MAN OF ACTION

A choice of records

My musical education began in a fairly conventional way. I was really provided with a very heavy fare of the kind of operas that the French Opéra probably did mostly in the late nineteenth century, partly by being taken to the opera constantly, and partly through gramophone records and through the fact that my mother, who sang quite well, used to sing arias from these operas – I mean works like the best-known operas of Verdi, Gounod's *Faust*, *Carmen*, pieces by Offenbach, arias out of *Samson and Delilah*, out of even minor composers, like Ambroise Thomas' *Mignon*, and that kind of thing – with the result that I reacted very strongly against this, and when I was a schoolboy could hardly listen to Italian opera, which seemed to me vulgar and tawdry, for at least two years. And my real musical education was completed by going to the Promenade Concerts, which were conducted by Sir Henry Wood, which was a very solid classical education in the masterpieces in the classical tradition of music. Works by Beethoven, by Mozart, by Bach opened an entirely new universe to me. I remember when somebody gave me a present of Beethoven's Spring Sonata, this opened the door into a wholly new world, as remote as it conceivably could be from the world of the opera of the 1870s.

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This was Beethoven's Violin and Piano Sonata, opus 24 in F major. While I expect there were, and there are, violinists with more brilliant technique and richer tone than Adolf Busch, and no doubt pianists of greater virtuosity than Serkin, what I adored about these players was their extreme purity and seriousness, and the fact that they had a certain sense of the inwardness of the music, which no other players at that time seemed to me to possess – a certain moral nobility, if you like, in the playing. And what was true of them was true of the Busch Quartet. I became a

tremendous addict of the Beethoven posthumous quartets, which transformed my entire conception of what art could do, of what the limits of human experience could be. As an example of this, here is the Busch Quartet playing Beethoven's Quartet No 14 in C sharp minor, opus 131.

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That was the first movement of the C sharp minor Beethoven Quartet, opus 131, played by the Busch Quartet.

The Busch Quartet was certainly the noblest and most moving quartet I think I'd ever heard in my life; at least I thought so in the 1930s when I first heard them and the memory lingers with me still, and really conditioned my whole attitude, perhaps, to chamber music.

My distaste for Italian opera didn't last very long. I came back to it quite happily, quite soon after my period of Bach and Beethoven and the great Viennese masters. One of the most beautiful arias in the whole of Italian opera seems to me to be 'Casta diva' in Bellini's *Norma*, sung by Rosa Ponselle, who I think is still teaching somewhere in America. It seemed to me a supreme record in the 1930s when I first heard it.

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That was Rosa Ponselle singing the name part in Bellini's opera *Norma*.

I still think that even now not quite enough admiration is given to Bellini as a composer of wistful, elegiac, lyrical music of the greatest beauty and sensibility, rather like some of the works of Chopin in the same mood – Chopin, who Bellini knew – the sort of mood which sometimes pervades short stories by Turgenev, who wrote at about the same time or perhaps a little later.

My earliest memory of opera at all is hearing Chaliapin sing the part of Boris in *Boris Godunov* – in Mussorgsky's great opera, which I heard, I suppose, for the first time at the age of eight in Petersburg at the time of the Revolution, in the middle of 1917. All kinds of fearful political events were going on, but the opera in the great Maryinsky Theatre went on. He was certainly the greatest singer and actor I ever heard or saw (I never heard Caruso, so I

can't tell), and his range was enormous. He sang not only tragic parts, with great magnificence and depth, but was equally marvellous in comic parts. He sang the part of Don Basilio in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, it seems to me, almost better than the Italians sang it. It's an aria which is about the terrible effect which malicious gossip can have on a man by crushing him totally, if skilfully applied. Here is the aria: it's called 'La Calunnia'.

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That was Fedor Chaliapin singing the aria 'La Calunnia' in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*. I can only assure those who've never seen him in opera that, when he sang, it was impossible to look at anyone, and hardly possible to hear anyone else on the stage. And although he sang comical parts as well as tragic ones, it was really in the great tragic Shakespearean parts that he was most magnificent.

But there is a singer, of course, in our day too who does this with great skill and effect – and that is Boris Christoff. He sings the part of King Philip in Verdi's *Don Carlos*, it seems to me, with incomparable magnificence. The scene is one where Philip sits alone, overcome by terrible gloom, by frightful despair – he's almost frozen with despair. The prelude which announces him is full of those death-notes which Verdi could convey so well. The king is rather a kind of Boris. He's unhappy, but he's also bigoted. His candles are guttering just before dawn; he's in a condition of black despair, and waves of self-pity wash over him. He says that his wife never loved him, that she looked upon his white locks with gloom, even when they first met, that his son is a rebel, the queen has betrayed him; that he will never know any peace until he's finally laid to rest with his ancestors in the Escorial. It's an extraordinary evocation of horror, self-pity, loneliness, fanaticism, with a kind of stern power and passionate religious faith.

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That was Boris Christoff singing the great monologue of King Philip in *Don Carlos* by Verdi ['Ella giammai m'amo', Act 3] – Verdi, who is perhaps the greatest master of conveying basic emotions in primary colours that music has ever produced; it's an

almost Shakespearean power and poetical capacity. This opera was put on at Covent Garden some years ago and is still going on there; it was perhaps the best thing they did since the war. The production by Visconti – and the conducting of it by Giulini – is something which nobody who heard those famous performances is ever likely to forget.

I spoke of Adolf Busch as a man who made a profound impression upon me in the 1930s. Well, his equivalent, so far as the piano is concerned, was the great pianist Artur Schnabel, who transformed not only my, but a great many persons', conception of the music, particularly of Beethoven, but also, I suppose, of Schubert and other composers. He was particularly marvellous, I thought, in conveying the strange and profound quality of the late Beethoven sonatas. Here is a piece of Beethoven played by him.

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That was Artur Schnabel playing the third movement from Beethoven's Sonata [in A flat], opus 110.

There are many ways of being moved however. Most of my memories go back to the 1930s, but after the war I heard a pianist very different from Schnabel – Dinu Lipatti, who was one of the most exquisitely lyrical and poetical players of any instrument I ever heard. He died young and very tragically.

Here is Lipatti playing Bach.

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That was Dinu Lipatti playing Minuets 1 and 2 from Bach's Partita No 1 in B flat [BWV 825]. Some critics complained of rubato. Perhaps so – it still seems to me the most exquisite performance.

Another composer whom I could never have enough of, and who we hear a good deal of now, but he was rather less heard in the 1930s, is Claudio Monteverdi. It seems to me that particularly his madrigals, even more perhaps than his operatic arias, contain a marvellous Elizabethan quality. There is a madrigal which conveys the passion of love, again with almost Shakespearean generosity and intensity. It's called 'Lettera amorosa'.

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That was 'Lettera amorosa' by Monteverdi, sung by Yvon le Marc'hadour.

The greatest conductor whom I ever listened to in the 1930s, the greatest conductor of that time, as I'm sure anyone who listened to him probably would admit, was certainly Arturo Toscanini. He doesn't need me to praise him. Let me just say this about him. He produced a mixture of fiery intensity and a marvellous singing quality which was really quite extraordinary. The combination of poetry and discipline of orchestral performances, in which every note of every instrument was audible as if for the first time, was really matchless. And then there was an extraordinary, almost agonised self-absorption in the composer's purpose on the part of the conductor – watching him conduct, even, had this effect upon one, so that one believed, rightly or wrongly, that this truly was what the composer had intended, and all other performances were completely blotted out from one's consciousness. But he was incomparable in Rossini, whom nobody, I suspect, ever conducted as he did. For example, in the Overture to the *The Italian Girl in Algiers* those tremendous percussive pistol-cracks and the marvellous silken violin *tutti* seem to me unlike anything else that has ever been created. Whether it was done by kindness is another question: one rather doubts that. But the effect is absolutely electric – electric and delightful.

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That was the Overture to *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, the NBC Symphony Orchestra with Arturo Toscanini. It seemed to me that the combination of strings and woodwind was absolutely miraculous.

And finally, in sharp contrast to Toscanini, another conductor of genius of the same period – Sir Thomas Beecham. He couldn't be less like Toscanini. Where Toscanini was almost painfully disciplined, painfully self-effacing before the desires of the composer, Beecham lived in a world of delight, charm, gaiety, colour. He perhaps had the most wonderful sense of pleasure of any great conductor, and that was so whether he conducted Beethoven or Mozart or Massenet. He was particularly good at music which had magical qualities. 'The Royal Hunt and Storm',

from Berlioz's *Trojans*, is a really magical work in the sense that Berlioz wanders in regions where other composers seldom venture. It seems to me a most enchanted, extraordinary piece of music[1] about the great storm described by Virgil in which Dido and Aeneas find themselves and then surrender to their passion.

Radio 3, 12 October 1974. 2.05 p.m.

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[1] [Played here by the London Philharmonic Orchestra.]