

# The Mysterious Maestro

## I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms

By Nancy Shear

Regalo, 320 pages, \$32

**T**he level of the orchestras in the world—especially in the '70s and '80s—has gone up everywhere,” the conductor Riccardo Muti claimed in 2017. Anyone familiar with old recordings—especially of live performances—knows that’s not true. During the interwar years, at least five American orchestras regularly sustained a degree of hypercommitment, evincing passion and love, today mainly to be found only in the ranks of the Berlin Philharmonic. What is more, each commanded a distinctive musical identity.

The most acclaimed American orchestra was Arturo Toscanini’s New York Philharmonic, which set new standards for songful precision. The least acclaimed, because taken for granted, was the Metropolitan Opera orchestra superintended by Ettore Panizza and Artur Bodanzky: an Italian powderkeg. The Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky boasted an astoundingly robust string choir. In Minneapolis,

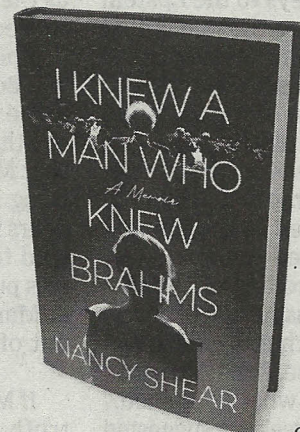
the raw energy and sinewy musculature of Dimitri Mitropoulos’s orchestra was unnervingly unique.

But the most mysterious, most controversial American orchestra was Philadelphia’s, where Leopold Stokowski went his own way. A sonic sybarite who ignored or altered every composer’s intentions, he evinced no known tradition or lineage. And he was himself cloaked in secrecy. At the time no one knew where and when he was born, or to whom. Though he sometimes claimed Polish parentage, his parents were British, his father a cabinetmaker. Even his spoken accent—never British or American—was purposely untraceable.

Nancy Shear has long owed us a book about Stokowski. For decades, she was his librarian and assistant. Her relationship to him was itself elusive. He was an employer, a father figure, at times virtually a lover. Her memoir, “I Knew a Man Who Knew Brahms,” reveals both the eccentric methodology of the conductor and the odd loneliness and insecurities of the man.

Among Stokowski’s frequent speeches from the stage, we have one from Robin Hood Dell, his orchestra’s summer home: “Would you like to go home now?” Stokowski inquired of his audience after a Tchaikovsky symphony. “A chorus of thousands yelled ‘No!’ He asked the same question before each of six encores. After the final work, hearing the audience roar ‘No!’ he suggested, ‘Let’s ask the orchestra.’ ‘Yes!’ the musicians yelled, and the concert ended.” Ms. Shear invaluable adds: “Even during Stokowski’s lighthearted comments . . . the musicians sat with their instruments poised, ready to start. String players kept the fingers of their left hands in place on the fingerboards, their right hands gripping the bows in playing position.”

In rehearsals, “whenever he stopped the orchestra there was absolute silence—no laughing, no chatting.” Stokowski fiercely guarded the instrumental parts he edited, with their many idiosyncratic instructions. “Don’t let anyone look at these!” he would thunder after handing Ms. Shear his scores after a concert.



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Ms. Shear contributes many a keen personal anecdote. An early encounter: “He answered the door in a white terrycloth robe. . . . He also sounded more British than I’d ever heard him sound. I was both thrilled and uncomfortable. . . . He suddenly stepped forward and enveloped me in his arms, holding me tightly, tenderly, quietly, then, wordlessly, he released me. . . . He had established a new closeness between us, and I didn’t want to violate his need for privacy. I had sensed, from his usual regal bearing, that he didn’t freely bestow expressions of pure affection; there was no hint of anything sexual in the embrace or in the sweetness of his smile . . . and I treasured this shift in our relationship.”

**Leopold Stokowski’s personality, musical practices and personal origins were cloaked in secrecy. The conductor preferred it that way.**

Ms. Shear’s book is as honest and unassuming as Stokowski was evasive and flamboyant. The “man who knew Brahms,” curiously, is not Stokowski, but an elderly Viennese gentleman, the son of a pharmacist, who as a child would deliver medications to the composer. Her secondary characters are Eugene Ormandy, who in 1938 succeeded Stokowski in Philadelphia, and Mstislav Rostropovich, the irrepressible Russian cellist and conductor, with whom she had an endearing little affair.

Of Ormandy she writes that “of all the conductors I worked with,” he was “the one I most disliked, both personally and musically.” Because he regarded loyalty to his predecessor as disloyalty to himself, she had to hide from Ormandy her continued professional relationship with Stokowski. “After Stokowski left the Philadelphia Orchestra, the musicians and the staff knew not to mention him—ever—in front of Ormandy for fear of reprisal. Even official orchestra publications downplayed Stokowski’s role in the ensemble’s history.”

In the 1960s, when Stokowski was finally permitted to return as guest conductor, “he’d write memos on the official Philadelphia Orchestra stationery that bore Ormandy’s name at the top, invariably turning the sheet upside down.” Traveling by train, he would lower the window shade when passing through Philadelphia. In a rare outburst, he once commanded Ms. Shear to “sit down!”—and proceeded to inform her “why I left the Philadelphia Orchestra!” His voice rising, “he told me about being denied the authority to program substantial amounts of contemporary music and to take the orchestra on foreign tours. ‘They dared to tell me what I could and could not do!’” This story matters, because replacing Stokowski with Ormandy—a move partly engineered by the musical powerbroker Arthur Judson—instantly diminished Philadelphia’s significance as a cultural hub.

No Leopold Stokowski could exist today, in the face of prying social media. Notwithstanding his glamorous marriage to Gloria Vanderbilt and an affair with Greta Garbo, he needed to be unknown. Recounted by Nancy Shear, his strange odyssey reminds us that art, in its highest manifestations, is itself mysterious.

*Mr. Horowitz has written about Leopold Stokowski in “Classical Music in America” and “Artists in Exile.”*