

The Bremen Town Musicians (2005)

(Die Bremer Musikanten)

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For many years a donkey served his master well, carrying corn sacks to the mill. But the time came when his strength began to fail, he was becoming unfit for work, and his owner was starting to wonder whether he could keep the animal if he could no longer earn his keep. The donkey sensed what was going on and, feeling that things were not going to improve, decided it was time to leave.

The journey begins

He set out one day on the road to Bremen: 'Surely I can become a town musician there,' he thought. After some miles, he came across a dog lying in the road, panting and looking exhausted, as though he had run some distance.

'Why are you panting so hard, old chap?' asked the donkey.

'Well,' replied the hound, 'I'm old and growing weaker each day; I can't go hunting any more, and my master was going to have me put down. So I ran away — but now how am I going to get enough to eat?'

'I tell you what,' said the donkey. 'I'm on my way to Bremen, and I'm going to be a town musician there. You could come with me and be a musician too. I plan to play the lute, so perhaps you could become a kettle drummer.'

Enter the cat

The dog thought that was a good idea, and so the new friends set off together. Further on, they came upon an old cat, sitting on the path with a very long face.

'Now then, my friend, what's happened to you?' asked the donkey. 'You don't look too happy.'

'How can I be happy when my life's in danger?' replied the cat. 'Now that I'm getting old, my teeth are wearing down and I'd rather sit by the fire and dream than go chasing after mice, my mistress wanted to drown me — so I left. But what am I to do, and where am I to go?'

'Come with us to Bremen; we're going to be town musicians. You must understand the music of the night pretty well, so come and join us.'

Thinking this to be good advice, the cat threw in his lot with the donkey and the dog, and the trio continued on their way. They came to a farmyard, where the farm rooster was perched on the gate, crowing for all he was worth.

The old rooster

'You have a pretty piercing voice,' remarked the donkey. 'Why are you crowing so loudly?'

'I've been foretelling fine weather for the day when the lady of the house wants to dry her laundry,' said the bird; 'but on Sunday there are guests coming, and tomorrow I'm due to have my head cut off and I'm to be used for making chicken soup. So I'm crowing as loud as possible while I still can.'

'Ah, red-comb, I think you'd better come with us,' said the donkey. 'We're going to Bremen, and I'm sure that'll be better than waiting to die. You have a good strong voice, and I think you could help us to make some good music in our new jobs as town musicians.'

The rooster agreed that seemed a good plan, and so the animals, now four, went on together. As it was still some way to Bremen though, and it was starting to get dark, when they came to a forest they decided to spend the night there. The donkey and the dog lay down under a big tree, while the cat and the rooster settled down among the branches. The rooster flew up to the top of the tree, as he felt safer there. However, before going to sleep he was looking around and, from his vantage point, thought he saw a light in the distance that might be a house. He called out and told his companions.



The house beckons

'The shelter here isn't very good,' said the donkey, 'so if you're right we should get up and go there.' The dog agreed, thinking that there might be some meaty bones there, which would do him no harm at all. So off they went towards the light, seeing it gradually become larger and brighter. As they approached the house, they saw that inside there seemed to be some thieves, gloating over their haul, eating, drinking and generally having a good time. As the donkey was the biggest of the group of friends, he went up to a window and peered in.

'Well, what can you see, grey horse?' asked the rooster.

'I see a table covered with good things,' replied the donkey. 'Good things to eat and drink, and some thieves sitting there and enjoying themselves.'

'Sounds as though it would suit us pretty well,' said the cat.

So they had a conference to decide how best to drive the thieves away, and eventually thought of a plan. The donkey would plant his forefeet on the window ledge; the dog would jump up on the donkey's back; the cat would climb on top of the dog; and finally the rooster would fly up and perch on the cat's head. Then they would all sing.

The 'music' starts

They took their positions, and at a given signal started to make music together. The donkey brayed, the dog barked for all he was worth, the cat howled and wailed, and the rooster crowed with all his might. It was quite a satisfactory din. The thieves took one look out of the window, saw what they thought was some kind of monster, or ghost, making a fearful noise — and fled for their lives into the forest.



As soon as the men had gone, the four companions went in, took their places at the table and made the most of the feast in front of them. Having eaten their fill, they put out the lights and each found his own sleeping place: the donkey on some straw just outside the back door, the dog on the mat inside the door, the cat by the warm ashes near the hearth, and the rooster perched on a roof beam. They were very tired and soon slept.

Robbers put to flight

But the thieves had not given up yet, and after midnight, when they saw that the lights were out and the house was still, they returned. Their leader said that they ought not to have let themselves be frightened so easily, and told one of them to go to investigate. Finding everything quiet, he went into the kitchen to light a candle. He mistook the eyes of the cat — who was awake, having heard a sound — for live coals, because they were reflecting the embers of the fire: so he held out a match to try to light it.

The cat was not amused and jumped at his face, spitting and scratching; terrified, the man ran to the back door to make his escape — but the dog sprang up and bit him on the leg. He got through the door to be met by the donkey, who gave him a smart kick as he passed. The rooster, awakened by all the commotion, flapped around on the beam, crowing raucously.

What the thieves saw

When the thief finally reached the others, he said, 'There's a terrible witch sitting in the house; she spat on me and scratched me with her long fingernails. There was a man with a knife by the door, and he stabbed me in the leg. In the yard there was a big black monster who beat me with a club; and then up in the roof the judge was sitting, and he cried out, "Bring the rogue here to me!" You can imagine that I got out of there as fast as I could.'

The thieves didn't dare to enter the house again and left for easier pickings. But it suited the four Bremen Musicians so well that they never left, and happily lived out the rest of their lives there.



Note: The large illustrations above are (*left*) a 'maxicard' picturing the animals singing their 'music', ; produced for the first day of issue of the 1982 German stamp (*see above right*); and (*right*) a bronze statue of the Musicians by Gerhard Marcks, situated in the city of Bremen and erected in 1953. The hooves and paws are shiny because touching them is said to make wishes come true. Other stamps are from Azerbaijan, 1997, in celebration of Grimm's fairy tales (strip of 3 and the miniature sheet, *top of this page*); Austria, 1997 (*above left*), winning entry in a children's competition to illustrate *Tales and Legends* for the Europa stamps that year; and Germany, 1982, the stamp from the maxicard, which shows the silhouette of a sculpture by Dora Brandenburg-Polster (*see also Wikipedia*). Also shown (*above centre*) is a German cancellation depicting the Town Musicians and marking the *Hafa* fair in Bremen in 1997.

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