Notes from the Editor

On Conductors, Composers, and Music Directors: Serge Koussevitzky in Retrospect

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This issue of MQ is dominated by a remarkable and closely annotated account of the relationship between Igor Stravinsky and Serge Koussevitzky. The rather repellent and two-faced nature of Stravinsky’s behavior revealed in this oddly empty and perfunctory epistolary collection comes as no surprise. This was truly a non-friendship. It reads rather like a one-sided display of kindness. No more startling is the extent of Koussevitzky’s generosity and his tireless advocacy, not only of Stravinsky but of composers in general (not to speak of young musicians). This is all familiar territory. But as the phrase “nice guys finish last” suggests, Stravinsky’s contempt for Koussevitzky as a musician, along with the sarcastic views of Nicolas Slonimsky and others like him, are what have ultimately influenced the historical view of Koussevitzky as a musician and conductor. The most unequivocal praise for his musical skills remains reserved for his prowess as a bass player. Rare recordings and eyewitness accounts attest to the unusual sound and virtuosity the young Koussevitzky possessed. When he played, the bass sounded more like a cello. Even his admittedly weak concerto for the instrument remains suspect as a sign of Koussevitzky’s musicianship; there are those who think that apart from the main theme, the work was written or at a minimum orchestrated by Reinhold Glière.

The notion that Koussevitzky was a “bad conductor” has been reinforced by the regular retelling of the fiasco of his 1921 performance of the Symphonies for Wind Instruments. It is further fuelled by the story of Koussevitzky’s rebarring of passages with complex meters in the Rite of Spring. Slonimsky contemptuously described how Koussevitzky needed rehearsal pianists to play the score for him in order to learn it. The overall impression of incompetence seems confirmed by the account in the Stravinsky correspondence of Koussevitzky’s handling of the Ode. Koussevitzky seems not to have picked up errors in transposition that presumably should have been audible. A negative view of Koussevitzky’s
talents was also underscored by Ernst Ansermet’s disregard for him, an attitude that may have been colored by the kind of anti-Semitism that Ansermet shared with Stravinsky.

No doubt Koussevitzky did not have perfect pitch; he did not have the aural acuity of Pierre Monteux, Igor Markevitch, or Pierre Boulez. Nevertheless, much of this criticism betrays envy on the part of both Slonimsky and Stravinsky. They were both unsuccessful in their attempts to establish themselves as conductors, despite superior specific talents like pitch recognition. Koussevitzky was also rich. The envy of successful performers is particularly acute for conductors, about whom it is still said that they represent an aspect of performance that requires little skill and technique. Stravinsky’s criticisms probably represent a legitimate observation of a shortcoming on Koussevitzky’s part. But, as James Levine once observed, no conductor has everything that an ideal conductor ought to have. A great conductor must bring at least one striking if not unique virtue to the podium. His or her capacities in those arenas where he or she does not excel may range from strong to only adequate. But in order to succeed conductors must have at least one commanding set of skills. One needs to remember that Arthur Fiedler, the Boston Pops conductor, had a so-called great ear and would have easily spotted errors.

The case against Koussevitzky has remained strong (even stronger than the posthumous criticism of Leopold Stokowski, another unfairly maligned conductor from the past) beyond the accusation of a less-than-perfect ear with which to find errors in complex scores or in rehearsal. He was also said to have not much of a baton technique. Funny stories about how the Boston Symphony learned to play together despite the absence of a clear ictus and a self-evident preparation before the onset of sound still circulate among orchestral musicians. The same so-called fault was evident in Willhelm Furtwängler as well. Yet his posthumous reputation continues to grow. Many conductors develop physical styles that can adequately be read only by their own orchestras; one of these was Herbert von Karajan. All criticism aside, few dispute the fact that during the twenty-five years of Koussevitzky’s reign at the Boston Symphony, the orchestra played faultlessly as an ensemble, much like a great chamber group.

What Koussevitzky possessed more than most conductors was an uncanny sense of color and sound. The Boston Symphony that he bequeathed to his successor, Charles Munch, was praised for the supple and sensual character of the string and woodwind sound. Koussevitzky also commanded the theater of conducting. Generations of students and listeners attest to the dramatic intensity and impact of his readings, particularly of the romantic repertory. Koussevitzky, according to the testimony
of both Aaron Copland and Howard Hanson, understood how to make each instrument of the orchestra sound not only beautiful but also appropriate within a particular orchestration. Their testimony for Koussevitzky’s sense of balance can be discounted as self-serving in view of Koussevitzky’s role as patron of new music, including their own works. But both outlived Koussevitzky and never gave a hint that their praise was conditional. When Koussevitzky retired, the Boston Symphony was second to none among American orchestras in terms of its sound, precision, and flexibility. Add to this the unparalleled variety and complexity of the repertory Koussevitzky performed. Whether he needed pianists to help him learn the work or not, in the end, in the most exacting environment, Koussevitzky produced polished premieres of countless works that have entered the standard repertory. His success in doing so rested in part on the quality of his performances, many of which were broadcast live nationally. Leonard Bernstein certainly learned aspects of the technique of conducting from Fritz Reiner, but his greatest debt was to what he learned about the art of conducting from Koussevitzky.

Koussevitzky was not the first or last conductor of note to marry money. The accusation that his wealth was the basis of his success constitutes an easy form of slander. Patron though he may have been, the late Paul Sacher will not go down in the annals of history as a conductor of Koussevitzky’s standing. Nor will dozens of other also-ran, self-financed conductors. What Koussevitzky brought to the podium was a profound understanding of the sound materials and rhetoric of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music. He also had undeniable charisma and a capacity for leadership as a musician. He did not work in the tradition of Arturo Toscanini or Gustav Mahler by harsh and nearly manic assertions of authority. Rather, he took on the insistent and demanding voice of a cajoler and idealist. He was called a conjurer, a magician. His theatricality had a warm substance to it that one does not associate with the legendary tyrants of the podium, including Reiner and George Szell. Unrelenting though he was, Koussevitzky’s authority was reinforced by an essential kindliness and commitment to the notion of music as essential to the human community. It is touching to read in the pages of this issue of MQ about his struggle to keep the Berkshire Music Center going during World War II. His tireless effort on behalf of composers and students was not a stratagem; it revealed an attitude to music not separate from his podium presence or the substance of his musical leadership. Koussevitzky is now remembered primarily as a patron, but his achievement even as a patron was linked to his prowess as a performer. His capacities as a performer and conductor made him the greatest patron of new music of the twentieth century.
Koussevitzky was the true heir of Arthur Nikisch, whose presence in the hall in combination with his dynamism as a conductor made the experience of music unforgettable to the Leipzig audience. Of the great conductors of the first half of the twentieth century, Koussevitzky shares with Stokowski, more than any other, the unfortunate consequences of a high modernist distaste for romantic subjectivity, the notion of personality, and the theatrical that still lingers with us. Both have suffered from a mistrust of the irrational “aura” and related intellectual prejudices that continue to surround our assessments of conducting and musicianship. What is partly responsible for the momentum of these prejudices, and therefore the way in which conductors of the past have entered history, is the impact of recording and, more recently, patterns of reissuing recordings from the past. Toscanini and Furtwängler have developed and maintained, posthumously, cult followings. Among all the legendary figures of the past, Koussevitzky remains least well represented in the modern CD format. He died right when the era of the long-playing record came into being. And he was not so interested in recording in the first place. Much of Toscanini’s posthumous fame rests on recordings made after Koussevitzky’s retirement from the BSO and after his death.

What is most intriguing about the career of Serge Koussevitzky, from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, are two not entirely related phenomena. First, there no longer is an evident symbiosis between conductors and composers of the sort that Koussevitzky pioneered and that held true for many of his contemporaries, including Ansermet, Monteux, Evgeny Mravinsky, Bruno Walter, and Otto Klemperer. New music, when it appears on the programs of major orchestras in the United States, does so in an almost token fashion. It is ironic to recall that Koussevitzky succeeded with the enormously conservative Boston public and an equally conservative stratum of patrons by shepherding in an era of new composers whose works created much more static and controversy than anything that could be put on the stage today. Our audiences are in fact less conservative and less easily outraged than the audiences Koussevitzky faced in Boston, Paris, and New York before 1950. New music never came to occupy a token place in the season repertory in Boston. Koussevitzky was not pressured by managers or orchestra patrons to stick to a conservative standard repertory. Using an emphasis on new music, he not only built a great orchestra in Boston, but also cultivated an audience and helped to expand it. Despite the criticism leveled at his protégé Leonard Bernstein during the latter’s tenure at the New York Philharmonic, it is striking to find how loyal Bernstein was to the Koussevitzky tradition and how much new music figured as integral to Bernstein’s programs. Few if any music directors today have managed to do anything comparable. There is such
fear and pessimism about the audience and the future of concert life that managers and marketing specialists have convinced almost everyone that the more traditional the programming, the better the audience and community response will be. Koussevitzky’s example should give us pause in accepting their advice. But most leading conductors today possess no binding relationship with any living composer of note outside of themselves (if they happen to compose) comparable to that which Koussevitzky cultivated, not only with Stravinsky but also with dozens of others.

The second phenomenon (which perhaps is connected to the first) has to do with the fate and context of live performance. In the end Koussevitzky's mode of music making and his approach to the profession were quite unaffected by the technological improvements in recording and the wider distribution of recordings. He certainly benefited from and embraced the radio broadcast of live performances. But as the correspondence with Stravinsky reveals, listening to a broadcast was understood as a subsidiary form to having a seat at a concert. One listened as if at a concert. What was left was an impression and a memory of what one heard. No one taped the broadcast, and no one expected that one could retrieve a record of that live performance later on. Live broadcast simply enlarged the audience beyond the seats in the hall.

The 78 r.p.m. record was a poor surrogate for a live concert. Beginning in the 1950s, however, long-playing records and the tape machine, the reel-to-reel analog tape—and certainly the CD in the 1980s—created a massive library of retrievable performances. As recording technology improved, the studio recording took the place of the live performance. During the golden age of recording, 1950 to the late 1980s, a new generation of listeners, performers, and conductors were trained, all with access to a growing number of accurate, permanent, retrievable accounts of the repertory. Most of these were meticulously edited to eliminate mistakes and the ambient sound of a live concert. In an interview from early 1989, at the end of his tenure with the Chicago Symphony, Sir Georg Solti chronicled the importance of recording to his career. Having made well over two hundred records, including more than one complete cycle of the Beethoven symphonies, he, trained as a pianist (and a superb one), admitted that he himself listened to recordings as part of his own preparation as a conductor.

Indeed, until the 1990s audiences came to live concerts with the sound of the music they were about to hear inscribed in their minds by listening to studio recordings. Whereas the record had once been the result and the documentation of the live concert, the concert became subordinate to recording. Even critics began to compare live performances against recordings. One positive result was that the expectation of accuracy and
error-free renditions increased between the mid-1950s and the 1990s, not only for orchestras but for all instrumentalists. The standard level of technical proficiency throughout the world has improved, much the way Olympic records are broken over time.

This pattern is now unraveling before our eyes. There are fewer and fewer recordings being made, particularly in the studio. New recordings are made and issued by companies with relatively small distributions, often of nonstandard repertory, and there are many reissues of back catalogs. Owing to the daunting economics of classical recording, organizations such as the London Symphony have resorted to issuing CDs of live recordings under their own label. The period of growth for new recordings has ended. Take, for example, opera. Solti made dozens of opera recordings in the studio. Very few are being made now. Today there are more people going to opera performances than possess any recordings at all. There are more individuals in the major houses in the United States or Europe on any given night than will ever buy an opera recording over a period of years. No complete opera recording, even of Puccini, made today will sell as many copies as in the past. No orchestral recording today will sell as many copies as Bernstein and Karajan made and sold.

The reasons for this are several. First, the market is and will forever remain saturated, with exception of new repertory. Second, there are probably fewer than 100,000 people in the United States who buy more than one classical CD a year. Third, who apart from the very young or the very old has the time to sit for over three hours, or even one hour, to listen to a recording? The declining competitiveness of classical radio attests to such changing habits. For opera the future may actually lie in the DVD, but even there one can raise serious doubts. Live streaming broadcast holds more promise. In short, the days when a recording of Bach cantatas sold 500,000 copies, as was the case with the Vanguard Records releases in the 1950s, are long gone.

We have become aware of this fact only during the past decade. This new reality is ironically a piece of good news. It turns out that more people out there are willing to go to a live concert than to buy or listen to a recording. The pendulum (if there is one) is swinging back. The concert possesses something no recording can. Only the snob with modernist Stravinskylike prejudices against interpretation and performers prefers listening to high fidelity at home. The mid-twentieth-century romance with recording as normative for music was itself a consequence of a certain kind of modernist antiromantic bias. The allure of the social public experience of music as a unique experience in time and space with other people around is what turns out to be the object of desire. It provides the opportunity to participate in and observe a unique moment of expectation, of
seeing other human beings making something happen, much as one finds in a soccer match or a baseball game. At stake are theater and spectacle, two characteristics—along with ornament and decoration—held in suspicion by modernist aesthetics. No one in his or her right mind would prefer to see a rerun of the Super Bowl as opposed to watching the contest as it unfolds in real time. The uncertainties, suspense, and tension of the event and witnessing the pressure to perform and make something happen are central.

If indeed today’s audiences, real and potential, want to return to the acoustic and visual experience of live performance, then concert life will need more artists in the tradition of Koussevitzky. His sort of magnetism and charisma, tied up as it was with a distinctive persona and point of view about the importance of music—and a certain kind of music at that—was precisely that which cannot be captured by any sort of sound document. Musicologists are well on their way to rethinking the notion of the so-called extramusical. If the score is not the whole text, neither is a recording. Music may reluctantly be understood by a new generation once again as the live event of creation and interpretation, as a subset of improvisation. Careers will be made not only by conductors who put on a show that is constant from one venue to the next, like a traveling circus. We will need music directors and conductors who, like Koussevitzky, develop an allegiance and following within a particular public and promulgate a vision of a season as a coherent set of successive live events. They must help shape a community’s expectations of something unique and local. They must therefore build an ongoing relationship between the listening public and performers. It took Koussevitzky a quarter of a century to do so in Boston. During his tenure, he was by contract forbidden to conduct elsewhere, and he conducted over one hundred concerts a season with his own orchestra, mostly in its own home, Symphony Hall. His international stature derived from his local achievement.

This model stands in stark contrast to current realities. Nonetheless, it appears increasingly that Koussevitzky’s model is precisely the right way to proceed. When one reads Solti’s explanation why he could spend only eight weeks in Chicago, one becomes sympathetic. There were decisive family reasons. Chicago never became Solti’s home. His children were not educated there; he preferred the English system. He never made the city his home. It is no longer possible to strengthen the role of any orchestra in any American city without the commitment to a particular community and its life and culture shown by Koussevitzky to Boston. He may have left for France for the summer during the first years. But ultimately he became truly tied to America. He built Tanglewood and changed the pattern so that he had a year-round connection with the orchestra. He turned the Boston Symphony into an instrument of the region around Boston, an
educational institution, and a standard-bearer for an aesthetic point of view, all with a distinct repertory. Successful music directors will in the future have to be integrated into their communities for the whole year and for the long term if new audiences are to be developed.

The aura surrounding Koussevitzky that can never be represented by records was an aura that was experienced in the hall, at concerts. It was forged by listeners and performers both (including the creation of a unique orchestral sound) and defined by a regular stream of live performances over years and decades. What is cold and clinical about a recording is precisely what Stravinsky and Schoenberg cherished. What is exciting, even messy, error prone, and full of surprises both good and bad is the live concert at which individuals can feel themselves, as listeners, to be active participants. The audience, its presence and reactions, is an indispensable part of any performance. It is an active, not passive, element in any adequate definition of music. The technical proficiency Koussevitzky was said to lack was, if he lacked it at all, hugely compensated by his skills of making music in real time and space. These skills made playing and listening to music seem indispensable facets of life for individuals and for an entire community.

This elusive and ephemeral aspect of musicianship—communication with a particular audience and a particular orchestra over a long period of time—has characterized all great tenures at orchestras or opera houses, from Mahler in Vienna, Nikisch in Leipzig, Walter in Munich, Mravinsky in St. Petersburg, Thomas in Chicago, Szell in Cleveland, to Bernstein in New York, albeit for a shorter period of time. More recently this pattern flourished, briefly, with Leonard Slatkin in St. Louis and Simon Rattle in Birmingham. Rebuilding the audience and the importance of orchestral music making, particularly in the United States, will require a return to this kind of committed tenure by conductors as music directors. They should model themselves after Koussevitzky and not after the peripatetic international stars of the last several decades, no matter how clear their beats and how perfect their sense of pitch may be.

Notes