

## Chicago Diary--A Dissent on Pellegrini

A week ago, a moment of genuine distress rippled through the diminishing circle of Chicagoans who listen to classical music. I felt it myself. Norman Pellegrini, who for over forty years was the program director of WFMT, the city's classical station, died at an area hospital at the age of 79. A local paper reported cancer as the cause of death.

The death of a person well-known in public life brings inevitable distress to those in middle age, especially if they knew the person in their youth. Samuel Johnson composed an excellent essay, characteristically brief and tightly written, to finish a series of articles called "The Idler" that ran for about two years in an English fortnightly. In the final essay, number 103, Johnson observes that "there are few things not purely evil of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, 'this is the last'...An even and unvaried tenor of life always hides from our apprehension the approach of its end. Succession is not perceived but by variation."

Maybe that is one reason why many in the city were troubled to hear that Pellegrini had died. We who listen to classical music had heard his fluent, confident voice on the radio for decades, before he was let go in a managerial shake-up at the station back in the nineties. And there is no denying that he made 'FMT one of the best classical outlets in the country. The station used to broadcast the concerts of the major orchestras at 8 o'clock on weeknights, and I can still remember the men who narrated them. Pellegrini handled the Chicago Symphony broadcasts. Martin Bookspan, with his slightly brassy New York English, spoke for the New York Phil. William Pierce, a true Brahmin, very sonorous, reported programs for the Boston Symphony: "This is William Pierce welcoming you to another full-length concert of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The symphony's music director, Seiji Ozawa, has chosen a single piece for this evening's program--Mahler's Symphony Number Seven in E minor...." This was spoken deliberately and slowly, the syllables going up and down like the bouncing red ball on a children's TV show, indicating the beat of a melody. I loved it; his voice seemed the very quintessence of Boston refinement. Robert Conrad had a very direct, to-the-point style for the Cleveland Symphony, and Philadelphia? Well... I can't really remember Philadelphia.

Pellegrini used a somewhat more formal tone in the Chicago Symphony broadcasts than when he was speaking to the local listening public. The tapes, after all, were going out all over the country. He seemed to take special pleasure in announcing that he was speaking from "Orchestra Hall, Chicago," reporting the name of the city with a distinct emphasis, especially on the second syllable, separating the name vocally from the performing center, Orchestra Hall, as though there were something special about the city--which for many of course there is. He brought in musicians and chamber groups to perform "live" in the studio, and there was the famous "Saturday Night Special," which ran for an hour or so, and delighted the city's audience for folk music. There cannot be any argument--Pellegrini made the station a pretty impressive place, and a pianist who had performed there told me that the program director put in long hours doing it. For many in Chicago, his was the first voice associated with serious music, as was Leonard Bernstein's for another generation, with his Young People's Concerts broadcast on TV in the fifties.

*De mortuis nisi bonum*, says Horace. The phrase is so common that I won't translate it, and Donne's beautiful statement has become stale through overuse. Still...I

am not going to pretend that I had unqualified admiration for Pellegrini's work; I will add that I know of others who felt the same way. The problem? Pellegrini, to use the language of my youth, was "full of himself." He had the most smug voice of anyone I have ever heard on radio. He simply radiated self-satisfaction with every syllable he spoke. And I am afraid that he looked the same way. Many years ago, leaving Orchestra Hall after a concert, I saw Pellegrini emerge from a side door, the one musicians often use when coming down to play. I assume it leads to dressing rooms for soloists and conductors. Pellegrini was positively beaming with self-contentment. In his autobiography, Leonard Woolf reports on the conversational style of G.B. Shaw. "You might easily flatter yourself that you were the one person in Europe to whom at that moment the famous George Bernard Shaw wanted to talk," wrote Woolf. "but if you happened to look into that slightly fishy, ice-blue eye of his, you got a shock. It was not looking at you; you were nowhere in its orbit; it was looking through you or over you into a distant world or universe inhabited almost entirely by G.B.S., his thoughts and feelings, fancies and phantasies."

I had a similar sense looking at Pellegrini, who appeared to see no more than the immediate objects before him, such as the door and maybe a few others leaving Orchestra Hall. He was too entranced with himself to notice anything more. He must have just finished up with a tape and perhaps had been backstage chatting with musicians. But the self-satisfaction was too obvious to miss, and I wondered what a Daumier or a Beckman would have done with it.

This quality seemed to affect the entire station. Certainly that tone seemed to disappear from 'FMT when Pellegrini did. But in the seventies and eighties, the other

broadcasters on 'FMT, to a lesser degree, projected a similar sound. To use a word I never use, something elitist seemed to creep into the station in those years. Not elitism in the sense that serious music appeals to a limited audience, as everyone knows, or that in the days of record retailing, pop outsold classical by a huge margin. But a different kind of elitism, which suggested somehow that we listeners were privileged to be hearing these voices and these broadcasts, and even the ad copy, that we should perhaps be sending in checks or writing thank-you notes to the station staff (which in fact I once did). If there was an exception to this, it would have been the redoubtable Studs Terkel, a genuine populist who loved all sorts of music and talked about it, interviewed people about it, in that rough-and-ready style of his.

The characteristic manner I am indicating ended years ago. If you are new to the station or have just begun listening in recent years, you may have no idea of what I am describing. But I have a theory of what was behind it. It's no more than a theory, and I might be wrong, but I cannot help but wonder if it was not connected to the spectacular success of the Chicago Symphony during the Solti years, which began in the early seventies. 'FMT, after all, was associated with the Symphony. The station disseminated those concert tapes, and once a year had weekend-long fundraising campaigns for the orchestra. Solti and his wife would even stop by the studio for a moment, to lend a little glamour to the event.

Chicago was a city shot through with rivalrous attitudes, and of course its chief rivalry was with New York. And there is no more effective way to "make it" with Chicago critics and the art-loving public here than to succeed with New York critics and the art-loving public there. How did Solti achieve this? By the trips he took with the

Symphony to Carnegie Hall in the 1970s, shortly after he took over as music director.

Winning over the public in New York is not easy to do, because New Yorkers understand what we are up to, and used to put us down extra hard for the effort. But Solti's concerts were such a huge success, and the combination of conductor and symphony so dazzling, that they simply overwhelmed the opposition. The concerts generated extremely favorable publicity for the Symphony, Chicago, and indirectly at least, WFMT. I sensed that this had an undesirable effect on the station. The staff put on airs and began to view themselves as a sort of cultural institution, something the city should be proud of, acknowledge, recognize--as it did the Chicago Symphony. If true, such an assumption would have had limited validity; 'FMT has always been a fine station, and since WNIB, "the other" classical outlet, disappeared years ago, we need the survivor more than ever. But when I offer this qualification to the regret, which I share, over Pellegrini's death, I hope you'll understand why.

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