



Policy Forum 07-092: Inspector O Faces the Music



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By James Church

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I. Introduction

James Church (a pseudonym) is the author of the detective novels, [Hidden Moon](#) and [A Corpse in the Koryo](#). In this essay, Church meets Inspector O, the primary fictional character in his books, and discusses the anticipated New York Philharmonic concert in Pyongyang in February.

"[Hidden Moon: An Inspector O Novel](#)" is the second Novel by James Church, published by Thomas Dunne Books.

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II. Article by James Church

- "Inspector O Faces the Music"
By James Church

I think," he said morosely, "I may have to buy a tuxedo. It will have to be fitted, which will cost me plenty."

Inspector O sat beside me on a bench that had a fine view of the lake. As sometimes happens, we had found ourselves in the same place at the same time, and I had invited him to lunch. We walked a bit afterwards, but I could tell he was edgy about something. He always thinks better sitting down, which is why I was glad when we came upon the bench. Over the oysters he'd mentioned he wanted to talk where we could be unobserved, but somehow it hadn't occurred to me that tailoring would be the first issue out of the box.

"Don't tell me you're getting married at your age?" An idle question among old friends.

"That crazy I'm not." He shifted uncomfortably. "Do you realize this is a metal bench? Who would make a metal bench? I can't believe it. They haven't run out of wood around here, have they?"

"Inspector, you seem terribly out of sorts. What's on your mind?"

"Don't pretend you haven't heard. The New York Philharmonic is coming to Pyongyang in February. I'll pull security detail; I can feel it in my bones. That means escorting around a gaggle of flute players."

'The term is 'flautist.' And what are you worried about? Musicians are a lot of laughs. Besides, the orchestra is world renown. Its trip is part of the civilized world's good faith effort to rescue you and your countrymen from the dark side."

He didn't flinch. In fact, he pretended not to have heard. "Maybe I can ask to be put in charge of the cellists." He gazed thoughtfully out at the limpid water. "There was a good line about cellists in a Bergman movie."

"YOU saw an Ingmar Bergman film? I don't believe it."

"Not in Pyongyang. I was in Helsinki on a bag run. The flights were grounded so I went into town and found a movie theatre. They don't like Swedes in Finland, but for some reason they were showing a Bergman film."

"You spelled that in a European way -- theatre instead of theater."

"Sure, and I take milk in my tea instead of cream. Is that a problem?"

Edgy. He was definitely edgy. I figured a change of subject might help the atmosphere. "Things are looking up, are they not? You just got a letter from the President of the United States of America, George W. Bush; Ambassador Hill has been in Pyongyang again; and regular train service has started between the two Koreas. And now the New York Philharmonic! You should be grinning like a saber toothed cat."

"It's not that. Things are going fine for now, but the waters are about to get choppy again. First we'll have to put up with more and more condescension. It sets teeth on edge in the capital, let me tell you. The way some of the Western news reports are written, you'd think we never received a visit by a symphony orchestra before, or that no one had ever heard of Strauss. I've sat through plenty of Russian orchestra performances. And not just Russians. The KBS orchestra was in Pyongyang not so long ago. I should know." A funny look passed over his face.

"Flautists?"

"You don't know the half of it."

"So, you like classical music, I gather."

"In December 2006, we marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of - don't bother guessing because you won't get it right even if you try - Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Yes, we listen to Mozart, not to mention Rossini, Strauss, Bartok, Tchaikovsky, and Shostakovich. If I have to sit through Shostakovich's symphony No. 7 one more time, I may pay postage."

"The term is 'go postal.'"

"Did I mention Verdi? Sure, classical music is all right. I prefer something with a little more juice, though. Do you know Ice Cube?"

This was going somewhere. O never asks a question like that idly. "Not personally, no."

"I need one of his tapes to put on my MP3 player. In my spare time, I'm trying to make a rap for 'Rich Harvest Comes to the Chongsan Plain.'"

I withdrew the rapier from my side. "Alright, I get the point. You're hep."

"Wow, dad, old-speak." He patted my shoulder. "You remind me of my grandfather in some ways."

"Charming fellow, your grandfather. Incidentally, where are you planning to get a tuxedo?" This was a feeble counterthrust of my part; he parried it without much strain.

"Are you kidding? I can get whatever I need in the markets nowadays. The ruffled cummerbund turns out to be a small problem, but I think I'm closing in on one in Najin."

"Tell me, you don't think I'm condescending, do you?"

He paused a beat longer than it should normally take to compose an answer to such a simple, slam-dunk question.

"Did you read the New York Times the other day?" he asked finally. "At a press conference announcing the Philharmonic's trip, one of your reporters asked my ambassador whether Mozart or Kim Jong Il was the better artist, or some damned thing. A few years ago, I was standing next to one of your journalists in Pyongyang when he asked a little girl whether she thought Jesus Christ or Kim Il Song was greater. Is there some sick pleasure your media get out of that sort of question?"

When O falls into this sort of mood, it helps to change the subject. "What do you think about the nuclear problem?" I asked.

"What about it?"

"Solution on the horizon, denuclearization, opening to the outside, joining the civilized community of nations - that sort of thing."

"I think you may just have broken a record for the most condescending thoughts in a single sentence."

"Why? You signed onto all of the documents, don't forget."

"Are we talking near horizon or far horizon? Many things are possible in the fullness of time."

"You sound more and more like a fortune cookie. Must be all that Chinese investment."

He refused to be baited. "Always in the hurry, always with deadlines. I'd hope your side would be satisfied with the fact that things are going in the right direction. But no, it's all or nothing. Well, you know what that means."

"This is the best chance you'll get; passing it up while a conservative Republican is in office will be a mistake."

"How many times have we heard that? 'You better deal with Brezhnev' some Soviets used to tell me. 'You never know what will come next.' If I had a cigarette for every time someone told us we'd better move now and not wait, my name would be Marlboro. It's now or never, they say. But you know what? We're still here. Some of them have disappeared, but here we are."

"Not in the best situation, you should pardon me for saying so."

"Best situation? And who is? The people of Iraq? Don't tell me, sometimes you have to break an egg to make an omelette."

I didn't say anything. I don't actually like omelettes.

O looked at his watch. "Speaking of best chances, what if I told you this is your best chance and you'd better take it. What if I said you don't know what might be around the corner?"

"You're not saying what I think you're saying, are you?"

"I never say what you think I'm saying. That's part of the problem. Just don't be so sure you have the upper hand all the time." He smiled. "No offence. Well, I've got to get moving. My plane leaves in a couple of hours. You staying around here?"

"I thought I'd take a train to Zurich. Geneva is pretty dull this time of year."

"Trust me, it's dull anytime of year. Take it easy." He stood up, and walked down the path toward the city.

"Be good," I called out.

He turned, glad to be ending on a familiar note. "And if you can't be good," he called back, "be careful." The path disappeared around a big horse chestnut tree, and I couldn't see him anymore.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the

network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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