

# Five Million Yen: Chapter 48

*by* Daniel Harris

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Ben was not a happy musician. The first rehearsal of Hausenstockmann's *Constellations* with the orchestra was a nightmare. The orchestra players were rebellious and had not learned their parts. Hausenstockmann was beside himself with fury. The musicians' union was threatening to strike. Jean-Claude, the orchestra manager, was frantically trying to mediate between the hostile parties.

In a fit of pique, Ben addressed the orchestra:

"Listen my friends. We are all professionals here. Musicians who fight against new music are foolish. Need I suggest, you will be considered fools for failing to give your best to premiere a major work by *the* major composer of the 20th century? Are you so superior that, you deign not to perform a piece of music? Is not your professional reputation sullied when you unilaterally decide to censor a musical composition? The composer has not asked you to do more than play notes. Is that so difficult?

My commitment to this work is absolute, continued Ben. Why not yours? We all should be working toward a mutual goal. You insult Maestro Hausenstockman, Serge Nobokolov, and myself when you fail to give your finest efforts to the performance of *Constellations*. Serge and I have committed ourselves to making this a spectacular performance. What kind of professionals are you that you would settle for less than the best? What will your audience think if you sound like rank amateurs? The history of this orchestra is distinguished by grand premieres. Now is a chance to add to that

legacy. Please, take your parts home and give them the attention and practice they deserve. The world is watching and listening.”

No one was happy with Ben's speech. A few orchestra members actually spat on Ben's instrument as they filed out of the rehearsal. A violinist burned his part on stage. The conductor, Igor Marcevicz, called a meeting of the orchestra and union reps and the soloists for later that afternoon. Ben was agog at the hostility of so many of the orchestra members.

Jean-Claude graciously offered his home as the place for the meeting of the orchestra representatives later that afternoon. Ben and Serge went to a bar. They both had two double Scotches.

—We should go to the meeting, said Ben.

—You go, Ben. I'm too blotto.

—I need you there. You are the main soloist, you crazy Russian.

—Fuck you. You constantly make me look like a fool. You and your glorious chops. What makes you think you are such a genius?

—Easy my friend. I'm the Sancho Panza to your Quixote. It's your show. You have to be the spokesperson for the soloists.

Ultimately, Nobokolov did not attend the meeting. At considerable cost, two extra rehearsals were scheduled. Ben was made the bad guy by the union and the orchestra representative. Ben left the meeting in a fuming rage.

When he arrived at his flat in Nice, there were messages on his telephone answering machine. Ben wondered if they were for him or the owners of the flat.

He took a long shower and poured two fingers of scotch, took a pen and notebook from his backpack, and entered the den to playback the message tape.

The first two calls were from Jean-Claude Lyon wondering where he was and reminding him of the meeting that afternoon at Jean-Claude's home.

The third call was from the maid saying she would be arriving Friday morning to do a light cleaning and would launder any clothes left in the hamper in the master bathroom.

Ben let the tape play:

—This is Hans Hausenstockmann. Ben, I shall need your continued assistance rallying the orchestra to make a decent performance of *Constellations*. Since you made that speech to the orchestra, they are out for your blood. I told Marcevicz that he had to bring the orchestra under control. I will speak more with you this afternoon at the meeting.

—Hello, Ben. This is Isabella Sanitizzare. I'm still in Paris and will be here until Friday afternoon. Perhaps we can have a late dinner Friday night? I will telephone you when I arrive in Nice. The memorial service for Claudia was very moving. See you soon. Ciao.

—Ben, this is Jean-Claude again. Sorry about all the nastiness today. Hans, Marcevicz and I appreciate your speaking up for *Constellations* at great risk to your reputation with the orchestra members. We appreciate your efforts. Marcevicz is meeting with some key players this evening. We hope to have a good rehearsal tomorrow morning at ten. Can you please arrive no later than nine-thirty? Traffic is always heavy on Friday mornings, so leave plenty of travel time.

—Ben, Gabe. What's your schedule this weekend? I'm driving to Milan for meetings with some potential cast members. Wanna tag along? A couple of hot Italian babes are set to audition. Let me know. I'm leaving early tomorrow morning. I've rented a Mercedes roadster convertible.

Ben stopped the tape and dialed Gabe's hotel.

—Mr. Gabe Benjamin, room 37, said Ben to the clerk.

—I'm very sorry, but Mr. Benjamin has a guest and is not to be disturbed. May I take your number?

—Please have him call Ben Clarone: 45 60 60 60.

—Nice?

—Yes, in Nice.

I wonder whom Gabe has in his room? mused Ben. Must be a woman, otherwise he would have taken my call.

Ben returned to the task of the phone messages:

—Mr. Clarone, this is Monique Speeltje. Remember me? I was a stewardess on your flight from New York last week. I will be arriving

in Nice on Saturday at 10:45 am and have a layover Sunday and Monday. Maybe we can meet? You can leave a message for me at Pan Am in Nice. The number is PanAmUSA. That's 72 62 28 72. Ben, I hope to see you soon and get to know you better.

Ben stopped the tape and called Pan Am.

—Pan Am crew operations. How may I help y'all, said a voice in a heavy Texas drawl.

—I'd like to leave a message for one of your flight attendants, Monique Speeltje. S-p-e-e...

—Hang on there, cowboy.

Ben listened to a tape of Monique identifying herself in several languages.

—Monique this is Ben. I would be pleased to welcome you. They have put me up in a large flat with plenty of bedrooms and bathrooms. It's in the center of Nice. You are welcome to stay here. I will meet you at Nice Côte D'Azur airport at 11 a.m. on Saturday. Call me if a problem, or if you change your mind. Looking forward to spending some time with you Monique.

Ben resumed playing back messages:

—Hey, Ben, it's Clovis. Sorry about what happened at the orchestra rehearsal this morning. I heard that the union and orchestra reps ripped you pretty good at the meeting this afternoon. If you want to escape this weekend for an afternoon picnic with barbecued ribs, give me a call. You may remember, I'm a pretty good cook. My husband, sculptor Michel Marteau, and the boys want to see and hear your contrabass up close and personal. My home number is 06 93 57 56 55. If not this weekend, maybe next. Let me know, old friend.

—This message is for Benjamin Clarone. My name is Arno Aghajanian and I represent Zoë Bontemps in the matter of your divorce. Please contact me as soon as possible. Your cooperation will make things much easier for all parties. The number is 1 213 566 9200. Remember, Los Angeles is nine hours behind France. I will be in my office until 2 a.m. your time.

—Ben. This is your estranged wife, Zoë. I'm in New York for ten days to do promos for *I'd Rather Not*. I thought we could get together for a chat. Call me at the Waldorf, 212 355-3000. We have to talk before the lawyers take over. They want me to clean you out. I don't think that is necessary. I'm making very, very good money. Don't think reconciliation, either. I'm much happier without you. Call me. Bye-bye, Benji.

—Ben! It's Heather. What am I to do? People are calling you for sessions and gigs. I tell them you won't return to New York until after Thanksgiving. Should I book dates after that? Call me, I wearing your favorite top and come-hither pumps.

Ben stopped the tape and called his service.

—Musicians' Service, Ben Clarone's line, said Hillary.

—Hillary, it's Ben. I need to talk to Heather.

—Where are you now? asked Hillary.

—I'm lying on a huge bed in a Second Empire bedroom in a mansion in Nice. Too bad you're not here.

—Ben, tsk, tsk. You are *so* bad. Let me get Heather.

There were multiple clicks and finally Heather:

—Ben, sorry for calling you, but I need instructions.

—Heather, I'm planning on being back in New York around Thanksgiving. Take all gigs after December 1st. Zoë's lawyer called me. They want to sue me back to the Stone Age. I'll need all the money I can make.

—I thought you had that \$5M Yen check worth \$15,000.

—Let's not mention that, Heather. Every nickel Zoë's lawyer knows I have is money he wants to steal.

—All right. Mum's the word about money. Don't complain if I book you like crazy. It will be the holiday season with plenty of casuals.

—No gigs for scale, Heather.

—Boulez wants you for special concerts in February with the New York Philharmonic. Sounds like a perfect gig for you, Ben.

—Yeah! Book it. When I said scale, I meant union hack-job scale.

—Jeez, Ben, don't yell at me. I'm only trying to help you.

—Sorry Heather. It's been a difficult day here. I guess I owe you another dinner and show.

—Ben, you're such a kidder.

—And you're the best tease I know. I gotta run. Big kiss and hold open some dates for dinner and a show.

—Ben! ...

Ben cut her off and returned to the tape for yet more messages:

—Greetings. This message is for Monsieur Benjamin Clarone, said a deep female voice. Please telephone Inspector Paumé in Paris, 1 21 21 20 00.

—What could Paumé want? wondered Ben.

—Mr. Brown? Mr. Green. I offer you a gig at Bar Oiseaux Ésotérique. Sunday night. Tell me if you can make it. Luc Martino will be playing bass clarinet and many flutes. Different musicians, same music, different style. Remember: No gig too far, no pay too low. Call me at this number: 04 93 15 59 51.

Ben stopped the tape, walked into the kitchen and refilled his drink. He had a rehearsal of *Constellations* on Monday morning. Sunday was free, but he didn't know how Monique would work out, or what he would do with her. She might like hearing him play with Lez's group Sunday night. If she had stewardess friends, she could bring them. More women never hurt a jazz club.

Ben dialed Lez's number. A lusty woman's voice answered. Ben could hear a vibraphone ripping through six-mallet exercises at a pace only Lez could play. Very impressive.

—Allo, oui?

—Ici, Ben Clarone. Je voudrais parler avec Lezardino.

—You can speak English, Mr. Clarone. I'm Susan. Susan Blixon, the jazz singer. Lez was hoping you would return his call. Hold one second. He'll be thrilled you called.

—Lez, Ben Clarone! Susan shouted to Lez, too close to the handset for Ben's comfort.

Ben heard the vibes stop and then the musical tinkles of mallets dropping on the vibraphone bars. Susan Blixon was an African-

American jazz singer, one of the best, but with terrible judgment in men. As far as Ben knew, Lez would be another bad decision.

—Mr. Brown? said Lez.

—Oui, Mr. Green, said Ben. Quel le plan, mon ami?

—Bar Oiseaux Ésotérique. 21 hours, le dimanche.

—No rehearsal? asked Ben.

—No rehearsal.

—Clarinette contrabass?

—Clarinette contrabass.

—No saxophone?

—No saxophone.

Ben was becoming frustrated with this echolalic exchange.

—Hey man, that's all you're going to say to me?

—Le dimanche soir. 21 hours.

—I bring a beautiful woman, said Ben.

—Bring two, one for me, replied Lez.

Click.

Ben took a big gulp of his scotch and wrote down the gig in his notebook. He also entered meeting Monique at the airport at 11 a.m. on Saturday.

The phone rang. It was Gabe.

—Gabe here.

—Gabe, you were deflowering young virgins, maybe, when I telephoned earlier, said Ben in a Brooklyn Jewish accent.

—Well, Ben, that would have been far preferable than what actually happened. I had a visit from Inspector Lilly Rose, Sherlock Holmes in the guise of a toad.

—That's serious. She's the equivalent to an American District Attorney

An awkward pause.

—Ben, I didn't tell you this because I didn't want to upset you. The other night I came back to my room...I was pretty schnockered... and discovered that the dummy paintings we put in my armoire were missing. I filed a complaint with the night clerk. When I woke the next morning they were back in the armoire, but they had been

opened. Those cheesy paintings Roi de Quoi put in the boxes were there.

An hour ago, he continued, Inspector Lilly Rose paid a visit. She told me that Dan Arris had filed a complaint that I was a party to the theft of two paintings he had consigned to you to deliver to Nice. Her people took the two dummy paintings. She said Arris had entrusted you with two Gringovitch paintings. I told her I knew nothing other than that the two boxes allegedly held paintings. I was keeping them for you and was going to put them in my safe storage area at the bank. I think she might be paying you a visit tonight.

—I already talked to her. She knows everything. She asked me why Arris roughed me up in the back of a taxi in Paris. I told her Arris was jealous because his wife, Claudia, was mad for me. Entre-nous, I believe Arris killed Claudia in a fit of jealousy.

—Well, my good friend, now Inspector Rose knows there is an art component.

—So does INTERPOL. I received a message to call an Inspector Paumé at INTERPOL.

—Ben, I think you are in deep do-do. You better come with me to Milan tomorrow, or we could leave now.

—Can't. Have a rehearsal tomorrow at ten and then women visiting me all weekend.

—Can't you musicians keep your pants on? I can be here for three months and the best I get is an air kiss from a pug-ugly local production assistant, complained Gabe.

—Well, I'm cuter than you, and almost famous, joked Ben. Besides when they hear me play fast tonguing passages there is a psychokinetic transfer to their feminine desires for ....

—You are some piece of work Clarone, interrupted Gabe. Too bad, I was hoping to use your knowledge of Italian to get me through the weekend.

—Sorry to disappoint. But I'm in enough hot water to bathe half of France.

—OK, I'll see you probably Monday or Tuesday. I want to hear all about it when I return.



—Ciao bello, said Ben, hanging up.

Ben continued playing the tape:

—Ben, this is Pascal LeRoi. How did the 100-franc note work? Give me a call when it's convenient. 93 22 23 45. (Ben could hear a woman's voice speaking German in the background.) Oh, and my wife Gisela invites you to come to a picnic at our historic farmhouse. My three children want to see and hear your contrabass clarinet.

—Mr. Clarone? This is Sophie Kessel from Villa Arson. I have been reinstated as a student. I don't have my job at reception, but I am working in the gallery, so I am happy. I don't know where you live now, but Rachel and I would like to thank you in person and treat you to dinner. Please telephone me at 93 05 06 18.

There were no more messages.

Ben finished his drink, donned shoes and a jacket, and went outside for a stroll. He walked to the sea. Big waves were crashing on the bulkheads and the beach. There must be a storm offshore, he surmised. On his way back to his lodgings, he passed the train station and saw an early edition of Friday's *Nice-Matin* newspaper.

There it was, the ultimate insult:

**Orchestre de Monte-Carlo dans la tourmente**

**Virtuose américain exige deux répétitions supplémentaires**

Monte Carlo Orchestra in turmoil, translated Ben, American virtuoso demands two extra rehearsals.

—Shit, that “virtuoso” is me. God *damn* those bastards, yelled Ben to the night sky. I'm the only one who can play his part perfectly and they are pinning a bad rap on me. Sons a bitches.

To be continued.

