

Podcast: [What If World](#)

Episode: 94: What if pianos could move and talk by themselves and stairs turned into houses?

File Length: 00:19:45

Transcription by Keffy

[Rising harp scales followed by the What If World theme song.]

Lyrics: What if kittens played the glockenspiel? And what if unicorns were real? What if you could fly or travel back in time, we welcome you to What If World. What If World. This is What If World.

[Gentle bell music.]

Mr. Eric: Hey there folks, and welcome back to *What If World*, the show where your questions and ideas inspire off the cuff stories. I'm Mr. Eric, your host, and today we're gonna start off with a question from McKenna.

Makenna: My name is McKenna and I'm nine years old and I really like playing the piano. And my question is what if pianos could move and talk by themselves. Thank you.

Mr. Eric: Ah, I used to play piano but I never got very good at it and I do regret it. I hope you stick with it, Makenna! You're probably already better than me.

And we're going to add one Patreon question from Benjamin. He and his brother David sent in questions. And David, thank you for being a patient big brother.

Benjamin: My favorite thing is rhinoceroses and my name is Benjamin and what do I say again, David?

David: How old are you?

Benjamin: Four and a half. And my what if question, what if stairs turned into houses?

David: What if stairs turned into houses?

Benjamin: Bye! Thank you.

Mr. Eric: All right. Rhinoceros. I don't think I've heard that as a favorite thing before. Very cool. I know there's been a lot of talk lately, so today I want to get right into the story. What if pianos could move and talk by themselves and stairs turned into houses.

[Rising harp scale.]

Mr. Eric: Zizi was a little nervous heading back to school today. You see, all the kids and all the teachers and all the parents said that every year of school got a little bit more challenging than the year before. Good thing Zizi was a lot smarter than the year before. Her best subject last year had been math but this year she was being forced to take music class and she hadn't had any experience with it.

As she walked up to the extra wide oaken doors that led into the Observatorium, she saw a big rhinoceros. Well, maybe not full grown, but still bigger than any human. And he had a bundle of books strapped to his horn.

Zizi: Oh, hi!

Mr. Eric: Said Zizi.

Zizi: Are you new this year? I haven't seen you around.

Benocerous: Yeah, oh, hi. I'm Benocerous.

Zizi: You're a benocerous?

Benocerous: No, I'm not a Benocerous, I'm a rhinoceros named Benocerous. I know that's kind of confusing.

Zizi: You don't sound like a rhinoceros.

Benocerous: Oh, they say when I grow up I'll get a deep, barrelly rhinoceros voice, but right now this is what I got.

Zizi: Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to judge, I just have never heard a rhinoceros talk.

Benocerous: Well, we've really got more of a complex language of grunts and scratches, hoof stamps and such. But I learned to speak Iffish and a few other languages, you know. So I could fit in.

Zizi: Wow! I only speak one language.

Benocerous: Oh. Is that because humans have small brains?

Zizi: No! Hey.

Benocerous: Oh, sorry. I've never really met a human before.

Zizi: Well, I'll have you know that humans have extremely large brains even if our heads aren't rhinoceros sized.

Benoceros: Sorry, sorry. I feel like we've gotten off on the wrong foot a little bit, um.

Zizi: Fresh start? I'm Zizi.

Benoceros: And I'm Benoceros.

Zizi: Nice to meet ya.

Mr. Eric: And the little girl and her new rhinoceros friend walked into the school.

Benoceros: So, where to first?

Zizi: Oh, yeah, well, I'm starting music class today. I'm a little nervous about it.

Benoceros: Hey, well, I can't play music to save my life. Looks like we'll both have to study a little harder than the rest, eh?

Zizi: Yeah.

Mr. Eric: They got to a massive staircase that led up to the second floor where the big kids studied. Deep, wide steps of hewn stone climbed ever higher. They could barely see where the steps finished!

Zizi: Guess we're the big kids now.

Benoceros: I know. I don't feel so big.

Mr. Eric: Said the rhinoceros. Just as they started up the steps, they heard—

[Piano scale.]

They turned to see a grand piano rolling its way towards them.

Zizi: Oh, that piano's going to have a hard time getting up the stairs.

Benoceros: Well, a couple of big kids like us ought to be able to figure it out, eh?

(To piano) Excuse me, would you like to be strapped to my back? Pretty strong, being a rhino and whatnot.

Mr. Eric: The piano played a few keys, sounding thankful enough.

[Piano playing chords.]

So Zizi took the rhinoceros's books and then unfolded the long, long bootstrap and used it to tie the piano upside down to the rhinoceros's back.

Benoceros: Now, I know this may not seem very dignified.

Mr. Eric: Said Benoceros, struggling with the weight of the grand piano as he ascended the stairs.

Benoceros: But we rhino folks seldom let people climb on our backs, so this is sort of an honor for you. Maybe.

Mr. Eric: The piano played a few indignant keys.

[Short stream of frenetic piano.]

But otherwise, stayed very still to keep from tipping.

Zizi: I'm Zizi and this is my friend Benoceros.

Topper: And I'm Topper, the highest form of building block.

Zizi: Oh, I didn't know you could talk.

Topper: She can't talk. I'm the one talking.

Zizi: Huh? Wha—?

Mr. Eric: Zizi looked down to see a little cluster of building blocks. They'd formed together to make sort of like a pincer and were clutched tightly to the tip of Ben's tiny tail.

Zizi: Oh, hi, Topper. Nice to meet you.

Mr. Eric: Said Zizi, as they finally reached the second floor.

Topper: Well, don't just stare at me. Give me some help.

Zizi: Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize—

Topper: Of course you didn't. People think just because I can build different things that I can do anything. Well, it's tough.

Zizi: No, I didn't. I didn't think that. I've just never met a building block before.

Topper: Well, you're in luck. I've heard a lot of building blocks can be pushy and particular.

Zizi: Oh.

Topper: Now, please bring me to the front of the music class and sit me at a 45 degree angle to the left so my good side shows.

Zizi: Oh, okay, Topper. Sure.

Mr. Eric: And Zizi took the little cluster of building blocks and then helped unstrap the grand piano before heading into class.

Benoceros: Boy, carrying a piano up a flight of stairs is... I don't know if I'm going to be able to do that every day.

Mr. Eric: The class was full of big kids and little mice and building blocks and a rhinoceros. Well, it was full of a lot of things, but there was no teacher yet.

Benoceros: Fancy that. Teachers make us climb all those stairs and then don't even show up to class.

Mr. Eric: The music classroom was rather dilapidated. The sheet music was so old it was crumbling on the stands and the stands had worn down so far they were barely off the floor. The chalkboard had so many cracks it looked like a spider web, and all the spider webs were full of pieces of chalk board. As for the musical instruments, it seemed the only one that wasn't falling apart was the new piano in class.

Just then, the grand piano rolled its way to the front and started playing another song.

[Piano plays a soft jazzy tune.]

Zizi: Well, if this year is just going to be listening to music without having a teacher, I think I'm happy to be a big kid.

Mr. Eric: All the class started getting up and dancing to the piano's music. Well, everyone except for Topper and Benoceros.

Benoceros: Uh.

Topper: No, no, don't tell them. I want to see the look on their faces when they realize...

Mr. Eric: And the piano made a grave sound.

[Rising minor scale.]

Zizi: Uh-oh. The piano is the teacher, isn't it?

Benocerous: Uh, yep.

Mr. Eric: And you know that look you make when you know you're in trouble. Well, how could you? No one ever is holding a mirror up to their face when they're in trouble. Well, I promise you, there's a look and two dozen big kids made it at the same time.

Zizi and all the rest took their seats as the piano regarded them with a wooden expression.

Zizi: Okay, okay. Let me look at my schedule. Oooh. Mrs. McKeyna. It doesn't say she's a piano, how was I supposed to know?

Mr. Eric: Zizi looked up to see the piano had wheeled itself right up to her desk.

Zizi: Hi, Mrs. McKeyna. I liked the music you were playing and I'm excited for music class.

Mr. Eric: But the piano just played more music.

[Piano playing agitated staccato.]

Zizi: Oh no, is this actually a foreign language class?

Mr. Eric: Abacus P. Grumbler appeared in a swirl of purple-green smoke.

Abacus: [Splutters] Class, sorry I was not here to introduce our newest teacher, Mrs. McKeyna. Yes, she's a piano, if you didn't notice.

Benocerous: Yeah, we mostly figured that out.

Topper: Some of us sooner rather than later.

Abacus: Class, I just want to apologize for the state of the room, you see, we had to get these stairs installed so the rhinoceros could get up them. And it's not your fault, Benocerous, I don't mean to say that. We just have limited resources.

Benocerous: Yeah, it's all right. I feel a little singled out but yeah, rhinos aren't very good at getting down stairs anyway, so.

Abacus: Oh, well, Mrs. McKeyna is a wonderful teacher and—

[Piano plays.]

What's that?

Oh, you can't take stairs, either. Oh. Never fear, your headmaster will figure this out.

Mr. Eric: And Abacus disappeared in a bright red puff of embarrassed magic. Then Mrs. McKeyna started to play again.

Zizi: Oh, I wish I could understand what she's saying.

Benocerous: Oh, oh, she's asking if anyone can speak piano.

Zizi: What? If you can understand her, then don't you speak piano?

Benocerous: Oh, no, I can only understand it. Can't rightly speak it, what with these big rhino toes.

Topper: Well, I can speak it of course, but I've got to turn myself into a piano to do it and I just don't have the blocks anymore, to be honest.

Zizi: Mrs. McKeyna, they can both understand piano, but I'm sorry. I think I'm in the wrong class. I just wanted to learn music.

Mr. Eric: And the piano slowly rolled its way to Zizi again.

Benocerous: Oh, she says every instrument has its own language but music isn't really a language at all. It's more about understand.

Zizi: But Mrs. McKeyna, I can't understand you.

Mr. Eric: And Mrs. McKeyna slowly rolled back, playing a new song as she wheeled out of the classroom.

Zizi: Oh no, my first day in a new class and I've embarrassed myself and I'm gonna get a bad grade...

Topper: I daresay you're right.

Zizi: Ooooh.

Mr. Eric: And Zizi grabbed up her backpack and ran out of the class.

Benocerous: Now look what you did!

Topper: I was just trying to be agreeable.

Benocerous: As someone who speaks piano, I thought you'd be more understanding.

Topper: Well, should we go check on her.

Benocerous: I already picked you up, you smarmy little building block.

Topper: Oh, thanks.

Mr. Eric: Zizi had never run out of class before, but of course she'd never seen a teacher roll out of one, either! And there was Mrs. McKeyna, her wheeled legs standing right at the edge of the giant stone staircase, Professor Grumbler standing right beside her, fumbling with his wand.

Abacus: Now, this spell will fix these steps, I promise. Just got to remember how it goes...

Mr. Eric: And then the rest of the class started pushing their way out behind Zizi.

Zizi: I don't get it. Is this the lesson? You're just playing music. I don't understand.

Benocerous: Oh, oh. She says, "Just listen and that I shouldn't tell you what she says."

Mr. Eric: And she did listen. She tried, but there was just too much noise around. Abacus's wand kept spurting out wild magic. Benocerous kept stamping his feet, trying to stay quiet. And there was Topper mumbling something in her ear as Mrs. McKeyna played on, her white and black keys staring bravely over the insurmountable staircase.

Zizi: Look at her, standing at those stairs. She knows she can't get down them but she's not afraid.

Mr. Eric: And then the music changed a little and some of the kids pulled out their own instruments and joined in. And she looked at Abacus.

Abacus: Magic please make this job less quitable and turn these steps into something hospitable!

Mr. Eric: He shook his wand and—

The stone steps transformed into a giant stone house.

Abacus: Oh, well, now you'll never have to leave... ugh.

Mr. Eric: And Zizi could feel Abacus's embarrassment and she knew that no matter how old you get, no one likes making mistakes. And then she looked at Benocerous as the music changed and her big, brave, kind, friend felt so nervous and out of place. He was afraid that some kids



might not get past how big he is and what he looked like. But under all that, he was still proud to be a rhinoceros. And finally through all the music, she started to hear Topper's voice again.

- Topper: I think it is hard to understand how other people feel sometimes. And listen, I don't mean to be pretentious, it just—
- Zizi: What's pretentious?
- Topper: Oh, it's a word that only people like me understand, but let me finish my, oh—I'm doing it again.
- Mr. Eric: And as the music stopped, all the noise of the hallway crowded back in on her.
- Abacus: I'm sorry, Mrs. McKeyna. Just give me another chance.
- Benoceros: You know what, don't listen to me. I'm just a rhinoceros, what do I know?a
- Abacus: Oh, looks like we're all stuck up here forever. I'm on top again, but I've never felt lower.
- Mr. Eric: And there, under all the noise and shouting, she heard music again, but Mrs. McKeyna wasn't playing. Her keys weren't moving.
- Zizi: What is that song?
- Abacus: Zizi, music class is on a break right now until we can fix these stairs.
- Benoceros: I don't think I hear anything. Of course, rhinoceros ears are so floppy. It's a wonder I can hear anything.
- Topper: I should have never used the word pretentious. My superior vocabulary has clearly broken her mind.
- Mr. Eric: But Zizi moved past the kids giggling at Abacus and the ones staring at Benoceros, and the ones looking at Topper like they wanted to add him to their building block collection. And she got right up to Mrs. McKeyna.
- Zizi: You hear it, too, don't you? Even though you don't have ears.
- Mr. Eric: And the grand piano rolled away from the big stone house. Zizi put her hand on the cold door and she could feel a song inside.
- Zizi: Abacus, you didn't mess up.

Abacus: I know I messed up. I always do. Hey, what now? Didn't? Surely you meant did did mess up.

Zizi: No, you did not.

Abacus: Oh, oh, oh, you mean I did not not mess up, clearly.

Zizi: Professor Grumbler, would you please just open the door.

Abacus: Oh, very well. It's about time all the children learn what a failure I am.

Mr. Eric: And when Abacus opened up the door to the stone house...

Students: [Gasp.] Wow... Oh, cool!

Zizi: See!

Mr. Eric: Beyond the stone walls stood a set of brand new musical instruments playing themselves. Music stands were scattered across the room in front of brand-new chairs. There was even sheet music that kept turning as the instruments played.

Abacus: How did this happen? My incantation was horrible.

Zizi: You might have said the magic words wrong but I guess the spell understood you anyway.

Abacus: Well, it still won't get a piano down the stairs.

Mr. Eric: Abacus said as Mrs. McKeyna pushed past him and all the other children crowded into the room.

Abacus: Well, I suppose you should at least have your class in this fancy room and then I'll try my magic again.

Mr. Eric: And as soon as Abacus stepped inside with them, the wide stone door swung shut behind him.

Abacus: Oh dear!

Mr. Eric: And suddenly it felt like the whole house was moving!

Topper: I knew this magic would place us all in great peril.

Zizi: No, Topper, it's an elevator!

Benocerous: Oh, we're going down.

Zizi: Professor Grumbler, now we have a way up and down the steps and a new music classroom.

Mr. Eric: The massive stone house finally hit the ground floor and a wide back door cracked itself open.

Abacus: Oh, thank you so much, House, for understanding me.

Mr. Eric: And Abacus left, his head held higher and his hat pointed straighter than ever before.

Zizi: Wow, that was a fun lesson. See ya tomorrow, Mrs. McKeyna.

Mr. Eric: And as Zizi went to leave after Abacus... the stone door shut in front of her.

Benocerous: Uh, we've still got about 45 minutes left of class.

Zizi: Oh, but I finally understand music, so I'm done with class, right?

Mr. Eric: Mrs. McKeyna slowly rolled up to young Zizi one last time and started playing again.

[Piano plays jaunty rag-time music.]

Zizi: What are you saying? Understanding's hard work, and you never get to quit? Oh, well, I guess I could learn a few notes.

Mr. Eric: And Zizi sat on Mrs. McKeyna's piano bench.

[Low, ominous piano chord.]

Zizi: Oh, oh, sorry.

Topper: Oh, find your own instrument, Zizi.

Mr. Eric: Mrs. McKeyna gave him a glare.

Topper: I mean, I'll help you find an instrument that isn't the teacher.

Mr. Eric: And Zizi walked off with Topper and Benocerous to find herself an instrument.

Zizi: I didn't know it was rude to play piano people.

Benocerous: I didn't know magic was real, everyone just accepted that the stairs turned into a house. That's literally impossible. That's not at all—

Mr. Eric: The end.

Benocerous: ... just gonna blow by that, right? All right. Okay..

[Falling harp scale.]

Mr. Eric: All right, McKenna and Benjamin. I hope you enjoyed your story and David, Ben's brother. I know you like Legos, so I threw a building block character in there for you. Hope you liked it.

I'd like to thank Karen Marshall O'Keeffe, my editor and producer, Jason O'Keeffe for our artwork, Craig Martinson for a theme song that I still love every bit as much as the first time I heard it.

And all you kids at home working those big brains to understand the messages behind the things you see and hear, people aren't always good at saying what they mean, and that's where a lot of hurt feelings come from. But if we work hard to understand each other, we can turn hurt feelings into good feelings.

Until we meet again, keep wondering.

[What If World theme song plays.]