

PROFESSIONAL LISTENER

MICHAEL HARTMAN IS ONE OF THE PEOPLE IN THE SEATS WHO HELP TO MAKE THE ORCHESTRA GREAT.

BY JEANNETTE COOPERMAN



Michael Hartman with his beloved Becky. Hartman likes to quote Albert Schweitzer: “There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats.”

It was 1962. Michael Hartman had gone downtown to the barber’s college for a cheap haircut, and his bus was chugging past Kiel Opera House. He hesitated—it would mean a second bus fare. He pulled the cord, stepped onto the pavement, and went inside to his first St. Louis Symphony concert.

No sooner had Michael slid into a seat on the main floor than an older woman, perfumed and powdered, leaned over. Did he have Mrs. So-and-so’s seats for the afternoon? He flushed; he hadn’t realized certain seats were spoken for.

But when Brahms’s *A German Requiem* began, he forgot his embarrassment.

Make that *A German-English Requiem*: “The chorus sang it in English and the two soloists sang it in German,” he explains now. “Eleven years later, a guy who was in the chorus sold us our house in Pasadena Park, and he said the administration had forgotten to tell the soloists it was going to be in English.” Hartman chuckles. “It was catch-as-catch-can in those days.” He’s thrilled by the orchestra’s current technical proficiency. “This orchestra has always had a personality that’s unique. It’s this sincerity they project, this joy in making music.”

And the Brahms? Wasn’t it a little heavy for a high school sophomore? “I

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thought it was some of the most beautiful stuff I'd ever heard in my life," he says simply. "As it was going by, I had this notion in my head: *Boy, this is what beauty in music really means.*"

That was the Symphony's guest conducting year, he says, "between the disaster of the Edouard Van Remoortel reign and when Eleazar De Carvalho took over in '63. He and Leonard Bernstein studied under Serge Koussevitzky at the same time." Hartman's learned every detail of the Symphony's history, and he praises and criticizes as intimately as a family member. Which, in a sense, he is. His grandfather, Joseph Valetic, played trombone with the Symphony from 1924 until 1931. "The first performance of the Kodály they played this season was in 1930, and he would have been part of that. Then the Depression crashed, and he had to find a real job."

Hartman's father "wasn't in the picture," so he spent many hours with his grandfather, memorizing the story of how he left the Austro-Hungarian Empire to sail here (despite "some iffy questions about the legality of his paperwork") and work as a musician.

You would think his grandson would have picked up an instrument, but he didn't. "I consider myself to be part of the professional listening audience," he says, voice resonant from years of teaching high school English. "There's not enough listening these days. The era lends itself to a whole lot of hearing on portable devices, but not so much listening and paying attention."

After that first concert, he acquired a reputation as "the classical music guy" at Bishop DuBourg High, subjecting girlfriends to music they'd never asked to hear. At the time, De Carvalho was experimenting with contemporary music—one piece even mixed in sounds from a cassette tape, and Hartman remembers the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reviewer writing "that Mr. De Carvalho had better take his tape recorder and go back to Brazil." Another concert was set up as a computerized contest between two orchestras on stage, with an electronic scoreboard keeping tally. "I heard some of the musicians weren't too hot on beating on the back of their instruments," Hartman says, "so they cross-wired the scoreboard."

He loves backstory, and he's been hanging out at the stage door ever since. He's always considerate, keenly aware that the musicians are exhausted by the adrenaline and sheer exertion of performance. But he's stunned how nice everyone is. A few years back, he watched Susan Slaughter, then Principal Trumpet, spend a selfless eternity chatting with a middle-school student who played trumpet in his band. "Me, I have ulterior motives of pressin' the flesh and finding out gossip," he says. "As the grandson of a player, I'm really interested in the musicians and what they're up to."

He loved Leonard Slatkin's composers-in-residence program and became good friends with one of them, Donald Erb. They talked about music, but also about Erb's stint on the USS *Baltimore*, Hartman says, adding, "I'm an absolute loony tune on World War II history."

Not even a good war story can rival music, though. He gave his collection of 2,500 LPs to a man living in the old Firehouse No. 1, in the Benton Park

neighborhood where Hartman grew up. But he still has more than 9,500 CDs, and a few weeks ago, he bought his eighth video set of the complete Beethoven symphonies. At a recent concert, a quote in the program from Nietzsche caught his breath: "Without music, life would be an error."

"Administrators change, audiences change, the players certainly change, but the music stays constant," he says. "That's the magnetic attraction." A second later, he corrects himself: "The music does change, in terms of performance styles and attitudes. But the emotion still comes through."

His most emotional moment, in 52 years of concert-going? "It wasn't musical," he says, stunned to realize it. "It was in the preconcert talk David Robertson gave about Ferguson. It was the most empathetic and reasoned response to that whole situation that I had ever heard. By the time he finished I had goosepimples.

"He really is something special," Hartman adds. "Not just his music, which is extraordinary. But this is one smart emotional cookie."

Takes one to know one.

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and staff writer for St. Louis magazine.*