causative agent for the collapse, as was shown on the program using a simple model – the brackets deformed in the heat, along with the trusses, and it caused the floors where the heat was severest to collapse down onto the next lower floor, which overloaded that floor's L-brackets causing that one to collapse. It became a domino effect. The

floor trusses were part of the tower's structural support – they gave the towers resistance to racking and to bowing-out under load, but only so long as they were attached to the walls of the towers. When the domino-failure of the upper floors started due to the heat from the fire, the sides of the building buckled (there was a video of this shown on the program). What actually happened was that each tower resisted collapse from the very severe fire for only about an hour – enough time for people in the lower floors to make it out, but not if they were delayed or inefficient at climbing down the dozens of flights of stairs. And, as it turned out, about another 300 people in the South Tower could have been saved, as one of the interior stairwells was unblocked (the plane hit near the corner of that building); problem was, the stairwell was filled with smoke for about three floors, so only three or four people took that path out, and they survived – the others went up toward the roof instead, and perished. I don't know what kind of structures will go up on the WTC site after the debris is cleared, but it seems clear that the WTC Twin Towers design cannot be used again.

On baseball: Maybe [Major League Baseball Commissioner] Selig wants MLB to undergo contraction so that some new teams can be born?" Nah, this is all about money. If you get rid of the teams that aren't financially successful, it's all that much more money from the TV contracts for the remaining team owners, and it also heads off any revenue-sharing schemes that would be needed to keep these near bankrupt teams afloat and competitive. I think that MLB will absolutely lose its anti-trust exemption if contraction happens, though. Or that years of lawsuits will indefinitely delay contraction.

### **Janice Gelb**

On having poor vision: "I took advantage of a Sears all-inclusive \$99 offer to get bifocals for home so I can watch TV and read at the same time." Pretty good price for bifocals! Mine cost about \$200-250, I think. I also had to decide what I needed them for – in the end, I opted for the usual long-distance prescription for the top part, and a mid-distance prescription for the lower inserts (and I don't use progressive lenses). The mid-range prescription I use for computer work that's just out of focus in the upper prescription. For reading, I take off my glasses.

On this year's Dramatic Presentation Hugo Award: "It's a shame that *Shrek*, *Harry Potter*, and *Lord of the Rings* had to come out in the same year." And it's no easier this year, with the second *LotR*, the second *Harry Potter*, *Minority Report*, *Star Wars Episode 2*, and the new *Star Trek* movie (most likely) to name a few. But the Dramatic presentation Award might be split by the time nomination for those comes up, which would cut down any competition from *Bluffy*.

### **Sheila Strickland**

On strange weather: "... what happens on New Year's Day? Snow! .. I took pictures just to remind myself of this extraordinary winter in years to come." It's been an unusual winter here, too, but for about the opposite reason. It's only snowed a few times (it's not rained much either, for that matter) and in February we had a stretch where temperatures got into the lower 70s. Decidedly unusual for this area.

### **Gary Brown**

On slow mail delivery: "It took the simple letter from West Palm beach to Tampa five days [to get there]." Be glad your mail doesn't need to undergo 'sanitizing' procedure, or it would take

five weeks. I do agree that the old three-day delivery of first class mail is now a myth, except for within-city.

On September 11<sup>th</sup> news reportage: “A TV report came on saying there were reports that there was another explosion at the State Department. ... In fact, there was a second report saying it was a car bomb of some sort.” Yeah, I heard that one, too. And that there had also been an explosion up on Capital Hill, and another at the Old Executive Office building. We got evacuated from our building because security was afraid that all federal agencies might be attacked (though, thinking back, I never felt that my own personal safety was ever at risk that day), but when I got outside I could see no signs of smoke from Capitol Hill, or over toward the State Department, or toward the White House, though there were huge billows of black smoke from the direction of the Pentagon. The attack at the Pentagon was unfortunately real, but the others turned out to be hoaxes or out-of-control rumors. Luckily.

### **Steve Hughes**

On the Enron way of doing business: “You start a new company! ... The new company will be entirely owned by your old company so you get any money it makes.” Actually, this happens a lot in the energy sector, especially with any overseas projects. It’s usually necessary to form a joint venture with the entity that owns the site where the new power plant will be built (or re-built). And yes, off-balance-sheet financing is an important factor for making the economics work, but more for the host entity than the U.S. investor.

On wise investing: “Anyone who puts their life savings into a single stock is either a fool or very greedy.” Both, I think. Nicki and I have our investments mostly into maybe 10 different mutual funds managed through either Merrill Lynch or Smith Barney. This past year hasn’t been a great one, but we haven’t really been hurt that badly, either. There were news stories about some of the people who lost almost everything because of the Enron collapse, and in many if not most of the cases, it’s their own fault – they either ignored the specific advice of a financial expert that they really, really needed to invest in more than just Enron, or they passed on chances to sell off stock early on when it was possible to do so and when the stock still had reasonable value. I do feel sorry for them, but they were unbelievably stupid and greedy. “A while back, I ... listened to a gentleman explain how those greedy investors in the Internet bubble got what they deserved while he had invested in a safe mutual fund. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that his ‘safe’ mutual fund was a major Internet investor.” On that note, I checked and saw that some of the mutuals we are invested in did have Enron stock. But not all that much, relatively. Enron was so powerful a year or so ago that most mutuals invested in them.

### **Jeff Copeland**

On movies: “*Lord of the Rings* is the most beautiful movie I’ve seen in quite a while.” Me too, but I’ll qualify that by defining ‘quite a while’ as ‘in a bit more than a year’ as that’s how long it had been since *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* had appeared.

### **Eve Ackerman**

On touring Washington, D.C.: “Raphi said they went to the Air and Space Museum but didn’t spend nearly enough time visiting the exhibits, and they went to see ‘the big penis’, which I correctly interpreted as the Washington Monument.” Hopefully they saw more than just those. Greg Benford and his wife Elizabeth were in town in early February, and I spent about half a day

with them giving them a pared-down version of my ‘all-out gonzo full-court press walking tour of downtown Washington’, which combines a bit of historical perspective with lots of walking and visits to most of the usual tourist places and some of the less obvious ones (and usually takes about 6 hours to do on a nice day). The Washington Monument wasn’t even open while Raphi was in D.C.; instead of there, I take my visitors to the Old Post Office Building, whose tower offers a somewhat lower but more panoramic view of the city. Did he get to see the new Roosevelt Memorial? How about the Einstein statue?

### **Randy Cleary**

No real comments this time, but I liked your definition of Zen.

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### **A Few Words About Classical Music**

The beginning of Spring is less than two weeks away as I write this, but the beginning of “Spring” is only a few seconds away, as long as it will take me to start the CD player. This version of “Spring” is the first of four violin concertos that make up one of the most famous works in classical music – Antonio Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons.” There are many good recordings of “The Four Seasons” – the two I have are Philips 422 479-2, which also includes three other violin concertos, and Laserlight 15 656 (which I found at the Waldens bookstore in the mall), which also includes another famous Vivaldi composition, the Mandolin Concerto (which most of you have heard before; it’s been used in television commercials).

A recording of “The Four Seasons” is pretty much an essential part of any classical music collection. Many composers, Beethoven, for instance, wrote a violin concerto that compares in stature and excellence with any of the Vivaldi concertos, but Vivaldi wrote four consecutive concertos of such excellence, one for each season. And they have stood the test of time – they were written in the Baroque era, in 1725, thirty-one years before Mozart was born.

### **Back to Europe**

I’ve only heard “The Four Seasons” performed live once, and that was in Prague several years ago. I’ll be going back there again in April, and also to Budapest, Bratislava, and Warsaw (all in two weeks). We’re trying to get a better idea of where all the energy market liberalizations are headed in the region over there, as we’re getting enquiries on it all the time. I’ll be meeting with the usual cast of characters – people from various Ministries, middle managers of electricity and natural gas companies, etc. And I’ll also spend some time with the Commercial Service people at the American Embassies in those cities, to try to find areas of mutual interest for us.

And yes, there will be another Postcard Diary. Next time. See you then...