

Frusick: Making Sweeter Music

They came up with the technology at the end of the last century: right after they'd perfected WiFi and 3D optics. Like so many inventions, Frusick was waiting for some bright spark to pluck it out of the ether.

And that's exactly what some bright spark did. You just hummed a tune into your mobile device. Once identified, you could do what you wanted. Rewrite the *Missa Solemnis*? No problem. Pretend to be a pop star and change the band? Sure. And if you don't like a chord, well, re-write the music. If that slurred chord in "Stone Free" by Hendrix bothers you - boom, it is no more. And your revision will sound just like the original.

After the launch of Frusick, soloists revolted, since no-one needed to know how to play. Simply by humming what you wanted – and in later versions, waving your fingers around in front of a monitor – you could re-imagine Haydn, the Heptones or Justin Bieber – all the greats from the last three centuries. Every day, Frusick's software engine slowly eats its way back through musical history: soon they'll be doing the madrigals of Hildegard of Bingen. Then the Dark Ages, the Romans – anything's possible with the right algo!

Frusick's programmers got super rich and did what super-rich people do. They escaped to two-hundred-hectare farms with fences and security guards to make cheese or paint or shape barrels, all the while drinking litres of ridiculously-priced wines and watching the world beyond their farm gates via the internet.

However, Frusick had a flaw. Not one which affected the profits of fApp-El, the MegaCorp that launched Frusick, you can be sure of that. The flaw was Frusick's perfection. After a while the public twigged there was no point in learning to read or play music. Sure, some clung on a while, but they soon gave it up.

Archivists and collectors went berserk snapping up Oboes, Bassoons, Viola di Gambas – any instrument they could get their hands on. After all, these instruments were rarities, sure to grow more valuable.

I'm a clinical psycho-linguistic neuro-aestheticist who specialises in music: it's my job to understand what motivates people so that we can heal personality aberrations as they present at clinic. We don't do things like therapy and drugs any more. These days, we stop people from doing things by offering them something better to do. By which I mean easier. Something that gets them what they want immediately: as much as you want, as quickly as you want it.

Thanks to Frusick, we can do this with the perverted impulse to make music. Want to write a tune? We can do that for you, wholesale. As a medical-psycho-social professional, I'm delighted to partner with the corporate sector to provide consumers with technology that assuages their creative desires – and all without collapsing into the poverty, substance abuse and chronic depression so common among musicians in the past.

Nonetheless, the absence of musicians has created a problem. The same problem that arose when MP3s and early internet video systems came in last century: the kids. Kids who don't want to be like everyone else. Being cool. Being different. The eternal folly of youth.

Just as kids back in the day started snapping up old vinyl records, or lionizing old people who played blues music, kids nowadays seem to delight in hunting down and hanging out with the last remaining musicians. Hanging out with musicians is proven to cause severe personality disorders. Furthermore, these children could become musicians themselves – a fate worse than the use of alcohol or recreational drugs. Naturally, it's been noted that abuse of these poisons is higher among those who succumb to musicianship.

Our solution is to empathise with these kids, to let them record music as they find it, then slave the tunes they've recorded into Frusick's memory banks. Sometimes the kids don't want to know – but that's why we fund the "Frusickal Mystery Tour." The kids get to travel around for free, hunting down these musicians. The parents love it because it's healthier than screen time and gets them out of the house. We love it because it enhances our relationship with future customers and builds Frusick's memory banks.

I won't deny the program has had its critics, principally those who argue that legitimate healthcare professionals such as myself – after all, I'm an accredited Fellow of the Royal College of Clinical Psycho-Linguistic Neuro-Aestheticists – shouldn't be getting into bed, as they put it, with corporate interests. But come on, this is the twenty-second century! What do you expect, a taxpayer-funded healthcare system free at the point of use?

Anyhow, that explains why I'm in the back of a People Transporter on the MagWay down to Kent. We thought we'd identified the last musicians in Western Europe but apparently there's some guy called Alfred Gardener who lives in this village called Hartfield. Gardener plays the Cello.

Our web crawlers tell us the kids think this guy's a genius. I mean, how could he be? He's eighty-five if he's a day, and he's never had any kind of publicity! He's never taught at any kind of University, let alone lectured at an EasyLearn institute over the web. And he never even worked as a musician! According to our records, he was a data manager in a life insurance company in London for forty years before he retired back to his village and tended his roses. I mean, what kind of genius goes and lives quietly in a village, for Gods' sake?

These days villages like Hartfield have "Protected Village Status." So that people can enjoy them as curiosities, we put fences, walls and barbed wire around them and monitor the in-flows and out-flows of

people via armed guards at the gates. Now that's only to protect the buildings and the inhabitants from crime and vandalism, right?

Anyway, so we're at the gates of this guy Alfred Gardener's village and I ask the kids to tap up their ID cards so the security Bot can read them. Amid much sighing and groaning, they pull out their mobiles and tap up. One kid is chewing Coca-Guarana and bopping his long hair against the side of the People Transporter. Another one waves his fingers around with headphones – ha! Must be Frusick Beta. Some rebel he turned out to be – sounds like he's polishing up something Mozart could have done a better job on.

After we get through the security Bot, we're inside the wire and just one kilometer from this guy's house. As a busy psycho-medical professional, I've rarely got the time to go inside Protected Villages, and when I do I always wonder why I bother. Those quaint old post boxes that will never see a letter; the inefficient housing and the pubs serving alcohol in archaic measures.

I guide my over-excited gaggle of kids down the main street, their eyes widening at the sight of the petroleum-driven vehicles in driveways; pointless flowers climbing up walls, the quaint little gutters they used to have under their roofs to collect pine needles. Or was it rainwater? I can never remember.

When we get to the designated number my mobile blips to say we've arrived. Then I notice the number is stenciled on the doorway in any case. How quaint. I check my GPS location: the picture I'd called up looks about the same, so I push open the little wooden gate and walk up the neat flagstone path, red, white and yellow roses bordering a tiny patch of lawn that can't be more than two metres square.

The kids gang up at the gate in hushed anticipation. Normally I'd be reminding them about their manners and behavior, but there seemed to be no need this time. They perch like medieval monks and

nuns, dressed not in habits but the latest teenage fashions, all spangled shirts and skinny rainbow trousers. I think how much they look like apprentice clowns or something. Poor, deluded kids. They'll grow out of it.

I knock on the white door using the steel knob someone put there a century or more ago. A minute later the door opens and a small, round man, stooped with age, massively thick spectacles slithering down his nose, peers out from behind it.

"Yes?"

He looks at me with suspicion, then at the kids by his garden gate, the door still half-closed against us as if I'm going to rush him. So this is the Alfred Gardener the kids venerate as a saint.

"My name is Doctor McMillan", I smile, "These young people would like to hear you play the cello."

"Oh yes!" Gardener's face brightens and the door opens wider. "Do come in – I've been expecting you."

The old man turns around and shuffles off through a doorway to the left. I catch a glimpse of the hallway beyond him. The old black phone with its cord between earpiece and receiver, when we've had mobile devices for as long as he's been alive.

I follow the old man into his sitting room on the left. Books – books! – line the walls. Even a painting, of some old brown dog on a farm, over the fireplace! The kids rustle in on tip-toe, walking as if they were at church, and sit down. Gardener catches my eye.

"Do you like the painting? It's my dog, Billy. He's been dead thirty years."

I smile thinly, unsure of what to say. I check the kids are behaving: rather than their usual cynical, uninterested state. All five of them sit on the floor, eyes rapt as they watch the old man's every move.

"Righty-ho then", he smiles. "I'll just nip off and fetch my beauty."

He shuffles out of the room and down the corridor. A few minutes later, he returns slightly out of breath, his cello's shapely torso between his arms, its metal foot rubbing along against the carpet as he comes back in.

"Whew! Goodness me, I'm getting a bit old for all this", he apologizes, smiling at the children, who variously blush, look away or smile back at him. Privately, I wish he would just get on and play the damned thing, then the kids could ask him a few questions and we leave. If we stay in the Protected Village for too long, the People Transporter will trigger the Security Bots to prevent harm from the alcohol abusers that frequent the "pubs".

The old man blinks and sits down on his stool. In front of him there's a thin metal frame with sheets of paper on it, sheets covered in squiggles, circles and lines. Music, I realize after a couple of seconds. The thing that instructed them what to play.

"Thank you for coming to visit me today, children." Alfred Gardener says. "I'm going to attempt Bach's Cello Suite in C sharp minor. I hope you enjoy it."

The old man picks up his bow, addressing the instrument like a dancing partner in some ancient courtly dance. He coaxes his bow on the strings and I hear a faint squeak as the wax glissades against them. A long, mournful howl comes from the instrument. Then music, the notes climbing in pitch, slowly, sadly, making the walls resonate, the books, the flowers, even the picture of the dog seems to join in chorus. I'm overcome. I listen, rapt, for ten minutes.

When he finishes, I look round at the children. Tears in their eyes, heads bowed, weeping. I look up at the picture of Billy the dog, the books in their dusty rows and the old man looking at his instrument as if he were in love, his round, lined face reflected in the rich polished wood. He embraces his instrument for a few seconds longer, then looks at me like I'm supposed to break the silence.