Variations on a Theme #21

from Rich Lynch • for SFPA 234 • written in May-June-July 2003

Joyeux anniversaire au premier grand compositeur américain

It's May 8th as I'm starting this SFPAzine and today I've been entertained by the music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, perhaps the first great American composer, who was born in New Orleans on this day in 1829. The local commercial classical music station played many of his compositions today, and a bit later this evening will have one of my favorites, the "Grand Tarantelle for Piano and Orchestra." The one that played during the commercial-free 10 o'clock hour this morning was his first symphony, descriptively titled "A Night in the Tropics," which pretty well exhibits the Caribbean/Creole influences on his music. (Both of these are included on an inexpensive CD, Naxos 8.559036)

It's entertaining to read about Gottschalk and his life as a composer and pianist. His parents were apparently fairly well off financially, but his initial exposure to music was from slaves on Rampart Street, rather than at some chamber music event. Before he could become too contaminated by 1840s New Orleans, his parents packed him off to study classical music in Paris where he remained for more than a decade and met such notables as Georges Bizet, Camille Saint-Saëns, Hector Berlioz, and Frédéric Chopin. His first compositions date to his time in Europe, though some of them must have been a bit difficult to stage ("The Siege of Zaragossa" was a composition for ten pianos!). He also matured into a very fine pianist, one of the best in the world, when he was in Europe, and when he came back to the United States in 1853 his life pretty much became a non-stop concert tour, taking him around the country and then to the Caribbean and South America.

Gottschalk apparently was enthused by the idea of performance transcending into broad spectacle. Some of his concerts were gargantuan, with hundreds of performers on-stage. He also had a well-developed sense of humor. Once, when attempting to stage one of his compositions for 14(!) pianos, he learned that there were only 13 competent pianists available that night. The manager of the concert hall campaigned to have his son become the 14th pianist, but it turned out that the boy had, at best, only limited skill. Gottschalk's solution to this mess was to play a well-intentioned practical joke – he had the striking mechanism inside the 14th piano removed so that it couldn't produce any sound; the performance wasn't ruined, the concert hall manager was kept happy, and piece lived up to its billing of 14 pianists on stage.

Gottschalk left no doubt of his loyalties after the Civil War began – he not only swore an oath to the Union, he even wrote an orchestral piece titled "The Union" which incorporated small bits from "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "Yankee Doodle." He did not remain in the United States for the duration of the war, though – a scandal in 1863 involving a female seminary student caused him to head south, and he spent most of the rest of his life in South America, eventually dying of yellow fever in Brazil when he was only 40 years old.

Gottschalk's music probably can be described as energetic, very melodic, and even eclectic – besides the Caribbean/Creole influence, many of his works feature simple American folk music

melodies, often with interesting variations and orchestration. Perhaps because of this, Gottschalk is quite often looked upon as a talented lightweight – the Naxos web site, for instance, describes his work as being "of varied quality ... [but] never profound or subtle, [with] a fresh and uninhibited atmosphere." As for Gottschalk himself, one of his biographers describes him as "both an arch-romantic and a rationalist, a sentimentalist and a pragmatist, at once America's first regionalist composer, its first multiculturalist, and its first true nationalist," which sounds a bit over-the-top to me, but on the other hand Gottschalk himself was most likely more than a bit over-the-top. He certainly knew how to entertain. His music still does.

Thus We Refute Heinlein

There really *is* such a thing as a free lunch, no matter what Robert A. Heinlein believed. At the beginning of the year, I made an unofficial resolution that I was going to get out of my office more this year to take part in seminars and the like that various think tanks around the city often sponsor. One of these organizations is the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, whose book forums include a free buffet lunch.

To Globalize or not to Globalize, that is the question...

I'm not sure how I found out about these – my politics are anything but Libertarian, so it was probably from my contractor, who knows from experience how to locate free food events. The first one I attended was actually a debate between two university professors (who also had other affiliations and interests, to be sure – both had written books that were for sale and made sure we knew it) about the pros and cons of Globalization. Now, I happen to believe that Globalization is mostly a good thing, or at least is something that has far more pluses than minuses. I managed to get called on for the very first question and directed it at the mostly-anti-Globalization speaker:

"If companies like Coca-Cola and McDonald's can be accused at bringing cultural homogenization [as he had contended] *to the non-western world, how come the anti-Globalists are not railing against an even greater such cultural homogenization force – the Internet? The only entities that seem to do that are countries like China, which have their own agendas to protect. Could it not be said, therefore, that many if not most people and organizations who claim to be anti-Globalization are so because they also have their own separate agendas to advance?"*

But what I got back wasn't an answer, just a diatribe against the Internet itself, and how it's increased the likelihood of school kids being exposed to pornography, etc. etc. In short, I got sloughed off.

Afterwards, at the deli buffet luncheon, I was hoping to do a little schmoozing and make a few more contacts, but people seemed to be more interested in chowing down. I'm guessing that if lunch wasn't part of the program, the turnout might have been much smaller, perhaps embarrassingly so. I have to admit, the chocolate chip cookies *were* world-class!

Lunch with Buzz

I counted that outing as a qualified success because the event was of interest, the food was good, and I even got a chance to vent some job-induced hostility by asking a politely snarky question to one of the speakers. The next time I went to a Cato luncheon book forum, I got another chance, and even 15 ~~minutes~~ seconds of fame as I was on national TV, coast-to-coast, for about that long. The topic of the forum was *Space: The Free-Market Frontier*, and featured

Buzz Aldrin as one of the panelists along with three policy-types, one of them from NASA. C-Span was there, no doubt because of the presence of Aldrin, and they were televising the event on one of their channels.

Everybody but the NASA guy spoke of how much better things would be, in terms of access to space, if only NASA and the rest of the U.S. Government hadn't strangled private enterprise's budding interest. Aldrin used his time to promote some of his ideas for easier and cheaper access to orbit (his part of the program almost seemed like he was presenting a proposal, and in a way, I guess he was, to the public). At the end, they had time for a few questions, and mine was the last one they took before the program ended.

I'd gotten there early and had a seat in the front row, so when I stood up to ask my question, there the TV camera was, pointing at me from about five feet away and bringing me to thousands of viewers across the country. (Oh, the power of the moment!) I actually asked an intelligent question, concerning the need for better justification for manned spaceflight than what's been tossed out at us for the past 40 years. One of the other speakers had thrown out a few ideas that he claimed would bring commercial benefits, and one of the tired old chestnuts he'd brought out again was that: "Space could help guarantee cheap and unlimited sources of clean energy."

However, the sad truth of the situation is: In a pig's eye it can! At least, in any foreseeable future. I tried to point this out with my question:

"The most recent study I've read, from several years ago, concluded that a solar power satellite for beaming power down to earth would cost about $1 million per installed kilowatt, in terms of capital costs. This is a full three orders of magnitude *greater than conventional earth-based power plants. You've already mentioned that, for solar energy collectors to be commercial viable, launch costs would have to drop by as much as two orders of magnitude, from about $10,000 per pound to $100 per pound. In my mind, that's not nearly enough; to get the SPS costs economically competitive, the cost-to-orbit would also somehow have to come down that third order of magnitude, to $10 per pound. But you can't even get Federal Express to deliver for $10 per pound, so how can you expect the SPS concept to ever become commercially interesting?"*

I didn't get a straight answer, but I guess I didn't really expect one. The speaker remarked there could be some newer ideas for power generation that weren't so capital intensive, and the program ended before I could try to wedge in a follow-up. At the luncheon afterwards, I got to talk to Aldrin for a couple of minutes (he was kept mostly busy signing books and being photographed), and asked him what the cost-to-orbit for his space booster concept was. Turns out the numbers have never been run – he replied that what his company was proposing was to progressively improve the launch hardware that's being used now; the implication was that the economics would take care of itself.

All in all, the event was interesting but more than a bit unfulfilling. I really didn't learn very much, but just being in such a media-sponsored forum where I could actually talk to Buzz Aldrin was a neat thing. Back in the summer of 1969, I never would have believed I'd have such an opportunity. For me, I guess the day's event came out mostly like what Marshall McLuhan had claimed; it really wasn't the information that was important, it was the medium that was the message.

How best to exit Iraq, and other obfuscations

Most of the Cato events are held at their own rather nice building on Massachusetts Avenue (I work in what must be the ugliest building in Washington, but don't get me started on that!). Being a think tank, though, they often try to influence Congress, and what better place to do that but up on Capitol Hill. At the beginning of May, while the Iraq War was still in progress, they held one titled "After Victory: A Strategy for Exiting the Persian Gulf," in the House Rayburn Office Building, more than a little for the benefit of Congresspeople and their staffers. The two speakers (both from Cato) made the point that it was not in anybody's best interests for the U.S. military to have any significant presence in the Middle East now that the Iraq adventure was about to wind down.

They actually made a few good points – it costs somewhere around $50 billion a year for what is essentially a mission to safeguard Saudi and Kuwaiti oil. This, despite the fact that only about 14% of U.S. oil supplies currently come from the Middle East. A large military presence over there might in fact even be detrimental; the former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia has gone on the record as saying the probability of further terrorism is "an inescapable consequence of the role we have assigned to ourselves as the principle guarantor of security and stability in the region."

Much of the event sounded like a broken record; neither of the speakers had anything bad to say about the war itself – indeed, it was actually praised as a means of ridding the world of a tyrannical regime, though they conceded that what eventually will follow in its place might not be something that we would be happy with. When they were done, I got to ask the first question (and with it, got another 15 seconds on national TV, though I think this time it was a delayed broadcast) – neither of the speakers, in their presentations, had ever mentioned the original and supposedly primary reason for bringing in the combined might of the American and British military to kick Saddam's ass. And so I asked:

"I noticed that neither of the speakers mentioned, even once, the four words that were supposedly the justification for this war: ***weapons of mass destruction****. None were used against U.S. or British forces during the war, and none have been found yet. It's not altogether beyond the realm of possibility that none will* ever *be found. On the other hand, I do concede that one less maniacal tyrant in the world is a good thing, so do you think it's possible that the war with Iraq may have been the right thing to do, but for all the wrong reasons?"*

I was hoping at least one of the speakers would be willing to take this point on, but it was not to be – if anything, they climbed even higher on the soapbox with both of them agreeing that, OK, we should get out of the region as soon as possible, but not until we've uncovered the stash of WMD that we *know* exists somewhere. (I think they were expecting a question like that.)

Weird Science

The Cato Institute isn't the only think tank that's giving out free lunches. There's another one, the George C. Marshall Institute, whose stated mission (according to their web site) is to "encourage the use of sound science in making public policy about important issues for which science and technology are major considerations." I've recently started attending some of their luncheon seminars, in hopes that they also may provide me some chances to do a little rabble-rousing. My first opportunity came at an event titled "Lessons and Limits of Climate History: Was the 20th Century Climate Unusual?" which was held up on Capitol Hill, in the Dirksen

Senate Office Building so as to attract the attention of lawmakers and their staffers (which it did). The presenter, a physicist from the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, had co-written a paper that took dead aim at the often-heard claim that the 20th century was the warmest of the past millennium; his presentation (which largely consisted of eye-glazingly numerous time-series graphs of temperatures at various places on earth) tried to support the claim that there was, in fact, nothing very unusual about the temperature record of the fossil-fuel era of mankind relative to previous centuries. The implication of this, of course, is that global warming is actually just a bunch of hooey, and that it might well be that we could dump as much carbon dioxide as we wanted into the atmosphere without any significant deleterious effects.

Personally, I doubt this is true. One only has to look sunward about 30 million miles to see what an albeit ultra-extreme greenhouse effect has accomplished. So, when he was finished, I got to ask the first question:

"It seems to me that it's mostly irrelevant what earth's past temperature trends were, or whether or not they can be correlated with fossil fuel use. There can be no doubt *that global warming would happen at some point – the planet Venus is an ultra-extreme example of that. The question ought to be, then, how* much *of an increase of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases can the earth's atmosphere tolerate before significant macroscopic climate effects begin to occur?"*

I guess I didn't word it innocently enough, because both the event's moderator and the speaker treated it as a hostile question – and I didn't even get very much of a response because they felt I'd asked a question outside the scope of the presentation. So my question was, in effect, declared out of order.

Most of the people attending the event had their own agendas, of course – many were congressional staffers (the lady I sat next to was a lawyer on the staff of the conservative Republican senator Ted Stevens of Alaska) and most of the rest were lobbyists of various flavors. There's an energy bill working its way through Congress and Global Warming-related amendments may well come up for vote. (I was more than a bit careful not to say anything that could get some right-winger pissed off at me to the point where he would contact my Agency.) There were also some liberal organizations present, including Greenpeace, who distributed an "informational" flyer that took dead aim of its own, at both the speaker and the Marshall Institute. Here's a sampling:

"[Speaker's name] has spent most of the last decade trying to disprove the occurrence of global warming. He has written countless articles on how an increase in carbon dioxide has no harmful effects on global climate.

"... A closer look at the George C. Marshall Institute's funding sources reveals a clear obstacle in the way of [its] pursuit of partial and 'independent' science. The Institute has taken $140,000 in the past 2 years for the climate science work from ExxonMobil alone. ExxonMobil actively donates to organizations like the George Marshall Institute to actively sabotage actions on ... the very real problem of global warming. When reports from [the Speaker] are presented under the auspices of groups like the Marshall Institute, it is not science with integrity. Rather, it is Exxon's junk science presented as unbiased science."

In the end, I doubt anybody who was there had their minds changed about anything. As for me, I'd like to think that I have an open mind – there *actually is* quite a bit that isn't known, or at least, isn't known well enough, to make all the climate models track accurately. It might well be that the global climate is much more forgiving than we have any right to expect. (Or, it might be

that The End is just around the corner.) It was an interesting hour and a half, and I decided that I'd go to more of their events if only so I can further hone my ability to ask innocently snarky questions.

There is no direction in space

There's been only one other Marshall Institute luncheon event I've so far been to, and that one was much less controversial and much more entertaining than that Global Warming dog and pony show. This one featured a speech by noted space historian James Oberg titled "Toward a Theory of Space Power" which had been billed as an overview on possible ways of evaluating competing options for national space policy. Oberg didn't really keep very close to the topic, which made it a rambling but much more entertaining event – we learned, for instance, that U.S. military intelligence people once monitored reports of UFO sightings in Soviet newspapers as indication of Soviet rocket launches and satellite recovery operations, and that the Russian cosmonauts on the International Space Station have a malevolent-looking hand gun up there in the Soyuz return capsule as part of their survival kit. (Read into that what you will.)

Several years ago, Oberg had been commissioned by the U.S. Space Command to compile concepts of 'space power' (the military analogy of 'air power'), but what he found was that it was a nebulous concept at best – in space analogies tend to break down, rather than be reinforced. For example, space is actually anything but 'high ground' in a military sense – anything up there is totally defenseless to attack, and moves in a highly predictable path. His conclusion was that there was at present no way to really determine what the proper direction for space policy should be, and: "Without ... a quantitative measure of 'goodness' of policy, contesting options are championed and chosen based on ego, instinct, aesthetics, sex appeal, short-term political gain, misperceived historical analogies, protection of past investments, external requirements, whim and whimsy – and even by default or randomly. From time to time the choices turn out to be correct, but we need to improve the odds."

All that pretty much supported what I'd thought all along about the rampant benign clueless-ness on what could and should be accomplished with all the money that's being spent for space-related activities. When we finally got to the Q&A session following his talk, I asked an only marginally snarky question to confirm that I was reading him correctly.

Me: "You are well-known as a futurist, so could you get out your crystal ball and perhaps make a prediction of what we can expect in the next ten years?"

His answer: "No."

After the Q&A ended, he came over to me to apologize for his curt answer, but I smiled and told him that actually, his answer spoke volumes. Back in the 1960s there would have been no doubt what the answer to that question would have been. The original Space Race, he replied, was a product of fear. If the Chinese put men in space soon, as seems likely, it would not produce the same result (he thought it would mostly be ignored).

Oberg is a thought-provoking speaker, and I didn't make it through the event without some of my own conceptions about space being at least partly turned into misconceptions. I'd always thought, for instance, that one of the major goals of rocketry research was to find ways of reducing the cost of getting things into earth orbit. But, he said, in today's world that might not be altogether that great an idea – there might actually be some incentive to keep launch costs, er, sky-high to prevent things from getting put in earth orbit that you'd really not want to be there.

Just launching a load of sand into the proper trajectory, for instance, could take out orbiting satellites or even an orbiting space station. He also mentioned that the Law of Unintended Consequences came into play many times in the history of the Space Age – one of these was when the U.S. Space Shuttle was developed. The Soviets had to have one too, to maintain international prestige, so they spent about $10 billion that they couldn't afford in developing one, which bankrupted their space program. The Buran shuttle turned out to be useless to them, it flew only once, and it was eventually destroyed when the roof of the hangar where it was stored fell in on it.

As for the luncheon itself... superb! It was a sit-down affair, and I had a salmon fillet open faced sandwich with several side salads and a nice fruit tart for dessert. And it was all free! Heinlein, I think, would have been appalled.

My new aspiration

At any rate, after a while I found that I was becoming a recognizable face at these events. I attended a Cato luncheon forum on "The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea" (which was pretty interesting – the so-called 'limited liability company' was, and still is, one of the most important tools for creating modern Western society). At the buffet luncheon following the forum, a woman walked over to me and complimented me on my question at the previous week's "Space: The Free Market Frontier" forum. I told her that I hadn't asked a question at the current forum because I couldn't think of one that was pointed enough. And at that she laughed and told me that in some of the past Cato forums there had been questions so finely honed that the persons asking them had been requested to leave!

Gosh, a new goal that I can aspire to?

Mailing Comments, SFPA 233

Ned Brooks

On the Columbia disaster: "And two months later we still haven't heard if anyone knows what happened." But five months later it's been confirmed what everybody had long presumed what the cause was – foam debris from the external tank damaged the shuttle's wing in a critical area (as if there were parts of the wing that are non-critical). What was surprising, at least to me, was that this type of incident has happened several times before, and there has been no urgency to fix the problem. What it takes is loss of life for changes to be made.

On pseudoscience: "Perhaps Captain Nemo could have mined coke in a volcanic crater!" Coke comes from coal, though, and coal is formed from vegetation in what used to be ancient swamps. A volcano, on the other hand, is made of formerly molten rock from deep in the innards of the earth. To recap – coal: sedimentary; lava: igneous. Mutually exclusive.

me

On the continuing Harry Warner estate situation: I previously reported that Harry's will stated that all of the contents of his house, including his fanzine collection, would become the property of one of the Lutheran Churches in Hagerstown, but that letters written since the last update to his will clearly stated Harry's intention that the Eaton Collection of the University of California at Riverside would be the recipient of the fanzines, and that he wanted $10,000 set aside to cover

packing and shipping costs. Since then, a representative of UC-R's Eaton Collection went to Hagerstown (I went with her) to meet with the church's representative and a lawyer who had been appointed harry's legal representative. It was not a successful day. Here's a description of what happened (taken from one of my emails to the 'Memoryhole' listserve):

> I spent a day in Hagerstown yesterday with Melissa Conway, from the University of California-Riverside, and Peggy Rae Sapienza, mostly in meetings with various people connected with the Warner situation. The news is mostly not favorable for any near-future settlement. Some highlights of the day, if "highlight" is the right word:
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> - The Church, which will get almost all of the Warner estate, has backed off its previous statement that it would honor Harry's wishes and give UC-R the fanzine collection and $10,000 from the estate for packing and shipping costs, as Harry had put in his letter to UC-R (back in 1995).
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> - The lawyer who is the legally-appointed representative of the estate is a total jerk. Melissa paid a call on him during the day, and characterized him as rude. His only statement to her was that "the collection will be sold."
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> - Somehow, both the Church and the lawyer have gotten the idea that the monetary worth of the Warner collection is upwards of $750,000. This was based on erroneous information that the Pelz collection was worth that much when it was acquired by UC-R. Because of this, they want to see how much they can get for it on the open market, regardless of Harry's stated wishes.
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> - Harry caused some of these problems himself. Portions of his fanzine in the Dec. 2002 FAPA have been used in court proceedings (how that fanzine got into the public record I have no idea). In that fanzine he was gloom-and-doom about UC-R's acquisition of the Pelz collection making his fanzines redundant, and that UC-R might not want them. The lawyer took that information and ran with it. Harry also, in the eight years since his exchange of letters with UC-R, did nothing to incorporate that information in his will. It has not been any fun at all trying to pick up the pieces in this mess.
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> - Melissa has decided that UC-R will step back and let the lawyer have his shot at selling the collection. In the meeting with the Church rep., we made sure to stress that the collection needs to be properly cared for in the interim, and that there ought to be some progress reports on how the cataloguing of Harry's estate is proceeding. They said they'd talk to the lawyer, who's overseeing that. I looked in the window of Harry's house while I was there, and there's still a lot of stuff in there that still hasn't yet come out. Supposedly all the fanzines from upstairs have been removed to a "climate-controlled" shed of some kind in a rental-storage place. I saw several college-age guys go in and out (these are the hired help), but I didn't see anything being removed. (We think the only reason we were able to get a meeting with the Church rep. at all -- he'd been ducking us -- is that they wanted to find out if we were a threat and might want to contest the will. When it became clear that that wasn't going to happen, the discussion became a bit more open.)
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> - We think it will be at least a year, maybe as much as 2 years, before UC-R will be a player in this situation. It will take that long to catalogue everything, and to find out if they can sell it, however unlikely that would be. The Church rep. assured us that nothing in the house would be indiscriminately trashed, especially as they have no real expertise on what Harry's belongings are actually worth.

As far as I can see, this ends my involvement in the situation. Melissa has direct contact information from here (I think she's planning to send a letter to the Church with information/corrections of misconceptions). I think that UC-R will eventually get the Warner collection. But it will require time and patience.

Richard Dengrove

Condolences on the death of your father.

On other alphabets: "I gather Cyrillic is based on the Greek alphabet." Yes. The alphabet was supposedly invented by two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, who were born in Thessalonica in the 9th century. The language was used to translate the Bible into the Slavonic tongue, and the two brothers became missionaries and teachers in the Moravia area (now part of the Czech Republic).

On cometary impacts: "The detail did not seep in that the comet [thought of as the most likely cause of the Tungusta, Siberia, event] had to have vaporized in mid-air." That does seem to be the prevailing theory, but I don't completely buy it. That's one hell of a lot of ice to be completely vaporized in just a few seconds. You'd expect a mid-air explosion to blow the thing apart, with chunks big enough to make craters making it to the ground. And if it really *was* a comet, how come nobody observed it before it crashed into the earth? This was not the middle ages – the telescope and camera were routinely used in sky searches by then.

Sheila Strickland

On the economy: "I hope that Nicki has managed to find a job by now." Nope, not yet. The economy needs a bit more recovery around here; lots of computer-types are on the job market. She's doing all the right things, though, and I have no doubt she will find another job eventually. As for now, she's receiving unemployment insurance money, applying on a few advertised job openings every week, and doing some quilting.

Tom Feller

On Hugo nominees: "I started but failed to finish *To Say Nothing of the Dog* by Connie Willis." I had more success; I liked it, in fact. A few months ago I read *Passage* and found it took a bit more effort to get through; it's probably at least 100 pages too long, that wouldn't be missed with a bit of tightening.

On the war: "President Bush failed to convince me of the war's urgency, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt." As did many of us. His credibility is about used up, though.

David Schlosser

On cash crops: "Doesn't Cuba also have tobacco as a natural resource?" You make it sound like they get it from an underground deposit.

On the Tungusta event: "I'm not sure what could have caused a mid-air burst as opposed to an actual impact." Larry Niven and David Brin, separately, postulated a mini-black hole. Which doesn't make any sense, either. Maybe it's time to bring the space aliens back into the picture.

Toni K.F. Weisskopf Reinhardt

On radio stations: "I got my favorite radio station back!" I guess I'm a bit spoiled, as there

are two different classical stations here that I listen to during the work day (one of them even posts its playlist at its web site). The commercial station, WGMS, is all-classical, except for the commercials, while the NPR station, WETA, only plays classical from 9am to 3pm during the weekdays. But WETA is more likely to play longer selections – complete concertos and symphonies – while WGMS only does that during certain hours of the day.

Gary Brown

On the war: "Where are these weapons of mass destruction, George?" Where indeed. The backpedaling has long since begun on that. The inability of the U.N. people to find any sign of them should have perhaps raised a red flag, but by then the Republicans were calling out anybody who expressed any doubts as unpatriotic.

On the health of SFPA: "I fear that if membership dips below 20, we'll be in danger of becoming extinct. And that dip below 20 isn't far away." Nah, we'd press on, most likely, until membership dropped below about 10, I think. My prediction is that we've got maybe a 50-50 chance of making it through the 300th mailing and no chance at all of making it to the 400th mailing.

Jeff Copeland

On the SFPA OEship: What's this I hear about you not wanting another term as SFPA OE? Didn't you see the fine print on the ballots we returned last time? (You were elected for life, buddy! No more of this wimping out, OK?) Seriously, you'll be a hard act to follow.

On fiction: "In 1996, Neal Stephenson and J. Frederick George disguised themselves as Stephen Bury and wrote their second novel together, *The Cobweb*, a story about the run-up to the first Gulf War largely seen through the eyes of a small-town Iowa sheriff." I'm working my way through his *Cryptonomicon* now (though "working" is hardly a fair way to describe it – it's a very good read), and I previously enjoyed his Hugo winner, *The Diamond Age*. No doubt I'll buy his other novels, and no doubt I'll enjoy them too. But how did *Cryptonomicon* get nominated for a Hugo Award? Three hundred pages in, and not even a hint of anything stfnal yet.

Guy Lillian

On Swancon: "Swancon was about the size of a DSC and of a constituency similar to your average gamers' convention." The impression I'm getting from your narrative is that it wasn't nearly the most exciting or interesting convention you've ever attended, and the most interesting event was your party.

On Australia: Your narrative is good reading, and I'm looking forward to the full DUFF trip report. You were there a few days longer than I was, and some of the things you did were the same as what Nicki and I did back in 1999. The Healesville day trip, for instance, was the only real opportunity we had to see any Australian wildlife, but we saw most of it there (though in confinement). We also did the Opera House tour and a walk across the bridge. And in Melbourne, we marveled at those Pillars of Fire. Is there more you did that's not reported here? No Sydney Harbour cruise? No Yarra River boat cruise? No trip to Victoria market in Melbourne? No walkabout out to the headlands of Sydney Harbour? Those were some of my memories of my time there. And we would have done more if I hadn't been ill the first week I was there.

Janice Gelb

On fiction: "I've never read any of [Elmore] Leonard's mysteries but I plan to do so now." He's very entertaining, as much in person as in print. I've been a reader of his crime novels for a long time. I think you'll find him a somewhat grittier version of Donald Westlake, but just as good.

On family trees: "Been meaning to ask whether the injured soldier Jessica Lynch is a relative." Nope, and neither is David Lynch or Merrill Lynch. It's a common name, especially in Appalachia and in the South.

On convention attending: "I am sad to announce that for the first time since I got into fandom, I will be missing three DSCs in a row." I'm not sure I've ever *been* to three in a row. Nowadays it's unusual for Nicki and me go to more than three or four conventions in a year; usually it's the local convention, Midwestcon, and the worldcon. This year we'll add the World Fantasy Convention, since it's here in D.C., but even then we wouldn't be going if we hadn't gotten volunteer-rate memberships. (I'll be doing gopher work there to keep from getting bored, like I was at the only other WFC I've ever attended.)

Gary Robe

On the uses of duct tape: "The vast majority of duct tape actually does go for installing HVAC ductwork." Really? I thought that it had been phased out a long time ago in favor of that metalized sticky tape. Or is that duct tape, too? I keep a small roll of duct tape with me when I travel because it's a safety device – it can seal doors from smoke incursion if a fire breaks out in the hotel you're staying in, and can therefore greatly lengthen survival time.

In Search of the Bubble that Won't Ever Burst

A bit of room left over, so I'll describe a few more of those luncheon events I've been attending. But, on the other hand, not all the events I go to actually have luncheons. There was one in mid-June at the Cato Institute that was a mid-morning event, with not even a snack in sight. The topic was "Taxing the Internet" and the speaker was the Governor of Colorado, Bill Owens. There's currently legislation pending in the U.S. Congress that would end the Internet's tax exemption status (or rather, companies who make sales via the Internet), and Governor Owens (a Republican) is attempting to lead the charge against such a law.

His reasoning was basically four-fold – he believes that any dot-com companies who rely on direct sales over the Internet are too fragile to survive even as little as a 1.5% levy, and that the so-called "brick-and-mortar retailers" (i.e., the storefront companies) have an unfair advantage in that they are supported by brick-and-mortar infrastructure, such as roads and utility access, where dot-coms aren't (so tax exemption would be a way of "leveling the playing field"). Owens also believes that if an Internet tax law was enacted, the dot-coms would be subject to a myriad of different tax rates for various states and localities to keep track of, which would be an oppressive burden that would affect dot-com profitability.

But from the way the event unfolded, it was clear that the real reason Owens was so adamantly against the new law was that it would create an unelected interstate bureaucracy that would be formed to, in effect, have power over interstate sales taxes, including the Internet,

wresting such control from the states and localities where it exists now. In other words, the proposed law was another example of that Republican antithesis, Big Government.

I was sitting way in the back, so it took me a while to get recognized for a question during the Q&A session that followed. It seemed to me that his reasoning was a bit flawed in places, which presented me an opening to try to find out how true-blue a Republican he actually was. So I asked:

"Governor Owens, it seems to me that your claim that the brick-and-mortar retailers have an advantage from their access to infrastructure over Internet dot-coms is not exactly true. The Internet itself is an outgrowth of ARPAnet, which was created by the U.S. Government in the 1960s, and there has been a large amount of money spent since then to expand and maintain it. Certainly this counts as infrastructure that the dot-coms have ready access to. I'm also interested in your opinion how broad the exemption from taxation should be for Internet retailers. Let's do a thought experiment where the economy eventually improves to the point that a new dot-com bubble forms and this time doesn't break; do you believe there would eventually be a point where the idea of taxation on dot-coms should be revisited?"

Up to then he'd been mostly fielding a series of softball questions from newspaper reporters. I don't know if I actually put him on the defensive, but he wasn't very clear in his response – he answered the first part of my question by saying that the Internet infrastructure was different from real-world streets and power lines, and did a bit of handwaving in way of explanation. (I would have loved to ask for a clarification but follow-up questions weren't allowed.) As for the 'burstproof bubble' part of my question, he admitted that "10 or 20 years down the road" it might be okay to take another look at Internet taxation, but only if the dot-coms were making an outrageously large amount of money.

From this I'm guessing that Owens might actually be a pragmatist rather than an ideologue, something that's becoming rarer and rarer in the Republican party. Or, at least, an ideologue with a pragmatist inside trying to escape. He was certainly a polished speaker and someone who comes across as very likeable, both important traits for getting oneself elected.

Anyway, my question to Governor Owens was apparently different enough from all the others that a newspaper reporter (a correspondent for the Rocky Mountain News) came over to me after the event was over and asked if he could telephone me later to ask me some questions. He never did, though, because I told him that I'm not allowed to speak for my Agency – and that's even assuming I'd have anything intelligent to say. I have to admit, though, I'm curious if my question made it into any news story about the event (and I don't think it did). It would almost make up for not having any free food afterward...

Georgia on My Mind, and Other Taxing Thoughts

There's a very successful real estate agent who works the area where I live, and the reason she's so successful is because she's not only very good, she's also very visible. And the reason she's so visible is in large part because she's married to a very successful marketer of a different sort. Her job is to market real estate. His job is to market her.

By now, most of you reading this have probably concluded that most if not all of the various luncheon forums I describe here really don't seem to have all that much relation with what I do at work. And you'd be right. It's not easy, for instance, to conjure up a connection between

international energy-related issues and, say, national space policy. I'm clever enough where I could probably do that if I had to, but it's not really necessary. All the justification I need for all those free lunches is that I'm marketing myself, or rather, myself as the developer of an Internet-based information resource.

I don't do it in any obnoxious way. In fact, it's rather subtle. All I have to do is trade business cards with anybody who's bemused/intrigued/appalled by some of the politely snarky questions I've asked at some of these events as I've innocently tried to yank a few people's chains. On the back of my card is the web site address and a short blurb that describes the site: "Business- and energy-related information about regions and countries of the world for researchers, exporters, and project developers." This type of approach, with the resulting word-of-mouth trickle-down, is probably the second-most usual way people discover my web site (after the ever-popular Google fishing expedition).

Before you get the impression that the only events I go to are ones where I can chow down, though, I'll quickly add that there *are* many other meetings I attend (including the dreaded telephone conference calls) that are of much more direct interest. You don't hear of them here because they're also, for the most part, boring (sometimes mind-numbingly so). But there *are* exceptions...

One of them was at the Commerce Department recently, where several businessmen from Georgia (the country, not the state) were here to help give people a warm-and-fuzzy feeling about business and investment prospects over there. One of the things that made it interesting was its no-bullshit nature – the delegation included nobody from any government ministry, just three guys who, with luck and determination, were able to find some success in a small country that's in need of much more. Their outright candor was refreshing, and the three of them held nothing back – Georgia is still a strange and at times scary place to do business, with part of the country under control of Chechin insurgents and a national government that Still Doesn't Get It in terms of removing bureaucratic hurdles for potential investors. The most intriguing story was by the bank president – back in 1992, not long after Georgia regained its independence from the former Soviet Union, he, two friends and $500 started the country's first independent bank. Ten years later it had assets of about $120 million and had become the largest bank in the country. The meeting changed a lot of preconceptions I'd had about the country – I guess you could say that I now have "Georgia on My Mind."

I didn't ask a question (snarky or otherwise) at that meeting because nothing I heard there was particularly self-important or self-serving. But that certainly wasn't the case the very next day at the Cato Institute luncheon meeting, where the topic was "Tax Limitation 25 Years after California's Proposition 13." For those who might not be familiar with the so-called "taxpayers movement," California's 'Proposition 13' was a direct ballot initiative, overwhelmingly passed back in 1978, that rolled back property taxes in California and places a strict limit on any annual increase. The immediate effect was to wipe out a budget surplus and force the state into some decisions, some of them a bit draconian, on what types of things the state was willing and able to fund. The tax limitation proponents have claimed that there have been no dire consequences of Prop. 13, as had been predicted, because a lot of fat in the budget actually needed to be cut and lower taxes allowed the local economy to flourish. While this is perhaps debatable, the one thing about Prop. 13 that cannot really be challenged is that it resulted in many people being able to

afford to buy homes (not only due to the lessening of taxes, but also because the property tax burden was now much more predictable) where before they couldn't.

But enough background. The Cato event consisted of a panel made up of four right-wing conservatives, including a U.S. Congressman (Rep. Doug Ose from California). The tone of the event was pretty one-sided – the tax limitation movement (which has since been active in other states besides California) had done tremendous good for the country, there was lots of new jobs created, blah blah blah, and all the credit belonged to blue-blooded conservatives and not those scurrilous tax-and-spend Democrats (one of the panelists even made a bad joke that took a gratuitous cheap shot at the Democrats). Congressman Ose even went so far as to say that what worked at the state level ought to also work at the Federal level, and that constitutional amendments that would limit federal spending and the ability to raise taxes, or even require a balanced Federal budget, ought to be on the table. This, to me, presented an obvious opening for a question. But before I could, something unexpected happened: Ose left in the middle of the event to go back to Capitol Hill.

It turned out to be fairly easy to get called on during the Q&A session that followed, so I decided to ask my question anyway:

"Representative Ose proposes that spending constraints at the Federal level are needed, but from where I sit I've noticed no real difference in spending trends between Democrat and Republican controlled Congresses. No matter who is in control, there are always directed expenditures, many of questionable worth or which benefit only small constituencies, that are inserted into spending bills by various members of Congress. From this, it would be easy for any outsiders to conclude that the desire for getting re-elected seems to be more important than doing the right things for the good of the country. So what would make anybody possibly think that Congress could conceivably achieve the supermajority vote needed to agree to a constitutional amendment that would place limits on Federal spending?"

I would have loved to hear a response from Ose but he was long gone by then, so I directed the question to the empty *chair* of Rep. Ose for the lack of anything better to do, and requested that the panelists decide among themselves who wanted to 'channel' the Congressman. It was the moderator (the Chairman of the Cato Institute) who answered, and his answer was actually surprising – he allowed that the best way, for now, to prevent Congress from running amok each year during the annual budget battle was for a divided government to exist (i.e., no single political party in control of both houses of Congress and the Presidency), and specifically pointed to the Clinton presidency as an example of how such checks and balances could effectively work.

Wow! A right-wing forum that *praised* Bill Clinton! And here I'd thought I'd seen about everything! (On the way back to my office I had to check the newspaper headlines to see if there had been any sightings of demons on ice skates.) Unfortunately, there were very few people besides myself who witnessed it all – no C-Span cameras this time, and I don't even think they were recording it for a web-cast. The potential audience, I'm sure, would have been thousands.

I'm beginning to think they could use some better marketing there..

OK, all for now. Hope to see some of you at Torcon!