

Before a bag is unpacked or the dateline dries in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a private conference marvels at being in the Old Town to go to chamber music over sidewalks that once resounded with high-kicking boot heel revelries by cowboys and newspaper scribes far into the night.

Relax; little more comes with the subject. I am not going to blemish the image of a stiff graybeard seated in a concert hall beside a lady rancher so charming that she smoothes passage for a freckle-necked herder such as myself.

Nevertheless, it is a long way up from being lead voice on the sidewalk version of "Black Jack David Came Riding Round the Hill" to hearing a string sextet play Brahms' B-flat Major, Op 18 in an acoustic toned room filled with coiffured and starched citizenry.

By allowing the gray whiskers to grow longer than normal and leaving the eyebrows and sideburns full, a perfect disguise masks my vocations and avocations. Under such a hirsute disguise, the other patrons might think that old wooly chap is a music critic from Vienna from the way he looks, "to be under blue serge" instead of "clothed in blue serge."

My pal made reservations far ahead to assure seats up close to the front. One problem she is unable to change is that hombres once needed less space to sit than today, in St. Francis auditorium or anywhere else from park benches to airplane seats. An unlucky draw on the displacement requirement for a 12-person bench now can assign, say, six average width patrons four spaces to perch, plus risk circulatory strangled hind legs from overcrowding.

Unlike poetry festivals, chamber music aficionados pack tighter without yielding to close contact. Row three, seats four and five seem the hardest to defend. On the first noon performance, the lady in seat three overshot her space far enough for her ruffled-blouse sleeve and toggle-braceleted arm to lead an invasion that gradually marked off an extra-precious conquest of my seat.

One universal compact held with my pal, any and all bystanders, strangers, ticket-holders or combinations anywhere on this cold earth is that if a vampire bat attacked as a rattler coiled to strike, they would hold up fingers and signal "Shush, Monte!"

The scold weakens this time as the pressure from my relinquishment begins to eke down the bench. The "shush" section notices the compression. The rubber cushion my pal sits upon finds traction. All 18 inches of us multiplied by

two gain sovereignty over part of seat four and nearly all of seat five.

Around poetry folks, if they become too close, a thin whistle under the breath moves them elsewhere, or widens the space. Note that the grasses on the 09 Divide are not the same as the "grass" among young fans at these festivals. (Yes, that's awkward, but it's hard going.) Should you find "grass" a problem, might best stay wherever serves for your 09 Divide.

Every summer before the Santa Fe event, I sit on Pampaw's wagon seat in the ranch yard to prepare for the benches and hard backs. By rigorously clinching and relaxing the hind legs together daily, cramps and spasms become bearable once in closed halls.

Being so packed gives confidence and protection to hombres such as myself, who retain the music education left over from rhythm band in the fifth grade in 1939 Mertzon. I am going to describe a pianist, the evening he walked on the stage, seated himself on the piano stool in a strong enough trance to transfer the spell to the audience.

Be phony to comment or criticize. Be risky, too. Lots of folks know classical music – my pal, for one. The way seems safe to share that this places the master pianist at an ivory keyboard on a varnished instrument, shined from

gold claw feet to slanted polished lid, in an auditorium filled to standing room, sending Debussy's magic into space.

Move back now to "Ol' Bo Jangles" the bracelet collector, seat three and points on seat four, expanded from the music to the degree that her right hind leg mashed my palsied left one into a dead stump. "Beg your pardon" seemed an option, yet we were so pressed together, a Siamese effect began to develop.

She'd dab her nose; I'd dab mine. She sighed; so did I. Her program slipped from her lap; mine fell, too. I dared not look to either side for fear the interruption might break the spells.

After three curtains, the audience began to file out the front door. My left leg felt like the paralysis from a cast or a leg brace. Outdoors, at first the eventide appeared like an eclipse instead of sundown after the severe body press. But invigorated by mountain air, I fully recovered in half a block.