



Can a concert band enthrall patrons at a beer hall? Should they? BRENT KELMAN

TRIPPING

And the band played on....

Sometimes things don't go as planned – and those moments often make for the best stories. Tripping columns offer readers a chance to share their wild adventures.

MARK KEARNEY BERLIN

I'm sitting in the Hofbrauhaus in Berlin and trying not to laugh.

And that's good because I have a clarinet mouthpiece between my lips as I warm up for a concert that's beginning in minutes. Sitting here with fellow members of the New Horizons Band from London, Ont., I can't help thinking – is this beer hall really the right venue for a 50-person concert band? We're not even wearing lederhosen. We don't play polkas and oompah-pah but a repertoire of jazz and pop tunes. Will *Mack the Knife* work here?

The stage for the haus band might hold five players. We're so big we've cleared out tables near the stage just to have room to set up. And the glances we get from customers already a beer or three into their visit seem to say, "What are you guys doing here?"

Good question. We're a community band from Western University's Faculty of Music. Some of us, like me, started as beginners; others played in high school and years later have come back to relive their band glory days. We play at about a senior high-school level on our best days, but that hasn't stopped us from touring Europe.

This gig at the Hofbrau is the latest in what is our fifth trip to Europe. We once played in Paris's Luxembourg Gardens in a pavilion that gave most band members shelter from the elements but not the audience. A storm

rolled in but to our surprise, the audience put up umbrellas and stayed. They applauded enthusiastically and one man, likely wine-fuelled, shouted, "Encore, encore." It felt good, even though one band member immediately leaned over and said, "don't forget, the French like Jerry Lewis."

Another time we played in the shadow of the Vimy Memorial in France, where the "crowd" consisted of a few curious tourists who were outnumbered by the several sheep grazing nearby. The after-parties are fun, too. Once in Florence several of us worked a conga line throughout a rooftop restaurant much to the other patrons', umm, delight.

But many of us wonder if the Hofbrau is the right venue for us; will anybody actually be listening? It seems like such a preposterous place to play. We do best in outdoor band shells and squares where locals and tourists listen at their leisure. But here in Hofbrau, if they're staying for beer they get us as a bonus.

So we play amid loud bar chatter and clanking beer steins, and get some polite applause throughout the 45-minute set – but I'd say the bar talk won.

We drown our pride in big glasses of beer and umpteen meats and sausage. At least, we didn't embarrass ourselves by playing the kind of hokey hits now being churned out by the haus band – sing-along tunes from ABBA and John Denver. We cheer ourselves up with another conga line, this time with a group of Brazilians.

But after a few more steins – this is Germany after all – the songs seem less cheesy. Hey, you have to respect fellow musicians, right? All of us join in on *Country Roads* at the top of our lungs.