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Education: A Cantata

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NEIL LAMPER

Education: A Cantata
scored for a number of voices

Solo: *lento con appassionato*
Oh, say, can you see
Where yer goin'?
By the public's probing light
What so proudly we hailed
At the PTA's last meeting?

*Aria:*
School days, school days,
Dear old Golden Rule days;
Readin' 'n' 'ritin', 'n' 'rithmetic
Taught to the tune of the hickory stick.

*First voice: teacher.*
Mrs. Dowling has gray hair and wears glasses. She can't control the rumble in her stomach so the kids sometimes call her Old Rumble-Gut. She taught government in high school for eighteen years and thinks creeping socialism is our greatest problem. The principal smiles to himself when he thinks of the trouble Mrs. Dowling had last year. A group of senior girls reported that Tom was feeling their legs. Mrs. Dowling didn't know whether to peer at the girl's legs to catch Tom in the act or to put her leg out to be felt. She began to talk to the principal seriously about grouping students on the basis of how much interest they showed in schoolwork. In that way, Tom would be in a special group; and one of the new teachers could handle it.

*Aria:*
School days, school days,
Dear old Golden Rule days;
Kissin', 'n' neckin', 'n' everything
Taught to the tune of the latest swing.

*Second voice: principal.*
Mr. Lynch has been a principal for eleven years. In all that time he has never seen anything quite like what he has to put up with when he chaperones the school dances. It reminds him of how he used to buy ten dollars worth of tickets to dance with some juiceless whore at the taxi-dance in the Garden of Alloah at Seal Beach, California. The thing that's shocking is to see the way little ninth-grade girls shake it around like pros. They wear skirts so tight they rip at the seams.
and display the dirty underwear. The boys don't seem to mind; they cut in and the bunch of greasy bodies sweat and shake in time to the music. The senior boys eye the crowd to see who's on the make.

_**Aria:**_

You ain't notin' but a houn' dog.
Just a' cryin' alla time;

_**Octet:**_

Hooray for the Orange and the Blue;
We'll always be loyal to you.
Fight, fight, fi—ight!

_**Chorus:**_

But we are afraid, we are alone, we don't know what to do.
(Piles of junk in abandoned basements.)
We are afraid, the schoolboard met, the superintendent is ill, the people have no money.
We have families to feed, and it's none of our business as long as we put in our time.
We are afraid, the wind blows cold, and next year jobs may be scarce.

_**Third voice: layman.**_

Lyle runs the garage and gas station where most of the teachers buy their gas. His daughter gets all D's in school, and when he raised hell awhile back, the principal fed him some bull about I.Q. scores. Lyle figured his kid was a damn sight smarter than some of those satchel-assed teachers that couldn't tell when their car wouldn't start that it was because the gas gauge had been riding empty all week. Lyle kept his mouth shut after that and let them run up their bills. The teachers thought they knew it all, but there were ways of pinching tubes when repairing tires that helped sell new tires. A bunch of crap about I.Q.'s was worth a few bills anyday. Everybody in the community knew the teachers were stupid when they wanted a new gym with a swimming pool.

_**Aria:**_

Row, row, row
For dear old Nassau.

_**Octet:**_

99 bottles of beer on the wall,
99 bottles of beer—

_**Fourth voice: school board member.**_

Mr. Rockwell didn't want the job of board member at first. But now that he was unopposed for three terms he sort of liked the prestige. His friends listed him as a leader in the community and he really thought he knew something about schools. He'd put the fear of God in a young teacher last year that made his daughter stay after school. He liked interviewing new teachers, especially the young college
girls. He was sure in another year he could work his way in with Miss Merton. Damn! The body on that woman would drive any man to drink, and he let his eyes tell her during the interview. Now if his daughter would only quit irritating the hell out of Miss Merton.

_Aria:_

The girl that I marry will have to be  
As soft and as pink as a nursery.

_Chorus:_

We are led, but we have no leader, and time is short.  
The world will not wait, but we have no leader.  
We dare not dare to do what others don't.  
We have our families, our jobs.  
There are too many taboos.  
Look at NBC, ABC, and the AP.  
The little man can't survive.  
You've got to go big or die.  
We have no leader, and next year may be a poor year.

_Aria:_

Say it with music,  
Beautiful music.

_Fifth voice: student._

When Bob was in the ninth grade, he had a motorcycle. He always came to school in a black jacket trimmed with chrome metal. He wore a motorcycle hat with the edges turned down over his ears. He didn't give a damn about schoolwork; in fact, he flunked English that year. He gave lots of girls rides on his motorbike, though. There was one cute little number, Joyce. She was crazy about him and they used to go out to The Pines on warm nights and lie in the grass. Bob carried a blanket in his saddlebags, and Joyce quit school in her sophomore year because she was pregnant. Too bad. She had one of those shorty haircuts and wore bangs over her forehead. Bob goes steady now with Carol.

_Aria:_

Then the lamb, ram, sheep horns began to blow,  
An' the trumpets begin to shout;  
_Sixth voice: citizen._

Mr. Steen's feet hurt him all the time. Carting dishes around a restaurant twelve hours each day broke down a man's feet. He figured if school in his day had been like it is now he'd be able to do something besides pick soggy napkins out of cups. Schools don't have standards anymore. Steen's kid came home and told him how the boys in science class fill Trojans with water and throw 'em at the girls. They pass kids 'cause they need the seats next year. Mr. Steen pushed the cart of dishes into the kitchen. He slipped his shoe off and nudged at the blister on his toe.
Aria:
Round and round the cobbler's bench
The monkey chased the weasel.

Seventh voice: lodge member.
Mrs. Wartnose has been campaigning against foreigners for a long time. They ruin a community. They bring lice, mice, and hordes of naked kids. The trouble is, as soon as they learn English, they start bitching about the schools. The schools where they came from were so much better than these in America, to hear them tell it. Well, Mrs. Wartnose has an answer for that. And along with it, the teachers should spend a lot less time with the UN and pound at America for Americans. American history, American government, and t'hell with the rest of the world.

Aria:
America, America,
God shed His grace on thee.

Octet:
Everything's up to date in Kansas City,
They've gone about as fur as they kin go.

Chorus:
We are afraid, it's too new, and I don't want to be the first.
We can't do anything like that, we've always done it this way, it wouldn't work. (The stale smell in the basements is like dried manure.) We feel the chill, but we must huddle together for warmth, the wind is cold. We would that we could do what we should,
But the others—
(The maggots crawl in the manure.)
It is not feasible, permissible, or defensible.
We are cold and afraid; the next year may be a poor year.

Aria:
Give me some men
Who are stout-hearted men

Eighth voice: speaker.
Board members, superintendent, principal, faculty members, students, and parents. I hope you feel some of the pride I do as I look at this new school. It is your school, yet, I, too, feel a measure of pride. Pride that my country, my people think highly enough of the education of their children to set aside the money to build a magnificent edifice such as this. A building where all may come—be he Jew or Gentile, white or dark, (background music: sometimes I feel like a motherless child) the lame, the halt, and the blind—to receive an education; an education of which we need not be ashamed. I would like to say a few words about that education.
Aria: 
Calm on the listening ear

Ninth voice: school dropout.
What the hell did they expect? A bunch a ol’lady teachers that never had no kids of their own and a principal that picked his nose. I didn’t have no good clothes n’ my old man worked nights and my ma the day shift at GM. Them damn teachers acted like there’s nothin’ in the world but books. They sounded like a telephone operator tellin’ time: read the assignment, study the lesson, go t’ the board, leave the room, answer the question, shine my shoes, kiss my ass. They send me to a guy called a counselor n’ he says, “Don’t you think we want to do what’s right for you?” He smelled like perfume n’ I says t’ hell with it all n’ quit.

Aria: 
They asked me how I knew—

Tenth voice: senior girl.
Everything was fine until I had to go and get pregnant. I don’t blame Dave, we were in love. My ma and dad wouldn’t hear of me dating, they were so old-fashioned. Dave and I always had to meet someplace. In school we stood in the halls and nobody paid much attention. Sometimes we sneaked into the locker room but the janitor caught us. My ma knew just how long it took to walk from school and if I wasn’t right home she called school. Of course, I had things on at school some nights and that was the trouble. The principal made me stay home after April but I could graduate ’cause the robe hid my condition.

Aria: 
The night is young and you’re so beautiful,  
Here among the shadows, Beautiful Lady.

Eleventh voice: somebody else.
Nobody knows what they want—that’s the honest t’god answer. Some say the three R’s, and others say they gotta learn to adjust. Everybody’s got to be like everybody else. Take my boy, Eli. Ever since he was five, he’s been practicing violin. He’s got a scrapbook with every news clipping on Heifitz. The other day the counselor takes him in and says he outta mix with the kids more; ya’ know, games, dances, that stuff. But Eli wants to practice four, six hours a day. No, he’s gotta adjust; he’s alone too much. He’s not like the rest of the mob.

Aria: 
Play, fiddle play,  
Play my love back to me.

Octet: 
The leader shouts democracy, by damn, or I’ll have your jobs.
The parents scream: the three R's, but we lost too many games this year.
The University moans: new methods, research, while sending the 112 class tests to be graded by IBM.
The students sulk, but they come through: that is, they live, they breed, they die.
(The little wheel turns within the big wheel, and there is nothing else to do.)

Chorus:
We don’t know, but at least we know we don’t know.
We confer and refer and defer.
(But the wind puffs through the basement, and there are cracks in the floor.)
The frontier is settled and there must be a change.
But our hands are tied;
Don’t blame us: we are cold, we are hungry.
It’s not our fault.
Blame the tribe across the river—
They have a green color.
Jobs were poor this year.
Blame the people on the other side of the hill—
They are purple people.

R. FOCO

So It May Be

Death may be a door closed tight
Barred against a day or night;
A breathless void, a lightless dream,
A mindless thought, an ending scheme.

Or . . .

Death may be a pass-through sphere
With life’s death key to enter there;
A vacuumed state, a dreamless light,
An ending quest, a conquered plight.