

Barbiroli/Houston Symphony Orchestra



when the
Maestros
came to Houston

by WAYNE CROUSE

Leopold Stokowski and Sir John Barbirolli. Swept into town on a wave of cultural enthusiasm, the two symphonic giants brought great credibility to the Houston Symphony and taught its principal violist a lasting lesson in contrasting styles.

When I arrived in Houston, Texas, in October 1951 to assume my new position as assistant principal violist of the Houston Symphony, I quickly was introduced to the world of Texas hyperbole. Texans loved to brag about anything having to do with their state: its size (larger than the *entire* country of France), its vast number of oil wells, cattle, cowboys and Cadillacs. Pretty much anything any other state might aspire to glorify, Texas had, only bigger and better — pretty much anything, that is, except cultural events, until the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition began in that upstart city, Fort Worth. Suddenly, the major Texas cities had a bigger and better challenge on their hands, and Houston was no exception.

A few years before my arrival, the Houston Symphony had become a professional orchestra. This, to Houstonians, meant that salaries were raised, the players were actually given a contract and were expected to make a living at orchestra playing without resorting to other employment — at least in the winter months.

The first reorganization of this new cultural oil spout was led by Efreim Kurtz, who relied heavily on the advice of teachers at conservatories such as Juilliard and the Curtis Institute of Music to provide him with new players (such as the fresh-faced new assistant principal violist). Kurtz was followed by a brilliant young Hungarian conductor named Ferenc Fricsay, whose “misunderstandings” with the board of directors unfortunately led to his departure after only half a season. The remaining six weeks of the season were filled by the venerable Sir Thomas Beecham, whose disdain for “barbarous” Texas caused enough hilarity among the Houston orchestra

members to fill a Texas-sized book.

The management, being Texans, needed a “big name” to pull the public (also, of course, being Texans) into the concerts and convince them to support this new expensive “cultural” orchestra. Who better, then, than Leopold Stokowski, the co-star of that famous actor, Mr. Mickey Mouse, in the Disney box office success, “Fantasia?” Why, Mr. Stokowski was a household name (although many Houstonians bragged about the fact that “Tchaikovsky” was coming to Houston)! The board of directors convinced Stokowski (with a lot of money, of course) to assume the title of music director of the Houston Symphony. This meant that he would bring along a few of his many recording contracts and make infrequent visits to the orchestra. But agree he did, and the Houston Symphony had the big name it wanted.

At the time of Stokowski’s announcement, I was “conducting” in Europe (more about that later) and was anxious to return to audition for the recently vacated position of principal violist. The Maestro, however, already had filled the position in New York City. It wasn’t till the next season when, along with 32 other positions, the job opened up again, and I was hired.

The press had a field day when “Stokie” (our nickname for Stokowski, used liberally and carefully behind his back) arrived in Houston. He must have felt he was back with M. Mouse in Hollywood as he was made an honorary member of the Sheriff’s Posse and photographed wearing a huge ten-gallon Stetson cowboy hat. And it must have seemed only natural for him to assume that he was taking over an orchestra of native-born Texans, who operated best, perhaps, rasslin’ cows or pumpin’ oil. The truth was that

most of us were from elsewhere and were as baffled by Texas as was Stokie.

Stokie, however, was sure that any lack of ability to communicate to the orchestra was due to the fact that we were all Texans. “Now how do you say slower (or faster, or louder, or softer, etc.) in *Texan*?” he would say to the orchestra. “I don’t speak this strange dialect, but I see that I must soon learn it.” All of this was delivered in his own puzzling accent, which was the mysterious result of an English birth and a German-speaking nanny. Some days words sounded more Slavic than others, and when he referred to the first violins as “dose yolins” and the second violins as “dese yolins,” there was speculation that the nanny may have been born in Brooklyn.

The Maestro didn’t hesitate to use various tactics to “size up” this Texas orchestra. One of his favorite tricks was to remain seated on his stool during breaks and scrutinize those who had the courage to remain in his sight. He had, either in his late 70s or early 80s, sired two boys with the young Gloria Vanderbilt (who never chose to visit her husband’s Texas connection) and welcomed any parent who would come up and share stories about their offspring. Those of us who had no offspring considered swapping stories about our nieces, nephews or even our pets as this seemed to be one of the few genuine avenues of communication with the Maestro.

We learned early on that the Maestro liked to test the alertness of his players. While rehearsing a piece, he might stop to fix something and then begin again in an entirely different place. Our only clue as to where he’d begin was the fact that simultaneously to giving the downbeat he’d call out the letter of the new starting place. This was quite a test indeed, and we

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suspected that many other orchestras had had the same Stokie alertness tests practiced on them as many of the scores were marked with enormous letters in the margins of the music.

He traveled with an extensive library of his own music, all carefully stamped with the inscription *Property of Leopold Stokowski* in the right-hand corner. My favorite piece was the one where the “principal stampist” had missed the first four letters leaving only *old Stokowski* on the page. I wondered how many other principal violists had gotten a grin out of that one and how truly accidental the stamping had been.

The Maestro was an ardent supporter of a technique known as “free bowing,” which he believed gave the orchestra a “seamless sound . . . more powerful and unstructured.” This caused problems, however, among his conservatory-schooled orchestra members who were trained in the traditional discipline of bowing together. We had to concentrate on *not* bowing together and began to develop an “after you, my dear Alphonse,” attitude with our bowing patterns. If we lost our concentration and began (Heaven forbid!) to bow together, we would feel the Maestro’s glare and hear his shout from the podium, “*Don’t be machines! You and your canned soup and your Social Security!*” We were never quite sure what soup and Social Security had to do with free bowing techniques, but the Maestro left no doubt in our minds that it was an insult.

During Stokowski’s second season with the orchestra, the “Saga of the Mutes” occurred. A mute, by way of explanation, is a small device placed upon the bridge (the wooden brace which holds up the four strings) designed to pinch the bridge and stop

some of the sound from coming out of the instrument. The Maestro decided that certain compositions required specific types of mutes to create the “distinctive sound” envisioned by each composer. Thus, the string players were required to buy three different kinds of mutes: one made of aluminum, one of wood and one of leather.

We were unable to second-guess which composition required which mute was to be used, but Stokie had definite ideas about each piece. It might be, for example, that Wagner required wood; Brahms was, of course, a leather mute sort of composer; and a French composer might be aluminum.

Logistically, these mutes became a nightmare. How could one store them so that they were accessible, and how could one use the right one without dropping it? (A cause for murder by glare from the podium.) The local music store was owned by an enterprising symphony violinist who quickly put in a supply of every conceivable mute that might be used, and we

armed ourselves to the teeth (or the strings, as the case might be) for one was constantly dropping and losing them in the dimly lit backstage areas. There were mutes everywhere that year, and every conceivable method for storing them was used. We finally worked out some methods that seemed plausible and by the beginning of the third season felt prepared for any “mute possibility.”

The first passage where a mute was required came up in a new composition that we were performing early in the season, and the concertmaster dutifully asked the Maestro which mute we were to use. Stokie looked at him rather blankly and said in a tone that referred back to the barbarous nature of Texas musicians that it really didn’t matter at all to *him* which mute we used! Ah, well. They’re all made of plastic today anyway.

During an intermission of a rehearsal shortly before the end of that season, Stokie overheard me discussing my summer plans with our principal cellist, a most attractive young



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After Stokowski’s departure, the Houston Symphony was “ripe” to be shaped into a real orchestra by their demanding yet gracious new conductor. Sir John and Lady Barbirolli soon won the hearts as well as the admiration of their colleagues.

woman. He often seemed to involve himself in conversations if beautiful women were around; let us not forget this is the man who fathered two boys well into the last quarter of his life. He had heard me mention that I would be conducting in Scandinavia and looked at me with a very different gaze than had been directed toward me previously.

"And what orchestras do you conduct in Scandinavia, Maestro?" he said.

"Oh, I don't conduct orchestras, Maestro," I said. "I conduct tours."

"Oh. Tours!" said the Maestro with a decidedly relieved look. "Will you be in Norway?"

I replied that I would.

"Then you must go and see the 'Veeking' ships in the museum in Bergen, Norway. They are magnificent and have been encased in mud for hundreds of years."

That summer I saw those ships — not in Bergen, however, but vividly displayed at the "Veeking" museum in Oslo. At a social gathering in the fall (given by several lovely young ladies in the Maestro's honor), I mentioned to him that I had seen the "Veeking" museum when I was in Oslo.

"You mean in Bergen," said the Maestro. That ended that conversation, for he was, after all, the Maestro and conducted orchestras, not tours!

Then there was the day Shirley smiled. Stokie was a man of many moods. There were the days that were bright with humor, and he might remark to a player who had pleased him with his playing to, "Do again tonight, Mr. X., whatever it was you did last night!" A reference to sex designed to make everyone smile and enjoy the good mood of the Maestro. The dark moods were a terrible contrast, particularly if one of his own works was being rehearsed.

On this occasion it was his transcription of the Bach "Toccatina and Fugue in D minor," a work originally written for organ, the instrument Stokie played as a youth in London. The rehearsal was not going at all to his satisfaction, and his mood was growing darker and darker. Unfortunately, Shirley, one of the first violinists, chose that moment to smile at a little secret joke with her stand partner, and Stokie (who usually kept an eye on the pretty girls) saw it. Incensed, he told



The renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski, a musical genius with ego and eccentricities to match, left his Houston Symphony players a wealth of stories to tell.

her to leave the stage and "go to a funny movie where you can smile all you wish."

Shirley was asked by the management not to return the next season. A smile at the wrong time could be costly when Stokowski was maestro!

Stokowski was renowned for championing the works of living composers and continued his cause in Houston, even founding a Contemporary Music Society (which lasted exactly as long as his tenure in Houston). Perhaps he felt that if he performed enough new works, one of them would surely be a "hit" and add the kudos of having "discovered" it to his biography. Houston, of course, was a city that loved the pot boilers of classical music, and the patrons were terribly confused by his erratic programming of some of these new composers. But as long as there were enough 1812 Overtures and Beethoven Fifth Symphonies in the program, they would accept these strange contemporary pieces.

One of these works was written by a percussionist for (what else?) percussion and strings. It was, to say the least, extremely complex and involved a lot of diving, throttling, banging, pounding, plucking and hitting of an amazing assortment of esoteric percussion instruments strung across the entire back rows of the stage. The strings kept abreast of the situation by skill, prayer and the use of a big

fermata (a place indicated in the score where the conductor stops the proceedings and waits a while before starting the whole thing up again). The young composer attended the dress rehearsal, and Stokie asked him, really as a formality, if he had any comments. This brash fellow had the temerity to come forward with a very long list of "suggestions," which did not sit well with the Maestro. As a matter of fact, these suggestions so unsettled him that during the concert he turned two pages of the score rather than one and completely missed our fermata, or re-grouping spot.

Surely the chaos at the beginning of the world was mild compared to what happened on stage during the rest of that composition. The Maestro finished the piece long before we did, and we finally stopped playing wherever we were. He was not a maestro for nothing, however, and motioned with great dignity to the young composer to rise and take his applause. The composer simply slumped in his seat and surely would have crawled under it had he been able.

With great aplomb, the Maestro turned back to the orchestra and gave the downbeat for the next number on the program. Unfortunately, it was a composition for the whole orchestra, many of whom were not on the stage. It went along fairly well for a few moments until we reached a passage for

winds and brass instruments alone. Stokie was vastly irritated when his conducting was met by silence due to lack of players and their instruments on stage. He crossed his arms in indignation while the entire stage had to be rearranged. He remained in this posture for what seemed like an hour after we were all seated, glaring at the orchestra for its impudence until he finally decided to raise those famous hands and begin the piece again.

Houston had three newspaper critics covering the orchestra at that time, and none of them mentioned the incident the next day. When it came to Maestro Stokowski, the emperor wore fine robes indeed.

In 1963 a ray of sunshine, formed in the personage of Sir John Barbirolli, swept through Houston, Texas. Stokowski had departed, and Sir John was on a guest conducting tour of the United States. In his hand, as though

as well as pit and symphony orchestras. Unlike his predecessor in Houston, he had "come up through the ranks." He knew what it was like to sit in an orchestra, and he also knew that the only reason for someone to be "up on the box" (the English term for podium) was because you must know more than the others. When someone asked him if he taught conducting he'd answer, "I suggest you go play in an orchestra for 20 years and *then* think about conducting!"

And so this wonderful man from Manchester found a group of admiring musicians who were absolutely "ripe" to be shaped into a real orchestra. And shape us he did. Unlike Stokowski's free bowing techniques, Sir John was absolutely precise about bowings, and every stroke had a reason. He brought his own music from Manchester and insisted that no one change or erase a single mark unless, after a discussion

tune!" It was as if I had been granted a pass to Heaven, and for the rest of Sir John's tenure I felt authorized to play the tunes in the Strauss waltzes. It was a true indication of the sensitivity of the man on the podium.

As a string player himself, Sir John enjoyed the rehearsals that involved only the strings. In speaking to the other sections of the orchestra, he frequently would refer to the strings as "we" saying, for example, "we" must not be covered or "we" must be able to play very softly. He knew exactly how to make an entire string section play the dynamic he wanted by telling them precisely the part of the bow he wanted used. If there was a very soft tremelo passage, he would insist that every player use an inch of the bow at the tip, the *very tip* of the bow. He said that "only those with advanced cases of serious arthritis might be excused from this procedure!" At this particular time in his career, he was conducting the Berlin Philharmonic as a regular guest conductor, and he loved to tell us that he was referred to by that orchestra as "Herr Spitze"—Mr. Tip-of-the-Bow.

Whereas Stokowski was recalcitrant about touring with our orchestra, and his wife never appeared in Houston, the Barbirollis were very amenable. The orchestra was "salable" with Sir John's name as director, and we made our first New York appearance with him returning in triumph to the city where he had conducted before World War II. Lady Barbirolli always traveled with us, sometimes as a soloist as she was a splendid oboist.

In the early 1960s, composers such as Mahler, Nielsen, Vaughan Williams and Elgar were not played in America as they are today. Sir John frequently programmed these composers' works, and we played them on many tours to splendid critical acclaim. It was a challenge to the orchestra to perform a giant work like the Fifth Symphony of Mahler night after night on the road, and Sir John spent a lot of time encouraging us. Before a dress rehearsal, he would say, "Now we are about to embark on a long musical journey. Get your backsides in a nice comfortable position, and off we go!"

After a performance of Mahler's Second Symphony ("The Resurrection"), the Barbirollis came for a supper at

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it were an extension of his fingers, he wielded a lovely, long, slim stick . . . a baton! Something we hadn't seen much of during those six seasons with Maestro Stokie.

The orchestra played with a genuine enthusiasm and love of music for the first time in a long, tense history. It was magic. And it was the beginning of a love affair between orchestra and conductor that lasted until Sir John's death seven years later. After a concert was over, the entire orchestra would wait to speak to Sir John or even to shake his hand. He gave us back our music, or at the very least, our love of playing it together.

He must have sensed our receptivity, even in the short time he worked with us as guest conductor, for he signed a contract to return the next season as conductor-in-chief. We were overjoyed and didn't even mind the fact that he shared his time with his beloved Halle Orchestra in Manchester, England.

Sir John was a cellist, trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and had played in cafes and theaters

with some of his principals, he decided to change a bowing. This was always a momentous occasion, and he was adamant that it be put in every part.

Sir John loved to "demonstrate" to the strings how he wanted (or didn't want) a particular passage to sound. He would borrow the cello from the principal player and show us just how he wanted a pizzicato or a particular bow stroke to go. He left no doubt in the minds or the spirits of the players as to the sound he wanted.

One of my favorite memories of Sir John took place during a rehearsal for an all-Viennese concert—lots of Strauss waltzes, polkas, etc. The viola parts to these pieces are written to torture the violists. Never do the parts allow you to play the melody for more than a few notes. Never! It's all off-beats . . . nothing but off-beats forever. It's a violist's version of Hades and, surely, where a viola player will be sent if he or she isn't deserving in the afterlife. Evidently my face registered the extreme pain I felt during the rehearsal, for Sir John leaned down and said to me, "For God's sake, Wayne, play the

my house. Late in the evening, Sir John had a coughing spell, which stopped only with great difficulty and alarmed us enough that I called a doctor friend who had attended the concert. The doctor came over immediately, bearing with him a portable EKG machine, which necessitated that Sir John lie on the bed with arms and legs outstretched. When I tiptoed into the room to see if I could be of any assistance, Sir John looked up at me and said, "Wayne, don't you think I rather resemble a primitive crucifix? Mahler would be so pleased!"

I had the privilege of being soloist with Sir John on numerous occasions. His second year in Houston, I appeared on the opening subscription concerts performing Berlioz' "Harold in Italy" and the same work again on Sir John's 70th birthday concert five years later. I spent hours with the Maestro, not just playing and rehearsing, but talking and listening to his ideas about the work we were doing together. He never could understand why Berlioz wrote so little for the solo viola in the last movement of "Harold" and suggested that a chair be placed on stage so that I might sit down during the 300 or so measures that the violist doesn't play a note.

"If you stand there, the audience will keep wondering when you're going to play again," he said. "But if you sit down, they won't!"

We worked very hard on a section of the movement called "The Pilgrim's March," in which the solo viola has accompanying arpeggios, which are played ponticello (an Italian term meaning to bow "against the bridge"). He felt that Berlioz wanted a contrasting "eerie" sound in the solo instrument against the muted sound of the strings playing the chant of the pilgrims. With great surprise, we read in one of the papers the next morning the words of the critic who said, "An otherwise beautiful performance of the Pilgrim's March in the Berlioz was marred by the soloist's lack of control of his bow to prevent it from making a scraping sound against the bridge."

Another work that was a great favorite of Sir John's was the tone poem "Don Quixote" of Richard Strauss. The principal cellist, Shirley Trepel, and I spent many wonderful evenings (usually followed by a meal of Sir John's

famous linguini di vongole bianco) playing for the Maestro. The viola takes the part of Sancho Panza, the servant of the Don, and there was one passage that I couldn't quite play the way the Maestro wanted.

Finally he said, "My dear Wayne, I'm sure you'd much rather be following 'The Don' in the back seat of a Rolls Royce, but I rather want it to sound like you're on the back of a jack-ass."

The passage has been crystal clear to me ever since. Sir John always knew exactly what he wanted and was willing to work until that sound was communicated and achieved.


Our first performance of "Don Quixote" was postponed because of the assassination of President Kennedy. When we finally performed the work, Sir John came out and gave an eloquent tribute to the late president before the performance. The entire orchestra and the soloists performed with an eloquence and majesty that is rarely achieved. Many of those in the hall, both performers and audience, were moved to tears.

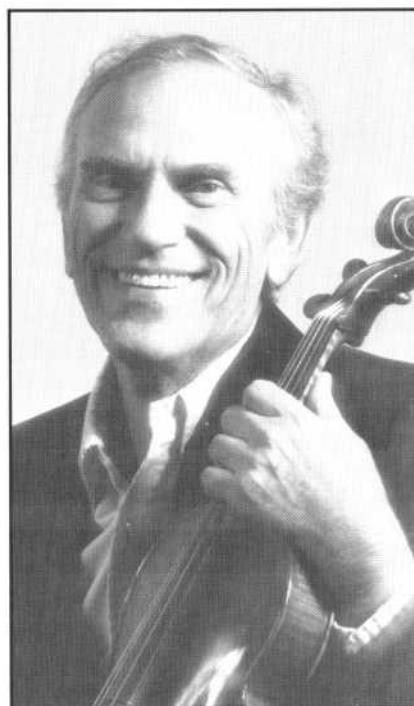
A few years after Sir John's death, a European guest conductor programed "Don Quixote" in Houston. It was the first work we had done with Barbirolli to be performed under another conductor, and of course, our memories rushed back to our memorable Barbirolli performances. At the obligatory party afterward, the guest conductor was overheard telling a group of people that he felt that he had made a tremendous impression on the Houston Orchestra because there were tears in the eyes of so many of the players during the performance.

There are but a handful of us musicians left who played under the direction of these two men in Houston. Certainly we experienced two extremely different approaches to handling the members of a symphony orchestra. True, neither were in their youth when they were in Houston, but both had had brilliant careers conducting world-famous orchestras.

Stokowski knew how to strike terror to the very depths of a player's soul. Sometimes one played with an incredible intensity simply, it seemed, because it might be God Himself up there on the podium! Certainly, with his waxen outstretched hands and the

halo of snow-white hair, Stokowski created an almost religious atmosphere on stage. It was, however, at *his* altar, not the composer's, that you worshiped.

Sir John's approach was so entirely different that it makes comparisons difficult. I can only reach for the contrasts. He treated his players like colleagues, with respect and admiration, always insisting that we "get things right." And we would do everything in our power to do just that. His abilities to teach, inspire, lead and control an orchestra made him the finest conductor I have ever known. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Wayne Crouse is a gifted teacher of viola and chamber music. However, he brings much more than musical expertise to his classes at the University of Oklahoma. His students reap the benefits of a performing career spent under the batons of some of the luminaries of the orchestral world — Sir William Walton, Andre Previn, Lawrence Foster, Sergiu Comissiona, Jorge Mester, as well as the late Leopold Stokowski and the late Sir John Barbirolli, subjects of this memoir. A graduate of the Julliard School, Crouse is active as a guest artist and instructor of master classes throughout the United States and Great Britain, including two appointments at London's Royal Academy of Music.*