



# All About Stoki—and Slava, too!

A review of Nancy Shear's memoir, *I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms*

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Meet the man who shook the hand of Micky Mouse: Leopold Stokowski, a self-created legend in his own time.

If you knew Stoki like Nancy knew Stoki!

Still in her teens, Nancy Shear of Philadelphia began insinuating herself into the world of the Philadelphia Orchestra as single-mindedly as Eve Harrington, of *All About Eve* fame, insinuated herself into the milieu of the Broadway diva Margot Channing. But while Eve was a snake in the grass, out to supplant her idol, Nancy was an innocent under the spell of the music. She had no yen at all for the spotlight.

Hanging around the stage door, sneaking past security, she quickly became a familiar face. Faster than you can say “Leopold Stokowski,” she was pitching in as the sorcerer’s apprentice to the orchestra librarian and hobnobbing with the controversial maestro himself, architect of the fabled “Philadelphia Sound” and 64 years her senior. Speaking of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” the masses knew Stokowski, too. This was the guy who shook hands onscreen with Mickey Mouse in Walt Disney’s classical-music extravaganza “Fantasia.” *I Knew A Man Who Knew Brahms*, Shear’s title informs us, pointing to an inconsequential episode in the library of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Her subtitle, *A Memoir*, gives no hint of her principal subjects. The first, which sees us through page 204, is Shear’s technically Platonic May-December romance with the conductor popularly known as “Stoki.” The second, overlapping with the first, is her eventually consummated May-October romance with the superstar Soviet cellist and dissident Mstislav Rostropovich, universally known as “Slava.” Antithetical temperaments, alike only in their charisma. A conducting-student boyfriend Shear’s own age in Philadelphia flits in and out, name-checked merely as Allen; a British maestro with whom she shared a more cosmopolitan intercontinental romance remains entirely anonymous.

Shear never married, never had children, never wanted to. The way she saw it, the family she was born into was more than enough. A depressed mother and an abusive father conditioned her early to protect herself by means of what she calls “hypervigilance.” The components of her



Born to play cello. Baby Mstislav catches some zzz's in Dad Rostropovich's instrument case.

defense mechanism include total recall, an uncanny ability to read other people's emotions, and a phenomenal capacity for compartmentalizing. These properties inform her writing, too.

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Her gift for juggling relationships with prima donnas and a supporting cast of scarcely less touchy talents and territorial hangers-on borders on the miraculous. Her novelistic character sketches are often unsparing, yet she never stoops to settling scores. She shows an admirable self-awareness of her growth over the decades. This is the woman who never cut her hair because she promised Stoki not to.

This is the woman who, entirely on her own initiative, scooped up bits of earth from the graves of Beethoven and Mahler to bury by Stoki's headstone.

But really, the book is not about her. Having gone on from her early ventures in the music library to prominence as a respected radio personality in the classical-music field and as the founder of a boutique PR agency, Shear has much to tell us about musical interpretation, the egos of great artists, backstage politics, and the changing landscape for classical music.

Was the era she lived with truly a Golden Age? It was to her, and she reveled in it to the fullest. She is insightful about the impact of music on her own emotions and parcels out her store of telling anecdotes with the timing of a fine raconteur. When technical matters crop up ("free bowing," anyone?), Shear deals with them in language any interested reader can follow. Very occasionally, she circles back to themes you may feel she has covered sufficiently before. But by no means skip the footnotes, where she has planted some of her zingiest Easter eggs.