

ILLUMINATIONS

BY SANFORD BROTMAN



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My journey toward writing program notes for Amadeus Concerts, now in its 29th season here in Great Falls and McLean, has not been a straight line.

As the dutiful son of determined parents, I endured piano lessons by keeping my baseball glove hidden in the piano bench under a pile of sheet music. Assured by the earnest noise I was producing, my mother would disappear into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Grabbing my glove, I would fly happily out the door to join my friends in the national pastime even as the voice of my mother, my sweet jailer, called after me.

After more than a year of that routine, Mom asked me what present I wanted for my ninth birthday, and I unhesitatingly answered, "To stop playing the piano." Mom then conferred with my teacher, Mrs. Burke, who asked, "Mrs. Brotman, what is it that Sandy loves to do more than anything else in the world?" The answer was, naturally and correctly, playing baseball. "Well, then," replied Mrs. Burke

to Mrs. Brotman, "that is what he should be doing."

Fast forward to age 22. Recently discharged from the Navy, I was in college courtesy of the G.I. Bill, working night jobs and in love with Margie. She was my first-ever serious love, and she re-introduced me to classical music

with a recording of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." It felt as though a door had opened: music that was beautiful, lengthy, complex and, in the case of the "1812," really loud. Was I in thrall to the music or to Margie? As with so many of life's important questions, I have never been certain of the answer.

While the relationship with Margie did not endure, my love of classical music has not only endured, but has grown deeper and broader over the ensuing five decades. Today my home library includes some 40 or 50 books about composers, conductors and music, plus a large file of notes made at concerts that should enrich the experience of future listenings.

After my retirement from an enjoyable career as a general dentist, Maury Brown, now president of the Amadeus Concerts board, asked me to become a board member and, knowing of my passion

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for music, suggested that I write the program notes, the purpose of which was to connect the audience to the compositions. Over the past four seasons, it seems as though I am achieving that connection—time after time, concertgoers tell me that they had not appreciated a particular piece or genre until they followed the music using my notes.

My modus operandi is very simple: Being a musical middlebrow, I don't tend to lose readers in an avalanche of technical talk. I always hated it when doctors, for example, tried to explain my ailment and its treatment by using terms unknown to me. It felt insensitive. I tried to avoid that habit in my own practice, often using simple analogies and metaphors to clarify. Recently, I applied that thinking in some program notes when I described the joyous interplay between two trumpets in a piece by Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741): "Sometimes they play in sync, and at others one echoes the other by a half-second delay. It is playful. If you will forgive me an inelegant analogy: In my backyard, sometimes I will see two squirrels in a chase, with one spiraling around and up a thick, tall tree, with the other just slightly behind him, and—I'm guessing—purposefully not trying to catch him. Playful."

In crafting concert program notes, I feel that I am part of a creative process, one of the final links between composer and audience: I make the music accessible. I can't even begin to tell you how exciting that is. For someone not formally trained as a musician or musicologist, I feel like the proverbial stranger in a strange land, a place filled with surprises in every season, indeed in every piece of music. An emotionally powerful example of this phenomenon occurred in the middle movement of last season's performance of "Concierto de Aranjuez" by Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-1999). I wrote, "The final few notes plucked by the guitar are like teardrops. Indeed, one story has it that Rodrigo and his wife lost their infant son around the time of this writing, and that the composer wrote this to vent his sadness and loss." Now I have heard the composition probably a hundred times and at least three times while writing my concert notes, but until I read about the personal tragedy, I never really heard these notes. Now I listen for them. I have often heard this same sense of discovery



spoken of by professional musicians as well.


As an Amadeus Concerts board member, I get to see musical performance from the inside. I compare it to opening a watch and appreciating all of the many parts it takes to make it function correctly. Among the challenges: choosing music that fits with the size of our orchestra and

the strengths of our performers; figuring out if the compositions work acoustically in our venues; discovering the best ways to inform the public and get press coverage; and determining whether we can do all of it within budget and at an attractive price for patrons.

Then there are those eleventh-hour decisions that audiences are never aware of—e.g., a musician is out sick and a last-minute replacement is not available, requiring our conductor, A. Scott Wood, to rework a composition so that it still sounds beautiful and balanced. On one occasion, Scott listened to a guest performer's solo encore, decided to add two supporting instruments for background and proceeded to write their parts from scratch. The added instruments gave the already-beautiful piece more emotional warmth. All in a day's work for our beloved conductor and his musicians. Enlightenment for me.

My current research focuses on our October performance, "The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace" by Welsh composer Karl Jenkins. Dedicated to the victims of Kosovo, this work is set to both secular and sacred texts, including the writings of Tennyson, Kipling, Malory, Dryden, Swift, The Koran and the Hindu Mahabharata, all within the framework of the Christian mass. This will be our most ambitious concert ever and will include a dozen instrumentalists and four choral groups.

I feel as though I am on a long and rewarding journey. Mrs. Brotman and Mrs. Burke, in that other world where sainted women go, must be shaking their heads and smiling at each other.

Details on the upcoming Amadeus Concerts season are at www.amadeusconcerts.com. 

TOP: A. SCOTT WOOD CONDUCTS THE AMADEUS ORCHESTRA; AND LARRY OATES, AMADEUS ORCHESTRA MANAGER, ON TRUMPET