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For Bruno Walter.

Mann, Erika

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For Bruno Walter

By ERIKA MANN



HALF A CENTURY it is since he first took up his magic wand, and thirty years since I first met him. I was very little then, and all I knew about music was that it belonged to

"Herr Walter," who in turn belonged to it. The two were inseparable. Listening to music meant listening to him; and seeing him means seeing personified the heavenly art, of which he was the chosen representative on earth.

"Earth" was Munich, as far as I was concerned. And it was the Koeniglich Bayrisches Hoftheater, as well as the Odeon Concert Hall, where he kept producing the unearthly sounds, which — so he said — were not of his making. A man called Mozart was the one to be thanked; or else it was Brahms; or a certain Schubert.

Privately, he lived around the corner from our house near the Isar. My parents and the Walters were friends, and my dearest friends were his daughters. Of course, they adored their father, who, they maintained, was not only the most affectionate, but also the most beguiling of parents. He played with them, and for them; he entertained them, and told them stories of which he was a great inventor — stories, which he was wont to perform, rather than merely to tell. A fairy by the trivial name of Minna Schusterbeisl had to be conjured up time and again. I still fondly remember her as a model expression of the glamorous uselessness of her breed.

You had to go to a great deal of trouble to make Minna turn up. But when, cloaked in wondrous odors, colors, and melodies, she finally appeared, you found yourself richly rewarded.

"Mortal!" she said in a sweet, if hollow voice, "What is it that thou wishest?"

Whereupon you confronted her with your dearest desire. "This, thine wish," Schusterbeisl replied promisingly, "I cannot fulfill!"

And off she was — odors, colors, melodies, and all.

Herr Walter, formidably impressive, as he seemed,

was enormously amusing. And how easy to amuse he was, how quickly touched, how readily impressed; the ideal audience; the perfect listener and reader.

He still is. He has grown immeasurably since the days of Munich. But the thirty years which turned the god of my childhood into a great figure in the world of music have left unchanged his youthful enthusiasm, his vast receptivity, his sprightly interest in all that is interesting. Going to the movies with him is like going to the movies with a brilliant child. And hearing him discuss a book he has read, a play he has seen, or a speech he has heard, is like listening to somebody very young, if keenly intelligent, and oddly experienced. He reads more and writes better than many a man of letters.

He is lenient, friendly, obliging. He dislikes rows, and finds unpleasantness distinctly unpleasant. He is also an optimist, in whose heaven there is a silver lining to every cloud. A fighter he is not. In fact, if the term had not fallen into disgrace, one might call him an "appeaser" of life — of private life, that is.

When it comes to music, all is different, and the gentle peacemaker turns into a zealous hero. The very word "compromise" is missing in his musical vocabulary. Instead, you'll find passionate devotion, fervid faithfulness, fierce perseverance, and an almost furious conscientiousness. That he was born a musician and endowed with the rarest gifts would not have sufficed to make him great. Talent is raw material. To change it into mastery a man needs character. He has got to be daring and disciplined; stubborn and sensitive; proud and humble; thrifty and generous; impressionable and imperturbable. He must teach himself how to join ecstasy with soberness; and within the boundlessness of his art, he must know his limitations. That's what it takes, plus talent and good fortune; and that is what has carried him to the lofty heights, where today we know him safely enthroned, and where — he tells us — he now wants to pause, and rest a little. After fifty years of service he feels entitled to some minor vacation. We quite understand, but doubt that he will get it. Once again Schusterbeisl ought to be conjured up. We can picture the scene most vividly.

"Mortal!" she says in a sweet, if hollow voice, "What is it that thou wishest?"

"I want to be left in peace for a year or so!"

"This, thine wish," Minna says promisingly, "I cannot fulfill!"

And off she is, odors, colors, melodies, and all.