

Variations on a Theme #14

from Rich Lynch • for SFPA 228 • written in July 2002

The Silk Road

Today I was able to walk from Italy to Japan in ten minutes. It was enough to break out in a sweat, but it wasn't because of exertion – it was the weather.

Summers in Washington are hot and humid, no doubt about that. You'd think that being located this far north of Florida, the heat and humidity wouldn't be about the same here in the nation's capital as for, say, Orlando. But it is, just about. No fun at all being out on the National Mall under the hot midday sun, unless there's something really interesting going on out there to look at or participate in.

At the end of June each year, there is – the Smithsonian's annual Folklife Festival. For ten days each summer, centered around Independence Day, the National Mall is transformed into a microcosm of two or three cultures. Usually one region of the United States is featured, along with one or two countries – last year it was New York City and Bermuda, and the year before it was the desert southwest and Nepal. This year's Festival was billed as the biggest and best one ever, and the first one with just a single theme – the Silk Road.

That's a pretty big thing to attempt, as the actual Silk Road went from Italy to Japan, passing through south and central Asia along the way. Nowadays, that's at least 15 countries, even though some of them are pretty small and many of them have similar cultures. Nevertheless, from the number of structures assembled on the Mall and the number of event tents they've put up, there was a lot of money and planning involved. Compared to this, a Worldcon is small potatoes.

In just the couple hours I was there, there was a lot going on. In my ten-minute stroll from Italy to Japan, I saw and experienced some pretty interesting things going on that were show-casing the various cultures – stone carvers from Tuva (a part of Russia bordering Mongolia), a puppet theater from Uzbekistan, bakers from China, glassblowers from Japan, decorative ceramics painters from Turkey, carpet weavers from Tibet, and Buddhist monks, dressed in their customary orange robes, who were working on a sand mandala.

Besides all that there were also several musical venues, all located inside large tents, that featured everything from Kazakh folk rock to Bengalese devotional music to Mongolian throat singing to Chinese opera. The biggest audience seemed to be for the Silk Road Ensemble, which included the world-famous cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. Their program event was an eclectic mixture of classical music sometimes mixed with traditional music from some of the countries along the Silk Road – for instance, a duet (of sorts) of cello and throat singer, with the cello playing an intricate composition that reminded me of Bach while the drone of the throat singer joined in partway through the piece and actually added to the overall complexity of the piece. It was fascinating.

Yo-Yo Ma was perhaps the reason the Silk Road came to Washington at all. In 1998, he founded the Silk Road Project to better study the interaction of ideas and cultures along the Silk Road, and to act as an umbrella organization for related artistic, cultural, and educational pro-grams. The Silk Road Project is cosponsor of the Folklife Festival this year, so in a way, the Festival is Yo-Yo Ma's project this year, and he's involved himself as hands-on as you can get – the Silk Road Ensemble has two hour-long events, in the 90+ degree heat, each of the ten days of the Festival.

As always, it will be a shame when the festival ends. (I say that every year, but it's true.) I don't know what they do for next year, but it will be hard to equal this year's Festival.

Classical Music

This would seem to be a good time to recommend a CD featuring Yo-Yo Ma. There are plenty to choose from, not only of classical music but also some things around the periphery, including music by the Silk Road Ensemble. However, not very many of these are reasonably priced (i.e., under \$12). Still, he's a wonderful musician to listen to, so I do recommend that anybody who is interested in classical music have at least one recording by him. One CD that I can recommend that *is* reasonably priced is a CD of three concertos by Franz Joseph Haydn (on CBS Masterworks, MK 39310), on which Yo-Yo Ma is featured soloist on the recording of Haydn's Cello Concerto in D Major. This is one of my favorite cello concertos; it is a very pleasant and melodic piece, and this recording of it is the best I've found yet. And there's more on the CD than just the cello concerto – there are also recordings (not featuring Yo-Yo Ma) of one of Haydn's violin concertos and his Trumpet Concerto in E-Flat Major (perhaps the best-known classical music composition for trumpet ever written), with Wynton Marsalis as featured soloist. This is a really good CD!

Mailing Comments, SFPA 227

Ned Brooks

On 'sanitized' mail: "Interesting about the brittleness of 'sanitized' envelopes. How badly damaged are the contents?" Any paper inside the envelopes doesn't seem as brittle, but some-times it seems discolored near the edges, and quite often the print offsets to other paper it comes in contact with. I think the 'sanitizing' is done by heating, or by some technology that causes heating as a byproduct. That would explain why the envelopes are often brittle. "Will it be supplemented by gas they now claim will destroy anthrax spores?" Don't know, but doubt it – the gas treatment is pretty expensive and if it's used everywhere you've got a large amount of hazardous gas to dispose of. Heat and radiation treatment seems to be effective, from what I've heard, and that can probably be done relatively quickly, with only moderate delay of mail delivery.

On fiction by David Brin: "My main problem with Brin as a storyteller is that, like Stephen King, he doesn't know when to stop. *The Postman* would have been excellent at 1/3 the word count." That's how it originally appeared, actually – a novella in *Asimov's* titled "The Postman" that makes up the first third of the novel. Novels pay better than novellas, though, which probably explains why he expanded it.

Richard Dengrove

On classical music: "There is no proof that Mozart was killed by the machinations of Salieri." Not only no proof, but plenty of proof that Mozart died from contagious disease, most likely Rheumatic Fever. (There was a story about it on *All Things Considered* a few years ago; it was the topic of a discussion panel at a medical convention.) Salieri has gotten an entirely undeserved reputation as a villain and a criminal because of *Amadeus*.

me

My latest Postcard Diary is now online at: <http://www.jophan.org/eurodiary8/> With color photos, instead of those lousy B&W scans. Meanwhile, there's a new issue of *Mimosa* (as many of you reading this are already aware). It's the first part of a two-volume Fanthology, 108 pages

of some of the best writing from the first 16 issues. Part two will be published by about year's end, and these will *not* be put online at the web site. (Many of the articles are already online in other issues; I don't want to do it twice.)

Janice Gelb

Hope you had fun on your Australia and New Zealand trip. Not sure I'll ever get back there again, so it will be nice to read about your travels.

On airline security checks: "No one on the plane freaked when they saw my crochet needle." On my trip to Europe, it was halfway across the Atlantic before I remembered I'd forgotten to take the multi-tool out of one of my carry-ons. The checkers had missed it (it has a knife blade about 4-inches long, too), so before I came back home, I put the thing in my checked luggage. I need to be a bit more careful on my trip preparations.

Your episode with Harlan Ellison ended just about the way I expected it to.

Guy Lillian

On the Japanese Seiun Awards: "One reason the Seiun Awards feel interminable is Hugo nominee tension – waiting for the charming people in the beautiful clothing to get their awards presented and leave the damned stage so *I* can lose *mine*." Well, this is the most entertaining explanation I've heard about why people don't like the Seiun Award presentation during the Hugo Ceremony. But I *do* like the mini-pageant of the charming people in the beautiful clothing, and I do think it adds a pleasant charm to the Ceremony. This is not the kind of thing you'd see at a regional convention.

On site selection voting: "Won't the '05 NASFiC be decided this year, since UK in '05 is unopposed?" Nope – the NASFiC is on a two-years-in-advance cycle, not three (like the World-con), so the '05 contest will be decided in Toronto. As for the Charlotte vs. Seattle choice for the '05 NASFiC, neither one has shown me anything yet, so no preference (so far).

David Schlosser

On temperature scales (one more time): I'd guess that, given the technology of the time, that the coldest produceable temperatures were those that nature provided." True if you lived in Minnesota or Lapland, maybe, but not necessarily true for much of Europe, most probably including the place where Dr. Fahrenheit had his laboratory. It takes almost no technology of any kind to mix ice, water, and ammonium chloride; when you do, you'll get a liquid that has a temperature of just about 0°F.

On Red Cross policies: "I'd suspect that, after the AIDS uproar, they are taking a fairly conservative approach in their estimations [about the transmissibility of BSE]." No doubt they are. This would presume, however, that there is solid evidence that BSE is a blood-borne disease like AIDS, and I've never seen any evidence of that. Is there any?

Irvin Koch

The photo of Dan Taylor is a dead ringer for Maryland fan Mike Walsh. Separated at birth?

Gary Brown

On 9/11 aftermath: "I see they are now claiming that the jet that went down in Pennsylvania was headed for the White House. Could be a ruse, but I suspect it is true." I'll easily believe that it was headed for Washington, D.C., but how can anybody know for sure what the exact target was? If anything, I'd think that it was the Capitol Building, and that the jet that hit the Pentagon

was originally intended for the White House (but the pilots couldn't locate it, coming in from the west with the morning sun in their eyes). It seems clear, from the way the plane circled once before hitting the Pentagon, that it was intended for a different high-profile target – that could only mean either the White House or the Capitol, but the Capitol is easily visible no matter what the weather conditions in Washington, and that plane didn't go for it.

Steve Hughes

On the Walther CP99 pellet gun: “This gun was an exact copy of the real thing. Shooting it is just as much fun as shooting a real gun but a lot easier since we can shoot it in our front yard.” I note that local ordinances where you are living are somewhat different from the ones here. Hope no overly exuberant cop drives through while you're doing that.

On mail sanitizing: “The process of irradiating mail to sanitize can affect the consistence of the paper by causing chemical changes. This means that paper and ink combinations that should be archival quality may turn out to be more like pulp paper.” Luckily, nothing that gets sent to me at my office address falls under that category, because nobody seems to give a damn at the deterioration this sanitizing is causing. Not sure what will happen when somebody sends me a CD, which will happen sooner or later. At least most of the time sensitive stuff is now being sent by fax and email.

Jeff Copeland

On *Spy Game*: “Nice movie, told largely in flashback.” One of the diplomatic service guys I met in Budapest has a small speaking role in it (as a CIA agent). He even has a scene with Brad Pitt!

On *Attack of the Clones*: “Well, [it] didn't completely suck.” Agreed. I didn't think that *The Phantom Menace* was completely bad, either. On the other hand, I didn't think that any of the first three *Star Wars* movies deserved all the acclaim they got.

On temperature scales: “I seem to remember that [water freezes at 32° and boils at 212° in the Fahrenheit temperature scale] because zero was actually the freezing point of some specific formulation of brine and 200 was the boiling point for the same mixture.” And just *what* was your grade in Chemistry? (Brines have higher boiling points than pure water, not lower.)

Toni Weisskopf

Such a well-written fanzine, and I am a bit apologetic that this comment is directed at Pat Gibbs' column of right-wing hoey that once again tries to put new clothes on the morally indefensible stance that Elian Gonzalez should have been kept from being reunited with his father. It is bullshit to claim, as Pat has, that politics come before family. If it was the other way around, with an American child held by relatives in Cuba, Pat would be screaming the loudest for us to Do Something to get the child back to his or her parents. In fact, dozens of such situations do exist, where a child was taken out of the U.S. by one parent against the wishes of the other. Pat, being a lawyer, should not have to be reminded about the legal precedents involved.