

The Page Turner

By Victor Parsonnet, a cardiac surgeon who contributed to the evolution of the pacemaker

I am not sure how my folks became intimates of Dame Myra Hess. It is most likely that my mother, while taking lessons from the legendary piano instructor Tobias Mathay in London, was introduced to Myra, Mathay's most famous pupil. Myra was considered one of the great pianist-musicians of her day. She had been "knighted" by Queen Elizabeth for her tireless contribution to the Second World War effort by performing almost nightly at the National Gallery during "the blitz." Thus, she became Dame Myra to the world.

In the late 1930s, Mom would go to as many of Myra's U.S. concerts as she could, dragging Dad along with her. Dad had just regained his enthusiasm for the violin, having taken up lessons after a long hiatus, and our family's long relationship to Myra would be his doing. After one Myra concerts—in typical Gene fashion—he had rushed backstage to the artist's room and charmed her into visiting us at our home, thus launching a friendship of close to 30 years.

As a child I adored her and would look forward to her visits. She filled our house with her presence. Even my younger sister, age 2, rocked back and forth in a tiny rocking chair, intoning in rhythm with the chair, "My-ra Hess, My-ra Hess, My-ra Hess." I never found out why Myra never married. My mother knew but would never tell. There were rumors of an unrequited relationship with someone, perhaps Harold Samuels, a famous British composer-pianist of his day.

We mainly saw Myra every year at Carnegie Hall, which was always packed with adoring fans. There were usually two rows of bridge chairs set along the back and sides of the huge stage to accommodate the overflow. This concert was special because it was the start of the tour; attended by her friends and music critics. While the audience consisted of other performers, there were also many fawning, middle-aged Myra Hess-followers, mostly women.

Following a concert, Myra would pull herself together quickly, after complaining to the small entourage in the dressing room (which included my mother) about how awfully she had played, then fishing for compliments with, "Was it really not too bad?" Not until she received appropriate reassurance was she prepared to entertain the mob collecting at the stage-door. I bristled watching it. The hand kissing, empty-headed admiration, exclamations of infinite praise, avowals of eternal love and devotion, and the pecks on the half-averted cheek ensued.

Afterwards, a select few would head around the corner to her hotel room at the Wellington, where her entourage would fuss around her. I saw my mother, whom my dad referred to as "formal Lil," get down on her hands and knees to warm Myra's soup on an old electric heater. The next hour or so was spent hearing Myra's stories, with rare contributions from the rest of us. We usually had little to say except as fillers to keep things moving. One simply couldn't talk about oneself or non-related things during these winding-down periods. Some talk was a bit "risqué," as we might have said then (she rather loved being "naughty"), though much was

rather shopworn. But just about everything muttered from her lips resulted in infectious guffaws of laughter.

About an hour later it would suddenly end, usually on a prompt from my mother, who would declare that “Myra must be tired” and we had best be trotting on. (Around Myra my mother always became very British; we could never quite understand that transformation.) Other times, when the group at the flat was small, Myra tended to become morose, aware of what seemed the hollowness of it all. What was the use? Why go through this agony over and over again, she would ask rhetorically? She knew the adulation would not replace the things she lacked, like a companion and children. For those fleeting moments, our little group filled that role.

But the next day it would all be gone—the introspection and self-doubts—and after commenting upon the reviews, usually good, respectful, and kind, the awful cycle of practicing, preparation, packing, traveling, excitement, and nerves would begin again. What else was there, anyway?

I admired the fact that Myra’s fame and popularity didn’t get in the way of her warm, affectionate, and generous nature. In my view, she was rather short and a bit dumpy but to hear my parents tell it, she had been “a beauty” in her youth. (From her old photos she looked about the same to me.) In her late 60s she was what one might call “handsome”—her graying straight hair parted in the middle and swept back low over her ears to end in a large bun. I once saw her with her hair down, literally. It reached her waist and was a feature of great pride to her, as were her legs, for that matter, which she would show to the knee in relaxed and coquettish moments.

Myra knew how to carry herself. She stood erect, head thrown back, chest out (what there was of it, for a British surgeon had performed bilateral simple mastectomies years earlier for bilateral cystic mastitis—a mutilating operation very much in vogue in those days). When she strode on stage, she looked intently at the audience, seemingly acknowledging the presence of each person. She flirted with them, especially when she played, as if to say, “just listen to this next passage.” In a rhythmic or light passage, she would actually bounce along with it. She intuitively knew how to play to the crowd. (Not surprisingly, she didn't “record” well; analogous to a student “not testing” well. It was not possible to flirt with a recording studio.)

As players today go, she didn’t have a big technique. The Brahms B-flat concerto was the most challenging piece I recall her tackling. But how she could play Mozart, Brahms, Scarlatti, and Schubert! To hear her play such music was a visceral experience. Even crusty cynics became weepers at times. She made glorious music like few others could do. We fans believed she produced it precisely the way the composers had intended.

Because Myra needed to retain a precise performance level of a huge repertoire to be played many times a week at the National Gallery concerts during the Second World War, she began to depend on “using” music. Following the war, she continued this practice. Why not relax and

enjoy one's own performance? And why not, furthermore, set an example for young aspiring pianists who live in terror of memory lapses? So, she did just that, and therefore needed page turners.

(Myra took occasional abuse from the critics for "using music." But she was secure enough to weather it. Despite her assertion that her purpose was to lead the way for others, that explanation was never quite accepted. She would be sad to know that the practice never caught on.)

After I started to play piano, our relationship evolved to teacher-pupil and sometimes even mother-son. At many of her East Coast concerts, I became her helper in the final minutes before she walked on stage, privy to her moods, fears, and preparatory routines, and was careful not to speak unless spoken to. I also became her most trusted page-turner and was jealous of interlopers who might occasionally stand in for me.

Despite the fame of some of these other page turners—all internationally known musicians, composers, and performers—my belief was that none of them was as good as me because they were not tall enough to reach across the music rest with their left arms, in order to surreptitiously turn the page without rising from their seats at Myra's left, and without disturbing the pace of the performance, or distract the audience, or even worse, distract Myra. I am tall, about 6-2, and long-armed. I had also been around music a lot, and despite an abysmal lack of pianistic technique, I fancied myself a great, though unrecognized, "musician." I knew when, how, and at what pace to "turn."

As my mother and the other women would rush to be in their seats for the moment when Myra would appear on stage, we were alone backstage. As the clock ticked, I was privy to her pre-concert nerves, her hand-wringing a faded, flowered handkerchief, and her unavoidable attacks of gassiness (she called it her "windy-pindies") and the last-minute primping and hair-straightening (never lipstick, although she did use rouge and powder), the deep sighs, and then the erect, proud march to what she called "the guillotine." As she walked on stage, I would trail behind her at exactly the right distance, and with exactly the correct diffidence, carrying her music, which I would place on the music stand and then sit while she took her bows.

And what a heady spot to be in! Through the years of my medical internship, surgical residency, and two years of marriage, sitting at the elbow of one of the most famous artists of the day while she performed in concert with The Budapest Quartet, the Philharmonic, the National Symphony, Toscanini, Koussevitzky and on and on, I wallowed in reflected glory.

Hardly a concert would end without one of the fan club saying to me, "Oh, are you the page turner? (or her son, or young friend, or whatever they were thinking?) You turn so-o-o musically!" I shall never forget the day when that was told to me by an extremely good-looking and amply endowed older woman, against whose bosom I was pinioned in the crowded doorway of the Town Hall dressing room. I later found out it had been "Kit" Cornell, as Katherine Cornell, one of the great stage actresses of the day, as she was known to Myra.

I made mistakes, but rarely. Once, when she was playing in Washington with the National Symphony, Myra had scotch-taped to the score a slip of paper with a minor change of some sort. Even though she explained beforehand what I was to do when we got there, I missed the point, and the page turn, and she was forced to grasp frantically at the music and turn the page herself. She didn't scold me for it, but she didn't thank me either. Nevertheless, as a rule I got lots of praise.

My most memorable time as her page turner came one Saturday in the fall of 1955 during my first year of surgical practice, (as an assistant to my father who was at that time, one of the busiest surgeons in New Jersey). I had morning "hours," which mainly translated to seeing a patient or two and hanging around reading journals and ad material. On this one slow morning, I agreed to see a sales representative, who plied me with a sample of meprobamate, the popular tranquilizer of the day. I knew I had page turning duties and I was especially nervous an important engagement that afternoon at a sold-out Carnegie Hall. I threw caution to the wind and swallowed one of those little pills to calm my nerves.

It was a fairly cool November afternoon and Myra was more nervous than usual, probably because she was getting on in years and worried that her technique might be on the decline. The first half of the concert was standard Myra: one or two Scarlatti sonatinas, a Bach prelude and fugue, and the Mozart C major Sonata. The audience applauded lovingly on her first appearance, and long and hard after each section. Towards the end of the Mozart, a slow movement, I realized I was feeling drowsy. While the rest of the Sonata got more vigorous, I became less so. In fact, I began to get that languorous, soft, dreamy feeling that one has in a late summer afternoon, lounging on a hot, sandy beach. During the intermission I decided to snap out of it by taking a brisk walk around the block.

The second half of the concert was just the Schubert B flat major, one of her favorites for which she was well known. I was fine for the first five minutes or so of the Schubert when I realized that I was growing drowsy again, but more gravely, probably made worse by my vigorous walk. Towards the middle of the slow movement, which was interminable (Schubert often takes too long to say things), I began a desperate struggle to stay awake.

I tried scaring myself awake with horrible thoughts. How would it look if I fell clattering off the chair? Or how would it be if I came crashing down on the keyboard? How would the critics describe it? Even attempts to generate my usual concerns failed to help, like fears of sudden audible flatulence while reaching across for a slow-movement page turn (the double entendre didn't amuse me), or turning two pages at once, or worse, hitting her arm in the middle of a technically challenging passage, or still worse, yanking the entire score off the music rack.

My scare tactics failed, and my drowsiness worsened. I resorted to pinching my thighs as hard as I could, counting bars in my head, deep breathing—anything except letting my eyes shut. After what seemed like an eternity, there was at last the double bar at the end of the last movement. No more pages to turn. Only 30 seconds left to end of concert. And then, right

there, with half a page to go, in front of 3,000 people and alongside the Knighted Dame Myra Hess, I fell fast asleep.

The applause snapped me back to sudden consciousness. And I got the usual raves on how musically I turned.