

When you are an amateur cellist and you are offered to play music in exchange for dinner, you accept the offer, regardless of what it actually entails. Barring a select few circumstances where I would refuse on moral grounds (e.g., playing the first Bach cello suite for a finance bro while he pours beer on Manet's 1882 Bar aux Folies-Bergères), or where the quality of food is in doubt (e.g., the Annual Conference of the Gastronomic Insect), there is no event I would not play at. So when the director of the Collège Néerlandais approached us after rehearsal and asked for background musicians at a dinner in the Maison Internationale, naturally I volunteered myself.

A few words on the Orchestre du Collège Néerlandais. Its name conveys an ambition entirely unmatched with its physical presence. Each week, depending on moon phases and the appetite of laboratory rats near the Sorbonne, between four and eight musicians arrive for rehearsal. English has the words 'quartet', 'quintet', 'sextet', 'septet', and 'octet' to describe such a group, but because the precise combination of people and instruments is never quite known until the concert, the name reflects not our observed turnout, but rather our theoretical maximum yield. I found out about the O. C. N. during my second week of living in Paris. I had attended a concert at my residence hall and afterwards told the pianist, Edgar, that I was desperate for friends and an orchestra. To fulfill both of my demands, he invited me to join a small group he conducted at the Dutch house up the street.

All that I and Júlia, the violinist, knew about our gig was the time, date, and duration. We decided to play four pieces: Bach's Air from the third orchestral suite, his duets BWV 803 and 804, and Schubert's Ave Maria. We had two short rehearsals. The evening of the dinner I put on my black suit and wondered if I would be overdressed. I was not. The dining room was held in the grand salon of the main building, one of the few interior spaces that was worthy of the exterior façade built in the style of the château de Fontainebleau. Advertised as a prestigious space with marble chimneys and a handsome parquet covering four hundred square metres (ten times the size of my apartment), the salon is located just one floor above the infamous restaurant universitaire. Eating in the R. U. -- in French, approximately homophonous with 'eating in the street' -- is one of those experiences which compels you to doubt the future of humanity and lose hope that we could ever learn to love our fellow man, woman, or nonbinary entity. On most evenings hundreds of students queue to eat three-euro meals in sheer cacophony, either while shouting at their friends, or alone. Fortunately, the cantine was closed for the event.

Around twenty tables, each with ten seats, had been set in the salon. On the tablecloths were bread rolls, wine bottles, glasses, cutlery, name cards, and a menu listing three courses. I had vastly underestimated how fancy the dinner was. Júlia and I rehearsed for around fifteen minutes when we were invited to the auditorium to view the keynote speech.

We sat down to the sound of heavy bass and a troupe of seven dancers. The dancers mimed fist fights, moved their arms a lot, and walked around the stage. This lasted twenty minutes. They received enthusiastic applause, with some providing standing ovation. Then a young man came out and began speaking in perfect television host intonation:

---Comme vous êtes, bien sûr, tous très malins malines, vous avez évidemment déduit que le spectacle que vous venez de voir parlait de la masculinité !

He then began to introduce the speaker, the woman we had all been waiting for. She was an ordinary looking woman of about forty with a headset microphone much like the one Tom Cruise wore in *Magnolia*. She had prepared a powerpoint about the trends of 2025, written about in greater detail in her book which was conveniently for sale outside. I had thought the world to be an infinitely complex and incomprehensible system. Not for her. She had a catchphrase for everything. No subject was out of reach and she touched all of them. If Lord Henry could only have dreamed of summing up the world in a phrase, she had actually done it. It was like she had asked ChatGPT to summarize every New York Times editorial from 2024. Her presentation was in four sections: zeitgeist, process, anti-body, and trajectories. She spoke of the Alice effect, tech burning borders, influencers as journalists, the commodification of emotion, the ultra-transformation matrix, life hacks, botox before wrinkles, whether it is worse to look old or modified, the dichotomy between trad wife cyborg and Moo Deng, injection as ritual, transhumanism lite, death as the last bug, the broligarchy, economic attention vs intention, aesthetic slop over truth, television as order in a world of chaos, the luxurification of everything, art as medicine, eating alone increasing the risk of heat attack, time limits to the digital world, exclusivity as luxury, the new virile Zuckerberg, content creators as God, seeking stability in travel, and isolation as status -- all working within the framework of limbic capitalism. I understood none of it. Júlia and I left as the applause started. We played for the guests as they filed into the dining room.

When we were asked to stop playing we were assigned seats for dinner. I was placed between two men, taking the spot of a woman named Ana. Everyone looked between forty and sixty. They were doing roundtable introductions when I sat down. There was the director of culture of Fragonard, directors of communication, leaders of tourism agencies, an arts journalist, and an old CNRS geographer. I maintained some vague hope that they might find me incredibly interesting so I introduced myself with most charming French I could manage.

---Du coup, je suis peut-être le moins illustre parmi vous...

They laughed.

---mais je suis chercheur en chimie au Collège de France.

---Assez illustre alors ! said one of them with a laugh.

I smiled.

---Et j'étais recruté, disons, pour vous jouer un peu de violoncelle, donc voilà. Je suis américain, je viens de finir mon doctorat à New York.

After this, during a meal consisting of a purée, a mushroom curry, and a strawberry mousse, the conversation took a rather focused turn towards Venice and its overtourism, travel during the pandemic, the morality of airplanes, and business travel. The dynamics of the table became clear very quickly. To say anything, one first had to wait for the geographer to pause between sentences; as they were very long, admirably constructed, and somewhat unpredictable, one had to be ready with an appropriate remark. Typically this came as an aside from one of the communications directors, or the travel agents. These would elicit

some laughter and occasionally allow another topic to be discussed. If the aside was interpreted, however, as a counterpoint to the geographer's thesis, then we would have to suffer through another string of pedantic yet well-enunciated phrases. At some point I had expected the conversation to disperse, freeing us to speak to our neighbours, and indeed this almost happened when the travel agent sitting to my left began telling me about his vacation in New York. But the man to my right shushed us so he could better hear the unending stream of golden words from the geographer's mouth.

There were few opportunities for me to speak. I was mostly desperate for the table to discuss anything but travel. I had thought of bringing up Proust in relation to Venice -- he dreams of the pearl of the Adriatic but is sent to the grey Norman coast instead -- but I was not quick enough. My greatest success was during a discussion on how different demographics travel.

---La mobilité des jeunes n'est pas tout à fait pareille, said a man.

Everyone looked at me.

---Oui, en effet, I said, moi j'ai remarqué de plus en plus les jeunes qui font de l'autostop. C'est mon mode de transport préféré, en fait.

There were murmurs of surprise and amusement.

---Du vrai stop, said my neighbour, pas blablar, on est d'accord ?

---Oui, bien sûr. Je me pose sur la route et je mets la puce. C'est beaucoup plus facile en France qu'aux États-Unis, d'ailleurs.

---Et comment vous avez commencé à faire du stop ? asked the arts journalist.

---Ç'était une inspiration littéraire -- j'ai lu les livres des grands autostoppeurs, comme Jack Kerouac dans Sur la route, ou bien Christopher McCandless dans Into the Wild.

I thought the table was sufficiently impressed and I had high hopes that we might discuss literature.

---Mais enfin, c'est niche comme mode de transport, said the Fragonard woman.

---Oui, c'est niche, agreed several others.

And the geographer began unloading another bottomless shipment of wisdom.

Only after the event did I discover that the tables had been organised by topic of interest, such as green energy, or agriculture. So my dining companions did not, after all, happen to have a deranged obsession with tourism. It was by design.