Sounds Like Quality to Me

While enjoying the view of the bay behind the Tampa Convention Center during the Systems and Software Technology Conference (SSTC) last year, I heard a series of deep melodic tones coming from someplace off to the right. Wondering if we shared the center with a musically inclined organization, I followed them to Platt Street where I found the "music" was created by cars passing over the grate of a bridge. Speed determined the pitch and duration of tone while the combination of notes resulted from the spacing of vehicles. The effect was as if someone were plucking cords on an enormous bass viol[1].

When I received my July edition of CROSSTALK, I was intrigued by Gary Petersen's BACKTALK [1] article based on Gene Weingarten's *Washington Post* article, "Pearls Before Breakfast." These articles describe an experiment in which only two people out of a thousand paid any significant attention to Joshua Bell, one of the nation's best classical musicians, playing his $3 million Stradivarius at the L'Enfant Plaza Metrorail Station in Washington, D.C.

Considering why I could hear music from automobile tires when other people failed to recognize a world-class performance in front of them led me to speculate why I can also see a recipe for disaster in activities that others might consider "cost effective."

Prior to the SSTC, I attended my 35th alumni reunion, including participation in the 100th anniversary of the Miami University Men's Glee Club. So I've developed a pretty good "ear" through singing over the years. Having spent nearly as much time witnessing the results of less enlightened software development practices, I'm also confident that I can recognize what is likely to work and what will not, even without the help of mathematical tools. As Dr. David Cook, another contributor to this column, phrased it, "When you work in quality, you see the world a little differently.[2]"

As for the other 998 people on the Metrorail, I can think of three points that might explain their difference in seeing:

- Experience indicates that great musicians are only heard in concert halls after paying big bucks for tickets. Thus, if somebody is playing in public, he or she must not be world class. Hmm, where have I heard that before? "Of course he doesn't know what he's talking about, he's from quality assurance. If he were really any good, he'd be a developer!" On the other hand, if you are a consultant, your advice is automatically presumed to be at least as valuable as your fee[3].
- Most people entering a Metrorail station are in a hurry to get someplace. I'd be a lot less worried about my retirement if I had a dollar for every time I've heard some variation of "I don't have time to (learn-prepare-implement) a (plan-system-methodology). This (anything) is needed (indication of immediacy)!"
- Some people simply don't appreciate music. This is unfortunate if it is due to a hearing problem, but on the other hand many people just don't care. A manager who isn't interested in quality development processes may attempt to implement a software application by doing nothing more than pointing at a developer and saying, "do it." Occasionally 'it' gets 'done' and these successes are hard to

argue with. Just remember that even with odds of 146,107,962-to-1, somebody does periodically win the Powerball lottery[4].

A Point-of-View Gun[5] is the obvious solution to all of this. Unfortunately, in addition to it being entirely fictional, the Code of Federal Regulations "Trespass to Land Owned and Leased by the U.S. Government" (10 CFR 860) prohibits the use of dangerous weapons on government property. Maybe a new television series would help people see things differently? You know, one in which an invisible violin player sneaks into different government software projects each week and then saves the day, the project, the budget, a pretty girl, and the world in general by playing haunting etudes at appropriately dramatic moments. Just remember to put me down for a recurring role as the equally invisible quality assurance specialist.

—Robert K. Smith
rkensmith@earthlink.net

Reference
1. Petersen, Gary A. "Net-Centric Virtuosity." CROSSTALK July, 2008.

Notes
1. Yes, a bass viol. A viol is a bowed string instrument. Similar to the cello, the viol, or viola da gamba, is played between the legs (hence the name "viola da gamba" or, literally, "leg-viol.") While it is not a direct ancestor of the violin, there is some kinship between the two instrument families. For more information, see <www.vdgusa.org> and <www.wikipedia.org/wiki/bass_viol>.
2. Idle conversation with Dr. Cook in a midwestern airport a couple of years ago.
3. Anyone interested in paying me a lot of money for advice is welcome to contact me!
4. As a visual reference, 146,107,962 grains of rice piled in four-by-three foot layers of 50 pound bags would be a stack more than 12 feet high.
5. Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – the movie, by Douglas Adams.

Can You BACKTALK?

Here is your chance to make your point, even if it is a bit tongue-in-cheek, without your boss censoring your writing. In addition to accepting articles that relate to software engineering for publication in CROSSTALK, we also accept articles for the BACKTALK column. BACKTALK articles should provide a concise, clever, humorous, and insightful perspective on the software engineering profession or industry or a portion of it. Your BACKTALK article should be entertaining and clever or original in concept, design, or delivery. The length should not exceed 750 words.

For a complete author's packet detailing how to submit your BACKTALK article, visit our Web site at <www.stsc.hill.af.mil>.