



Bridge is music and you're tone-deaf!
 by
Norberto Bocchi

I have to admit that my first steps in the bridge world were not particularly glorious, but even then were quite profitable. In fact at age thirteen I acted as caddy at the bridge club where my father played, collecting the boards and taking them to the tables, for the princely sum of four thousand lira (about two euros today). Between one delivery and the next I would cast a glance and overhear snippets of conversations ... but in those days bridge was a bit of a mystery to me. However, with cards in general I had already struck up a friendship and after school I would amuse myself by ripping off my friends in games of all kinds played in the bars in my neighbourhood.

My weekly income was then further supplemented by a marketing operation which seemed very smart to me and involved my sister, Mabel, a famous basketball player, although she remained completely unaware of my actions: every morning I got her to sign some autographs which I would then sell to my schoolmates or swap for break-time snacks...in short in those days I was a real businessman rather than a bridgeplayer, a quality which has diminished considerably over the years.

Leaving behind the bars and snacks, I was then promoted to kibitzer in the club where I'd worked as caddy, and after a long period during which I never even held any cards, I finally threw myself into playing rubber bridge and then proper tournaments. Right from the start it was clear that I had quite a talent for bridge and so when I was 18/19 I decided to make a change in my life, making the following choices in this order:

- a) play with a professional
- b) leave school...I'd had more than enough!
- c) hang up my basketball shoes...I'd been playing in the premier league



In fact I'd clearly realized that it was far better to enjoy myself more and sweat less...it was unfortunate then that once thrown into this new world, about which I knew very little from the inside, I found myself being brought up by the most difficult, demanding, cantankerous, BRILLIANT, partner to be found in Italy: Arturo Franco. And here are two anecdotes about this experience.

After Arturo had given me an extremely messy (or so it seemed to me then) system to study, He summoned me for a training session to check if I'd been diligent.

Right at the first hand, after a bidding full of

relays?, it was up to my teacher to have the last word on the final contract. The cards were as follows:

	ME	
♠	K Q x	
♥	A Q xx	
♦	K xx	
♣	A xx	
		
♠	A 10 9 8 x	
♥	K J	
♦	A Q xx	
♣	K Q xx	
	ARTURO	

He came close to me and said very calmly: "You see, Norberto, the whole world, having the information I have, would bid 7♠, but I would go further and bid 7NT and I'll explain why. If the spades are split 4-1, I definitely go down, but if the player with the four spades also has four diamonds then I can squeeze him and make my 7NT".

What was incredible was that he said all this having only seen his own cards. I don't think I've ever felt so disheartened: I felt like getting up and leaving. I didn't, but at that precise moment I realised that if I wanted to become a real bridgeplayer, I still had a long way to go.

The second episode took place during the Italian Team Championship. We found ourselves at the table with two gurus, Belladonna and Garozzo, while behind, beside, around us, in fact everywhere, were at least three hundred avid spectators. I remember that I was as nervous as a child before his first Christmas concert. Thanks to some divine intervention, given the circumstances, I played the right cards up till the 19th deal. The spectators were right behind us as the leaders. Despite the good score and the

euphoric atmosphere, I noticed however that hand after hand and for no apparent reason Arturo was getting more and more down. Then at last (for him!), during the 20th hand when by this point I was extremely stressed, I let the opponents make an insignificant overtrick. What on earth had I done!

He insulted me in the most imaginative ways including: "Bridge is music and you are definitely tone-deaf...you can't seriously think of being a professional if you make such terrible blunders." He went on ranting and raving for at least five minutes in front of the dumbfounded opponents and the throng, so much so that it seemed like being on "Candid Camera."

The year passed and the partners changed: from Mosca to Belladonna, from Cedolin to Ferraro and Versace, ending up with Giorgino Duboin, my partner for the past twelve years.

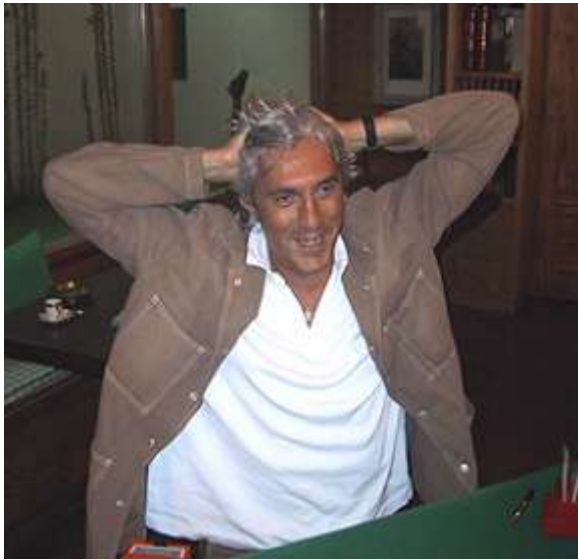
But let's take a step back in time to 1987 when I was returning by plane from China, where I'd been playing for ten days with Guido Ferraro.

Not content with this and being real bridge addicts, we took advantage of a stopover in Paris to participate in the Cino Del Duca tournament which happened to start that very day.

During the very last board of the tournament, after a rather flat performance, we found ourselves at the table with a French couple, probably lovers rather than husband and wife...and I'm sure that from what follows you'll agree with me. The auction goes like this:

Norberto	Him	Guido	Her
2♥	Pass	3♥	3NT
All Pass			

2♥ = preemptive



In one of the first tournaments we played with this new system we bid in this way:

Norberto	Giorgino
1♣ (could be strong)	1♥ (=4 or more ♠)
2♣ (GF or other hands)	2♦ (relay)
4♣ (cue bid + spades fit)	4♠ (please stop)
5♣ (odd number of aces + first round club cue)	5♥ (doubleton or queen of hearts)
6♣ (grand slam try but I need some help in clubs)	7♠

I led the Queen of hearts and then to my great surprise I saw Ferraro grinning like a Cheshire cat. After having quickly cashed the King and Ace of hearts, Guido exited with his last heart. To cut a long story short: my remaining four hearts were all good. In the meantime, while we calmly took all there was to take, from the third trick onwards, i.e. eleven times, the Frenchman, who was aware that his partner never had a heart stopper, started asking her in a very friendly and polite manner: "No more hearts, dear?" After each and every trick the lady, increasingly more ashamed and almost under the table, replied in a feeble and equally polite voice: "No, dear."

After every "no," he diligently and carefully ripped his card into four identical pieces.

Guido and I were absolutely astonished and about to burst into hysterics. Finally he got up from the table with a little bow, but with an expression like Jack Nicholson in "The Shining" and left us saying": Cette jeux est magnifique!" (this game is magnificent!).

A few years later my partnership with Giorgino Duboin began, and as you can imagine over these years we've seen it all and I could go on forever. But perhaps one of the funniest occurred when after having played Blue Club for some time we switched to Natural, even if it wasn't very natural with the numerous gadgets we added.

Both in a cold sweat—me because five times I'd bid clubs I didn't have and I was terrified that Giorgio would pass; him because he was respecting all the rules but knowing how anarchic I am he feared that I had completely forgotten the system. Finally his trust in me was rewarded as the contract was made, but be sure that Giorgino's lifetime was most certainly shortened by at least three years by that hellish club bidding.

Dulcis in fundo my captain, sponsor and friend, Maria Teresa Lavazza, who has put up with me for 21 years. Also with her there are a few stories to tell, including one which happened recently in Viareggio, where Maria Teresa played together with Ferraro.

After a rather difficult auction, our teammates reached a 4♠ contract. After the lead, Maria Teresa laid down her cards as dummy and Guido, with his 'notorious kindness' said to her: "Thank you, little one." How had he dared. Maria Teresa, interpreting "little one" as a reference to her, got annoyed and replied angrily: "That's what you'd say to your dog."

Obviously Ferraro meant a small heart from dummy.

Enough said. I'll sign off with just one wish: that Menton will be great fun for us all.