

53 and 54

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1981

John Bangsund PO Box 171 Fairfield Victoria 3078 Australia

a calculator for Xmas. I was pretty pleased about this, I can tell you, because there are a few sums I can't do in my head these days. When I'm idly sitting about calculating in my head how much we have left to pay off the car, for example, I still have no trouble working out the Rule of 78 (even numbers, multiply half number by number-plus-one; odd, half-plus-one by number) and how it applies to our contract, but there comes a point, usually when long division is involved, when my blip Recall Memory blip fails to function, I forget the number I first thought of, and I must reach for a scrap of paper and work the whole thing out properly. I'm not too bad on percentages, except when they get into fractions other than halves, but I'm almost useless on square roots and other fancy reverse figuring of that sort, so I was delighted to get a calculator for Xmas, until I looked at what I'd got.

The Sharp EL5812 Scientific Calculator (Made In Japan - no third-world rubbish for us) does a few more things than percentages and square roots. Offhand I'd say it does, oh, a few hundred give or take I mean it does quite a lot of amazing things that I vaguely understand or at least have heard of, and then there's umpteen zillion things I've never struck before in all my man-and-boy science-fiction-reading life. It's a bloody computer, that's what it is. Can't fool me, I know what the computers of the future are going to look like, because I've read a lot of science fiction in my time. I just didn't know the future had arrived, that's all.

I suspect the hand of Foyster in this. Not so long ago, Sally was talking about (sounding me out on, ha!) calculators, and I said John had told me it wasn't worth buying a calculator until I could get one that would drive the car, which might be a year or two yet. I'd made a mental note of that. Obviously Sally did, too, when I told her that, and decided that a cheap, not-so-clever calculator would do me until a Renault-navigating model came on the market. So here is my cheap, not-so-clever calculator, good grief, and for all I know, it is entirely capable of driving a small bicycle at least. Foyster knows I have a small bicycle - he remarked the cobwebs on it only recently - and he knows I'm innumerate. That's why I think he's been in on this.

Having thoughtfully packed Sally off to Hobart so I could get a bit of leisured Xmas reading, stencil-typing and tape-cataloguing done, I suddenly find myself with a viciously entertaining machine on my hands (Do you know how many seconds there are in a year? 31 536 000! For 1980 blip Recall Memory blip add in 29 February blip - 31 622 400 - amazing: where do they all go?), along with its 127-page instruction manual, which I understand easily as far as page 12, and I am beginning to feel awfully ignorant, which is a hell of a way to feel on Xmas Day.

The only good thing about all this, apart from keeping me off the streets, is that it's helping me to design a word-calculator. This handy little device (the basic model, I mean - some of my ideas may take time) will have about 40 buttons on it, including the letters of the alphabet, punctuation symbols and so on, and a refinement entirely my own, an OK button. What you do, you tap in the words or sentences you have in mind to write, and press the OK button, and if they're OK a random message comes up on the display - something like CORRECT! or BY GEORGE I THINK YOU'VE GOT IT! or MOVE OVER HARRY WARNER! - or, if

they're not OK, something like SEE FOWLER or HAVEN'T YOU GOT A DICTIONARY YET? or HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF GETTING A JOB ON ONE OF MURDOCH'S PAPERS? IT MAY BE YOUR LAST HOPE. That sort of thing. When it's perfected it'll sell millions, I'm confident of that. All I need just now is a bit of guidance with the EL5812, and I've arranged that: my nephew is coming over some time to help me. (He's 13 now. Amazing how quickly children grow up these days, isn't it?)

Have you ever thought of using a calculator to work out how much time you have left on a cassette? No, I thought not. It takes a multi-cross-cultural mind, such as my own, to apply a scientific calculator to such problems as tape-length, minutes, seconds and whether Michelangeli's cadenzas - actually Beethoven's, I understand, but quite late - extend or contract the average performer's time on the First Piano Concerto (the C major, op.15, of 1797 - remarkable work for its time). Some people would use primitive instruments, such as watches, that would ultimately produce the same figures or thereabouts, but think of the time they waste listening to the music!

Speaking of which, Maurizio Pollini will be on in a few minutes - the op.10 Etudes of Chopin, and a snatch of Stravinsky for afters - and I don't want to miss him, so if you don't mind I'll just say Hpy Xms! and be right back after dinner. (Missed the Queen's Message. Damn.)

After dinner Excellent, thank you for asking. The chicken Sally left for me was superb. The '78 Mount Pleasant Elizabeth Riesling was superb, if a little young. Pollini's Chopin was superb. What more could a man ask? The strength of character, perhaps, not to have gone on to the '80 Leasingham Bin 14 Chablis - but then I might never have written this.

Luckily, Her Gracious's Xmas Message was re-broadcast. She quoted Tennyson, but not, as I recall, Kipling. Her father was quite fond of Kipling. Her son is quite fond of Milligan. I can just imagine him, years from now, looking concerned but not grave, cheerful but not stupidly optimistic, carefully quoting Milligan in his Xmas Message to the folks and world.

The gist of HM's message was that things are pretty crook but they could be crooker, and we'll all muddle through somehow, because we've always muddled through before, we British. And, um, colonials.

I got the impression that she thought Britain was ruled right now by some idiotic, bungling, useless lot of doctrinaire politico-mathematicians who wouldn't know their GNP from their elbows. Was this year's Message a repeat, or is HM unhappy about Ms Thatcher? I do hope it was a repeat. Charles, after all, is reported in some quarters to be looking for a wife, and one could hardly have one's daughter marry into a family that was unhappy about Ms Thatcher, could one? Of course not. (Flash! Just heard the news! Prince Charles has announced his engagement to Michael Foot!) (Where will all this wild extrapolation end? Why does a very young chablis make one so excitable?)

Meanwhile in America: President-elect Ronald Reagan, in his Xmas Message to the people of Iran, has said that he doesn't know how Father Xmas will get a tractor down his chimney. Silly bugger, we elected him to nuke the Iranians, not tell them fairy stories.

10 January Someone woke me about 11 this morning. In accordance with Bell's Second Law, whoever-it-was hung up the instant I lifted the receiver. I thought it might have been Foyster, ringing to congratulate me on winning the National Times Music Quiz Competition, but I couldn't bring myself to ring him, in case it wasn't or I hadn't. I'll ask him tonight, when I return Jenny's music books, from which I got some of my classier answers.

Sally not home, car missing, either she's gone to church again or run away from home at last, not that I blame her, I'm hell to live with at the best of times and when I'm working on competitions I'm an absolute pig. Maybe it was her (okay, Alf, she), ringing to tell me she'd been to mass at St Peter's and decided to become a nun. Does the Church of England have married nuns? Funny lot, Anglicans.

So I had some coffee and listened to the music I was taping from Jaroslav Kovaricek's program when I went to bed, about 4, then cycled down to the delicatessen opposite Alphington station, where I bought the National Times that had been put aside for someone. Does someone else in Alphington go in for music quizzes? I wondered as I pedalled back to Fulham Road. I waved to Alf - another Alf, secretary of the local Labor Party branch - as I rolled past on my three-speed purple folding Raleigh, the very one that had cobwebs on it last time you read about it. I have decided, having now done at least two miles on the thing, that I don't like it much. I traded the Peugeot on it, because I couldn't get used to that foreign five-speed derailleurs (?sp) gearbox, eighteen months ago. The Peugeot, also a collapsing, folding and instantly-falling-apart model, was a better machine - Sally still has hers, the orange one with the flat tyres - but I think I'd be a lot more comfortable on one of those stodgy old heavy black touring Raleighs we used to have before the war. Not that long ago, actually: I sold my last one in Adelaide. It had served me faithfully since 1969, and had at least a million miles left in it.

Her Worship has returned (I was right about St Peter's - their high mass sounds divine - and wrong about the nunnery), having scoured the shops between Eastern Hill and here for a copy of the National Times for me. I told her they'd extended the deadline to next Wednesday. She agrees that's pretty rotten of them. I might have scraped into third place last Wednesday, with everyone on holidays and the libraries shut, and if I'd known I had another week I might still have got somewhere, but what the hell, it was very educational browsing through Jenny's books.

The other competition I'm working on is rather different. The Age, which is by way of being Australia's best newspaper, has advertised for a 'funny writer'. No, not a humorous columnist: the notice alongside Phillip Adams's column a few Saturdays ago clearly said 'Are you a funny writer?' The prize, for one 700-900-word column, from 'anyone from anywhere', is \$500. Seventy cents a word sounds like a fair deal to me, so I'm trying to write something funny. So is everyone else I know, and I find it just a little bit odd that several people lately have been reading my old fanzines and talking to me about the funny bits that they liked but didn't entirely understand.

I'm not at all sure that I could keep up a weekly funny column, but I've got enough ideas on hand for the first six months. At \$500 each, that's...

***** PHILOSOPHICAL GAS *****

***** 54 February 1981 *****

I wondered whether I could still do that fancy stuff. Now I wonder why I wanted to know. Anyway, Philosophical Gas, The Modern Journal of Turf Fired Harmonic Telegraphy, is still excessively typed and published by John Bangsund, PO Box 171, Fairfield, Victoria 3078, Australia Regis, for members of ANZAPA, FAPA, FLAP and GRAPPA. Subscriptions, when last cited, were securely fastened to a mixed haversack of international non-linear emoluments floating somewhere off the coast of Wollongong.

7 February I haven't won the Age's funny-writing competition, and for all I know, neither has anyone else. There are some mildly wryly amusing pieces in today's paper, but no word from the editor about that \$500. A friend of mine, who doesn't work for the Age, told me yesterday that the editor was very disappointed at the low standard of the stuff submitted. Well, I wasn't wildly excited by this news. I know that a busy working journalist doesn't have time to write to every unpublishable contributor telling him where he went wrong, but they do have a fair heap of printing machinery there in Spencer Street, and I rather thought the editor might have found a moment or two to compose a little form letter that could be posted out to all the idiots who accepted his invitation to write something funny for him. I didn't expect the man to find my stuff funny: I submitted it on the off chance that he might. If today's pieces indicate what he finds funny, then I was way out, because he prefers genteel humourists who lead the life of mildly wryly, and has no time for people who make puns like that one. That's okay. I'm only cranky because I took a fair amount of time off from being a busy working journalist to write this stuff for him, and I don't like finding out that he was disappointed at its low standard from a friend I ran into in a pub.

Stuff him. I'd rather write for you anyway.

Interlude Sally has applied for a job with the Antarctic Division of the Department of Science and Technology. We were talking about it last night, and she said she'd better get some literature on the Division's activities because she doesn't want to go into an interview cold. 'I'll just write that down,' I said, and started writing it down, and she said a very rude word and threw a cat at me.

David Grigg has found some excellent items lately for my collection of naval-backwaters, one of them in an article about Sydney's homosexual community; males and females of that persuasion don't always agree, it seems - in fact 'there's a lot of dissension between the two camps'.

Bah, Hummelbug! Music? Don't talk to me about that crazy bar-crotchet stuff! I was sitting quietly at the Foysters' place on the evening of the 28th, minding my own business, taking care not to smoke too many cigarettes at once because it does terrible things to their wallpaper, when the tall hairy one started asking me all these silly questions. 'Who wrote Mozart's 39th? How many horns in a horn trio? What do the following have in common: Fidel Castro, Yehudi Menuhin, Tommy Flynn? In which opera does the heroine say "Gak!" and die? What instrument handles water music?'

That sort of interrogation might unsettle a lesser man, but I just fired answers back at him as fast as I could make them up - 'Danzi Finzi Markenzie; fourteen; characters in an opera by Leigh Edmonds; none; bath tuba' - and after a while he gave up and threw the National Times at me and said he didn't know any of those.

That's how I got involved in the National Times Music Quiz Competition, driving myself and everyone around me mad for the next week. There were 100 questions, twenty each on Opera, Mozart, Orchestral Music, Chamber Music and Twentieth Century Music, but because the questions often had several parts, or required multiple answers, I finished up looking for 190 answers. By the time I got to Mervyn Binns's New Year's Eve party I had about seventy answers. I cornered George Turner, who knows even more about opera than he knows about science fiction, and extracted a dozen answers from him, all but one (it turned out) correct. He did not know who sang Figaro at the first performance, claiming not to have been around at the time. Mervyn didn't know either. Still, it was a pretty good party. It continued next day at Dianne and Damien's place. Christine Ashby asked me what I was writing for the Age's funny-writing competition, and I asked her which modern composer died after tripping over a dog, and we all had a good time. There was a lady at the party who looked remarkably like Valma Brown. Valma would be delighted at the number of people who cuddled her by mistake at the party. I knew it wasn't Valma because she couldn't tell me who had written a concerto for Ondes Martenot. Also, she was smoking. Canberra does funny things to people, but it's not that bad.

The rest of my answers (I finished up with 154 correct by my reckoning, 146 by the judges') came mainly from the Gramophone magazine, of which I seem to have accumulated about 250 issues, and Jenny's books on modern music. The two books I needed most, Einstein's *Mozart* and Kobbe's *Complete Opera Book* (?title), had disappeared from the shelves of every library and bookshop in Melbourne, it seemed. The competition closed on 7 January, and I posted off my entry on the 4th. I tried to forget the whole thing and concentrate on my work and that other competition. You can see how well I succeeded if you just go back two pages: by Sunday the 11th I didn't even know what day it was.

The official results took up two pages of the National Times on the 18th. The winners were a doctor who composes in his spare time, the secretary of a philharmonic society and a music teacher. The judges' comments make it pretty clear that I ran fourth or fifth, but I didn't rate a mention. Some of the official answers are ambiguous, and some just plain wrong, but what the hell, it was all good clean fun and it stopped me watching television for a week. But I must admit that I have been thinking a bit about why I went in for the thing. Was it to impress

John Foyster, who knows I'm not as clever as I think but thinks I don't know that? Was it to prove that a competent book editor or journalist can find out anything about any subject if he sets his mind to it? Was it simply to win first prize?

I think I can answer the last one. First prize was two season tickets to Musica Viva. Now, I haven't been to a musical concert since they threw me out of the Union Theatre for snoring through the entire second act of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (or possibly *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*: I always get those two mixed up), and that was many years ago, when I was still constitutionally capable of listening to music and not smoking for an hour or more. If I remember correctly, Lee Harding and I once went to a concert at the Melbourne Town Hall and heard a Bruckner symphony. For a committed smoker that's an endurance test more difficult even than going to church, I can tell you. No, I just wouldn't last out a concert these days.

Am I really as far gone as that? Surely not! If someone gave me a free ticket to something I liked, I'm sure I would make an effort. It might even be the first step towards rehabilitation and a return to the full and normal life enjoyed by non-smokers. I could catch a train to work, for example, instead of risking my life every day in the crazy, stinking, poisonous traffic. It's something to think about, if ever anyone is giving away free tickets to things.

Now, how's this for a mildly wryly amusing little coincidence? The Age, Melbourne's premier newspaper, of which I have spoken fondly and often in these pages over the years, is running a little competition of a musical nature in its admirable free lift-out TV and radio program guide. This week there are four pictures of composers, and their autographs, and you have to guess who they are. Well, that beats 'Which composers supplemented their incomes by (a) working as assistant to the architect Le Corbusier, (b) winning the jackpot on an Italian TV program, (c) teaching Greek at Harvard?', doesn't it? I think I'll be in it. There are fifty (50) prizes of two season tickets to Musica Viva.

Life's little ironies, eh, Tom?

If you've ever wondered why so many classical music concerts are *absolutely ruined by people coughing*, I am now in a position to tell you why this is so. They are smokers with free tickets, trying to redeem themselves and regain their place in normal society. Be gentle with them, kind reader. They have to start somewhere.

Postlude 'One of the residents who suggested the cut-and-cover tunnel, Mr Tom Tyer, an engineer, said the idea deserved a fair hearing and should not be supervised by the Country Roads Board. "This is entrenched bureaucracy at its worst," he said.' (The Age, 12 January 1981)

'On Saturday last, Mr. E. C. Cracknell, Superintendent of Telegraphs, who was on an official visit to Maitland, made further experiments, and achieved a signal success.' (Sydney Morning Herald, 1 January 1878)

And that's all for this time.