

I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms by Nancy Shear

★★★★½ Shear's life with Stokowski and Rostropovich makes a fascinating memoir and much, much more.

by Will Yeoman

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Nancy Shear's memoir *I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms* is a veritable three-part fugue, blending as it does personal memoir with portraits of two larger-than-life musicians who couldn't be more different from each other: conductor Leopold Stokowski and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. The result is not just a different perspective on the world of orchestral music, but an example of how art can shape identity while providing sanctuary from life's woes.

Indeed, that latter aspect of the book provides the emotional underpinning for everything. Shear explores music as "a profound conduit for human emotion, connection, and personal growth" as she chronicles her own evolution from starstruck teenager to mature artist and writer while acknowledging it required her to "recall tragedies as well as triumphs and relive painful losses" and "release" family secrets.

Shear's journey begins in adolescence, when music became her refuge from a chaotic home life where, as soon as "father's car pulled into the driveway, we'd have to switch off the music, and by the time his keys jangled in the door lock, the house would be hushed and filled with tension."

At 18, Shear became Stokowski's musical assistant, and during a long career as an orchestral librarian for leading orchestras she became close to Rostropovich, among many others. So, it's no surprise that another of the book's chief strengths lies in the author's ability to bring her musical mentors to life on the page as flesh-and-blood human beings rather than merely the distant legends many of us know them as.

Stokowski emerges as a compellingly contradictory figure – part theatrical showman, part musical purist. His unconventional methods, conducting without a baton and prioritising "expressive power over traditional 'prettiness,'" reflected his belief that "music is not always beautiful! Sometimes it is ugly!" Shear reveals the carefully constructed persona behind the maestro, including his fabricated Polish identity and mysterious past, while capturing his extraordinary ability to communicate through "some sort of magic," "hypnotism," or "ESP."

In stark contrast stands Rostropovich – "Slava" – whose warmth and emotional transparency provided a different model of artistic greatness. Where Stokowski maintained icy formality, Rostropovich offered "effusive

gratitude and humility," openly crediting divine inspiration: "I (was) born with talent for (the) cello." His fearless artistry, taking "astounding chances: leaps up the fingerboard to high tones that sang, frenzied passages that elicited gasps from the audience," matched his courage as a human rights activist defending Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn against Soviet oppression.

Throughout, Shear's prose is breathtakingly vivid, engaging and pellucid. This is in part down to her writing, demonstrating what she calls "hypervigilance" – a trauma-induced ability to recall events with cinematic clarity. This manifests in gorgeously evocative passages, such as her description of the backstage atmosphere. "The entire backstage area smelled of music: the scent of bow rosin, the perfume of valve oil, and the aroma of freshly pressed concert clothing mingled with the mustiness of decades of dust. That smell was like a drug."

Additionally, the memoir's structure echoes that of a musical composition, opening with a *Prelude* and closing with a *Coda*, while the narrative flows chronologically through decades of musical encounters. All the while, Shear skilfully weaves technical musical insights with personal revelation, making complex concepts accessible without sacrificing depth. Part elegy to a lost world, part tribute to music's power to change lives, *I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms* is a moving and endlessly fascinating read that will keep you up until the wee hours. And going back to those old recordings.

FILM

Dead of Winter

★★★★½ It may not reshape the action-thriller tropes, but it's smartly shot and gives Emma Thompson a role to relish.

by Jason Blake

Like the Coen Brothers' 1996 neo-noir *Fargo*, director Brian Kirk's *Dead of Winter* transports us to the icy landscapes of America's northern Midwest for a brisk and bloody, female-centred thriller.

British star Emma Thompson is Barb – in her late sixties, recently widowed and still living in the home she and her husband shared. We meet her as she prepares for an ice-fishing trip to the frozen lake they visited on their first date. She still carries a photo taken at the time and her husband's old fishing tackle box.

There's a weather system barreling in, and things can turn dangerous in these parts pretty quickly. But Barb, who has lived here all her life, has seen it all and drives into the coming storm regardless.

Momentarily blindsided by a blizzard, she stops for directions at an isolated and very run-down cabin. The occupant (played by Marc Menchaca) seems a cagey type, but that's not unusual in these parts. The blood splash in the snow? "Deer," he growls. Barb moves on.