

## Minuet & Trio

Frederic sat alone at a table, poring over the menu. Breakfast, breakfast, and more breakfast. Then the next page had things that weren't breakfast. It was a small diner, the kind that had cheap, tasty food that wasn't particularly healthy. The last part didn't concern him.

There weren't that many ponies there in the morning. Most ponies preferred to have breakfast in their own homes unless they were trying to navigate a tight schedule, in which case they had Frederic's full sympathies.

"Hello, sir," said a unicorn waitress. "Can I get you anything to drink to start?"

"Just a coffee," said Frederic.

"Decaf or..."

"Decaf doesn't help me wake up," said Frederic.

"Hey... I know that voice," said a mare.

*Oh, no...* thought Frederic.

Vinyl Scratch poked her head over the back of her seat—she was seated in the stall right next to Frederic's. "Well, waddya know—it's Octa's piano-buddy! Small world, ain't it?"

"Umm..." Frederic mumbled. He needed his coffee. "Hi."

Vinyl immediately jumped from her stall and circled around to Frederic's table. She sat down opposite of him and set down her purple glasses.

"Ain't this great?" she asked as she opened her menu. "I'll have a milkshake, thank you."

"Alrighty, then," said the waitress. "I'll come back to take your order later."

Frederic nodded as the waitress left. "Thank you." He looked at Vinyl, who was obviously not the kind of pony he'd sit down to have breakfast with. "Hi," he said, before looking back down at the menu. He turned to a page that had things that weren't breakfast on it. He contemplated whether or not he should get some pancakes and toast or a sandwich.

"I love these places," said Vinyl. "I always like having breakfast. Sometimes I come here and have breakfast for dinner. I love doing that."

"That's a mind-bender..."

"I'm not sure," Vinyl said as she looked over the menu. "Do I want pancakes or waffles?"

Frederic lowered his menu and raised an eyebrow. "Aren't they the same thing?"

"One's crunchier... Yeah," Vinyl said. "I'll have waffles. How about you?"

Frederic stared at her as the sound of the ceiling fan filled his ears. "I haven't decided," he said, before returning to the menu.

Vinyl leaned forward. "Y'know, I've been thinking a lot," she said.

"About what?"

"Your image," said Vinyl. "It's always important for performers like us to think about that. The kind of picture we want to put forward."

Frederic lowered the menu again. "I do not have an 'image.'"

"Uhh, yes you do."

"No I don't," said Frederic. "I don't craft some sort of caricature. I simply play the music I'm given. Like a professional."

"Exactly!" said Vinyl, hitting the table. "That's your image: professional. Gotta say, it works pretty well. Octavia's got the same thing going."

"I would certainly think so."

"So, have you decided?"

"Huh?"

Frederic looked up and saw the waitress standing there, ready to take their orders. In front of him was his cup of coffee, and Vinyl was already drinking her milkshake.

"Yeah," said Vinyl. "I'll have a waffle and some toast. Sourdough toast, I think."

"And you, sir?"

"Umm..." Frederic hadn't had time to think about his order, as Vinyl had distracted him with her conversation. Out of the corner of his eye he saw another waiter walking past their table. He watched as the waiter stopped at the stall Vinyl had formerly occupied. The waiter stood there, confused and a little dejected, before walking back to the kitchen.

"I think..." Frederic resumed. "I think I'll have the same thing. But with wheat toast."

"Alrighty, you two, I'll be back with your orders," said the waitress, floating their menus away from them.

"I mean, the whole 'professional' thing," Vinyl continued. "That's an image you put forward for ponies to see. And I figure the ponies who like classical music like ponies like that. I mean, could you see a pony like me playing one of those concert-O's?"

"Can't say I can..." Frederic said.

"Ahh, but you *do* have a personality," said Vinyl. "It's the whole..." She straightened her back. "Oh, *my*, I am ever so intellectually posh and my wit is razor-fine such that even my insults are polite."

Frederic was drawn to the conclusion that Vinyl was a great deal more intelligent and astute than her taste in music implied.

"And that's cool, you really put that into your music. That image suits it," she continued.

"Come again?"

"I mean, you have that whole 'stiff upper lip' thing going, so you play 'stiff upper lip' music," said Vinyl. "I mean, the music you play comes from that."

"I don't see why it should," said Frederic. "Just because I don't have a stormy 'image' doesn't mean I couldn't play a stormy piece."

"Well, then," said Vinyl. She took a sip from her milkshake. "I'm not sure what the point is. I

mean, music is all about expressing yourself.”

"Hardly," said Frederic. "I express the music that is on the page. I express the composer. If I want to express myself, I will compose. As it is, I am a musician, not a composer."

"Hey, that doesn't mean you have to be an automaton," said Vinyl. "I'm just saying you can put some feeling into what you play."

Frederic gave a weak laugh. "Feeling. That doesn't work very well for me." He sat back, holding his cup of coffee. "Let me tell you something. I've been playing piano my whole life, since I was a little colt. I'll never forget what happened at my first recital. I was working on a little piano sonata, nothing too difficult, but still, I practiced it for hours every day, just playing it over and over and over again. I loved that piece, and I couldn't wait for the recital, to share it with everypony."

"Well," said Vinyl, trying to piece together what his point was, "that's what I mean. I mean, what's wrong with that?"

"I'm not finished," said Frederic. "I played that piece as though it was coming out of my soul. And you know what? I was pretty proud of myself. At the next lesson after the recital, I asked my teacher what he thought of it." He looked at her, giving another weak laugh. "I asked for his honest opinion."

"And... what was that?"

Frederic took another sip of his coffee. This was the part he would never, ever forget. "I played it too fast. The tempo was inconsistent and it didn't match what the composer had written. I flat-out forgot about most of the dynamic markings. I got all the accents wrong. I was sloppy on the pedal, making all the notes run together. It was too rushed and too sloppy." He set down the cup. "That's what I got for playing with feeling."

Vinyl paused. She peered at him for a while, taking another long sip of her milkshake. "Honestly?" she asked. "Sounds more to me like your teacher was a bit of a jerk."

The waitress returned, floating their plates. "Well, here we are," she said. "Two waffles and two orders of toast. Now..."

"The wheat's mine," said Frederic.

“Figured you more for a white-bread type,” said Vinyl as her order was placed in front of her.

“No,” said Frederic, examining the jelly tray. “Wheat bread has more fiber.”

Vinyl soon lost interest in the conversation as she began lathering her waffle with butter. Frederic did the same, though he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Vinyl was a lot less subdued. Frederic was not at all surprised when she took the pitcher of syrup and proceeded to drench her hapless waffle in it. However, he did not expect her to do the same with her toast. Vinyl remained oblivious as he stared at her.

“I *loooove* maple syrup,” she said.

“Well, obviously.”

“Here.”

Vinyl floated the jug over to Frederic. He narrowed his eyes as he saw that there was only a thin line of syrup at the bottom.

“Look,” said Vinyl, “if I could just suggest, maybe once you should cut a little slack. Loosen the bowtie and let everything out. Don’t be afraid to indulge yourself.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” said Frederic. “You took all of the syrup.”

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Frederic stood at the door of Octavia’s apartment. It was five minutes before two in the afternoon. He was regrettably early. He liked being early to rehearsal sessions, but arriving early to somepony’s house was simply awkward.

He knocked at the door and waited for an answer. Tucked in his saddlebag was the piano score for the cello concerto Octavia was working on.

The door opened.

“Frederic! Glad you could make it,” Octavia said. She held the door open. “Come in.”

“Thank you kindly.”

Frederic entered into Octavia’s apartment. He looked around; it wasn’t very different from his

own place. Everything was neat and in order, though the upright piano in the corner didn't appear quite as worn from use as his. This was understandable, given that Octavia was a cellist and not a pianist. Said cello was propped up on a stand next to a chair.

"How have the rehearsals with the orchestra gone?" he asked, walking over to the piano.

"Miserably," she responded. "It's just what I was afraid of. I make one mistake and the whole thing stops. Then one of the trumpet players decides that it's hilarious to play his part up an octave."

"That's always annoying," said Frederic. He set down his saddlebag and took out the score. "So, where should we start from?"

Octavia sat down and readied her instrument. "Right at the beginning of the development," she said.

Frederic turned the score a few pages in. Frederic set his hooves on the piano and began to play. Octavia joined in on her cello. Obviously, Octavia wanted to make the practice as efficient as possible, opting to work on sections that had both of them playing.

Part of him wondered why she thought she needed to practice at all; she was so deft with her instrument that it seemed as though she was spontaneously perfect. The more practical side of him, however, knew that this was not true. No musician was worth anything without practice, and lots of it. Still, he admired her more than he could say.

They reached the cadenza, and Octavia stopped playing.

"It doesn't sound like you're having any trouble," said Frederic.

"You really think so?" she asked.

"Absolutely."

"Thanks," said Octavia. "Vinyl seems to think I always play perfectly, too."

"You know, I saw her earlier today," said Frederic. "She's quite, um..."

"She's special," said Octavia, smiling softly. "Very special. You're going to her club tonight, right?"

“Yes,” said Frederic. “Hopefully I can survive it.”

Octavia laughed. “Hey, Vinyl’s music isn’t bad. It just takes some getting used to.”

“Does ‘getting used to’ it mean lowering my own intelligence?”

“Now, *Frederic*,” said Octavia, “you need to broaden your horizons.”

Frederic turned around in his seat to face her. “My Celestia,” he said, “what has that mare *done* to you?”

Octavia laughed. “Honestly, Frederic, you’re an awful snob sometimes. But really, even aside from music, Vinyl’s a great mare. I think we might have something special.”

“I see...” said Frederic. She raised an eyebrow at him. For a minute, Frederic was afraid that she’d realize the way he felt.

"Have you... ever *been* in love?" Octavia asked.

"What?" asked Frederic, caught off-guard. “I mean... Pah, you know me," he laughed. "I have the personality of a rock. No pony goes for that."

"Well, still," Octavia said. "There has to be some pony you like."

"Well," Frederic said uneasily, "there was once... *one* mare." He shook his head. “But nothing ever happened.”

“The one that got away?”

“Something like that,” said Frederic. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Let me guess,” said Octavia, “it was one of those things where you had a crush, but never told her?”

“Well... something like that, yeah,” he said.

“Tell me about her,” said Octavia.

“Why?”

“Well, no reason. Just... curious, I guess. But we don’t have to if you don’t—”

“No,” said Frederic. “It’s alright. Just a little pointless. Nothing happened, and nothing ever *will* happen.” Frederic paused. “But she was smart. She was sophisticated, and she was incredibly talented and skilled.” He took a breath. “And... and she was the most beautiful pony I’ve ever known in my life. And she understood what beauty is and what beauty means.” He gave a weak laugh. “But I never had a chance with her.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find your girl,” said Octavia. “I think that there’s somepony for everypony.”

Frederic gave a weak smile and turned the score back a page. “Not for me, I’m afraid.”

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Frederic could hear the thumping “beats” from outside the club. He was not looking forward to this. *The Purple Horseshoe*, he thought, *that doesn’t sound tacky at all.*

It wasn’t a particularly large establishment: just some bar in a cheap end of town, but it did its best to dress itself up as a classier joint, up to the inclusion of a bouncer.

“And you are?” he asked.

“Frederic Horseshoepin,” said Frederic.

“You a member?”

Frederic sighed. “No, but—”

“Can’t you read the sign?” The bouncer pointed to a “MEMBERS ONLY” sign.

The door opened and a mare’s head poked out. “Hey! Freddy! Glad you could make it!”

The bouncer looked at her.

“It’s okay, Baller,” she said, “he’s with me.” She looked back at Frederic. “Glad you could make it. Wish is dropping some maaaaaad beats.”

“Wish?” Frederic asked dubiously, but Vinyl was in no mood to explain. She threw open the



door and dragged him inside. Inside it was almost completely dark, save for a few flashing lights. The noise that Frederic suspected was supposed to be music filled his ears, making it nigh-impossible for him to hear anything.

Up on a platform there was a unicorn with outrageous sunglasses standing at a turntable. Frederic suspected that this unicorn was responsible for the deplorable amounts of bass pulsing through the room. Around him ponies were dancing haphazardly.

“Vinyl?” Frederic asked, looking around. She was nowhere to be seen.

“Get offa my stage!” boomed a voice over the music. Frederic looked up and say that Vinyl had stepped onto the platform and was confronting the other unicorn.

“Whaddya mean, *your* stage?” answered the other unicorn, smiling slyly after her.

“*This* is what I mean!” she shouted, moving to the turntable in the center. “Who wants to hear some *real* music?”

The crowd shouted back in affirmation.

“I can’t *hear* you!” Vinyl shouted back.

*And I can’t hear anything*, thought Frederic as the roar from the club-goers nearly deafened him again.

“Well, you asked for it!” Vinyl threw a switch, and the music changed. The club went very quiet and Frederic wondered for a minute if he really *had* gone deaf. Then he heard a cello playing: Octavia’s cello. He listened to it and came to the realization that this was the piece that Vinyl had asked her to play for. He smiled, admiring the music.

Of course, Vinyl had to ruin it by throwing in electronic sounds and a low bass beat. The cello was still there, but the DJ had thrown layers upon layers of electronic instruments over it, making some sort of bizarre hybrid. The crowd resumed its normal level of noise, dancing around Frederic as he just stood there, listening.

He couldn’t figure out why these other ponies would want to make their own distractions when music was playing. *Doesn’t that get in the way of listening to the music?* he wondered.

Frederic pushed his way through the crowd, trying to find a seat. He found a chair near the back

that was unoccupied and sat down, letting out a relieved sigh.

The other unicorn, of course, barged back onto the platform at the end of the song. Frederic watched in his usual detached way, thinking about their relationship. Obviously they were performing partners, and they were carrying on some kind of “act.”

“Booooooring!” shouted Vinyl’s partner. “You call that real? Yeah, real *lame!*”

The crowd booed.

“Hey, she got nothin’ on this!”

He started playing another song, one that was faster and louder. Frederic predictably cringed, both at the blast of music and from the realization that Vinyl Scratch apparently had a male twin. The crowd, on the other hand, seemed much more appreciative, as their jeers had turned to cheers.

After several songs, Frederic had to concede that the songs were “catchy” – not something he’d be caught dead playing, but it could pass for background noise. He laughed at himself as he could almost imagine Octavia chiding him for his snobbery.

He ordered a glass of milk and kept to himself while the club members continued with their high-energy partying.

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The act continued for hours, until most of the ponies in the club had left. Frederic groaned, knowing that he was up far later than he should have been. He had by that point consumed what must have been a gallon of milk and was starting to feel a little sick from it.

“Well, how’d you like it?” Vinyl asked. “Wait, let me guess, you’re going to say it was ‘interesting,’ right?”

“Saw right through my charade, didn’t you?” said Frederic.

The other unicorn walked up.

“Ah, Frederic, this is my performing partner, Neon Lights, also known as MC-W1SH.”

“Heyo,” said Neon. “Say...” He looked at Vinyl. “You didn’t tell me you were into guys.”

“Pfft,” Vinyl said with a playful dismissive air, “don’t get your hopes up.”

“Oh you,” said Neon. “So what do you do?”

“I’m a concert pianist,” said Frederic.

“Cooool, that’s neat, really neat,” said Neon. “Vinyl, I swear, you keep picking up these classical music types. Like that violinist last week.” Vinyl’s face bore an uneasy expression.

Frederic might’ve expected him to get something wrong. This needed a correction. “Cellist.”

“Huh?” asked Neon.

“She’s a cellist, not a violinist,” corrected Frederic.

“Ohhhh, no no no,” said Neon. “That was *two* weeks ago.”

Vinyl froze. It took Frederic a few seconds to put two and two together, but the embarrassed expression on Neon’s face told the rest.

“*Excuse me?*” asked Frederic.

“Oops,” said Neon. “Proooooobably shouldn’t have said that...”

“Look, look, it wasn’t...” Vinyl said, trying to cover herself. “She was an ex... we...”

“It doesn’t concern me,” said Frederic, standing up. “I should go. Thank you for inviting me. I’ll be sure to compliment Octavia on her cello playing for that... piece of yours.”

“Are you going to tell her about...” Vinyl asked nervously.

Frederic paused, mulling it over. He wondered if he might have a chance. If Vinyl was indeed cheating on Octavia, then perhaps their relationship wouldn’t last. Then maybe, just maybe, he’d have a chance with her.

“No,” he said at last. “But,” he added, before Vinyl was able to let out a sigh of relief, “I think you should.” He turned to leave, looking at the clock on the way out. “Good morning.”