

The Page Turner

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

I am not sure how Arthur and my folks became intimates of Dame Myra Hess. It is most likely that my mother, while taking piano lessons from Tobias Mathay in London, had gotten to know or know of Myra, Mathay's most famous pupil. In the late 30s, Mom would go to as many of Myra's U.S. concerts as she could, dragging Dad along with her. He had just regained his enthusiasm for music, having once again taken up the violin.

But the final connection was Dad's doing. After one of Myra's concerts in typical Gene fashion he had rushed back stage to the artist's room, spoke with her, charmed her, perhaps, and invited her to their home, thus launching a friendship of close to 30 years. Arthur, whom my folks had met through old friends from Harvard and Wellesley, also attended the concerts, joining my folks in adulation. From there my personal relationship with Myra began.

I have all sorts of Myra stories. To her the most important concert of her U.S. tour was the late November Saturday matinee at Carnegie Hall, which was always packed with adoring fans. Often the audience overflowed into two rows of bridge chairs set along the back and sides of the huge stage. This concert was special because it was the first of the tour, and was attended by her friends and many major music critics. Some in the audience were musicians and performers themselves, and all were devoted music lovers, or so it seemed. But there were also many fawning, middle-aged

Hess-followers, mostly women, but sprinkled with tweedy, bookish-looking men.

Following a concert, Myra would pull herself together fairly quickly, after complaining to the small entourage in the dressing room, which included my mother; Beryl Davis, her niece; and Sazz, her helper and traveling companion; how awfully she had played, and asking, “Was it really not too bad?” Not until she received appropriate reassurance, which was not difficult to offer because she never was anything but wonderful—few performers were capable of making such lovely music—was she prepared to entertain the mob collecting at the stage-door. I couldn’t stand watching it. The hand-kissing, empty-headed admiration, the exclamations of infinite praise, the avowals of eternal love and devotion, the pecks on the half-averted cheek. It seemed to me that most of them hadn’t a clue whether the performance was good, bad, or indifferent. It was embarrassing. How could she enjoy this? She really knew how well she had done. Although we could scarcely tell the difference between 100% and 99.99% perfection, she could. But she ate it up nevertheless.

Afterwards a select few of her “intimates,” would repair “round the corner to her flat” in the Wellington, where her entourage, largely female—my mother among them—would fuss around her. My mother, whom I had never seen on the floor (“formal Lil as Dad called her), got down on her hands and knees to warm Myra’s soup on an old electric heater, with a cord too short to reach the table top, while Sazz and Beryl prepared tea and biscuits. Once Myra regained her composure, the next hour or so was spent listening to her 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 all were followed by her infectious guffaws of laughter. About an hour later it would all 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 Brrritish. My father, sister, wife and I could never quite understand that transformation.)

Other times, when the group at the flat was small, Myra became 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 was not pleased (at that moment) by all the adulation, and knew that it did not replace the things she never would have, like family and children. For that fleeting instant, 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. For what else was there, anyway?

Myra was a special and unique person. There is no doubt that she was considered one of the great pianist-musicians of her day. She had been "knighted" by Queen Elizabeth for her tireless contribution to the war effort by performing almost nightly at the National Gallery during "the blitz." Thus, she became Dame Myra to the world.

Despite her fame, immense popularity, and her public personality, she could be warm, affectionate, attentive, and generous. To hear my parents tell it, she was “a beauty” in her youth. (From her old photos she looked about the same to me.) Even in her late sixties 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 saw her once 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. They weren’t all that great, but her ankles were nice. She was proud of them, too. In my view, she was actually rather short and a bit dumpy. It was her bearing that made her beautiful. She carried herself magnificently; 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. By nature she 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, and Brahms, and 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 believe she produced it precisely the way the composers had intended.

When I was a child I adored her, and would look forward to the days when she visited us—my mother and father, that is. She filled the house with her presence. Even my little 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.

My relationship with her was mother-son, perhaps, or teacher-pupil. But at concerts I was her associate, her aide and helper in the final minutes before she walked towards the stage. I was with her before, during and after the concert, and privy to moods, and fears, and preparatory routines, careful not to intrude or speak unless spoken to.

Even though much of this was serious business, there were some amusing moments. For a long time after this event I am about to describe, I had assumed that one day, when she wasn't too up tight, and at just the right moment, she would find this story funny. She didn't. Perhaps it was the way I told it, or perhaps it was still too serious a matter or too lacking in proper awe. Or respect. Or something.

After “the war,” Myra had become accustomed to playing from music at The National Gallery concerts because, after all, who could be expected to retain

a precise, performance level, memory of a huge repertoire to be played many times a week? So, why not use music in the U.S. as well? Why should she return to the pre-war torture of memorizing her pieces? 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. For the East coast concerts, usually New York City or on occasion Boston and Washington, I was her page-turner.

(Myra took occasional abuse from the critics for “using music.” But she was prestigious and 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.)

I was jealous of my page-turning “rights,” even jealous of such interlopers as Ralph Kirkpatrick, Paul Hindemith, Arthur Mendel and others who might occasionally stand in for me. Despite their fame—all internationally known musicians, composers, and performers—none of them was any good at page turning 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 especially 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.”

And what a heady spot to be in! There I was, through the years of my internship, surgical residency, and two years of marriage, sitting at the elbow of one of the most famous artists of the day, turning pages while she performed as a soloist or in concert with The Budapest Quartet, the Philharmonic, the National Symphony, Toscanini, Koussevitzky and on and on, wallowing in reflected glory. Backstage, before performances, I was often alone with her; mother and the other women having rushed to be in their seats for the moment when Myra would appear 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 invisibly while she took her bows and, for the rest of the concert. (A really good page-turner is invisible.) I was privy to her pre-concert nerves, her hand-wringing in an ever-present, faded, tiny 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 the guillotine.

A truly good page-turner, a rare breed, turns without rising from his seat, and with arm motions and demeanor appropriate to the music, never reaching across too early, arm dangling in air, and never, never hurriedly. In slow movements one turns *lento*, *adagio*, *pianissimo*; in fast movements, one turns *andante*, never *presto* or *agitato*, and always at the precise moment that the performer would look up for the top of the next page.

It pleased me that I satisfied her and that I made no mistakes. Or almost none. Once, when she was playing in Washington with the National

Symphony, she 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. 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.

One Saturday in the fall of my first year of surgical practice, 1955 (as an assistant to my father who was at that time, one of the busiest surgeons in New Jersey). I had Saturday morning "hours" that day, which meant that I saw a patient or two, perhaps one of my own (if such a possession ever exists), and hung around reading journals and ad material until it was time to leave for New York to turn pages for Myra. A sales representative whom I had let in to see me, because I had nothing else to do, had plied me with a sample of *meprobamate*, the popular tranquilizer of the day. So, being nervous about the concert, as I always was, I swallowed one and promptly forgot that I had done so.

It was a fairly cool November afternoon, nippy, as Myra might have said, about 40 degrees. She was more nervous than usual before this concert,

probably because she felt that she was getting on, worried some about her memory and technical facility. There was the usual ritual of hankie twisting and pacing the floor in the artist's room. I felt fine and less nervous than usual.

Carnegie Hall was sold out—three thousand folks in the audience. 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 crowd was immense, no empty seats, applauding lovingly on her first appearance, and long and hard after each section. Towards the end of the Mozart, a slow movement, I suddenly realized that I was getting sleepy. But as the rest of the Sonata got more vigorous, I didn't change with it as I usually would have done, vicariously participating. 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 perk myself up a bit by leaving the hall through the artist's entrance on 56th street, walking vigorously to 5th Avenue, up to 57th, and so on around the block. There was plenty of time. I couldn't imagine what was wrong with me, but didn't worry much about it.

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 all right for the first five minutes or so of the Schubert when, suddenly, I realized that I was growing sleepy again, but more gravely, probably made worse by the mid-afternoon breather. Towards the middle of the slow movement, which was interminable (Schubert often takes too long to say things), I really began to struggle to stay awake. At first I tried scaring myself 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.

No luck. My drowsiness simply got worse. I resorted to other tricks, like pinching my thighs as hard as I could, counting bars in my head, deep breathing—anything except letting my eyes shut. A century later, thank goodness, there at last was the double bar at the end of the last movement. No more pages to turn. Thirty seconds left. End of concert. Only encores to come—without music and a page-turner. (“Grieps of pooses” she called them.) And then, right there, with half a page to go, in front of three thousand people, alongside the Knighted Dame Myra Hess, I fell asleep. The applause awakened me.

I got the usual raves on how musically I turned.