

The Singing Toads of St Pantaleon - Peter Mayle

Of all the bizarre events organized to celebrate the mass decapitation of the French aristocracy 200 years ago, one of the most bizarre has so far gone unreported.

I first heard about it towards the end of winter. Two men in the café opposite the *boulangerie* at Lumieres were discussing a question that had never occurred to me: could toads sing?

The larger of the two men clearly didn't think so.

'If toads can sing,' he said, 'then I'm the President of France.' He took a deep pull from his glass of red wine. 'Eh, madame,' he bellowed at the woman behind the bar, 'what do you think?'

Madame looked up from sweeping the floor and rested her hands on the broom handle while she gave the matter her attention.

'It is evident that you're not the President of France,' she said. 'But as for toads....' She shrugged. 'I know nothing of toads. It's possible.'

The smaller man leaned to back in his chair as if a point had just been proved.

'You see? Anything is possible. My brother-in-law told me there is a man in St Pantaleon with many toads. He is training them for the Bicentenaire.'

'*Ah bon?*' Said the big man. 'And what will they do? Wave flags? Dance?'

'They will sing.' The smaller man finished his wine and pushed back his chair. 'by the 14th of July, I am assured that they will be able to perform the Marseillaise.'

The two of them left, still arguing, and I tried to imagine how one could teach creatures with a limited vocal range to reproduce the stirring strains which make every patriotic Frenchman tingle with pride. Maybe it could be done. But how were toads trained, and what kind of man would devote his time to such a challenge? I was fascinated.

Before trying to find the man in St Pantaleon, I decided to get a second opinion. My neighbour Massot would know about toads. He knew, so he frequently told me, everything there was to know about nature, the weather and any living creature that walked or flew or crawled across Provence. I walked along the track at the edge of the forest to the clammy little hollow where Massot's house was huddled into the side of a steep bank. His three dogs hurled themselves towards me until their chains jerked them up on their hind legs. I stayed out of range and whistled. There was the sound of something falling to the floor and a curse, and Massot appeared at the door with dripping orange-coloured hands.

He came up the drive and kicked his dogs into silence, and gave me his elbow to shake. He had been decorating, he said. Did I not think the orange was very gay?

After admiring his artistic judgement, I asked him what he could tell me about toads. He plucked at his moustache, turning half of it orange before remembering the paint of his fingers.

'*Merde.*' He rubbed his moustache with a rag, spreading paint over his already garish complexion. He looked pensive, and then shook his head.

'I have never eaten toads,' he said. 'Frogs, yes. But toads, never. Doubtless there is an English recipe. No?'

I decided not to attempt describing toad in the hole. 'I don't want to eat them. I want to know if they can sing.'

Massot peered at me for a moment, trying to make up his mind whether I was serious. 'Dogs can sing,' he said. 'You just kick them and then....' He lifted his head and howled. 'Toads might sing. Who knows? It is all a question of training with animals.'

I told Massot what I had overheard in the café. Did he, by any chance, know the man who trained toads?

'*Non.*' St Pantaleon, although only a few kilometres away, was on the other side of the main N100 road and was therefore regarded as foreign territory.

Massot remembered his painting, proffered his elbow once again, and went back to his orange walls. On the way home, I came to the conclusion that I would have to go to St Pantaleon and continue my researches there.

St Pantaleon is not large, even by village standards. There might be 100 inhabitants, there is an *auberge*, and there is a tiny twelfth-century church. An old woman was sweeping her doorstep. I asked her if she could direct me to the house of the gentleman with the singing toads. She rolled her eyes and disappeared into the house, slamming the door behind her. As I walked on, I could see the curtain twitch at her window. At lunchtime she would tell her husband about a mad foreigner roaming the streets.

Just before the bend in the road a man was crouched over his Mobylette, poking it with a screwdriver. I asked him.

'*Beh oui,*' he said. 'It is Monsieur Salques. They say he is an *amateur* of toads, but I have never met him. He lives outside the village.'

I followed his directions until I came to a small stone house set back from the road. Monsieur Salques opened the door as I was walking up the drive and watched me. He radiated neatness, from his precisely parted black hair down to his noticeably clean, small shoes. His trousers had sharp creases and he wore a tie. I could hear the sound of flute music coming from inside the house.

'At last,' he said. 'The telephone has been *en panne* for three days. It is a disgrace.' He pecked his head towards me. 'Where are your tools?'

I explained that I hadn't come to repair his phone, but to learn about his interesting work with toads. He preened, smoothing his already smooth tie with a neat white hand.

'You're English. I can tell. How pleasing to hear that news of my little celebration has reached England.'

I didn't like to tell him that it had been the cause of considerable disbelief as close as Lumieres, and since he was now in a good humour I asked if I could perhaps visit the choir.

He made little clucking noises, and wagged a finger under my nose. 'It is clear you know nothing about toads. They do not become active until spring. But if you wish, I will show you where they are.'

I followed him through the garden until we came to a beehive-shaped building made from dry, flat stones. Salques opened the door and shone a torch into the interior. Against the walls were banks of sandy soil, sloping down to an inflatable plastic paddling pool in the middle. Hanging from the ceiling above the pool was a microphone, but there was no sign of any of the *artistes*.

'They are asleep in the sand,' said Salques, gesturing with his torch. 'Here' - he shone the torch along the bank at the foot of the left wall - 'I have the species *Bufo viridis*. The sound it makes resembles a canary.' He puckered up his mouth and trilled for me. 'And over here' - the torch swept across to the opposite bank of soil - 'the *Bufo calamita*. It has a vocal sac capable of enormous expansion, and the call is very, very loud.' He sank his chin into his chest and croaked. 'You see? There is a great contrast between the two sounds.'

Monsieur Salques then explained how he was going to produce music from what seemed to me to be unpromising material. In the spring, when a *bufo's* fancy lightly turns to thoughts of mating, the inhabitants of the sandy banks were going to emerge and frolic in the paddling pool, singing their songs of love. Every birdlike squeak and manly croak would be passed via the microphone to a tape recorder in Monsieur Salques' study. From there, it would be edited, re-mixed and generally transformed through the magic of electronics until it became recognizable as the Marseillaise.

And that was only the beginning. With 1992 soon to be upon us, Monsieur Salques was composing a completely original opus - a national anthem for the countries of the Common Market. Did I not find that an exciting concept?

Far from being excited, my reaction was deep disappointment. I had been hoping for live performances, massed bands of toads with their enormous vocal sacs swelling in unison. But electronically processed croaking? It was eccentric, certainly, but it lacked the fine untrammelled lunacy of the living toad choir. As for the Common Market anthem, I had serious doubts. If the bureaucrats in Brussels could take years to reach agreement on simple matters like the colour of a passport and the acceptable bacteria count in yoghurt, what hope was there of consensus on a tune, let alone a tune sung by toads? What would Mrs Thatcher say?

In fact, I knew what Mrs Thatcher would say - 'They must be *British* toads' - but I didn't want to mingle politics with art, and so I just asked the obvious question.

Why use toads?

Monsieur Salques looked at me as though I was being deliberately obtuse. 'Because,' he said, 'it has never been done.'

Of course.

During the months of spring and early summer, I often thought of going back to see how Monsieur Salques and his toads were getting on, but I decided to wait until July,

when the *concerto bufo* would have been recorded. With luck, I might also hear the anthem of the Common Market.

But when I arrived at the house, there was no Monsieur Salques. A woman with a face like a walnut opened the door.

Was Monsieur at home?

Non. He has departed for Paris. After a pause, she added: for the celebrations of the Bicentenaire.

Then he will have taken his music?

That I cannot say. I am the housekeeper.

I didn't want to waste the trip entirely, so I asked if I could see the toads.

Non. They are tired. Monsieur Salques has said they must not be disturbed.

Thank you, Madame.

De Rien, Monsieur.

In the days leading up to July 14th, the papers filled with news of the preparations in Paris - the floats, the fireworks, the visiting heads of state, Catherine Deneuve's wardrobe - but nowhere could I find any mention, even in the culture sections, of the singing toads. Bastille Day came and went without a single croak. I knew he should have done it live.