

# KOUSSEVITZKY

Recordings Society



## Letter From the President

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This issue of our newsletter—the first in over a year—is devoted entirely to Victor Koshkin-Youritzin's fascinating, in-depth conversation with conductor Anthony Morss. Koshkin-Youritzin joined our Board of Directors in 1990 and has served as Vice President since 1992. Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Oklahoma, Koshkin-Youritzin previously taught at Vanderbilt and Tulane Universities and was a Ford Foundation Fellow at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. An internationally known scholar, critic, and lecturer, he has published articles in *ARTnews*, *Arts Magazine*, *Art Journal*, *New Europe*, and the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. He is the author of *Oklahoma Treasures* (1986) and *Five Contemporary Russian Artists* (1992) and principal co-author of *American Watercolors from The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Abrams, 1991; a Book-of-the-Month Club selection). His feature article, "Koussevitzky: Missing in Action," appeared in the December 18, 1988 *Sunday Los Angeles Times* and, subsequently, in several other publications. It has since been translated and published in both French and Russian. He is currently researching an article devoted to Koussevitzky's Paris years for publication in this journal.

Since our last issue, several compact disc collections of Koussevitzky recordings have appeared. Pearl CD 9090 includes Fauré's *Elegie*, Debussy's *La Mer*, and the conductor's earliest recordings of Ravel's *Mother Goose* and *Daphnis*. Biddulph WHL 019 contains all of Koussevitzky's commercially issued double-bass recordings (including two quite different, but equally intriguing versions of the *Eccles Largo*) coupled with Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony and two Strauss Waltzes. Pearl CD 9037 consists of the first of Koussevitzky's two versions of the Mendelssohn Fourth and Schubert *Unfinished* as well as his unforgettable recording of Schumann's *Spring* Symphony. The crystal clear transfers are by the indefatigable Mark Obert-Thorn. *Gramophone* described the *Pastoral* as "a revelation...every phrase sings and is attentively shaped, and the texture glows with warmth". I lauded Koussevitzky's *La Mer* in the *American Record Guide* for "its spontaneity, boundless energy, and dramatic impact".

RCA has at long last issued its all-Prokofiev disc (#61657) consisting of the 1947 recording of the *Classical* Symphony, the Fifth Symphony, highlights from *Romeo & Juliet*, and the finale from *The Buffoon*. Booklet notes are by yours truly. In a review recently published on the internet, Raymond S. Tuttle asked "Has this symphony (the *Classical*) ever been recorded with more kinetic energy, and yet with firmer control? Koussevitzky will leave you breathless. Quick tempos are

also a feature of his recording of the Fifth, recorded in 1946. Koussevitzky's total timing of about forty minutes resembles Dorati's, in his well-regarded Minneapolis SO recording from 1959 (Mercury Living Presence 432 753-2), but Dorati skates across the music's surface where Koussevitzky digs right into it." RCA also snuck Koussevitzky's incomparable 1950 version of Grieg's *The Last Spring* into print as part of a collection of "Grieg's Historic Chamber Music Recordings" (61826).

Mark Obert-Thorn has prepared new transfers of several items for release on Pearl and Biddulph. An all-Berlioz program consisting of *Harold in Italy* with William Primrose, three pieces from the *Damnation of Faust*, and the *Roman Carnival* Overture was slated for release in January, but I have not yet been able to obtain a copy. Obert-Thorn calls this *Harold* "one of the greatest performances of *anything* ever captured on disc". A long overdue issue of Koussevitzky's complete British recordings (Beethoven Third and Fifth, Mozart 40th, finale from the Haydn 88th, and Sibelius Seventh Symphonies) are also pending on a two-disc set. Meanwhile, Jack Pfeiffer at RCA tell me that even though their "Legendary Performers" series is now caput, they still intend to issue the Brahms Third and Fourth Symphonies some time soon. Finally, BSO Classics (working in conjunction with the Boston Symphony) is set to release the complete Boston recordings of Karl Muck, including several previously unpublished items, along with Koussevitzky's 1928 recordings of selections from Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* and *Apollo* and the complete Second Suite from Ravel's *Daphnis*. All of the Koussevitzky items on that disc are also available from Pearl, but producer Brian Bell insists that his disc will offer several distinctive features: "For the first time, these Koussevitzky recordings will be digitally transferred direct from the metal masters (instead of shellac copies), and previously unpublished alternate takes will be commercially available for the very first time."

With this issue we welcome two new members to our Advisory Board: Gerard Schwarz, Music Director of the Seattle Symphony since 1983, and Alexander Bernstein, distinguished teacher, President of the *Bernstein Education Through the Arts Fund*, and son of Leonard Bernstein.

Thanks to Yana Davis for the design and typesetting of this publication. All photographs contained herein were used by permission of the Music Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

## Remembering Koussevitzky: An Interview with Conductor Anthony Morss

*For many years Anthony Morss and I have enjoyed a close friendship. Much of our conversation has consisted of discussions about music and specifically Koussevitzky, whom Morss knew since his own youth. Born in Boston, Anthony Morss studied at Harvard, the New England Conservatory, and the National Orchestral Association in New York. While still a student, he was chosen by Leopold Stokowski to be his Chorus Master and Associate Conductor with the Symphony of the Air. Since then, his widely diverse career has seen him as Chorus Master of Juilliard's American Opera Center—under Erich Leinsdorf and Thomas Schippers—and as Music Director of the Majorca and Saragossa Orchestras in Spain, and the Norwalk Symphony in the U.S. He has guest-conducted the Madrid, Barcelona, Marseilles, and Cape Town Orchestras, among others. In 1976 he conducted the American premiere of Massenet's Marie Magdeleine with Régine Crespin in Avery Fisher Hall. He led the 1978 Tosca production of the Marseilles Opera with Marton, Aragall, and Wixell. In 1990 in Tully Hall he conducted a concert version of Fidelio with original instruments, the first such performance of a standard repertory opera in New York. In addition to his symphonic posts, he has served as Music Director for the New York State Opera Company, Verismo Opera, the Maine Opera, Asociación Pro-Zarzuela en América, Eastern Opera Theatre of New York, and the Lubo Opera Company of New Jersey, a position he still holds. He has guest-conducted numerous other companies, including the New Jersey Lyric Opera, the Majorca Opera Society, Tampa Bay Opera, and National Grand Opera.*

*Koshkin-Youritzin: When did you first hear Koussevitzky?*

Morss: I initially heard him at the first symphony concert I ever attended in my life, which was in Symphony Hall in Boston, and I was quite young; I must have been eight

or nine years old at that time. I recall vividly that there were three composers on that program, and one name I did not know. Another name was Beethoven, and the final piece in the program was Tchaikovsky's Sixth, with which I had some slight acquaintance. The whole experience was absolutely magical, riveting. That would have been a tribute to anybody's first time hearing a great symphony orchestra play. There was something also especially compelling about Koussevitzky on the podium. Much of what I heard went over my head. What I did hear was something that was thrilling, something that was tremendously important in ways I did not fully comprehend—and an enormously emotional experience. The conductor seemed to be absolutely spent and so did the orchestra. I later discovered the orchestra really felt this way. The first oboe, John Holmes, told me that he found the *Pathétique* Symphony exhausting to play, and a string of performances in a week wrung him out. And Harry Ellis Dickson, one of the first violins, used to say that at the end of that interpretation—and indeed of almost any favorite Koussevitzky piece—the conductor was drenched from perspiration and the orchestra members were equally so. They really went through an experience! Would that we had such common occurrences these days in orchestral performance! Very rarely indeed.

*Why do you think that is the case today?*

I think the cultural impulse is waning in general, and although there are wonderful orchestras, somehow many of the conductors do not appear to be as tuned in to the old European music tradition. I think that is very fair to say. As I kept going to symphony concerts every week and coming to know the repertoire and listening to records, I came to see that the excitement Koussevitzky gener-

ated was not simply the result of a great symphony orchestra playing very cleanly: other conductors later on in my experience taught me just how boring perfect orchestral playing can be—Leinsdorf, for example. But Koussevitzky had something very special to say. On two other occasions, I heard him do the *Pathétique* Symphony live. By that point, I knew the work very well. The last time, I knew the piece note for note. And I remember being very curious as to how he was going to surprise me in the first movement, at the end of the second theme in the exposition ending with the descent of the bass clarinet, pianissimo, after which the whole orchestra explodes in a fortissimo half-diminished chord. The first time you hear it, of course, you jump out of your seat, but after the umpteenth time, when you know the surprise is coming, how can it be fresh? And I recall so well that, sitting in my seat in Symphony Hall, I heard the bass clarinet descend into almost nothingness, and then the orchestra produced a sound which had the effect of a hand-grenade exploding exactly two feet in front of my eyes! That sound was not only a fulmination of drama, but it was also round, beautiful, perfectly balanced, all musical sound—no noise in it whatever, though it was one of the loudest sounds I have ever heard a symphony orchestra produce. It was a tremendous, wonderful surprise, even though I knew it was coming. That was the kind of experience Koussevitzky generated so regularly. Some of the men in his orchestra resented him; most of them, I think, loved him. All of them, I believe, respected him.

I remember that one of my classmates at Harvard was the son of one of the first violins of the Boston Symphony, who complained after Koussevitzky retired that in the Brahms Symphonies rehearsals, Koussevitzky would stop in the same

places and make the same remarks practically every time they did the pieces. My comment on that was, "Yes, and every time he did them, the Brahms Symphonies were major artistic events!" They were always fresh to him. The standard masterpieces were fresh to him, I think in part because he was so curious about new music. And remember that, in Koussevitzky's era, new music meant Sibelius, Scriabin, Ravel, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Honegger, Hindemith, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Bartók, Copland, and Harris. Obviously, it was a lot to get excited about. The little twelve-tone music that Koussevitzky conducted, he rehearsed scrupulously, but he found the style uncongenial. Now, Lukas Foss, who was one of his most brilliant pupils, thinks that was a great shame.

*Do you know why Koussevitzky didn't like twelve-tone music?*

Well, yes, I think I know very well why he didn't. I think it is a credit to his musical taste and his humanistic convictions. I think it is a very impersonal style. The proof of that was that the era when twelve-tone became universally fashionable is now considered by most music critics quite overtly to have been a wrong turn. The music produced then very certainly killed off the expanding contemporary music audience that Koussevitzky had been building so carefully all his life. Koussevitzky treated twelve-tone music with enormous respect because of its difficulties, and, despite his own problems in finding any heart in it, apparently the performances were excellent, because he labored especially diligently over them. But he didn't find anything there which was personally satisfying, and I think he was right on the mark.

*What particular pieces would these have been?*

I think it was five short pieces by Anton von Webern, and two Berg pieces: the *Lulu* Suite and the Violin Concerto, the last of which Koussevitzky liked a lot.

Now, that leads me to the time that I came to know Koussevitzky personally, when I was fourteen years old. I was visiting the family of one of his very favorite trustees of the Boston Symphony, John Nicholas Brown, whose son Nicky Brown was my roommate in school and later in college. Mr. Brown was off in World War II. Mrs. Brown, her son, and I, as guest of the family, were invited by Koussevitzky to spend the weekend of August 4th and 5th, 1945 at his house near Tanglewood; "Serenak," it was called. And so I tagged along with saucer eyes and ears big as Perot's. Naturally, I was just a kid, mostly listening as a whole lot of other people talked to Koussevitzky. But he was unfailingly gracious and kindly to me. I perceived he had the personality of a benevolent and magnanimous emperor. And he did pay attention to us young people. Indeed, he insisted that Nicky and I ride with him to one of the concerts. He chatted with us about things quite unrelated to music. I remember him telling us to be very careful, not to drive too fast when we got our licenses, because the time saved on the journey was not worth the danger. He said this with a particular emphasis, which was characteristic of substantially everything that he said. Before we were introduced, my first impression of him came from his jackets hanging in the closet of the bedroom where Nicky and I were quartered. They were tiny, and I had the impression that Koussevitzky was a very tall man when he walked on stage, because he was so dignified and so perfectly proportioned. He was obviously a man of imperial command. He gave the impression of being very tall indeed, and when I saw these jackets, obviously they belonged to a short man. I think he was something maybe between five-foot-six or five-foot-seven. Then when I met him, I was in for another surprise. He used to rest before concerts, and he did not eat before an evening concert. He fasted. The rest of us would eat before, but he would eat afterwards. (When I started to conduct myself, I emulated that and found myself terribly hungry in the middle of the concert, so I only did

that once.) He had been resting upstairs, and he came down to meet Mrs. Brown. I remember that he *ran* down the stairs. He was a man in his seventies. But he ran down the stairs like an absolute bolt of lightning and hugged her in enthusiastic Russian fashion, obviously so tremendously pleased to see her and, as I say, was very kind and gracious to us young people. All the way through that weekend, I observed that he moved either very fast or very slowly, magisterially. There didn't seem to be anything in between.

Serenak was a rather rambling house with a beautiful lawn and view, very comfortable indeed. I recall that his conversation was concerned with music but also everything else under the sun. I had not expected a great musician to be so enormously interested in politics, for example. I remember he spoke about the theater in New York extremely knowledgeably. I know that he was interested in literature, particularly in theater. He probably was interested in painting, too, but I don't recall him talking about it at the time. I do remember the talk about the theater and politics, and what was so surprising about the political tone was that there we were in 1945, toward the end of World War II, with the Russians as our necessary allies against Hitler in Europe. Yet Koussevitzky—and Charles O'Connell confirms my own experience in his book, *The Other Side of the Record*—had foreseen in great detail the coming of World War II and even described very accurately main battles that would be fought. As I remember Koussevitzky saying, he knew that our side would prevail, but he also knew that our temporary allies, the Russians, were going to be the major source of trouble in Europe after the victory was achieved. This is something that very few people would say and that few Americans knew. Of course, he knew the Russian regime very well. He knew how black-hearted they were and how expansionist, and he made no bones about the trouble that we were going to have. He also said, again, quite farsightedly, that the only thing that could prevent that would be a

extremely close alliance among European states, amounting almost to a United States of Europe. That was the first time I ever heard that phrase. He was very prescient. He was really knowledgeable on that subject, and people who knew him much better than I, and who spent hours conversing with him, were always astonished at how well-informed he was, at the breadth of his interests, whereas somebody like Toscanini was so exclusively focused on music, that he was, I would say, considerably less culturally informed, although he was a very great conductor; I think that limitation shows up in Toscanini's interpretations. Koussevitzky's enormous breadth of cultural interests was very apparent in his enormous range of interpretive possibilities, his tremendous repertoire, which was probably bigger than any other conductor's.

But there were other things that occurred during that weekend which were unforgettable. I remember that one of the people who came to visit us was a minor Russian composer, Arthur Lourié, who was a friend of Koussevitzky's, and I believe he was there with his wife. At one point out on the lawn, Chinese costumes appeared, somebody had a home movie set up, and Koussevitzky put on a Chinese costume and did an astonishingly apt imitation of the Chinese: the walk, the stance, everything about it. It was just unbelievable. Other people have said that he could do characters from Russian novels and plays with truly professional skill. One of the things a conductor has to be is an actor. He is part scholar, and he is part actor. Koussevitzky certainly had that part down. Also, I recall that he was always cold, and he would wear, like all Russians, fur coats with great delight, but he would wear them on days when nobody else seemed to need them, and he always seemed to be cool after performances. I remember when he drove to the Tanglewood performance in his car, he was wearing his admiral's cape with a soft straw hat on top, which I didn't think went with it at all. This man certainly carried it off. But I saw

that he perspired a lot during performances, and he needed to be wrapped up afterwards so that he didn't catch cold. He needed an overcoat or cape as a matter of personal comfort, not simply because he thought they looked good.

*That is a fascinating observation. Has that ever been mentioned as far as you know?*

Yes, as a matter of fact, Charles O'Connell mentioned that on a hot day, he and Koussevitzky, who was wearing a fur coat, were walking through a St. Patrick's Day parade. Although O'Connell was hot and bothered when they got to the Carnegie Hall, Koussevitzky wasn't remotely perspiring.

Soviet regime indicated to him clearly that they were troublemakers in every possible sense of the word. He knew very well what to expect from them. And there was a time when he would not play Soviet music. He was only reluctantly persuaded to play some of the wonderful music coming from Prokofiev and Shostakovich, because he did not wish to appear to be endorsing a regime that he thought was inhuman. Ultimately, of course, considerations of musical quality won out, quite correctly, because now we find out that both Shostakovich and Prokofiev also detested the regime and suffered from it tremendously.

*How would his interest in politics, in general, affect his choice of music and attitudes towards music, and even*

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## *Koussevitzky had the personality of a benevolent and magnanimous emperor.*

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*Do you want to add anything about Koussevitzky's understanding of the Russian political situation?*

His comprehension of the nature of the Russian regime was not surprising considering his own experience with it; he had even protested the hypocrisy of the Czarist regime publicly. As a matter of fact, when he became a conductor, he published an open letter to the Moscow press excoriating the working conditions of the players in the orchestras in Russia. He had been first double bass in the Imperial Opera. He said the players were ground down by long working hours and ridiculously low salaries. There was even some talk of his being arrested as a result of that. So he could speak out against injustice any time, but his experience with the

*perhaps the way he would play? Is there any conclusion or hypothesis we can come up with on that?*

There was a famous occasion on which he had scheduled a Beethoven Ninth performance—which he said he regarded as the greatest symphonic work ever composed (and a great many of us would agree with him on that)—and there was a false report of a victory near the end of the war. Apparently, that performance was a little messy, a little disorganized, but that was evidently the most inspired performance of the piece he ever gave. He considered that the great values which music represented were the values that were being fought for in the war. They were certainly spiritual values, and he well believed that and stated it. So did Bruno Walter, who appeared on these shores

as a result of the conflagration in Europe; he also spoke of music as being a moral force. Now, the estheticians of the day thought this was very quaint, old-fashioned and nineteenth-century, rather Victorian. However, Walter's performances proved that he was telling the truth, as did Koussevitzky's.

*Did the situation of the war and the moral, spiritual power of music affect any particular piece he chose to program at that time, do you think?*

Not that I know of. Because he believed that all of the great music was so overtly spiritual in its ultimate import that just performing it with all his heart, which he was going to do anyway, would amount to a weapon on the right side of the struggle. He did include *The Star-Spangled Banner* before every Boston Symphony concert during the war. That was obviously the piece I heard him conduct the most.

*I think you told me long ago that one of the reasons for his starting with the national anthem was that it helped get people in tune, that they could play as loudly as they wanted, and that it loosened up the orchestra.*

It did have those advantages, I'm very sure, and it also allowed for some late-comers; it had all kinds of practical advantages.

*What was the principal purpose, do you think—patriotism?*

Yes, the main point was his patriotism and his dedication to the ideals that America was fighting for in the war. There is no question about that.

There was another thing that he said: the weekend before we arrived, there had been a concert in which one of the brass players had flubbed a passage so spectacularly, that it was spoken of by Koussevitzky when I was there. There was the notion running around later that if you made a mistake in performance, you got glared at all the next week in rehearsals. However, Koussevitzky's

reaction to that was very interesting. The man was plainly a perfectionist. Not only did he set the highest possible standards, but he, Toscanini, and Stokowski between them undoubtedly created our current high orchestral standards. These three did more than any other conductors in world history to raise the standards of what was expected of orchestras, and Koussevitzky was unrelenting. Koussevitzky's reaction to this mistake that was apparently very noticeable to the audience was interesting to me. He said that accidents would happen occasionally, but he knew that his men were giving the very best they had in every single performance. One strived for perfection, but one could not always expect to get it. In other words, he did not blame the man at all. Koussevitzky said that the gentleman was an excellent player and, furthermore, he was doing his very best, and if you had a very difficult solo, sometimes it would get away from you. That was not to be desired but it was to be expected every once in a while. Koussevitzky also said that his object was to give a great performance every time, but since that wasn't humanly possible, at least a just performance. He then went on to comment on the fact that although you might find an occasional player outside the Boston Symphony who was superior to the corresponding BSO musician, you would, in fact, not find an orchestra anywhere else that played together as well, both as an ensemble, and in style. Now remember that this remark was made at a time when, by universal consent, the Boston Symphony had the highest percentage of individual virtuosos of any orchestra in the world. The only orchestra on a comparable level, really, was the Philadelphia.

*Which year would this roughly have been?*

It was 1945. Since then other orchestras have climbed up into that super category, but just as Toscanini was imposing standards when he conducted the New York Philharmonic that were just unheard of,

absolutely vigorous perfection, perfect styling, and all that, so Stokowski in Philadelphia was running an open-ended orchestral laboratory, encouraging the players to come up with novel, inventive and very personal solutions to orchestral problems, such as what you do when you are in the middle of a wind solo and you run out of breath? The music wants you to go on. It turned out that Mason Jones—the first horn—and the third horn player had been playing together for so many years that they had developed a perfect identity of tone-quality. When one breathed, the other one would imperceptibly take over the note. When Mason Jones had tanked up again with air, he would come back. You wouldn't hear any entrances at all. You wouldn't detect that two players were playing: it sounded like one player with an absolutely endless breath supply. This, by the way, was undetectable even to an acquaintance of mine who was a bass player in the Philadelphia, and who was standing directly behind the horns in performance and rehearsals. He watched this happening: even he couldn't tell when one was playing and the other was breathing except by watching.

Koussevitzky probably knew how to play more orchestral instruments well than any other great conductor who has ever existed. He was, of course, the world's greatest bass player. So he knew strings inside out, and the BSO string sound certainly proved that. There was a famous occasion when a trombone player was auditioning and Koussevitzky asked for an A-flat minor scale, and the trombone player made a face and said, "Nobody ever asks for that scale." Koussevitzky said, "Give me your instrument." He played the scale, gave it back to him, and said, "Good-bye." Koussevitzky played a great many instruments as a young man. And he only settled on the double bass because of all the instruments he could play, that was the one for which a scholarship was available at the music school when he entered it without a penny.

Another aspect of Koussevitzky's conducting, I think, is crucial to comprehending just how great he was, and that was his extraordinary understanding of the orchestra as an "animal," as an organism, as a beast—how it moves, how it breathes, what it can do—because he asked things from orchestras that orchestras couldn't do prior to his career. The attitude toward the orchestra is crucial because here he knew so many of the instruments from the inside himself. He had a sense of the human side of orchestral playing, and he was able to project an excitement and an ideal that was precise enough so he could harness all of the individual skills of the orchestra; yet each individual man, especially the first-desk soloists, would then produce from his own soul a richness which no one could have told him about. Stokowski also encouraged this sort of thing, for example, in the slow movement of the Shostakovich Fifth Symphony. The basses would regularly get together outside of rehearsals and would work up fingerings and bowings of such incredible subtlety that by the time they were finished, he wouldn't have known how to begin to ask for them. This is the sort of thing Koussevitzky also developed in the orchestra by encouraging, with all of his dictatorial ways in rehearsal, an intensely personal input from the players. Now, contrast that with some conductors who are basically thinking of the orchestra like a big piano. And I would adduce a great conductor like George Szell as an example. Szell knew a great deal about instrumental playing, and, in fact, he probably knew everything you could read in a book. There was a celebrated occasion in which an oboist was completely flummoxed to find the fingering for a very difficult passage, and Szell looked down and told him the right fingering. To know more than your first oboist about oboe fingering is quite a feat, and yet, to me, Szell gave the impression of wanting to make everybody conform only to his own ideas of the piece. He also gave the impression that if he could have played 105

instruments himself at one time, he would have fired the whole orchestra and done the whole show alone. The result was a rather uniform, good sound that came out of Szell's orchestra, whereas in Koussevitzky's case, there was an unbelievable palette of orchestral colors, textures, and sound qualities. He could be rich and deep and German and majestic, even with all those French brass players, or he could be leaner and more delicate, like the French impressionistic sound; or he could create a passionate Russian sound, an entirely different color from the German. I think I never heard one orchestra sound like so many different orchestras, all of them magnificent, as under Koussevitzky's baton.

Now, it's interesting, in that regard, to know what many of the composers said about his treatment of their pieces and what they expected their pieces to sound like. Sibelius and Ravel both commented on that. They both considered Koussevitzky an extraordinarily fine interpreter of their pieces, and both expressed surprise, to some degree, at the wonderfully beautiful way their music came out of his orchestra. If you want to hear what Ravel envisioned, you'd probably listen to the recordings of Ansermet, which are intellectual, and very elegant; they are musical, but they're extremely French in style, and they're at emotional "arm's length." I knew Ansermet when he came to guest-conduct the Boston Symphony. He was a very intelligent man; we corresponded and I nearly studied with him, but he was too busy writing his book on the connection between mathematics and music.

*I always thought there was a certain amount of coldness and distance in his performances, almost a metallic quality of sound.*

He had an elegant, Gallic distance, and Ravel, who was that way himself, loved to keep the world at a distance. I find in Ravel's music this tremendous warmth, and even sensuality, but the interpretation is supposed not to lift the veil over that. He did find Koussevitzky's *La Valse*

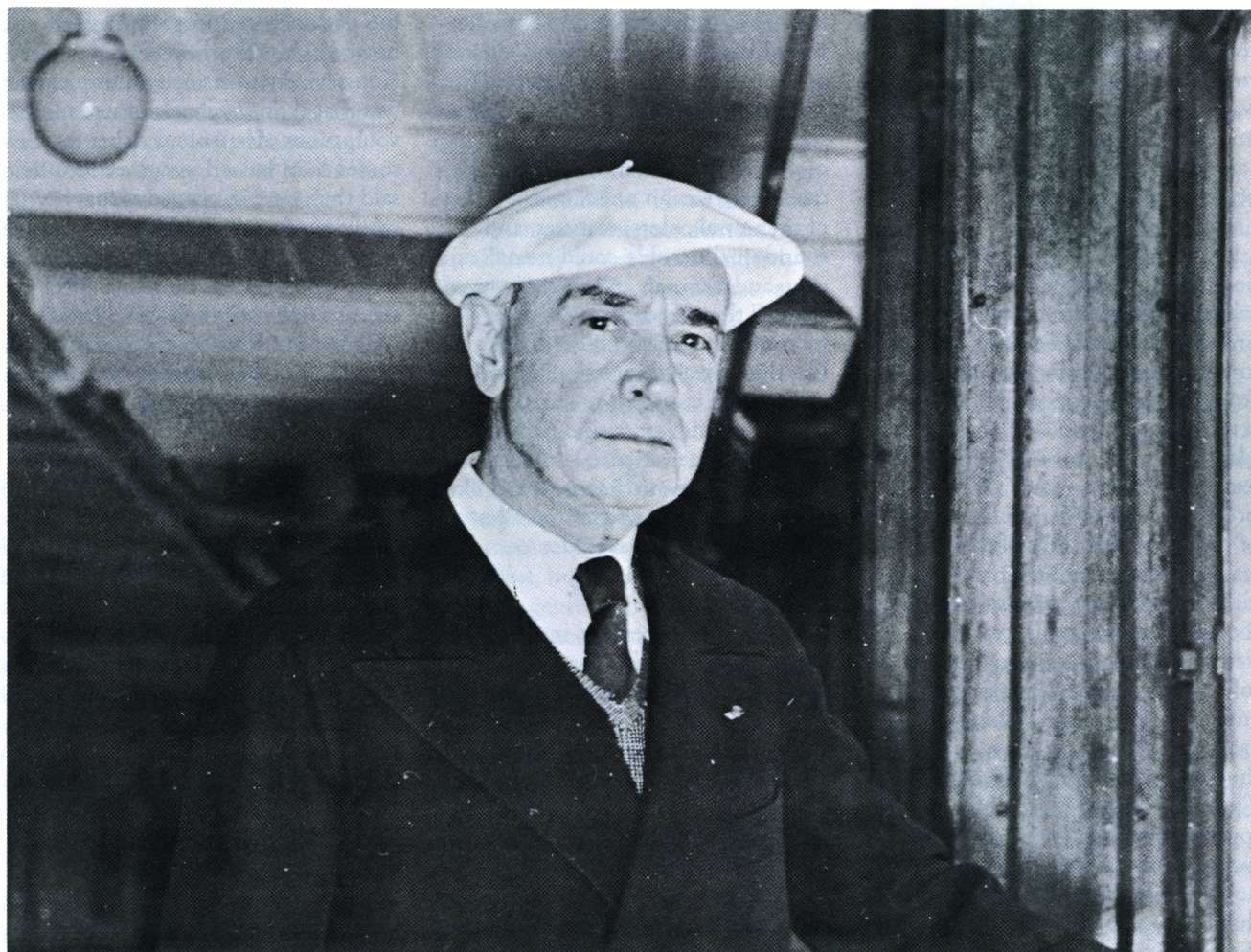
too personal and programmatic; however, his comment on Koussevitzky's versions of his pieces was that they were much more voluptuous, deeper and richer in sound than he had imagined, but he said they were so gorgeous that he wouldn't dream of asking Koussevitzky to change them. In other words, it was more beautiful than he had imagined. Sibelius's judgment of Koussevitzky was that he thought Beecham and Koussevitzky would be the matchless interpreters of his work (though in retrospect, I must say I find Koussevitzky far more compelling than Beecham). In private, however, Sibelius said that Koussevitzky made his symphonies sound more like Tchaikovsky than Sibelius had intended them to sound; but he said they were also more wonderful than he had imagined they could possibly be, and again, he wouldn't *dream* of asking Koussevitzky to alter a single thing in his approach. He found it absolutely marvelous. You see, that's significant. I came to know Samuel Barber a little bit when he came to the rehearsals of the National Orchestral Association in New York where I was studying conducting with Leon Barzin and also playing clarinet and celesta in the orchestra.

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#### *And when was this?*

This was in 1954-1955. We were giving the first New York performance of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* of which I had attended the premiere in Boston. Eleanor Steber commissioned that; I remember even the dress that she wore for the performance, and I recall thinking it was a very fine piece. I came to know it quite well when we were rehearsing it with the National Orchestral Association, and Barber showed up at the rehearsals. My roommate's parents, the Browns, had commissioned his Cello Concerto, so they had introduced me to him in Boston. We talked about both Koussevitzky and Toscanini because both of those conductors had conducted works by Barber. Both maestros were amusingly vindictive about one another. That's a story that's worth telling,

too. Barber told me that Koussevitzky had conducted many of his pieces and had actually premiered four of them, four important ones. I said, "How did he interpret them?" Barber responded, "Absolutely amazingly well." Every single work was rehearsed so scrupulously that every mark on the page (and you know Barber was a meticulously careful score marker) was observed. He had absolutely no fault to find, and I said, "How about the inner spirit of the piece? How often did Koussevitzky get that right?" And Barber said of the first performances, two of them were absolutely, perfectly what the piece should be—he couldn't have imagined them better. I asked, "What kind of a batting average do you find that?" He replied, "Miraculously high." The other pieces were given "just" performances, completely accurate, very conscientiously

prepared and beautifully played. Half of them were perfect, the captured ideal; in his experience, that was unique. Toscanini had done Barber's *Adagio for Strings* on tour with the NBC Symphony, I believe, in South America; then Koussevitzky did a lot more of Barber's pieces. Toscanini at one point was talking to Barber about Koussevitzky because he knew that Koussevitzky had been good to Barber, and Toscanini was thinking of doing the *Pathétique* Symphony, which he had never conducted before. He managed to find Koussevitzky's recording of it, which he had looked for quite awhile; oddly enough, it turned up under his granddaughter's roller skates. He insisted on playing the whole record for Barber, showing him the score and indicating how every single bar was just as wrong as it could possibly be. According to Toscanini, nothing



was right: this was just terrible, and that was impossible, and the whole thing was a sustained calamity, an artistic disaster. This, mind you, of an interpretation which is universally regarded as the finest ever heard in the concert hall, and one of Koussevitzky's dearest and most justified personal triumphs. I have to speak about that recording because having heard Koussevitzky do it three times live, and knowing the emotional wallop that it packed, I then listened to the recording. I had the original 78s, too. It was a very low-fidelity recording, low-fi even for the period. Everything is gorgeously played. Every chord is perfectly blended, the orchestra is immaculately together, and the whole is magnificently planned, but it's an emotional skeleton. If you haven't heard the live performance, you might think it very nice.

*But wasn't that recording—even with its limitations—still at that time considered the greatest?*

I think it was certainly for a great many years. Nowadays, I think of the fact that the Earth stopped moving at the end of those live performances. I mean, nobody breathed for a whole minute; the applause, which was ultimately thunderous, was very slow in starting because everybody was just heartbroken—everybody on stage and everybody in the audience. I have never in my life witnessed such an electrifying silence in the hall as followed every live Koussevitzky performance of the *Pathétique* Symphony. It was unbelievable. This is the performance that Toscanini found so impossible! Well, the shoe was on the other foot when Barber next went to have dinner with Koussevitzky. Koussevitzky said to him, "I understand that Toscanini has been very good to you." And Barber thought to himself, "I wonder what's coming now?" Koussevitzky continued, "Yes, I'm very impressed by Toscanini. He has extremely elegant gestures conducting; he's a very dignified presence in front of the orchestra, most impressive indeed." The members of Koussevitzky's circle were looking very worried because

they couldn't imagine him going on praising one of his arch-rivals. Then Koussevitzky burst out, "But he is no moosician!" And they went on, "Yes, yes, yes, he is no musician!" As for Barber, it was all he could do to keep a straight face, because here were two of the world's greatest conductors busily denigrating each other. Years later, I heard a wonderful story on this subject as told by Klemperer. In the 1930s, if you recall, Klemperer, Kleiber, Walter and Furtwängler were all conducting at the same time in Berlin. What an incredible time that must have been! Klemperer, in his old age, said, "Now all the young conductors are good friends and on a first-name basis. When I was conducting in Berlin with Kleiber and Furtwängler and Walter, we all hated each other. It was much healthier!"

*Did they in fact hate each other or was he just quipping?*

Well, no. That came out as a kind of unwelcome truth. At least he hated all the others; I don't know if they bothered to hate him. I do recall Koussevitzky warmly greeting Bruno Walter in the green room after a guest performance. What was astonishing about that? Why would he not be hospitable, of course? There was a very evident, enormous respect and affection with which he treated Bruno Walter, and I found it very touching. Because here was one great artist fully recognizing and celebrating the greatness of another. I think Walter had that kind of quality which made his colleagues appreciate him: Toscanini had no use for substantially any other conductor, but he liked Bruno Walter a lot.

*I wonder what Koussevitzky's opinion was of some of these other conductors and, for instance, what Stokowski's opinion was of Koussevitzky, since you knew Stokowski so well?*

When I worked with Stokowski, I tried to get around that subject, and Stokowski was very defensive. He very rarely criticized other conductors. He himself had been subject to such a massive, scathing criticism for

his unorthodox interpretations and his rather strange life-style that I think he made it a practice to speak only good of other conductors, even in private. When I mentioned the fact that I'd grown up in Boston, had heard Koussevitzky, and had come to know him a bit, as a boy knows a very busy, very famous older man, Stokowski's only comment was that when he first came to the United States (after all, that was many years ago—Stokowski was twenty-six when he took over Cincinnati), he said the Boston Symphony was a legend for technical perfection. It represented the highest standard of playing in the United States, and he would say no more. I did rejoin that the standards had ultimately slipped because of the BSO's economic problems. And I said, "You and Koussevitzky and Toscanini actually created higher standards than existed in the early part of the 20th century, and recognizably higher standards; and if you want proof of that, all you have to do is listen to recordings of the pre-war Vienna Philharmonic, which was considered the greatest orchestra in Europe." By today's standards, it sounds like a good civic symphony. In accelerandos, you often hear the first desks of strings obviously a little bit ahead of all the rest of the string section, and you won't hear that anywhere except in a civic symphony these days. No, the standards are tremendously higher. But Stokowski didn't want to say anything really bad about anybody because he did things his way, and that was really all he was interested in. When we were working together, and he was having trouble with one of the percussion players, he said that he had fired this man when he was co-director with Bruno Walter in 1949 of the New York Philharmonic, and that Mitropoulos, who then took over, had been persuaded by people to take the man back and had later regretted it. And he said, "Mitropoulos is a good conductor but a weak man. He wanted to be liked by everybody and that's not the way you can conduct orchestras."

*How would you compare Stokowski and Koussevitzky as colorists?*

Stokowski had a legendary control of color, and the difference was that the two conductors achieved their control in very different ways. Koussevitzky obtained his effects in rehearsal from very long, painstakingly detailed verbal explanation and correction, and then by tremendous fervor of exhortation and sheer projection of personality. But for him, rehearsals were long, painful, difficult affairs, and that was partly the result of his very ineffective stick technique. He looked wonderful conducting, but he was not easy to read so he needed a lot of rehearsal. At the most exciting moments, Koussevitzky was impassioned, but he was always dignified; he was always a model of artistic probity and decorum on the podium. Stokowski, on the other hand, was a magician with gesture. He would reach out and with the very first motion of his hands he would create a whole color without saying a word. As a matter of fact, he almost never talked tone color in the rehearsals. When I first worked with him, as his associate conductor—

*And that was when?*

That was 1956. I was still a student, and yet I was his chorus master, rehearsal pianist, librarian, and back-stage conductor for the performances; I had a lot to do in the performances. I expected his rehearsals to be filled with remarks about silken sound and play this on the G-string and do that somewhere else, and here I want to slide with a position shift, and all that sort of instruction. He never said a word about such things, and partly it's because he had his parts marked very carefully before the rehearsal began. I hear that he bought out the Philadelphia Orchestra library when he left after two decades: bought everything they owned because all the parts were marked exactly the way he wanted to do them. He loved free bowing, but I guess there were a lot of indications of fingerings and all of that. Then, if he wanted to get those effects in rehearsals, he would just tell the men to go back to letter B (and he would never give them time to look for it. They would just have to find it in

one second. It's amazing how quickly it worked.). He would reach out his hand, stroke the orchestra, and out would come this *incredibly* beautiful sound without a word spoken. The orchestra I assisted Stokowski with was the Symphony of the Air, which was Toscanini's old NBC Symphony; it was a good orchestra, but it played as dry as can be and very cleanly, as it had played for Toscanini, for whatever it was—seventeen years?—and suddenly Stokowski stepped in front of them and with one beat they were transformed into the old Philadelphia Orchestra. His was the art of gesture, and I remember watching him rehearse the slow movement of the *Pines of Rome* with the strings almost inaudible and his right hand moving almost imperceptibly; nevertheless, it was creating absolutely everything that you were

scarcely hear the beautifully balanced instruments. It's a problem. Koussevitzky had a habit of letting the stick descend very slowly, because he wanted that breathless quality; but that didn't tell you when to come in, and so in rehearsal there were frequently very ragged entrances. At one point, he stopped and complained that it was terribly not together; and he said, "Oh yes, I know what kind of beat you want. You want something like this." And he gave them a karate chop, and of course, nobody dared play a note, because the sound his gesture was asking for was fortissimo and the passage was pianissimo. So he said, "No, you see my way is better. Ven my stick touch the air, you start to play without to notice." Many times, I watched him begin something that was very soft and the hands would

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*"Ven my stick touch the air, you start to play without to notice."*

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hearing. The whole air turned into an electrified, rarefied charge, and the recording of the nightingale, after the clarinet solo, was even too loud: he had to say, "Tell the nightingale she sings too loud." But that was the supreme sound-magic. It was absolutely unearthly, and he said *not one word* to get it. He just worked on the musicians with his hand until they produced it, because his gestures were so hypnotically compelling.

Now Koussevitzky's gestures looked wonderful but they were not easy to read, and so rehearsals were very difficult; there are a lot of funny stories about him trying to start a soft woodwind chord, like the opening of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, which gives trouble to everybody. It has to be perfectly together and so soft that you can

just float down without any upbeat; the orchestra would start to play and nobody would know *how*. It was a mystery, even to other professional musicians. A new first violinist joined the orchestra and couldn't follow this, so he said to the assistant concertmaster, Alfred Krips, "Alfred, how do you know when to begin?" And Krips said, "Well, I don't tell many people this, but actually when his hand starts to go down then I close my eyes, and when I open them again, somehow everybody is playing and I am too." The most amazing thing of all was to watch Koussevitzky begin the Second Suite from *Daphnis et Chloé* of Ravel, because there you have the two flutes playing cascades of notes, and it's supposed to be just the splashing of water; it's early dawn, almost inaudible. You've got strings holding and

the two harps rippling back and forth. The way Koussevitzky began the piece, it was total magic; the stick used to float down and suddenly, the flutes would start from nothing—absolutely out of nowhere. You didn't know how it happened; apparently, James Papoutsakis, the second flute, would look at Georges Laurent, the first, and they'd give a kind of wink together and they'd begin; then everybody would just creep in without knowing how they got in. The result was like no *Daphnis* you've ever heard in your life. It was pure shimmer. Celibidache used to try to get that same effect: instead of telling the flutes to play soft, he used to scream at the strings, who already had almost nothing to do, until the flutes turned white and scarcely dared play at all. Celibidache treated orchestras the way most of us treat Kleenex! To get back to Koussevitzky's rehearsal technique, he would work on an orchestra until things that were impossible happened. Howard Hanson was once attending a rehearsal of one of his pieces with some low trumpet writing, and Koussevitzky insisted that the figuration required the trumpets to be brilliant. Hanson said to himself, every first-year student of orchestration knows that low trumpets can't be brilliant. Well, by the time Koussevitzky was finished with the trumpets, they were brilliant.

Another famous trumpet effect of Koussevitzky's was the *cortège* section in the *Fêtes* from the three Nocturnes for Orchestra of Debussy. The *cortège* section halfway through is a kind of distant march that begins with a fanfare for three trumpets over pizzicato and harp. The way the Boston Symphony did that—when those three trumpets came in—you couldn't believe your ears because they were literally one quarter of a mile down the road. I had never heard such an effect of distance. Usually in a passage of that nature, you hear three trumpets playing so softly that they're walking on eggs. It is almost impossible to avoid a couple of attacks which don't match the others in color or dynamics; any such discrepancy undermines the illusion

of distance. In this particular case, everything was perfectly in tune, perfectly balanced, and next to inaudible. It was trumpets, but so distant you didn't believe your ears. When Munch took over the orchestra, he programmed the same piece in due course of time, and when he got to that section and heard the trumpets play, he nearly fell off the podium. He was good friends with the first trumpet, Roger Voisin, who was a very charming person. Roger and I played together once and we came to know each other; he also lectured at my orchestration classes at Harvard on the trumpet. He related that Munch had said to him, "Roger, tell me: in that pianissimo fanfare in *Fêtes*, what are you using for a mute?" Roger replied, "Well you know, the usual thing." Munch said, "Oh, come on! You can tell me. Your trumpet can't sound that way using a regular mute. You've got some special thing that all you three have invented." Roger insisted, "I've never used a thing like that in my life!" And he couldn't get his boss to understand that they were just using regular mutes. They had been so drilled on that passage, and they had been playing together for so many years, that they didn't have to worry about intonation: they were perfectly in tune and matched, and so they could scale the volume down to the point where it was absolutely extraordinary.

It's amazing how exciting really soft playing can be. I once heard an all-Debussy recital by Gieseeking which he began with the *Children's Corner*, and the *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* was very, very soft at the beginning; and it was so exquisite and so even it was like pearls on velvet. The whole audience went into shock instantly—you couldn't believe anything so soft could be so clear and so beautiful. And that was the impression that I heard from those three trumpets, and that absolutely blew away Charles Munch. He could never believe that they hadn't gotten special mutes.

I heard more stories about the Boston Symphony from my clarinet teacher, Attilio Poto, who was second

clarinet in the Boston Symphony the last couple of years under Koussevitzky. He loved Koussevitzky, and what he had to say about him was, "The old man—God rest his soul—he made you laugh in rehearsal, he made you cry in rehearsal, he said such mean things; but he made you play better than you knew how to play." It was a universal comment on Koussevitzky that great as the Boston Symphony Orchestra of his era was, all the players were playing over their heads all the time. This was said quite specifically by Ralph Gomberg, the first oboe, who actually came in after Koussevitzky retired and, I believe, only played with him for those wonderful two weeks in 1950 when Koussevitzky came back to guest conduct the Boston Symphony after his retirement. When Gomberg retired after many, many years in the Boston Symphony, he was asked about the Boston Symphony—what condition did he find it in, how was it playing, and how did it compare with its early days? His reply was that he thought that the current Boston Symphony was stronger, man for man, than it had been ever. The strength went down to the last player on the last desk of every string—there wasn't a weak link in the chain. He felt that Ozawa, as a conductor, had them playing up to capacity very nicely. And then he was asked about the Koussevitzky era, and mind you, he came in at the very end, but he had known all the people who had played under Koussevitzky, and he had played under Koussevitzky himself during those famous couple of weeks of concerts. He said, "Well obviously, I have to say that there were fabulous players then in the first desks, but not everybody was as good as all the button-soldiers are in the orchestra now." What was the difference? The difference was that whereas Ozawa now has everybody playing up to capacity, in Koussevitzky's day, he had everybody constantly playing *over* capacity. They played better than they knew how to play. They didn't know how they did it. They were always skating on ice, as it were, so thin that there wasn't any ice left.

*But wouldn't that phenomenon, in the course of a performance, be an ongoing source of inspiration for the musicians—they'd be realizing, "My God, we're transcending our abilities."*

Exactly!

*And then you'd feel an amazing electricity and the sense of the spontaneous in a piece being played as if for the first time. Does that help explain that sense of extraordinary excitement?*

As a matter of fact, for that reason they ultimately discounted all of the hard knocks and the harsh things he said in rehearsal because the performances were so transcendent that they were tremendously nourishing. One of the horn players, after Koussevitzky's death, said that while he was alive, he hated him, but Koussevitzky was a great conductor, and they gave such great performances that it was the high point of the horn player's life. When Koussevitzky died I went to his funeral at the Church of the Advent, and some string players for the Boston Symphony played very beautifully during the funeral. Afterwards, I came to know the bass drum player, Nick Sternberg, and I asked him if he'd been to the funeral; he said no, he had seen all too much of that man when he was alive. Koussevitzky had been an absolute devil to work for; and so I dropped the subject and then asked him how he'd liked Ansermet, who had recently guest conducted the Boston Symphony with tremendous success. He had conducted *La Mer*, and Mr. Sternberg's lip curled as he said, "Oh, he talked so much, Ansermet, and he treated us as if we never heard of the piece. And then he conducted it, and it was putrid in comparison to the way we did it under Koussevitzky. I mean, *that* was a great interpretation!" Here he was praising the man of whom he had just said that he'd seen all too much in life, but the enormous pride of what Koussevitzky accomplished eventually overrode absolutely every other consideration.

*Was Koussevitzky more of a taskmaster in that sense than Toscanini?*

No, they were both very fierce and very cruel to the men. Toscanini, of course, in the New York Philharmonic threw people out right and left, so he was hated quite extensively by many of the players. On the other hand, in the NBC Symphony, he never fired anybody. He chose every single man on the list and he never fired one of them. The Personnel Director made changes, but Toscanini personally never fired anybody. If he fought with them, he fought—but he would fight with them for 17 years.

*Wouldn't he have been tempted to fire them, or is it just because he had hired them, he stood behind them?*

He had hired them, and he stood behind his original choices. For all of the cruel things that he said—and he said the worst things anybody had ever said to an orchestra—he was forgiven. In fact, all of them loved and admired Toscanini, and some of them won't even allow you to say that he was a tyrant in spite of all the wounding, terrible things that he said to them, because they all knew that they owed their jobs to him. They were enormously honored by the association. Toscanini was also very old and very famous when this all began, and they were picked by him and chosen, as it were, for a marriage for life musically. Thus, you won't get any of them to say anything but the nicest things about Toscanini. There, by the way, is an interesting comparison. When I was working with the Symphony of the Air, they told me that Toscanini never made any remarks about tone color—that he was fierce about ensemble, phrasing, intonation and all of that, but that he never said a word about sound. Actually, I heard Toscanini on a recorded rehearsal say something about sound to the double basses during a passage that was particularly difficult to get in tune at the end of the first act of *La Traviata*, the end of the party scene. He had the basses play it by themselves because it

wasn't in tune. Finally, he said, "What notes you play? You compose yourselves?" Finally, it was in tune but it was ugly. He stopped the orchestra and he said, "*Bassi! Vinagre, limoni et tutte le cose che fanno uh-h-h!*" (Vinegar, lemons, and all the things that make ugh.) Then they played it again, and it sounded sweet. But in general, he wasn't interested in tone quality. Although the orchestra could play with very beautiful tone, that was a by-product of the music that he was making.

Incidentally, I'd like to comment on the difference of development between Koussevitzky and Toscanini, because we have records from both of them from the same era. They were contemporaries, and they both recorded with the BBC Symphony in the '30s, for example. Some of the records show magnificent work from both of them. My feeling is that Toscanini was interested in clarity and power above all, and when he was a younger conductor, there was a lot more freedom and give-and-take and a lot more richness of sound. As he grew older and became afraid of getting old, his tempi grew faster; everything grew drier. He claimed he'd been poisoned all his life by the German approach to music, by which he meant outrageous liberties. He scrubbed everything so clean and literal that ultimately it became rickety, bandmasterish, insensitive, and much too fast, as if to prove he was still young. After one of his last concerts in London, he was asked by a friend of mine, then a music student, what it must be like to interpret music from the perspective of so many glorious years of experience. Toscanini's reply was revealing: "One is always afraid of getting old and slow." However, I also have to say that even at the very end Toscanini gave occasional performances that were transcendent, and I've heard many of them now on tape in the Museum of Broadcasting. Generally speaking, though, if you want to hear the best Toscanini, you have to go back to the 1930s: either those few recordings of the New York Philharmonic or the ones with the BBC Symphony. As I say, it's always

rather fast; it's always rather clipped, but there's a warmth and a flexibility that later nearly entirely disappeared from his music-making, and quite deliberately so. In Koussevitzky's case, he always tried for the same results musically from performance to performance, and his rehearsals were amazingly consistent. Witness the comment that he always made the same remarks in rehearsal in the same places. Over the years, his interpretations deepened and matured, but at any given time, he would strive for the same specific goal. Now, you don't always achieve it. The temperature is different in the hall one day, one night from the next, and different halls have different acoustics. In general, Koussevitzky was an astonishingly consistent conductor, but over the years his interpretations became more humane and more beautifully inflected. And also more subtle. So I think he grew very considerably. There is talk that in the last couple of years he sometimes pushed the brass too hard, and occasionally it was a little raucous, because old people, who don't hear the higher partials so clearly, tend to want things to be louder. Certainly Toscanini got a fetish about loudness such that he nearly ruptured timpani heads. There are lots of stories about that.

There's one about Koussevitzky's last recording, which was made at the end of his life when he came back for the last time to conduct in Boston for two weeks. One of the concerts ended with the Brahms First and the other one with the Sibelius Second. I spoke to Koussevitzky specifically about the Sibelius because I knew that he had recorded it with the orchestra in the course of the rehearsals. He told me they had to stop for retakes, and he said the particular problem with recording that symphony (as he might have said about almost any Sibelius symphony) was that Sibelius dealt with incredibly long lines in which tension builds slowly over ages of time for a powerfully emotive payoff at the end. If you stopped in the middle, then you had to remember the exact degree of tension that you were at in the course

of the long build-up. That was a hazard in recording Sibelius which was not present in most other recording sessions. However, he said, "Vee played good for the record." He happened to be quite pleased with that recording, and I think he was justified. It's a superb performance. The Brahms First Symphony interpretation was also heaven-storming. It fulfilled absolutely all of my dearest heart's desires for that piece.

*Is that the live performance you heard late in Koussevitzky's career?*

Yes. In fact, after that performance I spoke to him again and urged him to record it, because the Toscanini performance, which was quite a good one with NBC, in the Victor catalog, was getting very old and they needed a new one. That was the 78 performance, anyway. They needed a new one on LP, and I said, "Really, Dr. Koussevitzky, you owe it to posterity to put this down. It's a matchless interpretation," and he said he agreed that he really did want to record it, and he said he would do something about it. Unfortunately, he died before he could do that. I was very pleased that, years later, after I had come to know Madame Koussevitzky quite well (she and I were both living in New York), she quite vividly remembered that conversation. The only other Brahms First Symphony interpretation I've ever heard which equaled Koussevitzky's was another magnificent performance which you also know well, the 1950 Berlin Philharmonic's *Titania Palast* live performance by Furtwängler. It was different from the Koussevitzky but equally amazing, and both of them ended up to be statements about everything that is treasurable and grand in music—a complete, rounded statement of the most profound values imaginable.

An acquaintance of mine played in the Juilliard Orchestra when Koussevitzky came to do the Beethoven Ninth with them, and the orchestra had been immaculately prepared. This must have been, I suppose, in the late '40s—toward the

end of Koussevitzky's career. My acquaintance said that the orchestra had fallen apart at the first rehearsal with Koussevitzky. They couldn't read his stick and couldn't keep together. Koussevitzky was quite severe with them, the way he was with his own orchestra if they were not "up to snuff." The player was a little contemptuous. By that time, orchestral players had become very impatient with conductors whose sticks weren't instantly readable. With rehearsal time being cut progressively back, all of us have learned to be very clear the first time around because the consequences are horrendous if we're not. And Koussevitzky had grown up in an era when there was endless rehearsal time. So here he was, dealing with a well-prepared student orchestra that wasn't used to him at all, and initially they couldn't follow him. The orchestra was chagrined that they were so well prepared and yet fell apart in rehearsal. I said to this player, "What was the performance like?" He replied, "Oh, unforgettable, of course!"

Incidentally, I heard that when Koussevitzky retired, instead of doing nothing, he went off on a whole tour guest conducting all over, and he conducted some great orchestras and some orchestras distinctly not so great. What happened with the not-so-great orchestras is most interesting, because the local conductor usually stayed around to hear what was going to happen and even came to the rehearsals. I heard of a couple of instances (I can't recall the orchestras now) in which the local conductor was deeply flattered that the great Koussevitzky would come to guest-conduct his orchestra, and he went to hear what it could possibly sound like in the performance. What he heard was an amazing replica of the Boston Symphony—its virtuosity, mellowness, fire, flexibility, the whole bit. He was, of course, perfectly thrilled that his modest orchestra had been transformed. And the next week, he stepped triumphantly back on the podium for the first rehearsal, waved

his arms towards his new orchestra and found out that the coach had turned back into a pumpkin.

By the way, speaking of being consistent in the search for artistic ideals, there are two basic approaches in music performance throughout the ages, and they're both very respectable. One of them is Koussevitzky's, which is to think long and hard about the piece and strive to realize your conception the same way every time, and then, over the years, as your ideas deepen, so your interpretation will change. The other one was represented at its highest peak by Wilhelm Furtwängler. Furtwängler would rehearse an orchestra with extreme care, and then in performance he would go into a kind of trance and go searching for whatever the truth of the moment seemed to yield. This is a very dangerous thing to do, and the results were, of course, wildly uneven. On days when he hit his inspiration, those performances are absolutely beyond this world they're so wonderful. And other days, when he didn't hit his inspiration, the results could be very slow and logy. Characteristically, he would slow down and look for meaning, and when he found it, he could sustain a slow tempo that probably no other conductor in the world could get away with. A recent critic in New York referred to Furtwängler's habit of using the slow movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as an opportunity to converse with angels. On the other hand, if you know several Furtwängler recordings of the same piece, you know how very different they could be, one from another. I own two different recordings by Furtwängler of the Beethoven Fifth, and one of them is very fast and one is very slow.

*It's the Vienna that's the great one, as I remember.*

The Vienna is the great one; that's the slow one. Exactly. Furtwängler's improvisations were based upon very, very solid rehearsal. Beecham also loved to improvise in performance, and his ideal of rehearsal was to get it just far enough so that there would be

no traffic accidents, no wrong notes, so that he knew what the men were going to do and so that they *didn't* know what *he* was going to do. That kept them on the edge of their chairs. But that also required that Beecham really stand up and take control, which he was perfectly capable of doing; some days, however, he was just relaxing and enjoying himself and things went to pieces. Similarly, Munch loved to improvise—after all, he played concertmaster for Furtwängler, I believe, in Leipzig in the Gewandhaus. But his improvisations, unfortunately, were not based on rehearsal. He didn't like to rehearse, and he would stand turning the pages of the score in the rehearsal saying "*Pas nécessaire, pas nécessaire!*" In the early days, when they were still full of Koussevitzky's ferocious discipline and meticulous preparation, the orchestra players welcomed this because suddenly school was out. In the performance, Munch could control the orchestra and really inspire them, but he was a very erratic personality—lovely man, by the way, a truly charming person—and when he was "on," he was wonderful. And then when he wasn't "on," he wouldn't even bother to give them the minimum stick work that they needed and so the orchestra was in danger of falling apart. They came to resent that. Oh, they always liked Munch personally, but they came to resent that they became known as the "Sleeping Giant" of American symphonies. It was said that Munch "guest-conducted" the Boston Symphony for thirteen years because he never subjected them to the same kind of grinding discipline that Koussevitzky did. In the early years of Munch, they were so well disciplined they didn't need that. Later on, things began to slip, not because the orchestra couldn't play well but because it needed to have its "shoes shined," as it were, and he didn't want to take the trouble to do that. Occasionally, he'd come a real cropper because he wouldn't rehearse and would depend upon the inspiration of the moment, and the inspiration wasn't there. Well, you couldn't even keep together. Whereas in Koussevitzky's case, the stick may not

have been clear, but the musical intent was crystal-clear, and the orchestra fought like mad, like a chamber music ensemble, to keep together. The incredible ensemble of the Boston Symphony, which was legendary, derived partly from the consistency of Koussevitzky's artistic vision, his tremendous moral fervor, his enormous projection, and partly from the orchestra's practice of keeping together despite his uncertain stick—well, the stick was not uncertain. The stick always made the same gestures, as I understand, in the same places. So if you didn't catch it the first time, you caught it the fifth, and that was what you were going to get in concert. He wasn't like some people who just forget to beat in concert and just try to live the music privately. Koussevitzky was always projecting it, and the players made up with the chamber music sixth sense for what they figured out they weren't going to get from the stick. That's why it was so essential that Koussevitzky, in rehearsal and performance, was so consistent in what he wanted. Once in a while, there'd be a passage like one in the Sibelius Sixth that is very improvisational. And he said to the men in rehearsal, "In this particular passage, I really don't know what I'm going to do. You'll have to follow me." But that was in marked contrast to his general approach to rehearsals, and the rehearsals paid off.

Also, the Boston Symphony tuned unnaturally "high" in Koussevitzky's era. They're now down to 442, like almost every other American orchestra. But in his day, they'd tune 444, and I think that came directly from the fact that when he reformed the orchestra, he had a core of French wind players, and in Paris, they tuned up outrageously high because the string sound in Paris then was very thin. With no richness, you tend to tune high for brilliance. If you have good richness, you can go lower. In Boston, they had both, but the standard happened to be set by the very high tuning pitch the wind players brought with them from Paris, and so everybody else had to conform. That meant some of the

wind players had to shave a millimeter or two off their different barrel joints or whatever. My own clarinet teacher, Attilio Poto, when he joined the Boston Symphony, found it very hard to play up that high in his instrument. Even pushed in all the way, it was still on the edge of being flat. There was one moment when he was doing the slow movement of the Brahms Fourth, with the two clarinets in sixths and thirds and in the most sensitive register, right around the throat notes, where it's always very hard to get perfectly in tune. Koussevitzky insisted on absolute perfection of intonation.

By the way, he also insisted on absolute perfection of the virtuoso passages, but he would not drive the orchestra up the wall in rehearsal the first day or so. He would expect them to woodshed those passages and even did not have to refer to it. They knew they had jolly well better be clean as a whistle, but he didn't waste time screaming at them if the difficult spots didn't come out perfectly the first time; they would come out perfectly later on. He knew that, and there was that kind of working trust with the orchestra. About intonation, however, he was merciless at all times. This Brahms Fourth passage was not going well; they had a rehearsal break and the two clarinet players stayed there, Valerio and Poto, working on that section and trying to get it in tune. One was just a little sharp and one was a little flat and the result was painful; most people probably wouldn't have known anything was too wrong but Koussevitzky's ears were very keen. So ultimately, the two men ended up exchanging barrel joints, and after the rehearsal resumed Koussevitzky went right back to that spot. Then it was perfectly in tune, so Koussevitzky put down his baton, looked at them, smiled, and said rather loftily, "So, now is gut. But why must we have skendals?" So that was a problem with the high tuning in his day which was a little unusual.

As an interpreter, Koussevitzky had probably the widest range of any of the great conductors. We have already spoken of the fact that the

orchestral sound could vary enormously from style to style. He could be very German, very Russian, very French; he could be quite Nordic with Sibelius. The characteristic sound was one of exceptional beauty, extreme clarity, and enormous flexibility of dynamics. And the emotional range corresponded to that: that is to say, he could project austere grandeur; he could project fulminating passion like very few conductors (remarkably few could reach that level of emotional intensity); he could be enormously elegant. As a matter of fact, his whole approach to music-making was elegant, and he refused, in general, to allow the orchestra to make noise of any sort. Even the biggest sounds had to be beautiful and musical-sounding. And he could be very amusing. His *Till Eulenspiegel* was actively funny.

fact that he not only played it but also commissioned it. And that is perfectly true. On the other hand, many of the great interpreters, people like Bernstein, were always giving enormous credit to Koussevitzky as a champion of young musicians.

By the way, here is a comment on Koussevitzky's opinion of other conductors. When Bernstein got a chance to work with Reiner at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, he was a little leery about telling Koussevitzky this for fear that Koussevitzky would consider this disloyalty, going to another famous name for study. But Bernstein nevertheless said, "I have had this opportunity, what do you think?" And Koussevitzky replied, "I advise you to go and pay close attention to absolutely every word that Fritz

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## *In Koussevitzky's case the stick may not have been clear, but the musical intent was crystal-clear.*

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And he could project real mystery, tenderness and a special kind of compassion, which I think was one of the most touching legacies that he left as an interpreter.

He was also famously curious about new music and supportive of it and new musicians. He was said to be a very egocentric person, but he was enormously helpful to probably a wider range of young musicians and performers than anybody else you could name. Stokowski was also enormously helpful. Toscanini was remarkably *unhelpful* to anybody except Guido Cantelli; that was quite a notable part of Toscanini's career. But Koussevitzky was a great champion of new music and new musicians. Now people tend to think of him as significant largely because of his championship of new music—the

Reiner says to you. Mr. Reiner is in possession of the very highest European traditions." That was truly generous. Koussevitzky was asked to give an opinion, not for the gallery, not for his fan club, but as to what he really thought about an opportunity. I think Koussevitzky's generosity, warmth, love, kindness, his interest in helping creative people and in being creative—these were the outstanding characteristics that I observed in him. Stokowski, whom I came to know very well when I was much older, was also a fascinatingly intelligent man and helped many young people—he helped me—but he was essentially an aloof person. And his pose of wisdom and kindness was likewise very impersonal. When you got to know him you could see that ultimately he was much happier to be alone. He had

hewers of wood and drawers of water who fetched and did errands for him, and they all just adored him. But, in fact, he wanted to be in the position where he needed nobody. Now, Koussevitzky was just the opposite. He loved people, and he loved being around people. He loved to share. His music making was sharing and loving, a combination of strength and beauty, which, to me, defines the essential qualities of any great music. And that was the quality of the man. In rehearsal he could be very severe. He could say dramatic things that were apparently very unkind, but this was all done in the service of the music, and he loved music more than he loved power. And I would say that, ultimately, the reason why Toscanini tended to dry up in his last years was that the struggle between music and power ultimately was won by power. And in Koussevitzky's case, music won out over absolutely everything.

*When you are talking about power, you are talking about the power that a conductor has, rather than the power that the music has.*

That is right. It is the sense of command presence. Now, all these men had it to a very great degree. Furtwängler, Beecham, Stokowski, Toscanini, Walter: when those men entered a room, you stood up to attention, because some great person had walked in. When they made an appearance on stage, a prophet was there. And their command over the orchestra was, in one sense, necessary for them to do what they did. But I remember Toscanini and Koussevitzky particularly as men who, when they walked out on stage, owned a whole lot more than the orchestra. They owned the chairs, the orchestra, they owned the stage, they owned every chair that the audience sat in, and they owned the audience too. It was really quite thrilling. In Toscanini's case, one of the men who played with him for many years, and became a good friend of mine, told me that Toscanini's warmth was passionate but impersonal. He compared it to sex without love.

*Ah. But you feel that in his music.*

I think you can feel it, especially as he grew older. The fascination with power, and that means power over people—that means outside of music as well. Whereas, in Koussevitzky's case, I had in his presence the most enormous sense of his sharing and giving, and the delight that he took in it. I think that generosity was perhaps the outstanding characteristic of his music. And here is another interesting thing. We were talking earlier about Ravel and Sibelius, and that he made their music sound richer and perhaps more passionate than they intended, but it was so beautiful they wouldn't change a thing. I have, in the past, argued that the conductor or interpreter who makes a work sound better than you have ever heard it sound is merely revealing the truth of the work, and not putting anything added or adventitious onto the work. And I think in general, that is a sound statement. But I have to say that no one has ever made the Berlioz *Harold in Italy* sound as good musically as he did. And I listen to other people doing the piece, I study it, and I think it is just a collection of pretty tunes. It is really very badly put together, orchestrated by genius, but basically a glamorously orchestrated junk-pile. When you listen to Koussevitzky perform it, you are quite convinced it is great music. He somehow lifted it up to a whole different level and that seems to upset my theory. You can't play a piece better than it is. But in that particular work, I have to admit with some chagrin that Koussevitzky did just that. With Koussevitzky's enthusiasm for all different kinds of music, in every case one felt there was a personal statement of intense loyalty and ideals that he was making through his interpretation. They are all philosophical statements in some way, even the light entertainment pieces, which some people regret have been lost from the standard symphonic repertoire; I mean lighter works like the *Danse macabre*, the *1812 Overture*, Rossini Overtures. They used to turn up on pops programs. But now pops programs

are exclusively devoted to movie scores or people like Frank Sinatra and Barbara Streisand. And so these light classics never get performed at all.

*They can be wonderful; the Strauss Waltzes, for instance, are gems.*

Absolutely. And conductors like Furtwängler used to love to include a lighter item at the end of the program.

*I think Fiedler was a greater conductor than most people give him credit for.*

Exactly so. But nowadays you have to end with a long-faced Mahler symphony, or you are nobody. So the whole range of light classic repertoire has simply disappeared down the drain. Nobody's playing it, and that is a great loss to music. Koussevitzky and Beecham, of course, were in their element with this sort of thing. So was Stokowski. So was Toscanini. He could do the Rossini Overtures like nobody on earth. He could do von Suppé Overtures, again, absolutely superbly. And it is a great loss that modern conductors consider all of this material beneath them.

*Did Koussevitzky have any comment about Furtwängler that you ever heard?*

Never. The conductor in Germany that Koussevitzky mentioned with such relish was Nikisch. Nikisch had been conductor of the Boston Symphony some years ago. And Koussevitzky had gotten to know Nikisch in Germany and admired him tremendously. So did Furtwängler. Koussevitzky used to say that he considered himself the continuation of Nikisch's art. Nikisch was, like Stokowski, a man who could reach out without a word and transform an orchestra, mesmerize an orchestra, and enchant it. But, Stokowski said to me, when I asked him about Nikisch (whom he had heard), that he was an amazing conductor, but a lazy one. Nikisch didn't like to rehearse. He didn't like the hard work that went into guaranteeing a good performance. He relied



on his ability to take over with his incredible stick technique, to create a performance out of thin air. Stokowski indicated that was not artistically responsible: Nikisch should have required a more thorough preparation. But Nikisch was a very generous and lovable personality. Koussevitzky admired him enormously, and Nikisch had told him that if he went to America, he should conduct the Boston Symphony: that was the only orchestra that was really good enough for him. He was very complimentary about Koussevitzky's early concerts conducting in Berlin. Although Koussevitzky said at one point that he had studied with Nikisch, he never took lessons; he just watched, he devoured Nikisch with his eyes to see what he could learn from him. Koussevitzky, as you remember, had never gotten the diploma of what they call the "Svobodnyi Khudozhnik" (Free Artist), which meant that you had mastered all of the theoretical subjects in the Conservatory, after which you could go and do anything in music. He never, to his dying day, knew the theory of harmony. However, he had an incredible innate musicianship, and he knew the function of harmony; he knew exactly where it was heading, and the men of the orchestra told me that he could pick wrong notes out of anything. Remember, he conducted nearly everything symphonic. One of my professors in college, Alan Sapp, a very methodical person, had done a review of Koussevitzky's repertoire, thinking that while Koussevitzky appeared to play everything, surely there were major holes that would show up under a systematic examination. Professor Sapp was amazed to discover there was not a single major piece of any value that didn't turn up with almost mathematical regularity in Koussevitzky's programs. Of course, Koussevitzky played his favorites more frequently. Some of the repertoire that he did people don't do anymore; and conversely, there are some things that have come to the fore that now you are expected to do that nobody was doing then. But of the known standard repertoire of the time, Koussevitzky had

probably the biggest of any conductor. Beecham and Stokowski did a lot with repertoire as well.

*Did Koussevitzky ever comment, as far as you know, on Stokowski?*

He did, but not to me. Of his two main rivals, he said one conducts overtures by von Suppé and the other one conducts for the movies. Stokowski, he thought, was a very fine craftsman but based too many of his interpretations on sheer erotic appeal. And Koussevitzky felt that that was an artistic limitation.

*But, still, sex is a major driving force: a great performance can be like a great sexual experience.*

All great performances have such incredible life force that that has to be a component of it. But that shouldn't be the preeminent focus. That was one of the troubles with Toscanini: he became obsessed with power. Not simply sexual power, although that was a part of it, but political control, personal control, domination. Power. Koussevitzky had a lot of personal magnetism. But Toscanini was interested in total domination. And that is a different story altogether.

*What was unique that Koussevitzky can teach us today?*

What I hear now in the work of great conductors of that era—even Reiner—is that in those days conductors stayed on their podiums and polished orchestral discipline week in and week out for most of the year. Today, though, you generally can't get a major conductor to stay with his orchestra for more than twelve weeks a year anywhere in the world. They want to jet off and do their guest engagements. But Koussevitzky used to say that lazy conductors don't deserve to conduct great orchestras. As far as he was concerned, to qualify as a hard-working conductor, you have to learn a lot of pieces, really work them out, and keep insisting on the highest possible orchestral standards. One thing that you hear as a result in Koussevitzky's recordings is that every chord is perfectly tuned,

perfectly balanced. Instruments do not stick out unless they are solos. Sections play as a block. They are also emotional building blocks. They are remarkably unified in their ensemble work, in their section work. Even though you may say the orchestra rank and file is better now than it was in those days, you do not have that kind of totally unified orchestral playing today.

I think also that Koussevitzky's outstanding characteristic as an interpreter is the combination of fanatical discipline and heart, inspiration and flaming excitement, the freshness of that super-rehearsed umpteenth performance of a Brahms symphony. You hear the ultimate in dignity and majesty. You hear the ultimate in perfect passion. It is all under control, fresh, and rigorously rehearsed. So you are not dependent upon a flashy artist blaring out a finale that is going to bring the audience to its feet. Everything is thought through. The orchestral mechanism is incredibly oiled, buffed, shined, loved, and kept in perfect order. And there is the sense of the enormous emotional relevance of what is happening. In Koussevitzky's presence, you were very conscious of the fact that this was the most important place in the world to be. When he was conducting, this was the greatest thing that was going on in the world in absolutely any field of human endeavor, anywhere! You were there, and you were witnessing it. And he could do that in rehearsal, too. One of the reasons why he got so testy with the orchestra when he wasn't getting perfection—some envious people said he simply screamed until the music got wonderful (though many conductors screamed without getting anything)—was that he produced a sense of occasion for every rehearsal (and so did other great conductors, of course). This was tremendously important for what he was doing. He was building toward a major human statement every time. Now, I would say that in Koussevitzky's case, the performances, intense as the rehearsals were, were always greater. When I was with the NBC Symphony—the

Symphony of the Air—they said their greatest performances were always the dress rehearsals.

When I was in London, I spoke to Harold Lawrence with the London Symphony. He told me Szell had come to town and just conducted the BBC, and they had five rehearsals. He insisted on every one. The orchestra was playing so magnificently that after three rehearsals they begged him to eliminate the other two. But Szell liked to pick, so he picked and picked. By the time he was through, the musicians were so bored that they were missing notes in the performance. After Szell's death, a book came out written by the first desk players of the Cleveland Orchestra. They all admired him deeply, but they said that the best playing they ever did was in the first rehearsal. Szell was one of those who liked parts very meticulously marked, so that you knew exactly what was going to happen; since he would conduct all the way through without stopping in the first rehearsal, the players had a sense of a fiery freedom and an improvisational vitality which was never recaptured after he took the thing apart like a watch and then put all the parts together again—or sometimes failed to do so.

Now, Stokowski said, when I worked with him, that he preferred the dress rehearsal to the performance because there was nobody present to cough, rattle programs, and jangle jewelry, and there was nobody who wasn't perfectly concentrating on the music and the music alone. However, Stokowski was such a showman that I can't believe, knowing him well, that he wasn't tickled pink with the fact that he could turn an audience on its ear. In Koussevitzky's case, by contrast, the rehearsals were intense, but they built to performances that left everybody absolutely worn out and wrung out. I remember so many times going out of a Koussevitzky performance thinking that my feet didn't touch the ground, and nobody else's did either. One could scarcely speak. You walked out of Symphony Hall and the world was changed. It was a different world; it even looked

different. You weren't the same, so the world wasn't the same. These transforming experiences happened many times. I am sure they happened with Furtwängler. I know they did with all the greats. Koussevitzky was the one conductor whose work I knew perhaps the best in those days, certainly, but coming back to his work years later through recordings I am being made aware that there is simply nobody who has equaled many of these interpretations. When he was conducting music close to his heart, there was really nobody who could touch him.

*Which pieces would you point to?*

Well, first, all of the Brahms' symphonies, except the Second, I would say. Here is a point about Munch's improvisational qualities. I heard Munch do two live performances of the Brahms Fourth in two different years. Both were unbelievably moving and beautiful, and even more personal than Koussevitzky's very majestic, splendid performance. And yet both of Munch's recordings of it are thin, scrappy, French, and not even in the ball park. They are very disappointing. Koussevitzky's Brahms Third Symphony—both live and on disc—has never been equaled by anybody. The Fourth Symphony is also a very fine performance.

*Isn't it a welcome indication that RCA has at long last begun to reissue at least a few of Koussevitzky's performances?*

They know they have a major artistic legacy in him. He recorded pieces that nobody else could do as well. I think, though, no matter how you remaster some of the '30s performances, there is a limit to what you are going to get. An instance that comes to mind is the Sibelius Fifth Symphony—no one has ever matched Koussevitzky's interpretive understanding of this piece. That is a fine recording just as it is. But I also remember two live performances that were much more sublime in Symphony Hall. The ending of that symphony grew to a point where you didn't think the orchestra could play

any louder, but it kept up a continual crescendo of ever more beautiful sound, up to an absolute emotional wipeout level. So, the recording of the Sibelius Fifth is a very valuable document. Certainly *Harold in Italy* was superbly recorded, and even today, I think, sounds magnificent. Even the recording delivered the same kind of punch that I remember in concert. Incidentally, Toscanini scorned this recording also. He wanted to record the same piece with the same viola soloist, William Primrose, and when Victor would not let him—since Koussevitzky's recording was so successful—Toscanini shook his head in pity for “poor Primrose!” The *Daphnis*—

*That, of course, is out now. It has been re-issued.*

How fortunate that is, because I think again that interpretation was also criticized by some critics, like Virgil Thomson, for making it much too personal and too sexy.

*It is pretty sexy. That is reissued with the Pictures.*

*Pictures* is an old recording, from 1930. Koussevitzky commissioned the orchestration of that piece and did a recording as quickly as he could. A wonderful, wonderful interpretation. All the winds sound extraordinarily French. The sound quality is quite good, although Koussevitzky couldn't achieve his full concert fortissimos in low-fi. That piece is a very exterior work and I think depends a lot on hi-fi excitement. There is not a great deal of emotional depth, but Koussevitzky provides unusual continuity and charm.

*I agree. What, by the way, do you think of Stokowski's dazzlingly imaginative version of Pictures vis-à-vis Koussevitzky's?*

Stokowski told me he thought Ravel's orchestration was superbly brilliant but not Slavic enough for his taste. The only problem with Stokowski's version is that it concentrates on the grotesque and immense



*Pierre Monteux, Koussevitzky, and Charles Munch*

elements of the work. Stokowski loved everything to do with doom bells and demons, as in the *Baba Yaga* section. Some parts of the piece come off extremely well, other elements much less so. There is an overwhelming crunch of force and darkness which, to me, is a little disturbing because they remind me of Toscanini's overall search for demonic power. Stokowski had a fascination with the primitive, the bizarre, the faintly satanic, the dark, and the exotic. All of those are perhaps legitimate fields for expression, but the problem with Stokowski as an interpretive artist was that his concerns were not the fundamental spiritual concerns of the great European repertoire. He was primarily interested in power and color. Koussevitzky commanded, I think, as many colors as Stokowski, but Stokowski got them more easily than

anybody. And he concentrated, as I have known from countless rehearsals, on color and tone to an unbelievable degree. He could hear which one of the violas had to play more. And yet when he was listening for that, wrong notes would escape him. Conductors tend to hear what they are listening for. And so I found that Stokowski was matchless in his way, but he was also concentrating on material that was not in the basic greatest European tradition—he was a fabulous conductor of showpieces. But Koussevitzky had it all. He could do the light material; he could do the showpieces; he could do the roast-beef German repertoire really splendidly.

Oh, here is another thing I recall him saying when we were in Tanglewood all those years ago and I was staying at his house, Serenak. He

loved Bach and Mozart, and conducted them with great relish. I heard him say then that if he had his way, he would retire and conduct nothing but Bach and Mozart because he found that all of music was in those two composers—that they were absolutely inexhaustible. I marveled to hear him say that because, first of all, although his tastes were very catholic in music, his greatest successes were in the romantic and early modern repertoire. No question about that. So I didn't question the sincerity of his admiration for these two composers and his wish to devote more time to them, but I couldn't see him giving up his Tchaikovsky, Brahms and Ravel. I never thought his Mozart was particularly stylistically wonderful, though the Bach, inauthentic by today's standards, was still very meaningful music-making. But, you know, what he was saying

about Bach and Mozart was totally sincere. He confided to a very close friend of mine, Mrs. John Alden Carpenter, that at one point he found Mozart's music very difficult to do, and he said he felt that he himself was not the ideal interpreter. There were things about the style that simply escaped him. The timing of Mozart has to be absolutely perfect—it is very unforgiving. And he said, "My orchestra plays well together, but somehow or another, I don't feel that I am the ideal interpreter of Mozart."

*I have heard criticism of Koussevitzky to the effect that his sense of structure wasn't always as strong as it could be.*

Well, you can say that.

*And I don't know if that would relate, then, to his ability to do Mozart as opposed to certain more romantic composers.*

You can point to individual interpretations in which that is true. But I also say that if you examine the Brahms and Sibelius symphonies, in which structure is paramount—

*Yes. And, of course, he brings structure out of chaos with Harold in Italy.*

Exactly. And remember his success with the Tchaikovsky Symphonies, which are highly passionate but still structured like the great German masterpieces. Since Tchaikovsky wasn't one of the Mighty Handful, he was criticized in Russia at the time for being based too much upon German scholastic models of structure. And to us, of course, that is one of the things that makes the Tchaikovsky Symphonies so marvelous. They are tremendously Russian, and yes, they are superbly structured, as only the Russians or the Germans knew how to do. This music was close to Koussevitzky; I think you will not find better interpretations of it anywhere.

*Tchaikovsky's, you mean?*

The Tchaikovsky, and, as I say, the Brahms is wonderful. Koussevitzky's *Tragic Overture* was fabulous. I am sorry that he never recorded that. I listened to him rehearsing it once, and it was absolutely the best interpretation I ever heard. His Brahms Violin Concerto with Zimbalist was magnificent, both for soloist and conductor; it is a pity he never recorded it, either. I never heard him conduct the second Brahms Piano Concerto; Beveridge Webster told me that when he played it with the BSO, in the finale Koussevitzky made an unrehearsed accelerando which left Webster sweating to keep up. That was a rare departure from Koussevitzky's usual dependability: I'm sure it was exciting, though.

movement's spiritual solace seemed unusually apt and refreshing. Pianist and conductor relished the different moods of the finale—the Hungarian swagger of the rondo theme, fierce and at the same time playful, and the light-hearted contrasts to it. As in the first movement, they created a sense of flowing coherence that eliminated all the structural awkwardnesses of the piece—the tenuous formal connections between sections, the grandly proclaimed second theme that is promptly dumped, the cadenza near the end which usually destroys the momentum built up and thus robs final bars of their effectiveness. Hess kept up the intensity and momentum throughout the short cadenza and made it part of the race to the glorious conclusion. For once, the ending was overwhelming. The audience responded with delirium to

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## *Koussevitzky's essential characteristic was his generosity of communication—sharing.*

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Koussevitzky's interpretation of the first Brahms Piano Concerto with Myra Hess was unusually fast in the opening movement—initially, one thought too fast. But as it continued, all of its structural problems in the movement—its excess of thematic material, excessive length, rigid imposition of textbook sonata form upon a narrative drama—all melted away under Koussevitzky's headlong passion. The music acquired both emotional and structural coherence, and Myra Hess—swept along in the lava flow, playing no doubt faster than she wished—produced an unaccustomed titanic volume of sound in addition to her usual nobility and sensitivity. The coda generated an unprecedented excitement that stampeded the audience into a frenzy of applause, and quite rightly. After that, the second

this inspired collaboration. When Koussevitzky, deeply moved, gave Myra Hess a big kiss, the staid old ladies of the Friday afternoon audience let out an unprecedented whoop of delight. Koussevitzky was not usually good at following a soloist, and I think he was probably the leader here interpretatively, which was not inappropriate in this symphonic concerto. I have certainly never heard Hess play on other occasions with such monumental dimension, fine artist though she always was.

When he was conducting music that was close to him, the structural parts came out simply wonderfully. Just wonderfully. Everybody has his strong points and his weak points. A conductor like Koussevitzky, whose repertorial sympathies were so

enormously broad, can't expect to be preeminent in absolutely every area. But even Toscanini, who was so structurally minded, has recordings of major German symphonies in which he is dry as dust, and you can see the harness, but there is no horse.

*Yes. How crucial is empathy with the music!*

Exactly.

*And being inspired by it, which gives you that superb, supreme power of concentration that pulls you through and pulls your interpretation compellingly together.*

Yes, and this is the point that Stokowski made in an interview with the BBC many years ago, when he was asked where he got his interpretive ideas. He said, well, of course, he studied the score and analyzed it very carefully, but, ultimately, his interpretive ideas came out of his own instincts. That is the only place they can come from. And the young interviewer just jumped all over that—how about the standard canons of interpretation, the accepted traditions, etc.? Stokowski said, “Nonsense!” If it doesn't come from your own heart, it doesn't mean a thing, no matter how well-schooled it is. And even if your taste is bad—and his own was, on occasion—you are stuck with it. That is who you really are. You can't do anything that is worthwhile, unless it is an emanation of your own self.

*What you say is interesting because nowadays many people talk about art being a manifestation by necessity of sociopolitical conditions. How does this affect a conductor performing? Ultimately, you don't think about those things, do you? You feel and live the music.*

I think Bruno Walter had it right when he said you start with the greatest possible humility and reverence for the masterpieces, you study the scores, you take seriously what they tell you, you look for all the markings and indications, and then you take the piece inside you

and digest it. After a long time of patient and very humble study, the piece becomes a part of you. And, in the end, when you get up to perform it, all humility is gone, because you are so unified with that piece, or at least as much of it as you can understand, that it becomes your piece; you wrote it. It is you. And it is your own soul you are giving out to the people. I think that is a very honest, truthful, accurate and profound description of what goes on with a great interpreter. If you don't believe that, if you think that the conductor is simply a traffic cop who is reading the flyspecks off the page, then you are asking for a very impersonal reading. And let me tell you that there are many conductors who view themselves that way, or who give the impression; that doesn't mean that Toscanini was bad, because he was a great conductor. But on a bad day, you get somebody like Toscanini who has the vitality of a horse, who is lashing the orchestra into an uninformed literal rendition of what is on the page. You know, that has tremendous personality in itself. It is not a very nice personality, but I say that you can usually recognize a Toscanini performance on records if you tune in somewhere in the middle; whereas a Koussevitzky performance will be so different, depending on the style of the composer, that you may have trouble in guessing who is conducting (except that it is probably performed magnificently).

*Well, that point of humility and love, I think, is very important, because one has to be humble in front of great works.*

Exactly. But you also have to dredge up something from your own life, from your own experience, your own heart, which tells you specifically what it is about this great music that makes it so important to you. Because really that is what the people are going to hear. A few years ago, during the time of great fascination for scrupulous observance of the text, I remember a New York music critic who commented, “The young people coming up are giving extremely accurate renditions of what is on the

page. What they forget is that we, who are in the audience, require to know of these performers what it is about these pieces that makes them love them.”

*And you feel that doesn't come through as much as it could.*

It really doesn't with some of the younger performers. The pianists, thank goodness, have stopped training just for dry typewriter technique. Now they are playing real legato again, yet these young performers still have to feel their way into pieces. They may well be reluctant to superimpose a limited life experience on top of a mature masterwork. But basically, we are stuck with the fact that our performances and our interpretations are not going to be much better than our own life experience and understanding of them. Because, as I say, if you just give a literal reading of the piece, that is a statement for interpretation, too, and it is pretty dry. There is a story about Samuel Goldwyn: somebody reads him a plot or an outline of a movie and Goldwyn doesn't say anything. And the man says, “I came this far and I read you my outline and you don't give me any answer?” Goldwyn says, “Well, no answer is also a kind of answer.” So, lack of interpretation is also a kind of interpretation, and it is one that we have heard a lot of in recent years. And, frankly, it doesn't do much for the piece. If you don't love it, if you don't understand it, and if we don't find out in the audience why, how you understand it, and why you love it, then simply going over the notes is not going to do a great deal for us. One of Stokowski's main points was that music is not a white page with black dots: music is what happens when somebody transforms these pages into a living communication in sound. He was right. And I would say Koussevitzky's essential characteristic was his generosity of communication—sharing.

*And you think that comes through in the recordings?*

In abundance. More so, of course, in the later recordings and the hi-fi, and more so even then, in our memories of the live performances. I used to think that I was romanticizing my picture of Koussevitzky, that in the early days, of course, it was a romance of getting to know this great music. Probably any good performance of the masterworks I would have found thrilling. But then I came to know the repertoire well, I came to know many other conductors' interpretations. Then I would go back to hear Koussevitzky and I realized, "This is more wonderful than anything." Two years after Koussevitzky retired from the Boston Symphony, he came back to conduct two weeks of unforgettable concerts. And I recall thinking, "Well, I have learned a lot about music in the meantime. Is he going to look to me as great as I remember? Or is he going to appear strangely shrunken?" Well, this is a very important thing I hadn't mentioned to you before. Charles O'Connell, in his book *The Other Side of the Record*, mentions that when Koussevitzky appeared on stage, he was an austere, dignified, almost patriarchal figure who reminded O'Connell of the last figure in a long ecclesiastical procession, in which the most venerable and the highest-ranking ecclesiastic appears in the end. Well, that was quite true. But I had observed something that nobody else has ever commented on, that when Koussevitzky was about to make an entrance, the door would open, and before he appeared, some palpable presence would materialize on stage, invisible but there. And I had that impression many times at his concerts. When he came back to guest conduct, I tested it out. Was it going to happen again? And sure enough, the lights went down, the door opened, nobody appeared, and *something* came out on stage. It was undeniable. The projection was so intense that Koussevitzky's aura, or whatever it was (I don't know how to define it) came out on stage before you saw him physically. And then when he appeared, of course, naturally the audience rose in respect and tumultuous affection. But there was something there on stage before his

physical body appeared. And so I thought, well, that proves it. I wasn't imagining it. It did happen. Just amazing!

Apparently when he returned after those two years away, he started conducting the first rehearsals and said, "Vat has happened to mine orchestra? Now vee vill vork!" He had extra rehearsals, and the poor brass player's lips were hanging off with fatigue, but Munch had given the orchestra a leaner, more French sound, and the brass were often racky and unblended. Then when the orchestra began to play, I heard once again this wonderful, glorious, old-fashioned Boston Symphony sound, and they were playing as well as they had ever played. As I say, the Sibelius Second was unforgettable. The Brahms First was the greatest that I had ever heard. It was the ultimate realization of my dreams: everything about the orchestral playing—the beauty of the strings, the expressiveness of the woodwinds, the power of the brass, the perfect balance; the wonderful dynamic range, the wonderful expressive range. Everything was completely fulfilled, and there he was again, owning us all—the chairs we sat in the whole hall, everything; someone who deserved the title of emperor, and who was just handing out this glory with both hands in all directions. It was quite a dramatic confrontation with my doubts and my first love, because on account of his wonderful example, I had wanted to become a conductor in the first place. I had by now heard many other conductors, knew the pieces very well and knew many other famous conductors' interpretations. Then this figure arrived on the stage and revealed himself as the king of them all. It was a very exciting day.

*What other pieces do you particularly think should be re-issued?*

The Sibelius Seventh, thankfully, is out, because again, no one has ever touched his interpretation, his understanding of that. I had liked the piece for years but thought it never quite came off, in spite of all the

marvelous elements, until I heard Koussevitzky do it, and then I realized that the work was absolutely perfect, a splendid symphony. But it is not an exterior work for the great public. Koussevitzky's version is just, say, so emotionally right and so gripping. The Tchaikovsky Fourth, I hope, will soon come out. Bernstein, incidentally—who learned this piece from Koussevitzky—does a wonderful job. Also, the Prokofiev Fifth, which was reprinted in a Vault Treasure Series of Victor, but is now out of the catalog entirely; that again is an untouchable performance, light years ahead of everybody else who has ever recorded it. What else? A very exciting version of the Shostakovich Ninth. That is a fantastic interpretation. He makes it a much better symphony than anybody else has ever managed to do. Also, the excerpts from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* are splendid interpretations. All of his Strauss tone poems are matchless, to my way of thinking, gloriously rich in characterization and drama: the witty, fun-filled *Till Eulenspiegel*, the dynamic *Don Juan* (Toscanini was magnificent with the virile thrust of this piece but very cool in the seductive, feminine sections: Koussevitzky gives the whole range), and the inspiring *Death and Transfiguration* [1949 private recording with the Boston Symphony, never issued—ED], which my most experienced musical friends cannot listen to without getting moist eyes at the end. The other works he did of Ravel are amazing. I think the *Rapsodie espagnole* is extraordinary. There again, that shows the orchestral control and the wonderful sensuousness which never degenerates into cheap sexuality. It is just hot as can be. There is a Beethoven Fifth and a Beethoven *Eroica* which are wonderful. As for the Ninth Symphony, he did not like that recording at all himself. I think it is a splendid interpretation: the orchestral playing is just first-rate, but Koussevitzky had such an incredibly high regard for that piece that nothing short of incandescent excitement and spiritual sublimity was going to satisfy him, and what it sounds like is a very measured, thoughtful, splendid

dramatic German interpretation. But he would not settle for that. I heard him do it live when he retired from the Boston Symphony. It was just seared into my memory. I heard him rehearse it over the air, and then I heard the live performance; it was one of the greatest performances of anything I have ever heard from anybody. I am of two minds about that Beethoven Ninth recording. I think it is a fine job, but again it does not represent what we heard in real life.

When I was spending the weekend at the Koussevitzky house, we had all heard the story about how Koussevitzky's beat was hard to follow and how the men ultimately made up their minds that you started when the stick, which was just floating gently downward, passed the third button on his vest. Well, I assumed Koussevitzky would not have heard that story, because it was not complimentary about his stick clarity. Not only had he heard it, he told it, on *himself*! I was a little surprised at that. It was said that he could laugh at himself. He maintained his public image as a major interpreter, which was very important for him, and he did not like to be stripped of his dignity; but he could laugh at himself, and that was one occasion when I definitely thought he was doing that. Also, the food that we ate at his house was absolutely delicious. Other people have commented on the fact that he kept a very good table, and indeed he did. The food was not particularly European. It was somewhat international, but it was mostly standard stuff. It was all very tasty. There was an occasional Russian specialty, like *kasha*, which I had never had before. But that was the only thing that I remember that was really out of the ordinary. I recall that everybody ate well and Koussevitzky did not overindulge himself. He ate only after performances.

*Did he drink wine?*

Charles O'Connell said that he used to toss off a quarter-pint of bourbon as a cocktail, which

O'Connell found absolutely deadening to the taste buds, and Koussevitzky was apparently never drunk. He did not like to be out of control in that way; he did not like to be disproportionate or immoderate. He loved good clothes, good food, and good times, but all in sensible proportions. And the house was the same. It was rambling, very comfortable. It was a very pleasant house, with a wonderful warm atmosphere and not super-décoré. I remembered there was a portrait by Chaliapin (the singer's son) of Koussevitzky, which he handed out reproduced on the cards that he autographed, and I still probably have an autographed card with that portrait. The Green Room in Symphony Hall had a whole collection of portraits and drawings of him, a bust or head, and various memorabilia. Serenak was a comfortable, extremely livable house with an absolutely wonderful view. And that was about the way Koussevitzky wanted to live, I think. He made his guests feel very much at home, and he said to me personally at the end, "Now, come back and see me after the concerts and say hello, because I want to keep in touch with you." I was so thrilled. Here I was a fourteen-year-old kid, and I was nobody, right? And he was very dear and very sweet, and he remembered me later on in Boston, as I stood by and watched him talk to a lot of other musicians. I always went up to shake his hand and tell him sincerely how much I enjoyed his performances, and I glowed just by being in his presence, because he was always giving out, even when he came to congratulate some other performers. I can see him backstage at the premiere of the Messiaen *Turangalila* Symphony, which I believe Bernstein conducted, and I think was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation. Koussevitzky was as excited and thrilled as if he had written and conducted it himself. Anything that advanced music was just catnip to him. He was an enthusiast *par excellence*. His favorite word was "*extraordinaire!*" It was always very French, drawn out to great length and pronounced with special emphasis.

*It is part of the power, don't you think, of Koussevitzky and maybe Furtwängler and certain other great conductors earlier in the century, that they were actually the pioneers in interpreting many great pieces and consecrating them on disc for posterity.*

That is substantially the most amazing part about these men, that they had no previous generation on which to base their own interpretation in many instances. In fact, even when they did, my own teacher, Barzin, told me that when Furtwängler came along, he found a Brahms tradition of pure mud. You relive the whole history of Brahms when you hear a civic symphony wrestle with the Brahms symphonies. Furtwängler cleaned everything up; the mud turned into gleaming mahogany. His Brahms has the most beautifully clear line. Toscanini then came on and scrubbed it even cleaner, perhaps. But what I am saying is that Furtwängler's models were really pretty bad orchestral performances ("This way out in case of Brahms"), muddy, heavy, you couldn't hear the counterpoint: everything was too thick. All you could hear was the top and the bottom. Furtwängler changed all of that, and created a new tradition. Mahler and Walter between them around the turn of the century (or just before in Vienna) created the modern Viennese tradition of playing Mozart. It was very different from what they had before. There were the strings played with tiny short bowings, sounding like little music box Meissen figurines, what G. B. Shaw referred to as the "dapper *petit maître*" school of Mozart playing; or else, heavily romanticized, made into Beethoven, as it were. And nothing between the two. The modern Viennese School was invented by these great conductors, Mahler and Walter. Similarly, Koussevitzky had no models on which to base his Ravel and Sibelius interpretations, and he was contemporaneous with many composers whose work he conducted. He was a young man of nineteen when Tchaikovsky died. He knew Sibelius intimately; he also knew Ravel. There was a sense of being

there at the creation and proceeding from nothing, I have heard the second performance Koussevitzky did of the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra, and you can't believe how well he understood that piece! He knew he had hit a winner, he knew he had hit every single lemon on the slot machine when that score arrived. He saved Bartók's life temporarily, you know.

*How?*

Bartók was dying in the hospital with leukemia. Koussevitzky came to the hospital and said, "Mr. Bartók, my foundation has decided to commission a major orchestral work from you, and here is half of the money as a down payment." Bartók said, "I can't accept it. I am dying, and I will never finish the piece." And Koussevitzky replied, "Well, that is too bad, but the money is given and it can't be taken back, and I hope you will recover and complete the piece. But in any case, the terms of the arrangement are that you are paid the money whether you actually complete the piece or not." Next day Bartók had an incredible spontaneous remission. A couple of days later he was out of the hospital; he had brought a ream of music paper and

there he was, pouring out the Third Piano Concerto, the Concerto for Orchestra, and the Viola Concerto (which he didn't finish). But previously, he had made up his mind he was going to die in that New York City hospital, and he had been reprieved for several months. He even got to the first rehearsals of the Concerto for Orchestra, and Koussevitzky told him he thought it was the greatest piece written in the last fifteen years. So at last, having been misunderstood in America, Bartók was basking in the world's greatest orchestra's thrilling performance of his piece. Now, the public did not particularly like it, and when Koussevitzky walked off the stage after conducting a meticulously prepared version of the Concerto for Orchestra, he was overheard by the orchestra to mutter, "*Idiot Publikum!*" Koussevitzky knew just what to do about that, which was to change his announced program a couple of months later and reintroduce the Bartók Concerto. He was going to shove it down the public's throats. He was going to play it until they found out what a great piece he already knew it was. I heard a recording on tape of a live performance (it must have been broadcast) of that second go-round a couple of

months later. I can't believe how deeply inside the piece he had gotten. And whereas Bernstein makes part of the piece humorous, Bartók was pretty grim in those days, and this is a very serious work; everything about Koussevitzky's performance speaks of an intimate knowledge of all of the emotional coordinates of the piece. It's an extraordinarily fine performance from any standpoint, except the timpani gets lost at the very end of the first movement. Everything else is just sensational. You could not imagine that a major new work could be so completely assimilated intellectually and emotionally. Koussevitzky recognized it instantly as a masterpiece, and he played it that way and proved he knew exactly what he had. I would say that nobody since that time has understood the piece any better, and here he had no precedents at all for it. So yes, I agree with you that for some of his greatest interpretations he had no models—he had to rely on his own imagination, his own mind, and his own heart to come to terms with this new repertoire. The greats of his generation have set standards we may never surpass.

*Transcribed by Cynthia Kerfoot*

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## About the Koussevitzky Recordings Society, Inc.

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The Koussevitzky Recordings Society was established in 1986, and it is dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of the recorded legacy of Serge Koussevitzky. The Society is a non-profit corporation staffed entirely by volunteers. Our Board of Directors includes President Tom Godell, Vice President Victor Koshkin-Youritzin, Secretary/Treasurer Karl Miller, and Louis Harrison. The Society's distinguished Advisory Board consists of Antonio de Almeida, Martin Bookspan, David Diamond, Harry Ellis Dickson, Charles Dutoit, Mrs. Irving Fine, Lukas Foss, Karl Haas, Richard L. Kaye, and Gerard Schwarz. Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, and William Schuman were Advisors during their lifetimes.

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 these bi-annual newsletters which include interviews from the archive, articles about the conductor, and book reviews.

To become a member and receive our newsletters, send a check or money order in the amount of \$18 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, contact the Society at our Boston address.