

Author's note: During these unprecedented times I have kept busy by writing down episodes from my student days at the St. Cecilia Conservatory in Rome, Italy and conducting career entitled 'Waiting in the Wings'. I have shared a few episodes over the last few months and here is a new one. (You can find the previously shared stories on westvalleysymphony.org) Cal Stewart Kellogg, March 2021.

MAGICAL MOMENT OF MUSIC

I began my conducting career in 1975. From 1976 to 2006 I worked primarily in the opera theaters of Italy, United States and Canada. There were also a few opportunities to conduct symphonic concerts. This story tells of one such experience.

In 1978, l'Orchestra Nazionale dell'Accademia di S. Cecilia hired me to accompany Leonid Kogan who was to perform the Shostakovich *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra op.99*. This well-known Soviet violinist was a regular part of the season but, each time he came to the Accademia, he had to put up with mediocre conductors. I had personally witnessed him struggle with a belligerent and erratic individual on the podium and it was painful to watch. Determined that sort of situation would not happen on my watch, I worked very hard on the concerto and learned every nuance of the piece. Armed and ready, I was prepared to give him an orchestral carpet to walk on.

We started to read the piece with the orchestra. He kept a steady tempo throughout the first movement ignoring the indications of the composer. Quite often he would come closer to me and whisper, "Too loud." My conducting teacher, Maestro Franco Ferrara, had always told his students that the soloist would have his or her way of presenting a concerto to the public. We, as conductors, were to accompany and stay out of the way. So, somewhat disappointed, I followed and kept the orchestra as soft as I could.

Kogan's approach to this music was completely indifferent. I left the rehearsal with a heavy heart. The next day we again went through the concerto. In the first movement at a certain spot, he slowed up as the music indicated. I was right with him. He changed to a slightly fast tempo where it was written and again I stayed right with him. We were to perform the concerto twice: once on Saturday evening and once on Sunday afternoon. The Saturday performance was void of any nuance; he went straight through the piece, not bothering to do anything other than play the notes. However, on Sunday, something wonderful happened. As we began the concerto, he moved slightly closer to me so that eye contact was unimpeded. Then, he never took his eyes off me. He then played the entire piece as the composer created it. Every detail was there. It was an incredible moment in which everything seemed to fade from view leaving just him, me and the music. The orchestra was there of course, but the musicians were under the same spell. It was like hearing this concerto for the first time. An incredible applause followed the final notes. We walked off stage. Before returning to take a bow in front of the enthusiastic crowd, which by this time was on its feet, he looked at me and said "Listen to that. This is not the Beethoven Concerto." He had been burned by so many conductors at the Accademia that he had been resigned to play it safe. Somehow, he perceived that I could give him an accompaniment which allowed him to freely express the music he so obviously loved.

He was a quiet man and never sought the spotlight. Still today, he is remembered as one the great Soviet violinists. And I have our one-on-one performance to remember until the day I die.