

28 Plays Later – Challenge #17

Let's be super duper strict. Below are the rules for your play:

1. You must have 4 characters in the play - and the gender for 3 of them must be undefined! You can add two more - but only if they are not human.
2. One of the characters plays the banjo - really badly, and one character only speaks in rhyming couplets (can be the same if you like).
3. There must be a minimum of 3 pauses in the play, one of them must be a super long pause (think Pinter to the power of Pinter).
4. One of the characters has had relations with everybody else in the play (as well as characters that are mentioned but not seen).
5. Every line of dialogue must have one of the following: either 7 words, 12 words, 22 words, 29 words, 56 words or 99 words (you can punctuate as you like).
6. The play will contain three acts/scenes, but you can add one more if it's a dream.
7. At some point, everybody on stage falls down to the ground.
8. Each scene/act must contain one person being told off for shouting (even though they didn't shout), and another person revealing a big secret (even though it may not be true).
9. Each scene/act must have at least 10 lines of dialogue and 10 lines of actions.
10. Oh - and you must pick one letter of the alphabet (not Q, X or Z) for each character (each one can have a different one or the same) that they are not allowed to use in their dialogue at all.

FRAPPING PACHELBEL

(a dark fantasia for string quartet... and banjo)

By

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CHARACTERS:

CELLO

VIOLA

VIOLIN 1

VIOLIN 2

The characters representing the stringed instruments are not actors playing instruments. They are actors embodying the instruments. Should they play, there will be an actual musician off-stage. (Except for CONDUCTOR who plays banjo badly, on stage.) None of the characters are gender-specific.

SCENE ONE: CANON

Lights up on a stage being used for a chamber music rehearsal. There are four chairs in a loose semi-circle facing the audience. Each chair has a music stand positioned in front of it.

VIOLIN 1 (V-ONE), VIOLIN 2 (V-TWO), and CELLO enter from different directions, greet each other with awkward hugs, and then take their seats, leaving the chair between CELLO and V-TWO open.

CELLO (somewhat annoyed): I thought we were starting at two. Should we start warming up?

Before anyone can respond, CONDUCTOR and VIOLA enter together, pausing to share a kiss before they arrive at the group. They should be giggling and laughing like new lovers who were just having a quickie in one of the dressing rooms.

V-TWO: Oh, look, though late, they're alive!

Methought the pair would never arrive.

V-ONE: Still significantly tardy, though, Conductor and Viola.

CELLO: Of course, they're late. I bet they were busy canoodling. Brazen pair.

V-TWO: You imply that you and our baton holder

Never exhibited behavior bolder.

CELLO (to VIOLIN 2): Would using normal sentences cause your death?

CONDUCTOR: Cello, darling, don't shout. Viola, if you'd take your seat? We will be sharing this canon three days from now. Sunday afternoon.

VIOLA goes and sits in the empty chair.

CELLO: Which piece, precisely, are we doing? And for your information, I wasn't shouting. If you want, I could show off some shouting? Wait. You said canon. Not (dramatic pause... waiting for everyone's attention.) *Pachelbel's Canon*?????

CONDUCTOR: Thank you. A shouting demonstration won't be necessary. Yes. The Canon in D.

VIOLA (jumping up and clapping hands) I love Pachebel. I actually have a part. I take the *melody*.

CELLO: (upset, standing up) You *had* to mention Melody. You *had* to.

VIOLA: (confused) What's the problem with Melody? Melody and Harmony are the backbone of any musical composition. Or... or do you mean that Melody and our Conductor were... were a *couple*?

V-ONE: That woman, which name will not fall from my lips, was Conductor's prior... *companion*.

V-TWO: Melody came betwixt you and me

Nudging Cello to great, green envy.

VIOLA (understanding): Sorry, Cello. But...why is that related to dislike of Pachelbel's Canon?

CONDUCTOR: The Canon in D... yes, *the* Canon.

CELLO: Pachelbel's Canon. Violin One gets a lovely solo. You, Viola, get a lovely solo. Violin Two plays the main line for a while, which ought to be illegal. But me. Are you aware of what I am grudgingly allowed to voice? I will tell you. Oh, I will tell you. It's horrible: eight quarter notes, fifty-four times. Frapping Pachelbel.

VIOLA: I still don't understand how that relates.

CONDUCTOR: Everyone, rise. We will begin rehearsal and you will understand Cello's point.

All strings rise to their feet and CONDUCTOR signals to CELLO with the baton. CELLO immediately begins to walk in a circle around the others.

CELLO sings their next line, but as they sing, an actual cello begins to play:

CELLO: D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A

*V-ONE begins to walk as CELLO starts their eighth rendition of the same chords. VIOLIN ONE's part is the same as CELLO's at first, though higher, but after four repeats of the eight-note phrase, it diverges into the same melody most of us are familiar with. It should be noted that ONLY CELLO sings the **names** of the notes. Everyone else sings the pitches using the word "Da."*

V-ONE (singing, then joined by actual violin): Da, da da da, da da da da da da da, da....

The Conductor signals to VIOLIN TWO.

V-TWO repeats what V-ONE did before them.

V-TWO: (singing, a bit quieter than V-ONE, perhaps not as confidently): Da, da da da, da da da da da da da, da...

CONDUCTOR signals to VIOLA who also begins to walk and sing, first the same quarter notes as everyone else, and then their own melody. However, VIOLA is a rebel. Their circle is in the opposite direction of the others.

They continue walking in more and more complicated patterns – except for CELLO, whose circle remains simple – as the various harmonies of Pachelbel's Canon in D increase in volume (thank you, off-stage ensemble) and the lights fade to darkness.

SCENE TWO – GIGUE

Lights come up on the same stage, but there are no chairs, save for the one on CONDUCTOR's podium.

CONDUCTOR enters carrying a banjo. Instead of climbing into their chair, they sit on the edge of the podium, and strum the banjo experimentally a few times. Then they begins to play – slowly, as if they're just learning the song and the instrument - the chord progression for Pachebel's Canon:

CONDUCTOR: G, D, e-minor, b-minor, C, G, D – wait, that can't be right...

CELLO enters from upstage left and stands behind and to the side of CONDUCTOR, just listening for a moment.

CONDUCTOR (trying again): G, D, e-minor, b-minor, C, - argh!

CELLO (sings the chords): G, D, e-minor, b-minor, C, G, (accents the last two notes) **C, D.** Tell me, is Viola aware you're cheating on her with your new little... friend?

CONDUCTOR (glares at CELLO): Must you always be so loud?

CELLO (rolling their eyes): Have you always been unable to differentiate forte from piano? Should we be worried? Call in a tuner, perhaps? I could go –

CONDUCTOR (interrupting) Don't tell Viola. I mean - I'd be grateful if you didn't tell -

CELLO (their turn to interrupt): Why didn't we... You flit from instrument to instrument, but I thought what we'd had was real. Was I wrong? Was I missing something? (pause, then, after several seconds of silence, CELLO sits next to CONDUCTOR on the podium.) I thought I'd been reliable.

CONDUCTOR sets the banjo on the stage, and turns to look at CELLO.

CONDUCTOR: You were. Steady. Faithful. Reliable. All those things. But the shouting... you were always so loud – you still are. It was overwhelming. I felt overshadowed. You're more musical than I could ever be. Your range is so broad. The truth is that Viola, Melody, even Banjo here, are nothing next to you. But you... it's like your volume's always blasting.

CELLO reaches for CONDUCTOR's hand.

CONDUCTOR stares at their clasped hands for a long moment, then pulls away, only to cup CELLO's face.

CELLO meets CONDUCTOR half-way, their kiss tentative at first, then growing more passionate.

CONDUCTOR pulls CELLO closer.

CELLO (breathless, aroused, but stopping things): No. Not right now. Or... not here. What will you tell Viola?

CONDUCTOR: Maybe I'll just introduce Viola to Banjo.

CELLO and CONDUCTOR leave together, stage left as VIOLIN ONE and VIOLIN TWO enter from stage right.

V-ONE (picking up the abandoned Banjo): Poor soul. Country music cannot fix all.

V-TWO: Diverting from our typical fare

Might have helped to clear the air.

V-ONE: I doubt air was the fault or the fix.

V-TWO: Mayhap I did not explain....

By air I meant the love-charged pain.

V-ONE: Sing, child, and I will sing harmony. Waiting must not slow us.

VIOLIN TWO gives VIOLIN ONE a surprised look, then nods in acquiescence.

V-TWO (singing to the tune of Pachelbel's Canon): Ha-le-lu-jah, ha-le-lu-jah. Ha-le-lu-jah, ha-le-lu-jah. Ha-le-lu-jah, ha-le-lu-jah. Ha-le-lu-jah, ha-le-lu-jah. Ha-le-lu-jah, ha-le-lu-jah. Ha-le-lu-jah, ha-le-lu-jah.

V-ONE (joining in after the first eight 'hallelujahs', but at double time.) Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.

The two continue as a round, trading parts back and forth eventually leaving the stage hand-in-hand.

SCENE THREE – CODA

Lights up on the same stage, but this time there are red velvet curtains framing the stage, obscuring the upstage wall, etc. There are also gold-framed mirrors hanging upstage.

ALL STRINGS enter, but where before they were in rehearsal clothes, now they are the shiniest version of themselves. Their costumes suggest inlaid purfling, and hand-carved wood, and they each have a bow worn in a scabbard, like swords.

They take their places in the semi-circle, and wait.

CELLO makes a show of checking their watch.

VIOLA makes faces at CELLO.

VIOLIN ONE and TWO put their heads together behind their music stand.

The waiting continues.

Finally, CONDUCTOR enters, dressed in formal wear, bows to the audience, and takes the spot at the podium.

CONDUCTOR: Strings, attention. Would you tune, my friends?

CELLO sings an A.

VIOLA, and BOTH VIOLINS match the pitch.

CONDUCTOR: Very well. Cello, if you would, darling?

VIOLA gives CELLO a slitty-eyed look.

CELLO: Of course, Maestro. D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A, D A B F# G D G A

As before the chord builds, but this time VIOLA steps in next, following CELLO in a close pattern, as the music builds, the actors speak over the sound of the actual instruments:

VIOLA: I saw you and Conductor yesterday. You just had to slither back into favor. How could you? I thought we were friends!

CELLO: Friends? Weren't you the one who ousted Melody from the CONDUCTOR's bed?

V-TWO (hissing in anger): Have you two forgotten your part?

We're *meant* to be creating art.

V-ONE: Viola your day with Conductor is long past. Unhand your claim. You will not win now that VC's pawn has turn'd royal.

CELLO: Did you just call me a *pawn*?

CONDUCTOR: Strings! All! Quiet down. Focus, darling dears.

VIOLA (stops their pattern and draws their bow, like a sword, slicing at CELLO) You! You are the cause of all my pain. Cello has warmer top notes. Cello has sensual low notes. I am so tired of Conductor's comparisons (slices at Cello again) You may be a pawn turned queen, but I? I am done with this ensemble. I choose Fiddle and Banjo as consorts. We will rave from hill to mount and back once more.

The music from offstage stops as each instrument ceases walking their pattern and joins the swordfight that began with VIOLA and CELLO. By the end, only CONDUCTOR is left standing, because the INSTRUMENTS have fallen to the ground.

CONDUCTOR: Evidently, the Canon in D was an unwise choice. A wiser selection would have been Ravel's Bolero. (Looking at the fallen INSTRUMENTS) I shall conduct no more. (Stabs himself with their baton and drops to the ground with the others.)

BLACKOUT.

