

LOST AND FOUND

THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY SEEKS TO RECLAIM
THE LOST ART OF LETTER WRITING

BY RAPHAEL MAURICE



PAWEL KOPCZYNSKI

Brett Dean with pen in hand.

Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards.—Aldous Huxley

Autumn settles over St. Louis. An ideal time in which to think about the passing of things: summer's gradual disappearance, children leaving play to return to school, routine coming back silently and reordering life itself. Autumn is the season to witness the leaves changing into countless colors, while the evenings grow cooler and nature begins to write, as it were, her letters against the crisp air.

During this time, the St. Louis Symphony is reviving that lost art of letter writing, through music and through the act of encouraging patrons to write their own letters in the ornate surroundings of Powell Hall. The composer, Brett Dean, is quite right when he states that “not only is letter writing

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becoming a lost art, but one could argue that handwriting itself is an endangered skill.” And so for the weekend of Dean’s *The Lost Art of Letter Writing* (November 21-22), the St. Louis Symphony invites you to write letters in the foyer, paper, writing instruments, and envelopes provided. And keep in mind the addresses of your recipients. Those involved with this particular project will gladly mail the letters for you.

The act of making marks on paper is an art form itself. Dean, recalling his own child’s return to school, added the following: “Aspects of my daughters’ education, in particular its heavy reliance on electronic stimuli, have reinforced my view that we are genuinely losing touch with the tactile element of written communication.” So take time and lose yourself in writing, writing as an art that asks that you look at your own compositions and writings as fine arts in and of themselves. Dean concludes: “Sure, we stay in touch arguably more than ever, via telephone, email, and messaging, but that too has undoubtedly changed the nature of communicating.” Rather than go backwards, the St. Louis Symphony invites you to go slower, taking in both Dean’s magnificent violin concerto, *The Lost Art of Letter Writing*, and your own memories and abilities to write those missives that haven’t yet been made or sent.

For the weekend of Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 (January 22-23), a piece that sends us to the stars and back, you are encouraged to write love letters. After all, this symphony features the famous fourth movement, the Adagietto, which is a

“letter” written for the composer’s beloved Alma. But also keep in mind that the first movement of the Fifth Symphony is a funeral march. Things come into being and pass away. Although this might sound platitudinous at best, it is the evanescence of the people around us that can often inspire us, shake us, and wake us up. Mahler himself, in February of 1901, suffered a sudden hemorrhage that nearly left him for dead. He recovered, and went on to write his great symphony in a villa in Austria. But it wasn’t only a symphony that he dedicated to his love—Mahler left a poem for Alma:

*How much I love you, you my sun,
I cannot tell you that with words.
I can only lament to you my longing and love.*

And indeed, Mahler’s Adagietto is an exquisite lamentation, an other-worldly piece that writes, so to speak, its loss and love upon the air. Mahler mailed the Symphony No. 5 to Alma, and upon receiving it, she was able to decipher and read his undying love for her within the score.

Finally, for Alban Berg’s *Altenberg Lieder*, inspired in part by the Viennese poet-writer Peter Altenberg, patrons are encouraged to write post-cards. Berg’s 1911-1912 composition delves into themes of love, of course, and love’s power from beyond the grave. The following comes from Peter

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Gustav Mahler, 1902 portrait by Emil Orlik

Altenberg, the bohemian-par-excellence of the early 20th century. He was known for writing upon picture-postcards; poems, sketches of life, and marginalia were some of the forms in which he worked. On a side note, he often sent his lover to see shows that he was expected to review, and relied on her impressions of the shows in order to craft his articles: “Only after death do we fully fathom the distinctive qualities of a loved one, delve deeper into their essence, the living manifestations of which no longer disturb us.”

Peter Altenberg’s words suggest that the living have the potential to distract us from actually appreciating them while they are present, alive. Continuing with the theme of evanescence, a good deal of Altenberg’s words grapple with the problem of the living and the dead. Rather than getting bogged down in metaphysical inquiries, for the *Altenberg Lieder* weekend, patrons are encouraged to write to those very people who are living and breathing, who do have the potential to “disturb us,” but who can also warm and attract us from distances. Think of the postcard as a canvas upon which to write not only

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WRITTEN COMMUNICATION.”
—BRETT DEAN

words, but a place to make pictures and drawings as well. Getting in touch with Altenberg’s medium of choice, the postcard, might just put you in the mood to take chances with where and to whom you send your creations. Perhaps to the planets themselves, as inspired by Gustav Holst’s *The Planets*, on the same program.

Festina lente. Make haste slowly. Take time to throw yourselves into letters, love notes, and postcards while in the surroundings of Powell Hall. Although a good deal of the music featured for these weekends might sound sad or melancholy, there is no dirge to be heard. As autumn approaches and summer wanes, recollect your loved ones in a variety of ways and treasure them through your efforts at writing, that nearly lost art, that way of going slowly.

Raphael Maurice is a writer, poet, and musician. He lives on Cherokee Street with his wife and comrade, Jill Maurice. An avid music fan, he looks forward to seeing you at Powell Hall.