

MUSIC TO MY EARS

Schippers's Remarkable Legacy

by Irving Kolodin



Thomas Schippers—"He made a great deal of memorable music, but the chord that will linger longest resounds from his bequest. It is an act of generosity that just may inspire emulation."

EXCEPT FOR NEWSPAPERS in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he worked, and in Palm Beach, Florida, where he sometimes visited, the musical press has for the most part issued few postmortems on the singular case of the late Thomas Schippers. It is as if it were an everyday occurrence for one of the most accomplished conductors of the era to die of cancer at the age of forty-seven and for him to leave to the Cincinnati Symphony, of which he had been music director since 1970, an estate of nearly a million dollars.

That he was tall and good-looking (with a photogenic profile) was both an advantage and a disadvantage for Schippers in the postwar musical world of the 1950s. Being young, American, and good-looking were assets that opened doors for him, even those doors that led into the orchestra pit of an opera theater; but his lack of experience was not always offset by his substantial talent.

A year or so after his first conspicuous success as conductor of the television premiere of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, in 1952, I sought him out for an interview. After I had put my questions to him, he produced

one for me: "What do I do now?" I suggested a couple of years in Germany, where he could learn his craft. His lack of enthusiasm for the idea is clearer to me now that I know his military service had already included a year (1950–51) in Germany.

Talent as well as good looks brought him to the pit of the New York City Opera in 1953. At twenty-three, he was the youngest conductor ever to have had such an opportunity at the City Opera. By 1955, he had still another identity as "the youngest ever"—this time at the Metropolitan, where he conducted Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*.

For the next Metropolitan season, his assignments included Puccini's *La Bohème*. He was so well versed in the text and the score that he could feed every word to the singers and sing every part with the orchestra. To some of the older performers, however, his lack of practical experience prompted such comments, prior to a working session, as "Let's go and rehearse the conductor."

Bit by bit his energy and application outmoded such derogation. A guest engagement with the New York Philharmonic at twenty-five (1955) opened

another world of opportunity to his quick mind and ready responses. Aptitude later took him to La Scala at twenty-six; his association with Spoleto and RAI (Radio Italiana)—and he performed many unfamiliar works with both—fostered a linguistic talent that eventually gave him command of seven languages. An instance of his gifts at their best was contained in his 1965 revival of Beethoven's early (1790) *Cantata on the Death of the Emperor Joseph II*, which revised for many listeners long-held ideas on the kind of music the young composer was producing before he left Bonn for Vienna.

Anything resembling a debit in "practical" experience vanished on the night of March 4, 1960. He was the conductor that night of the Metropolitan's performance of Verdi's *La Forza del destino* (in which, tragically, Leonard Warren collapsed and died onstage during act two).

The Sixties—he was in his thirties then—were a mixture of grand successes and some opportunities overreached (hampered as he still was by lack of knowledge). The opera houses in which he appeared included La Scala, Spoleto, Bayreuth, Covent Garden (London), Teatro Colón (Buenos



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Aires), and, of course, the Met. At the last named, his aptitude for the French repertory was manifest in such a masterpiece as Massenet's *Manon*.

No conductor could have excelled the effort Schippers put forth for the premiere of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, with which the new Met opened in 1966. The approaching end of Rudolf Bing's long tenure at the Metropolitan spurred something of a boomlet for Schippers to be his successor. There were, however, those who put him down (vis-à-vis the needs of the Met) as too "casual," one who "did not always come prepared" for a new assignment. La Scala came to be more and more his operatic base. It was there that Beverly Sills, as Schippers's chosen replacement for Renata Scott (who had been forced to give up her part in a production of Rossini's *L'Assedio di Corinto* because of pregnancy), achieved the breakthrough (in April, 1968) that opened the way to her mammoth success.

By this time, any aspersions about "ambivalence" or "lack of focus" in Schippers's professional life had disappeared in the aftermath of a profound change in his personal life. That change was his marriage to Elaine (Nonie) Phipps on April 17, 1966. His casual introduction of me to her, some weeks before the marriage, was accompanied by this Schippers aside to me: "She doesn't belong to the wealthy branch of the family." Whatever the purpose of that disclaimer, she did in fact have all the connections required to satisfy the average person's idea of wealth and position.

Companionship, order, and emotional security in his private life undoubtedly had an effect on the stability, indeed the maturity, that now began to characterize his work. His direction veered more and more to the concert hall, with an occasional leaven of opera. When he accepted a long-term engagement as music director of the Cincinnati Symphony, in 1970, it was like a homecoming. The Schipperses went house hunting and found, overlooking the city, an old Victorian mansion that he described as "Tara transplanted from the South." The performances of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* that Schippers conducted at the Metropolitan in early 1972 were undoubtedly the high point of his American operatic career to that time.

The first stroke of adversity set in soon after. Mrs. Schippers began to ail and died (aged thirty-four) as 1972 turned into 1973. The effect of her death on Schippers had better be left unpraised. The only anodyne was work.

The venerable old Music Hall had been internally modernized in 1971-72, and the regenerated, revitalized Cincinnati Symphony was brought to a new high standard of achievement under its demanding director.

Even before his wife's death, Schippers had been troubled by a sense of dissension and confusion in American life. In an article devoted to the upsurge of energy in Cincinnati ("A Foresight Saga in Cincinnati," *SR*, May 20, 1972), Schippers said, "Americans don't seem to believe in America anymore. . . . If there were something I could do to hold the pieces together, I would." He found his opportunity in the aftermath of his personal tragedy. Mrs. Schippers's estate was left to purposes of her own; by prior agreement nothing passed to him. He drew a new will in which, apart from a few bequests to friends and the creation of a trust fund for his parents, he left everything to the Restricted Endowment Fund of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra for the sole use of the orchestra.

For anyone who expressed surprise at this disposition of his own earnings and investments, he had a startling response: "My money was made in music, and I want it to go back into music."

In Italy during the latter part of 1976, Schippers spoke with annoyance of a cough that had become obsessive. Near the end of the year, after some distressing signs of weakness, he came home to see his own doctor. The verdict was soon all too clear: His lungs were cancerous, and surgery would be useless.

Determination and a willingness to pursue any course of treatment kept him alive through the summer and fall. Early in November, despite anguished and incensed protest from at least one of its professional advisers, the board of the orchestra announced that Schippers had been designated "conductor laureate," and a search was soon on for a successor. This was equivalent to pronouncing him unlikely, ever, to resume his work.

A few weeks later, Schippers executed a new will, reaffirming his intention to leave his estate—roughly a million dollars, though appraisal of all property has not been completed—to the orchestra.

During his career, Schippers came to make a great deal of memorable music, but the chord that will linger longest is the one that resounds from his bequest. Such a gesture may never happen again, but we can all cherish it as an example of generosity by a rare man that may—just may—inspire emulation. ●

Doughnut-watching•The virtue of dissatisfaction•The egalitarian thrust

When it comes to evaluating the performance of the American economic system, it's hard to get some people to look at the substance. They get so hung up on shortcomings that they fail to discern accomplishments. Instead of comprehending the doughnut, they become fixated on the hole.

As a result, they come out almost totally negative and conclude that we ought to scrap the whole system and rebuild from scratch. In our view, this ignores the extraordinary benefits that our system—perhaps best called “democratic capitalism”—has produced for the ordinary person over the years. It also ignores the question of what to substitute for the most dynamic, most egalitarian, and most productive system in history, despite all its obvious flaws.

We don't feel any theological attachment to the American economic system. Certainly it can be improved. And this is exactly the point: The system has improved throughout the past 200 years, no matter how unevenly, is still improving, and seems likely to keep on improving if given a chance.

The best way to gauge any system's improvement is, of course, to monitor its performance.

If you look only at the hole, you'll find that both unemployment and inflation in the U.S. are still far higher than any of us would like.

But if you look at the doughnut over the 10 years through 1977—a decade that encompassed the Vietnam war, the oil embargo, and other afflictions—you'll find this: The number of people employed in this country increased well over twice as fast as our population did.

And, as Ben Wattenberg points out in his book *The Real America*, family income in the U.S., after adjusting for inflation, has doubled in a generation, and the steady upward movement of median family income in our country has created a “massive majority middle class... something that has never happened before anywhere...”

This is not to say any of us should be complacent. On the contrary, healthy and informed dissatisfaction with the status quo has underlain

much of our country's progress. But this constant progress itself has created problems: By performing economic miracles, the system has created enormous expectations and a growing desire for instant gratification of those expectations.

The key to this dilemma is partly one of timing: Our system is indeed able to work wonders when it is allowed to operate within rational, realistic timetables for change and with minimal government intervention. The problem often lies in expecting too much too soon, and this in turn often leads to well-meaning but misguided government intervention, which does more harm than good.

Most of the critics of our system agree that it is wondrously productive, though they are reluctant to comprehend that material wealth is indispensable if a society is to support such essentials as health care, education, and other social services. They fault the system on “moral” or other grounds—including, sometimes, esthetics. And they focus disproportionately on the short-term malfunctions that punctuate the system's long-term performance.

At least part of the carping at our economic system is sheer intellectual faddism; it's easier to criticize than to learn the basics of economics, which can require one to overcome deeply rooted biases. Many elitists seem to feel that in the long run our country will be better off if the decisions are made by a select few rather than by the masses of people. Since our economic system is essentially egalitarian in its thrust, elitists often appear to fear and distrust it.

Being egalitarian, the system naturally develops a constituency that is large and loyal, even if not as vocal as those bent on remaking society in their own image. If left unchecked, this tendency of people to think for themselves will almost inevitably strengthen both our economic and political systems.

This is a prospect we find it easy to live with. We believe that over any reasonable period of time the American people, no matter how much they criticize their economic system, will devote themselves more to appreciating the doughnut than to denouncing the hole in it.

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DANCE

The Menace of Show Biz Unions

by Walter Terry

"THERE IS NOT a single ballet company I know that has not been on the brink of bankruptcy sometime during the past ten years," says Anthony Bliss, executive director of the Metropolitan Opera. "Almost all ballet and modern dance companies have more than once faced the prospect of going out of business." John Waddell, cochairman with Bliss of the board of directors of the enormously popular Joffrey Ballet, adds, "We are living dangerously close to a formula for self-destruction." The crux of the problem can be summed up in one word: *unions*.

Ballet's financial straits come at a time when theater and dance around the world are flourishing as never before in history; since 1970, dance attendance in America has increased by a spectacular 600 percent. Not so long ago, about 60 ballet performances and perhaps 15 modern dance recitals took place in New York City each year; today, New Yorkers attend close to 500 ballet performances annually, and a balletomane can attend a modern dance, ethnic dance, or avant-garde dance event any day of the year. In the nation at large, there are more than 300 dance companies, several of them major professional troupes and more than 100 of them regional ballet groups that are culturally important to their areas.

Such aesthetically encouraging figures in no way erase the terrifying deficit figures that any one of these many companies must face. It is possible that simple business mismanagement may be causing the financial squeeze for some—but not many—troupes. Almost all companies, however, are plagued by the union problem. This does not mean that Equity, Local 802, or the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA, the union for troupes that are all dance) is a villain. There is neither villain nor blameless hero. It's a matter of viewpoint. A union contract is designed to secure fair salaries, obtain benefits, and protect workers. The dancers and the associated workers in a ballet enterprise (musicians, crew, and so on) are just wage earners to a union. But to the directors of companies, to choreographers, to boards of directors, to most dancers themselves, dancers are not laborers—they are artists.

"Dancers are basically poor union material," observes John Gingrich,

president of the Association of American Dance Companies, a service organization that works to develop and foster performing opportunities for all companies. And Waddell explains: "Dancers dance because they have to, because dancing is a necessity to their very lives." But according to most directors, the musicians in a ballet orchestra perform not because playing accompaniments for dancers is their lifeblood or because they are devoted to Joffrey or Balanchine or Martha Graham but because they collect a salary. Likewise, members of stage crews work not out of loyalty to a ballet master, even if he is the genius of the century, but because they have a job.

These differing attitudes undermine the financial structure of most dance troupes. Waddell's figures for a Joffrey Ballet payroll during a typical week at the New York City Center illustrate the point. The total payroll in round figures was \$100,000: \$20,700 for the salaries of 46 dancers; \$36,000 for the salaries of 46 musicians; \$31,000 for 24 stage crew members (electricians, carpenters, stagehands); \$10,800 for artistic and administrative personnel; and \$1,500 for other employees (house personnel). In other words, two thirds of the total ballet company payroll went to the orchestra and the crew.

Does such a discrepancy between what dancers are paid and what others involved in the production earn suggest that the tail is wagging the dog? In part. But there are extenuating factors. Jane Hermann, director of research and special projects—with a particular accent on dance activities—at the Met, notes that musicians and stagehands see themselves as part of a national industry, whereas dancers direct their loyalties toward one artistic director and usually accept the fact that they can be paid only what their particular company can afford.

Gingrich, agreeing, notes also that the union can be credited with some accomplishments. "In small cities and towns, boards of directors of local ballet companies have treated dancers in ways they wouldn't dare treat musicians in the local symphony. AGMA has forced boards to treat dancers more seriously, fairly." But Gingrich has a warning as well: "We must continue to ask unions for restraint because government support is not going to grow

much right away, foundation support is already eroding dangerously, and audiences cannot afford to pay higher ticket prices than already exist. Unions must consider the survival or the disappearance of dance companies."

The answer to the desperate financial problems facing dance companies is neither simple nor single. Obviously, funds must be raised above and beyond moneys earned at the box office. Bliss points out that fund raising is much more difficult for ballet companies than for most other performing arts enterprises. "The Met is ninety years old," he notes. "It is an institution. Institutions seem permanent, solid. Opera and symphony companies usually have been founded by community groups and have become institutionalized in due course. But dance companies, even big ballet companies, usually have been founded by individuals, and individuals are not invitations for investments." The American Ballet Theatre (ABT) was brought into being because the late Richard Pleasant had a dream in 1939; Lucia Chase supported and continues to support that dream. The New York City Ballet would not exist if it had not been for Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine. The birthright of companies named Joffrey, Graham, Cunningham, Ailey, Taylor, and so on is self-evident: They were created because of the desires of artists. Yet all these companies have performed been hothoused into institutional form, with its attendant requirements and none of its advantages.

In the past, ABT actually has suspended activities; just a few months ago the situation was so desperate that there were barely funds to meet the payroll. Both the Joffrey and the Alvin Ailey companies have cut down drastically on New York engagements because of increased costs; and two years ago, the San Francisco Ballet—the nation's oldest ballet troupe—was so close to bankruptcy that its dancers took to the streets and danced for coins. It survived. But for how long? Someday, hopefully, the United States government will support its performing arts to the degree that other nations do. Until then, as Bliss says, "companies are skating on thin ice. And unions themselves must consider the individual circumstances of dance companies if they are to survive." ●