

CRESCENDOS AND DIM INNUENDOS

By

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THERE is no telling when a love of language takes hold. But it is worth noting that, once the capacity to love is developed within the individual, words become like the sweethearts of fleshier variety. An old one may be cast off in favor of a new one. The new one may not be quite right after a while, nor the newer one after that; but a return to the first is not ordinarily foreseeable when the string has gotten long enough. If it were to happen, it would be with a new understanding, very likely.

Take the word "fastidious." Long ago I thought, mainly because many others thought so, that fastidious taste was something possessed by aristocrats of spirit and giants of intellect. Possessed, to be sure, but I learned eventually that Miss Fastidious had been possessed by all the wrong possessors. She kept, or was kept by, the wrong company.

Look in the dictionary. You will find that etymologically the word "fastidious" conjures up such sensations as loathing, disgust, disdain, and contempt. And for a working definition of the fully matured adjective "fasti-

dious," we find (1) not easy to please; very critical, and (2) daintily refined, oversensitive; easily disgusted.

So—if fastidious, or fastidious taste, is to be taken as a sweetheart, it should become the partner not of one of us but of that other beauty, "fulsome praise," a doll who emerges with some regularity in the utterances or writings of persons who should know better. I am not now going to deal with that one, except to say that fastidious taste and fulsome praise deserve each other. The fact that I may have had an early liking for either one of them was attributable, as I have suggested, to the contagions of bad usage.

Extrication from such misalliances was aided by an experience with Paul Hindemith, composer, instrumentalist, teacher and philosopher of his art. Yes, and good eater, good storyteller, good caricaturist with pen and ink, and mighty good conductor. It was in that last capacity, or rather in the dual role of composer-conductor, that he came to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the spring of 1963. I was then the general manager of the orchestra.

Each of Hindemith's concert programs was to contain a work of his own. But, because he wished not to feature more than one of his compositions in a single concert, he was able to show us where, among the works of other masters, he was able to find the good life in music. This meant we would hear a Bruckner symphony, and he chose this time the Symphony No. 7.

During that period the Chicago Symphony was involved in a notable series of performances for television, produced by Station WGN-TV, with syndicated distri-

bution in the United States and abroad. The programs for television were made up largely of pieces recently rehearsed and played for the regular subscription audiences in Orchestra Hall. Naturally, Hindemith was scheduled for television concert.

While all this was going on, the Bruckner Society was preparing, so they notified us, to award its medal to Paul Hindemith in recognition of his advocacy of Bruckner's music. What better time to do it than his Chicago engagement. What better way to inform the world than to memorialize the award ceremony during the intermission interview of the telecast.

This would mean, of course, putting the Bruckner symphony on television, a rather weighty challenge to the broadcasting people. But it proved to be not so difficult, conceptually, as one might have imagined. The commercial broadcasters, to their credit, were easily motivated by the suggestion. Indeed, their thinking was so fresh that they shunned the obvious device of filming the time-worn scene of pinning a medal on a celebrity. That kind of traditional ceremony was to be handled, with quiet charm, at a reception in The Cliff Dwellers.

The television directors planned instead to fashion a slow dance of camera around medal, close up, during the interview segment. So I was to interview the guest of honor, the medal was to be treated by a combination of optics and velvet background, and the Bruckner music would do what it had never done before—and might never again do—reveal itself in full proportions on commercially sponsored television.

But there had to be a hitch. The television programs were one hour in length, which meant something less

than a full hour of performing time. What with messages from sponsors, station identification, production credits—indeed, the interview with Hindemith—Bruckner's No. 7 was beginning to look like a tight fit, or worse. It is well known that Bruckner symphonies are never short; some are longer than others.

What the television specialists proposed next could only mock the initial pleasure I had experienced when they had said yes to the Bruckner idea: "Ask the maestro to make a few cuts in the score."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A few cuts—trims—lop some of it off."

I should ask Hindemith to do that to another composer? True, many conductors have edited many scores with snips here and there, but I was not about to put myself on record with such a request to Paul Hindemith, who was no mere conductor. Or, to say it a better way, I was not going to advise him what to do unto others.

But the broadcaster knew how to whittle down a symphony manager. "How many television stations do you know," he asked, "that would be willing to put on Bruckner symphonies at all?" I was falling rapidly and soon made my pact with the devil. Directly I went back to my office to rehearse the little speech I would make to our great guest, as follows:

"Professor Hindemith [*pause*]. I am about to ask you something, with great reluctance and without conviction. Only because our television people suggested it am I doing it. Not that they are bad fellows. On the contrary, in the cynical morass that is commercial television, they are veritable idealists. They want to put your Bruckner

on the television, and to show your Bruckner medal, and have me interview you, and everything.

"Well, not exactly everything [*another pause, and a cough*]. They ask—and here I act only as transmitter, not originator, and I will understand perfectly if you refuse on the grounds that it cuts across your aesthetic grain. . . ." [You will note how I introduced here the word "cuts" just to test for allergy before administering the full dosage.]

"Ye-e-es," he said, not pausing and not coughing.

So I continued. "They say that in a program of one hour total, minus the commercial announcements, et cetera, there is not enough time for the complete Bruckner No. 7, and they suggest you make a few cuts here and there."

Here I not only paused; I died. In these last moments I reviewed the illustrious career of Paul Hindemith in my mind, down to the last detail of our recent lunch.

We had dropped into a good restaurant, during an off hour when there would be no crowds, so that we could eat and have some beer and conversation in relative privacy and quiet. In the doorway he and his wife paused, she tensing herself for something her marriage must have taught her was imminent.

Hindemith pointed to a recessed amplifier in the ceiling and said softly and firmly: "You hear the music coming out of that thing? I will eat here *if* they turn it off. I don't believe in captive audiences, even if it would be my own composition coming out of there."

I got the manager to turn it off, and he made no issue about it what with so few other customers to be offended at that hour.

Hindemith, then, was the man before whom I was destroying myself to ask for a few nice little cuts in Bruckner. Well, you know how it is with romanticized self-destruction. You survive. And soon I was hearing Hindemith's voice.

"A few cuts? Ah-ha! Let me show you how I can do it. It will not hurt a bit. I know just the places in the score, here let me show you." And he pulled out the massive conductor's score, opened certain pages with scarcely any leafing at all, and pointed out bridges he could soon make with his pencil between good connecting points here and there.

Now I must let you down. As it turned out, the clever cuts were not made. There would need to be too many for respectability. To reduce a one-hour symphony into something manageable by this method would have required too much cleverness. Instead, it was decided to offer the broadcaster one or two whole movements, frankly designated as excerpts, and to fill out the program with Brahms's Academic Festival Overture and Hindemith's own Concert Music for Strings and Brass.

What does this experience prove? That Hindemith, a scholar, artist, and craftsman was willing to give it a try, within limits, whereas I would have backed away from the problem the broadcaster put to us. You can see, therefore, that as between Hindemith and the symphony manager, it was the manager who could be relied upon for fastidious taste in the matter.

Hindemith died too young. He passed away the next winter at the age of sixty eight, which is not very old for a conductor. Perhaps he started upon an active conduct-

ing career too late in life to enjoy the longevity such a pursuit so often carries with it.

It has long been my belief, and I have discussed it briefly before, that such octagenarians and septuagenarians as Otto Klemperer and Leopold Stokowski and the late Arturo Toscanini, Fritz Reiner, Sir Thomas Beecham, Bruno Walter, Serge Koussevitzky, and Pierre Monteux could not be active for so many years except for one thing: symphony conductors do not fall so easily into the cardiovascular or gastrointestinal traps as do business executives or some others who perform purely administrative command functions. Or, if they fall, they fight their way out better.

Only recently some surveys have begun to show that the age bracket of thirty to forty has produced numerous fallen heroes because of heart failure. How interesting that the more traditional trouble zone of age sixty or thereabouts has held so few terrors for conductors, whereas others are beginning to succumb at half that age.

I think I know why. General body exercise, on a daily basis, plus abundant opportunity to blow the cork emotionally. Many a myocardial infarction or gastric ulcer has been avoided because of this, I am convinced.

The conductor who perspires through his rehearsal shirt, who exercises his arms and torso about twenty hours per week in rehearsal and concert, who alternately quickens and slackens his pulse and respiration (however involuntarily) through the excitations of music, its preparation and its performance, is not being sedentary in middle age. He is exercising various muscles, including the heart, perhaps even the legs and feet if he shifts posi-

tion often enough or does some of the shallow knee bends of his calling.

Some conductors are determined walkers outside the concert hall, though statistics are inconclusive in this regard. Oh, yes, one more detail. To the extent that an ounce of whiskey has been medically recommended to some hypertensively inclined individuals, conductors have been found to be scrupulous conformists. The little nip out of a thin flask has brought dilation to many a maestro's blood vessels after a concert and has noticeably relaxed the tensions which tend to linger in the dressing room.

I mentioned emotional release. There is that which musical performance provides, and there is the other opportunity of reprimanding one hundred men at a time. The man who does not have to repress that urge, say I, is the man who will avoid an ulcer.

But such opportunity will not exist as broadly as it did in earlier generations. Musicians in the orchestra now have grievance procedures and articulate committees who can run a rebuke from a conductor clear up to a full dress arbitration. I hope they have the sense to exempt that maestro whose explosion is, in its own right, a work of art co-equal with his best concert performances, and nail down only the little batoneer whose insults are the expression of his own inadequacy. For the rest of the way, the big man will manage all right with only a bit of rewording. Instead of telling the first horn, "Mr. Glummerer, you are a fool and an idiot," he will simply learn to say, "Mr. Glummerer, I know you are not a fool and an idiot, and the whole orchestra knows it, so the next time I tell you what I want, I know I will get it from you."

The orchestra men, for their part, will need to watch

their language, especially when they move into that new area of communication we may describe as opinion samplese. Consider the *Conductor Evaluation Sheet* which has been published by a group of them recently. It contains some thirty questions, most of them listed under the heading, "Objective Evaluation."

Question No. 13 reads, "Does he demand the best performance of which the musicians are capable?"

And Question No. 24 asks, "Does he avoid stopping for mistakes that will correct themselves?"

A conductor who can meet these two qualifications with equal success will keep his job, if not his sanity, forever.

We have now arrived at the subject of mental health. After the body's needs have have been served through exercise, and its vital organs have avoided the perils of disuse, what of the mind? How long does it hold out, or how well does it function? I can only say that I have never noticed the slightest sign of senility in any man who has continued to work regularly as a conductor in his advanced years.

I saw Fritz Reiner, after more than one coronary accident and what the doctors call decompensation, pick out musical detail with unerring accuracy, all the while holding the long line of comprehensive performance with total control. Beecham and Monteux showed no declines as technicians or artistic personalities in their eighties. The case of Toscanini, who was closer to ninety when his time came, is widely known. Some concert halls, made of brick and stone, lost their efficiency before he did, showing where we have to look first for obsolescence if we are are really interested in the subject.

Some of us would think that the way old conductors keep going is by resting around the clock except for the two or three hours of necessary work—saving up all their energies for the essential rehearsal or concert.

Well, Stokowski, who today in his eighties is learning new music and restudying old scores for concerts and recording sessions in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere, came once to the Chicago Symphony when well up in his seventies. His hip was freshly pinned together by the orthopedists because of an injury incurred while romping with his young sons. Touch football, the story went.

When he got off the train in Chicago, he hinted at a reluctance to walk from trackside to the depot. I knew better than to suggest a wheelchair to him but remained alert to the possibility of fetching one as soon as he would say the word.

What happened next is what usually occurred when I watched Blackstone the Magician and others of his tribe. My attention had been riveted somewhere off the center point of the problem so I was not prepared for the trick. Stokowski spotted a baggage wagon, hoisted himself smartly onto the back end of it, and rode stylishly the rest of the way into the main terminal.

A smart manager would have thought not of fetching a wheelchair but of summoning a photographer.

If Stokowski rested around the clock, I would not have been able to know it. One evening he got hold of the architect of one of Chicago's unusual new tall buildings and rode off in a taxi to spend several hours inquiring about the design and the engineering. On another night he pointed to restaurants he had listed in a pocket notebook, told me these were the ones he had been to on

earlier Chicago visits, and asked which interesting new one I could take him to.

Then there was the business with the Hungarian gypsy musicians.

Stokowski had sent word that his programs would include Kodaly's wonderful romp, the "Hary Janos" Suite. The piece, if it is to be done with its full Hungarian flavor, calls for a *czymbalom* player. These can be very difficult to find, and Stokowski said that if we had none in Chicago, he would have the harpist do a small trick with his instrument to create an approximation of the needed tonal effect. I think he mentioned putting tissue paper between the strings.

In the old days it was easier to find a *czymbalom* virtuoso. There were a few restaurants, even downtown, where they could be located. Now I had to ask one or two of our symphony players to do some sleuthing. They came up with a gentleman named Janos Hossuth. Stokowski, as he picked himself off the baggage wagon, asked, "Did you find a *czymbalom*?"

"Yes, maestro," I said, "and I am pleased to report that our men find him to be a good musician. He plays well and reads well. Of course, I don't know how well he can follow a symphony conductor."

"Fortunately," said Stokowski, "you have a symphony conductor who will be able to follow him."

We went through the first rehearsal well enough, and Mr. Stokowski engaged Mr. Hossuth in conversation. Where does he work? Does he have a partner who plays gypsy fiddle? Yes, said Mr. Hossuth, a very good one. Fine, said Stokowski, tell me where your cafe is and I

will come out to hear him. I haven't heard a good Hungarian gypsy fiddler for some time.

Alas, said Mr. Hossuth, it's a slack period in the cafe, our ensemble has been laid off for a spell, and I am playing by myself. But I will be glad to get the violinist and have him come play for you.

"Have him meet me at Orchestra Hall after Thursday's concert," said the maestro. I knew this would be fun, and, since I would be seeing him back to his hotel after the symphony concert, I was sure he would invite me up to his suite to hear the serenade. At least I hoped so.

On Thursday night, about fifteen minutes before the end of our concert, the building superintendent called me from the front stairway to say the musicians had arrived. Oh, yes, I said, the gypsy fiddler—or did you say musicians, plural? "Oh, several of them," came the reply.

When their double bass player came by, I knew that the dimensions of our impromptu musicale had changed dramatically.

"Maestro," I said to Stokowski as he took his last bow, "you have more than a gypsy violinist here, where are you going to put this combination?"

"Why, on the stage," he replied, "where else?" This is when I found myself talking like a homicide detective. "Don't anybody move," I told the crew, "until the audience has left the hall."

And I began to think. Reiner, our music director was home recovering from an illness. Not for him, a Hungarian, had I ever arranged a serenade by Hungarian musicians. Not for him had I ever run the risk of over-time pay for stage hands for such monkey business. But

for a guest conductor of British birth and Polish parentage, look at me.

And what would I do next day if the musicians' union sent in a complaint and a bill for unauthorized engagement of the free services of some of their members? I am eternally grateful to that union for not triggering a controversy if they heard about it. And if they did not hear about it until now, I want to express my appreciation to that fine old legal nicety known as the statute of limitations.

Well, it was quite a concert and quite a sight. A cleared-away section of the stage, a band of gypsy musicians, some sounds the likes of which Orchestra Hall had never heard, and Stokowski's profile at parade rest.

When it was over, I prepared a little explanation for Reiner, in case it should become necessary to answer a few questions. I planned my defense in terms of mistaken identity. I thought it was to be a few players from Poland who were traveling through the Chicago area, looking for cousins who had been born in England and had begun their American symphonic conducting careers in Cincinnati. You see, Stokowski had been conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony, and so, later, had Reiner. This, I figured, would show our chief how attentive I was to tradition, how well I knew the career histories of such great conductors as Reiner and Stokowski, and how anxious I was to please Dr. Reiner's Cincinnati predecessor who was now his guest conductor in Chicago.

My time came to explain not many weeks later, but I lost all my courage. What Reiner said to me is not impor-

tant, except that I may say that Fritz Reiner never lost his courage.

Nor his ego. Here is a good time to say that if a few medical or psychological terms have found their way into this essay, they have done so through layman's unfastidious usage and not with any claim to scientific accuracy. So when I refer to ego, I mean that factor of personality no great artist can be without. It is what gets him onto the stage, identifies him with a great piece of musical literature, turns him around to face the public, and sends him home to prepare for the next triumph. Perhaps it also is that which, with an assist from elastic arteries, keeps senility from gaining an inch.

Reiner was preparing Handel's oratorio, *Israel in Egypt*, with solo singers, chorus, and orchestra. He had not much physical strength after those illnesses and, as it turned out, not much longer to live. But from his seated position he was still capable of rehearsing a mighty force of performers and of telling them, in his weakened voice, just how and where Handel's music took on special colorations and rhythmic values in support of the scriptural texts.

After the separate rehearsals of chorus and orchestra, he went through his first general rehearsal without, so I thought, a bit of trouble. But when the singers and players began to drift offstage, he called me to the podium and told me of a pressing need for the one remaining general rehearsal.

"Tomorrow," he said softly, "you will have to get me a microphone and put a loudspeaker up there." I felt truly depressed, for here I saw coming the first confession of weakness I had ever heard Fritz Reiner make.

"Yes," he said, still pointing "up there," which was in the direction of the organ loft from which the tried-and-true Irwin Fischer had just dismounted. "Yes, I simply will have to have a microphone and loudspeaker tomorrow. I'm sorry, but Fischer is getting a little deaf. He does not hear me when I speak to him."

The incident with Reiner and the organist may suggest that such men as Reiner never permitted themselves to have self-doubt. Well, what one does or does not permit one's self does not always govern. I have found that these supremely gifted people could feel as insecure at times as any of the rest of us. That they rule out the possibility at the moment they are exercising the command function is something else. Going full speed ahead may require a disdainful attitude toward torpedoes.

Unfortunately, in popularizing such individuals we often have made the mistake of publicizing their aggressions, their insults, and their seeming intolerance of others, because it makes a better story. If Sir Thomas Beecham made a witty remark at the expense of someone else, it was a shot heard 'round the world. If he poked fun at himself, the immediate witnesses might appreciate it, but they would not necessarily rush around telling so many other people that the incident would soon reach the transatlantic cables, the popular magazines, and the Tuesday afternoon ladies' music appreciation meetings addressed by gossipists disguised as lecturers.

Mischa Elman was one who was often cited for intolerance toward other violinists. He was not a field commander in the sense that a conductor is, but the kind of supremacy he achieved early in his career over other

performers, over ordinary listeners and crowned heads, over parents who felt that a violin in the hands of a child was a guarantee of upward mobility for the whole family, made him a truly formidable figure in the Western world.

Now, although I had hoped in this essay not to repeat a single old story, nor any not experienced at first-hand by myself, I would like to cheat one time in order to establish a frame of reference. They tell of the American debut just a few years ago of David Oistrakh, and of the many professional violinists who were in the throng of listeners. When Elman was asked for an opinion after the recital, he is supposed to have said, "Well, I'll tell you, even Heifetz plays better."

Let me tell you now of an experience I had with Elman. This happened before my managerial assignment, when I was working for the *Chicago Tribune* as a music reviewer and editor of related news matter. Elman was in the midst of his golden anniversary tour, and not a mere fiftieth birthday celebration, please note. This referred to his half-century of bowing, and not scraping, before international audiences.

It was a wonderful opportunity for a journalist, especially one whose newspaper, more than a century old itself, kept priceless files of its own coverage of first performances. I buried myself in the material and wrote an advance piece which spanned the young Elman and the golden jubilarian.

At the recital, I found a sadness I had not anticipated. The golden tone was still there and so was the self-confident figure who planted both feet squarely in the nineteenth-century romantic viewpoint. But the audience was

pitifully small. Elman was having some management problems in Chicago at the time, and that did not help him, but it was also likely that his audience was no longer sizable.

When I turned in my review to the copy desk, I did something that was not usual in a profession which generally avoided direct personal relationships with performing artists. I picked up the telephone, located his hotel, and asked to speak to him.

I told Mr. Elman I was calling him not so much as a music critic but as a younger man of the particular generation which had profited so much from the Elman example. I said to him, "On an occasion such as this, my generation owes you a word of thanks. If it hadn't been for you, Mr. Elman, many a child would not have been handed a musical instrument by his mother and told, 'Practice!'"

He thanked me, and then I said, "And I'll tell you something else, Mr. Elman. I mean about today's recital. The way you played the Chausson *Poeme* was something wonderful to hear."

"Oh," he said. "Why, you didn't like my Brahms?"

I am eager to say that this was not exactly the Mischa Elman of legend, the king of the hill, fighting off all challenges with a cutting word, a disdainful glance and some dogmatic opinions about the—his—art of the violin.

I have mentioned Beecham. Sir Thomas had a range of wit, from the innocent to the Mephistofelian, which sent ripples through the musical world. Although the kindest and most generous of men, he knew how to disguise a

twinkle with a frown. And so it could often be assumed, by superficial observers or collectors of mere hearsay, that Beecham was always delighted to be able to cut someone down.

During his last American tour, he was saddened by the death of his long-time manager and friend, Andrew Schulhof. I had been told that this had been an exemplary relationship between artist and agent, all the more effective because of its informality.

As Sir Thomas was en route to Chicago, I received a message from Mr. Schulhof's widow, advising that she would carry on the business and reminding my office that we should do thus and so about Sir Thomas' fee and some other important details.

I sensed a little danger here. Mrs. Schulhof's ideas, while conventional enough, were somewhat at variance with the procedures as I understood them, and a look at our contract with Beecham reinforced my fear that I might not be able to do things her way without offending him. Certainly not without consulting him.

So I consulted him.

"What!" he asked, with that emphatic pronunciation which moves the *b* around in front of the *w*. I repeated the lady's instructions.

"If your society goes along with those unspeakable improvisations," he said, "I will not conduct."

Now wouldn't that be nice. I was not very long in the management business at that time and the thought of blowing an engagement of Sir Thomas Beecham was giving me a tight feeling in the throat.

As you have gathered from the Hindemith incident, I am the type who tries to smooth things over with an ex-

planation. "You see, Sir Thomas, the lady is motivated by the best intentions." He did not disagree, so I plowed on. "Being a recent widow, she probably is receiving advice from several sides. Her lawyer, her accountant, and, as I have sometimes seen, a brother-in-law who moves into situations of this sort with crackling, if unsolicited, advice."

Beecham was still listening, and I was impressing at least myself, so I came to the clincher. "Sir Thomas, there are things about wills and estates and executors that make widows act differently under stress than you might expect. But if you still want me to do things your way and take my chances with the lady, I'll do my best." The American translation of that was, of course, "He's just got to conduct that concert."

Now Beecham moved in. "Wills and estates, you say. I know a thing or two about that. I have been an executor several times myself. I am an authority on chancery and equity." He waited a second as though to allow the chorus to respond in pure Gilbert and Sullivan; "For he is an au-tho-rity on chan-ce-ry and e-qui-ty."

"Let me tell you," he went on, "what happened once when I served as an executor. There came a day when I was summoned to the bench, notified that I had overdrawn the accounts, and ordered to make restitution out of my own funds. Ho-ho-ho!"

Those of you have heard Santa Claus say "Ho-ho-ho" at the conclusion of a jolly remark have heard only the second best "Ho-ho-ho" in the business, I may say.

Fritz Reiner was not a man to say "Ho-ho-ho," but he could be amused, and when he wanted to he could, with a half-smile and a very few well-chosen words, en-

tain others as well. He was, as I have suggested about Beecham, most amusing when walking the thin boundary between self-assurance and doubt.

For me, learning to read between the lines of righteous assertion was the key to understanding the difficulties of achieving and maintaining a top-rung position on the conducting ladder, against all comers, especially against those who, with half the talent and twice the charm, managed to gain listeners and adherents with undeserved ease.

So I give you, in conclusion, the evening Reiner arrived, as usual, three-quarters of an hour before concert time. He paused in the doorway to the box office and asked the ticket sellers, "Good evening, gentlemen. Are we sold out *again*?"

"Yes, sir, we certainly are, Dr. Reiner."

"You see," said Reiner, "I have always had to take the good with the good."

To which may be echoed, in the light of such associations as I have mentioned here, so have I.

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