KOUSSEVITZKY
Recordings Society

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Letter from the President

It was with deep sadness that we learned of the death of Leonard Bernstein on October 14th. On a personal level, it was Bernstein who introduced me to classical music (not to mention one Serge Koussevitzky) via his unforgettable *Young People's Concerts.* Bernstein's passion for great music inspired me to pursue a career as a classical music broadcaster and somewhat later establish the Koussevitzky Recordings Society. I simply cannot imagine what my life would have been like without Bernstein's art. While he was by no means a slavish imitator of his great predecessor, I could nonetheless discern the spirit of Koussevitzky in every one of Bernstein's performances. I shall miss him very much.

"Softly, as cats can crawl; almost not there at all." Those lines, borrowed from Bernstein's *Mass,* are an apt description of RCA/BMG's recent CD release of the Koussevitzky recording of Leopold Mozart's *Toy* Symphony. It is the single Koussevitzky item on a compact disc entitled "Christmas with Mozart" (#60121-2-RG). The transfer is near-perfect—you'd never know it was recorded in 1951—and the performance is a pure delight from start to finish.

Concerning further reissues, there is some good news (perhaps) from RCA. In response to what they believe is an international resurgence of interest in the conductor, they have tentatively scheduled two Koussevitzky CDs for release next year. One is to be an all-Tchaikovsky disc, while the other will have an all-American program. If you'd like to help insure that these recordings are released in the near future, you should write directly to Jack Pfeiffer at RCA. His address is: RCA Records, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036.

A few copies of Stradivarius STR 13614 may still be in circulation. The box for this CD announces that it includes the "world premiere performance" of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* given by Koussevitzky and the BSO on December 1,1944. Don't be fooled: this is the same performance (deriving from the broadcast of December 30, 1944) that was included in WCRB's *Art of Koussevitzky* series. To make matters worse, the sound on this disc is harsh, unpleasant and nearly unlistenable. It is also the only current source for Koussevitzky's incredible, path-breaking performance. The CD is filled out with Brahms Symphony #1 (with the date given correctly this time—2/17/45).

Pearl's two-disc set of Koussevitzky's Sibelius (GEMM CDS 9408) is garnering critical acclaim around the world. *Gramophone* described it as "a marvelous set, excellently transferred." *CD Review* added: "Mark Obert-Thorn's transfers are first-rate...This set provides the best possible tribute to Serge Koussevitzky's art." For those who haven't yet heard these discs, listen for Jim Svejda's *Record Shelf* radio series. He's scheduled three programs in late December/early January devoted to these CDs.

Just as we were about to go to press, we received the news of Aaron Copland's death at age 90. Copland was not only a great composer, he was a kind and modest man. I met him only once, but I shall never forget his warmth and sincerity. We dedicate this issue of our newsletter to his memory and to that of his dear friend, Leonard Bernstein.

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New KRS Advisory Board Member

The most recent addition to the Advisory Board of the Koussevitzky Recordings Society is Swiss-born conductor Charles Dutoit. In *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians,* Nicolas Slonimsky states that Dutoit "studied conducting by watching [Ernest] Ansermet's rehearsals with the Suisse Romande." This certainly calls to mind Koussevitzky's "studies" with Arthur Nikisch. Further, the drama and intensity of Dutoit's best performances are frequently reminiscent of Koussevitzky's work.

The Society's Mary Rodman recorded this brief conversation with Dutoit at Tanglewood during the summer of 1989:

Charles Dutoit: Koussevitzky in my youth was a name which was important because he was always in all the biographies of the composers that I was reading at the time. He was there because he had that publishing house, first of all, the *Editions Russes de Musique.* And I read so much about him. He was a fantastic man.

Now he is the man who came to Boston and made this orchestra, in a way. He worked so much with the Boston Symphony, and he did so much here. We are here on *his* territory. When I came here as a student, Koussevitzky's ghost was always everywhere. I know that he was a great conductor. Not that I have heard him, but I have talked to so many people of the older generation who knew him and had met him. He is part of the history of this century in every field, not only connected to the Boston Symphony, but in the world in the post-Diaghelev period. He did equally well the French repertoire as well as the Russian and other things.

Monteux, Koussevitzky and Munch—it is that tradition which made the Boston Symphony what it is, which is unique, because it is a much more luminous sound than other orchestras in America or in the world. And it combines warmth and the elegance of the sound and the phrasing which I think is part of the heritage of this triumvirate.

Mary Rodman: How do you feel when you are likened to Koussevitzky? Do you see yourself in that tradition?

CD: I'm certainly more in that tradition than in the tradition of Furtwängler. Yes, I do a lot of music of that period in which Koussevitzky was involved. You know, I've conducted most of the pieces that he commissioned. Another great thing about Koussevitzky is that he commissioned so many pieces for the Boston Symphony. And he commissioned great things, from the Roussel Fourth Symphony and Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* to Stravinsky, to everybody. There is an enormous list. I think it is actually next to Paul Sacher in Switzerland, who commissioned many, many things also, but for chamber orchestras, for his chamber orchestra. And most of these [the Koussevitzky commissions] are masterpieces. Koussevitzky is unique in the world in this regard.

MR: Have you commissioned anything with the Montreal Symphony?

CD: Yes we do, but it is not the same thing. It doesn't come from myself. It comes from the tradition that we commission things from Canadian composers, and we get a grant from the government. It's not as exciting as being the Music Director of the Boston Symphony at the time of Koussevitzky and having around you all these great composers, such as Stravinsky, Bartók, Roussel, Honegger and on and on. You just say, "I'm celebrating this anniversary of the Boston Symphony, and I want to commission this and that." You find the money and, on top of it, you are lucky to receive masterpieces!

You know, I adore this place here at Tanglewood. It's certainly my favorite spot. I think it's unique. I was a student here, and I always loved it, all these years. And when my daughter came here, she was so absolutely crazy about this place. Everybody is. There is something very special about this place. Koussevitzky had the good fortune to start that wonderful thing here. Already for that I think he should be immortalized.

MR: Well, he is immortalized through every student that goes out the doors of this place and pursues a career in music

CD: I suppose I'm just one of them. Plus the fact that my repertoire is similar to what he did and what people linked to the Boston Symphony used to do. That's why I feel so good with the orchestra. Because I know that I just scratch a little bit, take out the dust, and I find the whole tradition coming out. It blossoms like that. ✱

Interview with Aaron Copland

Peekskill, New York, Feb. 12, 1976. From the Copland Interviews, Oral History American Music, Yale University; Vivian Perlis, Director.

Vivian Perlis: Tell me about Koussevitzky's concerts at the Paris Opera.

Aaron Copland: Yes, the *Koussevitzky Concerts.* I think there were always four in the fall and four in the spring, and there of course Nadia Boulanger was a great help because she took me to visit Koussevitzky especially when he was announced. I can't remember exactly the sequence of events, but when he was announced as the new conductor of the Boston Symphony I remember she said, "You must meet him, because he can be of great help to you." So she took me.

VP: Was that toward the end of the time that you were there?

AC: He was named in 1923 for the season of 1924, which exactly coincided with the time I came back to the States, so it couldn't have been better from my standpoint.

VP: Didn't you play for him?

AC: Yes, I did, that early ballet, *Grogh.*

VP: How did he receive that?

AC: Very well, he was very enthusiastic. I can't remember whether he said he would play it with the Boston Symphony and then we switched to the *Organ Symphony* when Nadia was invited to come and act as organ soloist in his first season, and she asked me to write a work for her. I think that was the way it was. It seems to me before that he was going to play some excerpt from *Grogh.* In the beginning of *Grogh* I think it was, I had what was called the *Cortège macabre.* I think that was the piece that was originally scheduled to be played. I don't know if it was ever announced as such. That's my memory of it. And then we switched to the *Organ Symphony* when he asked Boulanger to be a soloist with the Boston Symphony.

VP: Would you say the most important element of your return to this country was the connection and the sponsorship of Serge Koussevitzky?

AC: Very much so. That and the League of Composers, those two elements were very important.

VP: With Koussevitzky conducting the work that Damrosch did with the organ and the orchestra, how did it happen that Damrosch did this in New York and then did Koussevitzky arrange for that?

AC: No.

VP: Not even with Boulanger?

AC: Oh yes, well yes, that's how it happened. I mean since she had been invited—I imagine by Damrosch, who was very fond of her—I think when Koussevitzky heard that, naturally he invited her to be soloist with the Boston Symphony also on the same trip, and since I had been asked by her to do the *Organ Symphony*—originally it was to be an organ concerto, I don't know how it got to be a Symphony— and since she was going to play in both places they both agreed to play the new piece that she was going to introduce to the States.

VP: That first performance in Boston, the audience reaction was not completely favorable.

AC: I can't honestly say I remember the precise nature of the audience reaction. I don't remember anything very remarkable in either case—either remarkably enthusiastic or remarkably slow applause. It was sort of conventional. That's the way I seem to remember it. But the really exciting thing about the event was that I had won over a real friend in Koussevitzky. He had been apparently very favorably inclined toward me after a visit or two at his Paris apartment, but that was really the first piece that he conducted, and from then on he was back of me one hundred percent. So that was the really important result of that performance.

"The really exciting thing about the event was that I had won over a real friend in Koussevitzky."

VP: Had he been championing contemporary music, particularly American composers, before this time?

"He created an atmosphere which seemed to imply that there was nothing else of importance that was happening at that concert except my new piece, and of course that's very exciting for a young composer."

AC: During my student years—1921-1924 in Paris—his concerts in the fall and in the spring with rented orchestras so to speak, were one of the big events of the spring and fall season, and at those concerts he introduced new pieces by Stravinsky and Milhaud and the group, *Les six*, but I don't remember his playing any American music. In fact in those days he didn't know he was going to be invited to be conductor of the Boston Symphony, so he had no reason to particularly to stress American music. It would be easy enough I imagine to look up the actual programs that he gave. There are biographies of him, one or two. But my memory of those days would seem to indicate that American music was not exactly in his purview at that time.

VP: Looking at it now do you have a feeling that there was any realization on his part of you as an American composer?

AC: Very much so. He was intrigued by my rhythms. My rhythms seemed to be sort of American and somewhat jazz-inspired even before I made any use of any kind of jazz. I remember his remarking on that always. It made conducting of the pieces a little bit difficult, since the rhythmic life was a rather important element, and not rhythms that he would have been used to. But the kind of enthusiasm with which he surrounded any performance of my new work was the really exciting aspect of the event for me. It wasn't just like an ordinary premiere, it was *the* event of the week.

I often spent the entire week as a guest at his house in Boston, and he created an atmosphere which seemed to imply that there was nothing else of importance that was happening at that concert except my new piece, and of course that's very exciting for a young composer, to have an orchestra like that at his command, and that kind of enthusiasm I've never met anywhere else before or since. Perhaps Leonard Bernstein could create something of the same excitement, but most conductors are rather...what shall I say—occupied in a serious way about how we are going to do this piece, and how difficult it is, and other technical things surrounding it, but Koussevitzky took this attitude that you are the coming thing, and every piece you write is going to create excitement. He had gone through the whole Stravinsky period in Paris two years before, introducing each new piece of Stravinsky's, and he carried that over to Boston.

VP: I think the reason I asked you about the audience reaction was in terms of Koussevitzky and whether he could get away with it.

AC: He, well—in a sense he did, and in a sense he didn't. I mean we got bad criticism from the Boston press. There was a very conventional and proper Bostonian critic there at the time—I've forgotten his name—who we knew in advance wasn't going to like it. But he [Koussevitzky] wasn't fazed by that, he just took it in his stride, a sort of we'll show 'em kind of attitude. It wasn't easy, it was a struggle, but that was part of the fun. If everybody had loved it right from the start there wouldn't have been any struggle, there wouldn't have been any fight, and he liked that, he enjoyed that.

VP: And you enjoyed it along with him.

AC: And how, yes. My parents were a little disturbed. I particularly remember after the performance of my *Piano Concerto* the headline in the paper was, COPLAND'S LATEST POOR STUFF, and I remember my father being particularly upset by that POOR STUFF. He didn't know music, of course, but he certainly knew what poor stuff was, being a merchant.

VP: I read some of those reviews a few days ago, that came out in Boston after the *Piano Concerto* particularly. And that continued somewhat in Boston, there seemed to be a much more conservative attitude there, even later, with some of the things that were more readily accepted in New York.

AC: Yes. Boston was a very conservative town. I think less so now, after the Koussevitzky years. Musically certainly it's less so.

VP: Koussevitzky was already so solidly established as a conductor. After all there were other conductors who really suffered from trying to play contemporary music, almost forcing that kind of thing down people's throats even if they didn't want it.

AC: The main rival of course was Stokowski. He was the only other conductor at the head of a really fine orchestra who was doing that kind of propaganda for new music, and Koussevitzky was very aware of what he was doing down there in Philadelphia. I don't know how Stokowski was about Boston, but they were the two leaders of the new orchestral music anyhow.

VP: Did Koussevitzky think that your interest in jazz was something that you should follow, or did you do that on your own?

AC: Oh I did that on my own. He knew nothing about jazz. He was very intrigued by jazz rhythms, he thought they were quite difficult to handle, but he thought also I feel sure that it gave the music an American flavor. No other element was quite that obviously American—probably some of the tunes, but certainly the rhythms.

VP: How did you feel about the way he actually conducted the music?

AC: Well, he conducted it like a Russian would conduct it. He didn't have the really Bernstein-American flavor, but he was pretty good at rhythms, and I was happy with the performances. The Boston Symphony was an excellent orchestra, so that I felt very lucky.

VP: You must have been aware of that because that might have been a period of time where you would have had difficulty having works performed, as many people have.

AC: Yes. Well, I had difficulties in other places, but I was very lucky in Boston, because Boston came to New York with the orchestra, and that helped the situation in New York, also. The other great help of course was the League of Composers in New York, and the concerts that they gave.

VP: And then the commissions from the League. Was that at the request of Koussevitzky?

AC: I can't remember. I rather doubt it. It might have been.

VP: I think it was—according to Claire Reis [Executive Director of the League of Composers].

AC: Oh it was? Well, then it was.

VP: It was through him that they reached you.

AC: Oh, I had forgotten that. Another plume in his bonnet!

VP: Also, Koussevitzky asked Claire not to involve you too much, and to leave you to your composing. Did he feel that he wanted to make any attempt to conduct other American composers that early? Virgil Thomson for example was certainly composing at that time.

AC: You never looked at the old Boston Symphony programs of the '20s? I have not too clear a memory of exactly how much he did. He was I would say rather cautious, that is to say he knew his audience, which had had some force-feeding as far as new American music, so he didn't want to do it.

VP: He wasn't sponsoring anybody else in terms of that much confidence in their works?

AC: Well, I think when Roy Harris came on the scene that was in a sense a sponsorship. I have to look at the programs myself to be reminded of who the composers were that he played. Some of them I may have brought around to him. You see, he used me as a kind of, what shall I say, a connection with the younger ones.

VP: You were the American connection?

AC: The "American connection," (laughs) with what the younger guys were doing that I was aware of Sessions, Piston. Well, he knew Piston, because he was on the scene in Boston. And I didn't bring too many people around, there weren't that many writing Boston Symphony material, on that plane, you know. And some of it seemed too conventional to me and I wouldn't encourage it.

VP: You mentioned being at the house. Was that his home in Boston?

AC: Yes.

VP: Was that a meeting place for many musicians?

AC: I'd never lived in Boston for any length of time until I had a job at Harvard, so I don't know exactly, but I wouldn't say there was any special center. He was a very busy guy—he had to study his scores, and they had a social life of their own, and being the head of an important orchestra in Boston you have certain social, I won't say responsibilities, but you get involved in dinners and such, so that I don't remember anything particularly social as far as the composers were concerned in the household.

VP: But your relationship with him, was it more student and conductor, or did he treat you as a colleague?

AC: Student would be too much to say. He didn't treat me like a student, no. Like a young colleague whom he was very definite-

ly interested in, and when I say interested, not only in the music that you might write, but also how you were going to make a living while you wrote it, how you could free yourself of a job so that you'd have the time to devote to this composition that he was waiting for. That also was very exciting: he was *waiting* for it. It wasn't exactly go home and write it and then he'd forget about what he'd said. This was a passionate interest of his, which made it all that much more exciting.

VP: Psychologically it would be a little bit the same as that confidence that you described that Nadia Boulanger gave.

AC: Definitely. It's one of those things—I cannot imagine my career without those two people. I don't know what would have happened precisely, or how I would have gotten...Well, something could have happened I suppose, but they made it that much more possible and easy. I don't know who got him his job as conductor of the Boston Symphony. I've forgotten how that came about. He was in the public eye in Paris, but who had the bright idea of bringing him to Boston I really never did ask. Somebody in Boston must...

VP: ...[have] had the courage to do so, considering his interest in contemporary music.

AC: Yes, that's right.

VP: It interested me that there was any possibility that he would have found the jazz kind of rhythms difficult, considering he had done a great deal of Stravinsky, and certainly what's in *Firebird* for example would have been somewhat comparable to the *Symphony for Organ and Orchestra.*

AC: Yes. Well, *Music for the Theatre* was much more jazzy in an obvious way and caused him more trouble.

VP: You mentioned that Koussevitzky was not only interested in the music, but in trying to see that you found a way to do the composing that he wanted. Did he have anything to do with the Guggenheim?

AC: It's very possible. As a matter of fact I remember he wrote for me. We had to have letters of recommendation, and he and Boulanger I think were the principal supporters

VP: Did that give you enough to live on for those—it was two years wasn't it?

AC: Oh it was definitely enough. It was $2,500 yearly, and that was a lot then. I suppose it would be equivalent to $10,000 now.

VP: Wasn't there a critic there [in Boston] who gave you a hard time, who was very conservative? I think his name was Parker.

AC: Yes, H.T. Parker. He was an elderly gentleman who had been on the paper for many years, and of course the idea of playing music inspired by jazz in a concert hall seemed very shocking. It was like playing it in church, you know, in the middle of a service. It just seemed all out of key to them, as if I and my music had no place there. But Koussevitzky was very brave. He faced them down and insisted that that was what he wanted to do, and he did.

VP: Did Koussevitzky have any difficulty with the kind of rhythms that were in the *Piano Concerto* and later in the *Symphonic Ode?*

AC: Yes, he approached them like a European musician would approach jazz rhythms that he didn't feel or didn't have in his bones, so to speak, but he was very good with Russian rhythmic materials, so it was a question of his adapting himself. And I used to live at his house, you know, through the whole week of the rehearsal period, and every night we'd get together upstairs in his studio room, and I'd bang out on the piano some of the rhythms again, and go over them carefully with him, so that it wasn't a casual introduction of a new piece, such as when you send the score to a conductor that you don't know very well and he likes it, and says he'll play it, and then you come to the performance. It wasn't like that. This was a whole week that centered around the introduction of your new piece. The rest of the program seemed to have no importance at all. He was replaying great masterpieces, of course, alongside it.

That was an incredibly fortunate circumstance for me because it made the introduction of each new piece seem like a musical event: it wasn't just a new piece, it was another of the great moments of that particular season, or at any rate it was meant to be one of the great moments—that was the idea. And he knew in advance that his rather conservative audience wasn't going to like a piece based on jazz materials, that they would be somewhat shocked by the musical style. But it didn't faze Koussevitzky, on the contrary he was rather pleased at being part of the avant-garde, and introducing new things he believed in, which he knew the audience wasn't quite ready to accept. In other words he had a very realistic attitude toward it all. He didn't come away from the concert hall thinking, "Oh they are all going to love this in the newspapers." Hard experience and hard knocks had taught him not to expect ready acceptance. ✱

Book Review

The Other Side of the Record, by Charles O'Connell. Greenwood Press, 1970. 343pp. (Original edition: Knopf, 1947)

For many years, Charles O'Connell was connected with Victor Records, serving as Director of Artists and Repertoire for Red Seal Records in the 1930s and early 1940s. His book is a gold mine of information—and misinformation—about some of the figures he recorded and about the industry of which he was a part. The book is also a splendid example of "don't get mad, just get even" as he repays at least some of the slights he received over the years. But in spite of its irritable tone and its sometimes less than accurate "facts," no one interested in recordings should miss it.

True, this volume was written at the end of World War II and published originally in 1947, but it wears well because the persons with whom the author deals are still very real to record collectors. Younger collectors should also be interested in the era prior to and during the war and in the recording careers of such artists as Toscanini, Rubinstein, Horowitz, Monteux, Fiedler, Traubel, Flagstad, Iturbi, Grace Moore, Stokowski, and all the others about whom O'Connell writes.

His book is a gold mine of information—and misinformation—about the industry of which he was a part.

Not least by any means is the chapter on Serge Koussevitzky with whom O'Connell recorded for many years. His dealings with Koussevitzky, both on a personal level and on a professional basis—usually the two were intermixed—are not only of interest but of importance as well. In fact, it would seem that O'Connell had a hand in the negotiations which led the Boston Symphony and Koussevitzky to renew their Victor contract during World War II and eventually unionize the orchestra.

Some of the numerous stories which surround the Koussevitzky legend are given here in their origi-

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nal context. And there are some glimpses of Koussevitzky the man which show him in a highly favorable light, even though they are neither worshipful nor fawning. But far more importantly, O'Connell deals at some length with the critical period during World War II for both Koussevitzky and his orchestra: the fight over unionization; the rearrangement of the orchestra's finances; and the efforts by both the New York Philharmonic and Columbia (both broadcasting and records) to get Koussevitzky away from Boston, RCA Victor and NBC.

One can argue with some of O'Connell's judgements, but then one must remember that he was writing in 1945 and '46, and much has happened since with both Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony. O'Connell's comments on Koussevitzky's relative neglect of American conductors as compared with his work on behalf of American composers falls rather flat when Koussevitzky's relations with Bernstein are remembered. And one might question whether Koussevitzky was not too much controlled in his choice of American music by Aaron Copland, though O'Connell did not think so.

It is unfortunate that O'Connell gives rather too much attention to a live performance of the Beethoven Ninth with Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony in order to prove a point and to the premiere of the Shostakovich Seventh, though he does knock in the head all the wartime propaganda about that work, amazingly still perpetuated in 1990. Shostakovich himself subsequently indicated that the facts about this work were contrary to the fiction and so proved O'Connell to be largely correct about the origins of the work.

O'Connell has been described as "terribly irritable," but while this may have been true (and much in the book would seem to support this view), he was also capable of dealing with a myriad of musicians and, at least in some cases, winning their friendship (e.g. Stokowski) or their professional confidence (e.g. Koussevitzky). O'Connell's book is a valuable piece of recording and musical history, which deserved to be reprinted and deserves to be read.

by Kenneth DeKay
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About the Koussevitzky Recordings Society, Inc.

The Koussevitzky Recordings Society was established in 1986, and we are dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of the recorded legacy of Serge Koussevitzky. The Society is a non-profit corporation, which is staffed entirely by volunteers.

The Society is involved in a variety of projects, including the creation of an "oral archive" of conversations with those who knew and worked with Koussevitzky and an archive of the conductor's recorded performances. The activities of the Society are highlighted in our bi-annual newsletters. These include interviews from the oral archive, articles about the conductor, and book reviews.

To become a member and receive our newsletter, send a check or money order in the amount of $15 to P.O. Box 288, Boston, MA 02254. Memberships run from January to December. Those who join in the middle of the calendar year will receive all the publications for that year. Back issues of our newsletters are also available. For a complete list, you may contact the Society at our Boston address.