

# Peter Schickele, Composer and Gleeful Sire of P.D.Q. Bach, Dies at 88

He wrote more than 100 symphonic, choral, solo instrumental and chamber works. But he was better known, and celebrated, as a musical parodist. Who can forget the “Concerto for Horn and Hardart”?



By Margalit Fox

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Peter Schickele, an American composer whose career as a writer of serious concert music was often eclipsed by that of his antic alter ego, the thoroughly debauched, terrifyingly prolific and mercifully fictional P.D.Q. Bach, died on Tuesday at his home in Bearsville, a hamlet outside Woodstock, N.Y. He was 88.

His death was confirmed by his daughter, Karla Schickele. His health had declined after a series of infections last fall, she said.

Under his own name, Mr. Schickele (pronounced SHICK-uh-lee) composed more than 100 symphonic, choral, solo instrumental and chamber works, first heard on concert stages in the 1950s and later commissioned by some of the world’s leading orchestras, soloists and chamber ensembles. He also wrote film scores and musical numbers for Broadway.

His music was performed by the New York Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Lark Quartet, the Minnesota Opera and other notable ensembles, as well as by the folk singers Joan Baez and Buffy Sainte-Marie, for whom he wrote arrangements.

But to his resigned chagrin, it was as a musical parodist in the tradition of Victor Borge, Anna Russell and Spike Jones — Mr. Schickele’s particular idol — that he remained best known.

For more than a half century, through live performances seemingly born of the marriage of Mozart, the Marx Brothers and Rube Goldberg; prizewinning recordings; and even a book-length biography, P.D.Q. Bach (“the only dead composer from whom one can commission,” Mr. Schickele liked to say) remained enduringly, fiendishly alive.

Leaping from Mr. Schickele’s pen in P.D.Q.’s name were compositions like the “No-No Nonette,” the cantata “Iphigenia in Brooklyn,” the “Unbegun” Symphony and “Pervertimento for Bagpipes, Bicycle and Balloons.”

With these and myriad other works, Mr. Schickele, who billed himself as P.D.Q.’s “discoverer,” gleefully punctured the reverent pomposity that can attend classical-music culture.

It was P.D.Q., after all, whose work won four Grammy Awards to Mr. Schickele’s one. It was P.D.Q. who packed some of New York’s foremost concert halls for decades of annual Christmastime concerts. And it was P.D.Q. who, unbidden, could rear his head insidiously at performances of Mr. Schickele’s serious music, with audience members who had come expecting belly laughs sometimes walking out in bewilderment.

“There are a lot of people who are not only surprised I write serious music, but also disappointed, like, ‘Here’s another clown who wants to play Hamlet,’” Mr. Schickele told The Los Angeles Times ruefully in 1991.

As Mr. Schickele could scarcely have envisioned on an April night in 1965, when, with borrowed money, he rented Town Hall in Manhattan and loosed the full-blown P.D.Q. on an unsuspecting public, he had created a genial genie who refused to go back into the bottle.

“I certainly would like my other stuff to be better known,” he said in a 1988 interview with the music journalist Bruce Duffie. He added, of his doppelgänger, “I guess I would have to say I’m jealous.”

The trouble, critics concurred, was that Mr. Schickele was a victim of his own prodigious ability as a pasticheur. It was a skill that found outlet in his serious music — tonal works, often jocular in their own way, with audible influences including folk music, jazz, blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

“At his frequent best, Mr. Schickele can lay claim to a leading role in the ever-more-prominent school of composers who un-self-consciously blend all levels of American music,” John Rockwell wrote in The New York Times in 1987. “William Bolcom has attracted deserved attention for his works of this deliberately eclectic sort, and Mr. Schickele deserves some of that same attention.”

Even more conspicuously, however, Mr. Schickele’s skill as a musical magpie found memorable outlet in the phantom 18th-century composer P.D.Q. Bach.



Mr. Schickele posed in a Horn & Hardart Automat in Manhattan in 1966. His alter ego, P.D.Q. Bach, composed the masterwork “Concerto for Horn and Hardart.” Keystone Features/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

## Tavern ‘Treasures’

The supremely unmusical spawn of Johann Sebastian Bach — “the last and by far the least” of his 20-odd children, Mr. Schickele called him, “and certainly the oddest” — P.D.Q. was dreamed up by Mr. Schickele and friends at midcentury.

In the years that followed, Mr. Schickele made successive “discoveries” of P.D.Q. Bach manuscripts — on one occasion in a Bavarian castle, on another in the East River, on at least one more in a trash can, but most often in the beer-soaked basements of the taverns that were P.D.Q.’s perennial haunts.

Among them were such epochal works as “The Stoned Guest,” a half-act opera; “The Abduction of Figaro,” a full-length opera; “Hansel and Gretel and Ted and Alice,” an opera “in one unnatural act”; and the Concerto for Two Pianos vs. Orchestra.

In creating P.D.Q.’s oeuvre and putting it onstage, Mr. Schickele cannily deconstructed the classical music of Mozart’s time and just as cannily reassembled it in precisely the wrong configuration.

The perversions began with the titles. Then came the instruments for which P.D.Q. wrote. Oh, there were violins and pianos, all right, but there were also such organological oddities — all playable — as the left-handed sewer flute (made of plumbing pipes); the double-reed slide music stand; the tromboon (the bastard spawn of a trombone and a bassoon); and, most deliciously for New Yorkers of a certain vintage, the Hardart (see below), a small edifice comprising literal bells and whistles, plus a series of glass doors with sandwiches behind them.

There were also the curious human voices for which P.D.Q. wrote, among them the bargain-counter tenor and the off-coloratura soprano.

Crucially, there was the music, which betrayed a deeply cerebral silliness that was no less silly for being cerebral. Mr. Schickele was such a keen compositional impersonator that the mock-Mozartean music he wrote in P.D.Q.’s name sounded exactly like Mozart — or like what Mozart would have sounded like if Salieri had slipped him a tab or two of LSD.

Designed to be appreciated by novices and cognoscenti alike, P.D.Q.’s music is rife with inside jokes and broken taboos: unmoored melodies that range painfully through a panoply of keys; unstable harmonies begging for resolutions that never come; variations that have nothing whatever to do with their themes. It is the aural equivalent of the elaborate staircases in M.C. Escher engravings that don’t actually lead anywhere.

Last, but far from least, were the performances themselves. Year after year, expectant audiences would be greeted by William Walters, Mr. Schickele’s longtime stage manager and straight man, who would announce dolefully that Mr. Schickele had been detained. A chorus of happy boos from the audience ensued.

Then, in a slapstick flash, Mr. Schickele appeared. In his early, supple years, he often slid down a rope suspended from the first balcony; on at least one occasion he ran down the aisle, vast suitcase in hand, as if delayed at the airport; on another he entered, pursued by a gorilla.

Once onstage, Mr. Schickele embarked on a pun-filled monologue that introduced P.D.Q.’s latest musical transgression, be it “The Civilian Barber,” “Chaconne à son Goût” or the haunting carol “O Little Town of Hackensack.” (“O little town of Hackensack,/How yet we see thee lie;/St. Nick hath gone, by now he’s on/His way to Tenafly.”)

It was an index of Mr. Schickele's perennial devotion to unorthodox entrances that in later years, when infirmities genuinely required him to roll onstage in a wheelchair, audience members laughed heartily, assuming it was all part of the shtick.

Some critics found P.D.Q. intolerably sophomoric. But for decades, audiences ate him up, and many reviewers lauded Mr. Schickele's joyous verbal, physical and musical wit.

"The mad Bachian professor, though consummately gifted as a mimic, is also much more," James R. Oestreich wrote of Mr. Schickele in *The Times* in 1992, adding, "Even his zaniest creations show independent personality and compositional integrity (of a highly perverse sort, it is true)."

All this from a comic character that Mr. Schickele expected would endure no more than a few years.



Mr. Schickele in 1966 after "discovering" more sheet music composed by P.D.Q. Bach. These pages were found in a trash can; others turned up in the East River and in taverns. Buck Hoefler

## A Roving Childhood

The son of Rainer Schickele, an agricultural economist, and Elizabeth (Wilcox) Schickele, a high school science teacher who worked as a mathematician for the government during the war effort, Johann Peter Schickele was born on July 17, 1935, in Ames, Iowa, and reared there, in Washington, D.C., and in Fargo, N.D. — wherever his father's job took the family. (The elder Mr. Schickele, who had been born in Germany, was the son of the noted Alsatian novelist, essayist and dramatist René Schickele, whose work was condemned by the Nazis.)

Enraptured by acting, young Peter and his brother, David, started a theater in the basement of the family home, playing out the plots of cowboy films and radio serials. Then, when he was about 9 and visiting a record store in Washington, Peter had a transformative experience.

"They were playing a record in the store," Mr. Schickele recalled in a 1997 interview for the NPR program "All Things Considered." "It was a sappy love song. And being a 9-year-old, there's nothing worse, of course. But all of a sudden, after the last note of the song, there were these two pistol shots."

That song, he learned, was Mr. Jones's "A Serenade to a Jerk."

"I've always felt that those pistol shots changed my life," Mr. Schickele continued. "That was the beginning of it all for me."

An accomplished bassoonist, the young Mr. Schickele played in his local symphony, the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra, when he was in high school.

Years later, he would pay tribute to his North Dakota roots by bestowing upon himself, in his role as P.D.Q.'s earthly representative, an august academic title: professor of musical pathology at the University of Southern North Dakota at Hoople. (There really is a Hoople, N.D. There really isn't a University of Southern North Dakota there — or anywhere.)

After earning a bachelor's degree in music from Swarthmore College in 1957, Mr. Schickele received a master's from the Juilliard School in 1960. Over the years, he studied with the composers Roy Harris and Vincent Persichetti.

In 1959, he attended an early performance of Stravinsky's liturgical work "Threni" at Town Hall, where he ran into his friend and fellow Juilliard composition student Philip Glass and a Juilliard dance student, Susan Sindall, with whom Mr. Glass was on a date. Later, Mr. Glass and Ms. Sindall broke up, and Mr. Schickele and Ms. Sindall kept running into each other. They began corresponding. They started dating in 1961, and they married the next year.

The precise origins of P.D.Q. Bach are shrouded in the bibulous mists of time, but it is fair to say that he had his first conspicuous flowering in the late 1950s, during Mr. Schickele's Juilliard years.

Needing to flesh out the program of a student concert, Mr. Schickele recalled a work that he, his brother and a friend had written as teenagers in the early 1950s: “The Sanka Cantata,” a parody of Bach père’s “Coffee Cantata,” which they ascribed to a Bach black sheep they called P.D.Q. (in common parlance, short for pretty damn quick).

Reviving P.D.Q., Mr. Schickele supplemented the Juilliard program with a new composition, for which a classmate had suggested the sublime title “Concerto for Horn and Hardart.”

(For those unfortunates born too late, or reared too far from the East Coast, to have reveled in its splendors, Horn & Hardart, a fixture in New York and Philadelphia throughout most of the 20th century, ran the first Automats, gleaming temples of low-priced gastronomy behind whose rows of coin-operated little doors beckoned worlds of macaroni and cheese, baked beans, blueberry pie and much else.)

P.D.Q. Bach concerts soon became annual staples at Juilliard and at the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado, where Mr. Schickele studied during the summer.

After earning his master’s, he spent a year on a Ford Foundation grant as a composer in residence for the Los Angeles public school system and taught briefly at Swarthmore before joining the faculty of Juilliard’s extension division in 1961.

But by the mid-1960s, Mr. Schickele, as resolute a populist as ever in his own compositions, had begun to bridle at the entrenched musical snobberies that he felt defined Juilliard in those years. Perhaps P.D.Q., he thought, could commute his sentence.



Mr. Schickele during a concert of the New York Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in 2006. Though he was best known for his madcap parodies, he was also a serious musician and composer. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

## Grammys Roll In

On the strength of tape recordings of the Aspen and Juilliard concerts, Mr. Schickele obtained a contract with Vanguard Records. He left Juilliard.

The first P.D.Q. Bach album, “Peter Schickele Presents an Evening With P.D.Q. Bach (1807-1742)?” a live recording of the inaugural Town Hall concert, was released in 1965.

Though Mr. Schickele lost money on the early concerts, by the end of the 1980s he was spending six months a year taking P.D.Q. on tour — an enterprise that handily subsidized his serious composing during the remaining six.

His other P.D.Q. Bach recordings include four Grammy winners for best comedy album: “1712 Overture and Other Musical Assaults,” “Oedipus Tex and Other Choral Calamities,” “WTWP Classical Talky-Talk Radio” and “Music for an Awful Lot of Winds and Percussion.”

He earned his fifth Grammy, for best classical crossover album, for “Hornsmoke,” which includes his serious compositions “Horse Opera for Brass Quintet,” Piano Concerto No. 2 and other pieces.

Mr. Schickele’s classical recordings also include Quartet No. 1, “American Dreams,” by the Audubon Quartet; “Schickele on a Lark,” by the Lark Quartet; and “The American Chamber Ensemble Plays Peter Schickele.”

He wrote the score for the 1972 science-fiction film “Silent Running,” starring Bruce Dern. With Robert Dennis and Stanley Walden, he also contributed songs to the Broadway revue “Oh! Calcutta!”

Mr. Schickele and his wife, who survives him, split their time between homes on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and in Bearsville. In addition to her and their daughter, Karla, he is survived by a son, Matthew, and two grandsons.

In the early 1990s, Mr. Schickele, weary of the road and also, ever so slightly, of P.D.Q. Bach, took a long sabbatical, focusing on his new radio show, “Schickele Mix.” Syndicated nationally for some 15 years, it featured him in serious discussions of music, combined with the playing of works by composers as diverse as Chopin, Gershwin and Philip Glass.

In the 21st century, with the radio show having run its course, Mr. Schickele revived P.D.Q. In 2015, he held a gala 50th-anniversary concert in Town Hall.

Shortly before that performance, Mr. Schickele, in an interview with The Times, marveled, somewhat stunned, at P.D.Q.’s staying power.

“Years ago I used to watch Victor Borge, still concertizing in his 80s,” he said. “And it never occurred to me that I would do the same. I’m amazed that P.D.Q. has gone on for 50 years.”

He added, voicing a sentiment that could apply equally to his audiences and to himself, “It just goes to show, some people never learn.”

Alex Traub contributed reporting.

**Margalit Fox** is a former senior writer on the obituaries desk at The Times. She was previously an editor at the Book Review. She has written the send-offs of some of the best-known cultural figures of our era, including Betty Friedan, Maya Angelou and Seamus Heaney. [More about Margalit Fox](#)