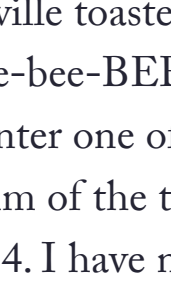


BUT FIRST ...

The View from There



BY JOHN MAUCERI

MAY 30, 2020

READING TIME: 2 MINUTES

Last night I woke up at four A.M. from a typical conductor’s nightmare. I was rehearsing Sibelius’s Symphony No. 2 in a bunker with a bored and unresponsive orchestra. When I stopped conducting, they just kept playing. Humiliation turned into a wrestling match with sheets and a duvet. I had forgotten to prepare, and my score—which was the size of a postage stamp—fell to the floor. As I bent down to pick it up, I heard myself say, “You are losing them. You are losing them!” And then I woke up.

It’s never easy to be a conductor. In a way, the pandemic has made it easier. There is no work anywhere in the world. That doesn’t mean we aren’t surrounded by the echoes of music everywhere. My Breville toaster oven signifies that the toast is done by going bee-bee-bee-BEEP, bee-bee-bee-BEEP, which I hear as the opening of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony. When I enter one of my passwords each day (nine syllables plus Enter), I type the rhythm of the third phrase from the second theme in Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstance No. 4. I have no idea why, except perhaps a longing to make music *anywhere*, and a 10-syllable tune is rare. The Jura coffee-maker and the microwave play the same pitch when I have them working simultaneously. It’s somewhere between a B-natural and a B-flat—60 cycles per second. You see, this isn’t easy for us.

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I have noticed over the years that certain words are translated into musical names. The word “turnabout” inevitably becomes Puccini’s *Turandot*, and the moving company Roadway, which has its logo in gigantic letters on the side of trucks, can only be read as “Broadway.” Both errors are followed by personal disappointment.

Years ago, New York’s Department of Sanitation’s acronym—D.S.N.Y.—which occasionally appears on manhole covers, meant that Mickey and Minnie were living just below the street in a subterranean Magic Kingdom seen only by select civil servants.

When Princeton announced its first black valedictorian, Nicholas Johnson, *The New York Times* ran the story (May 12) with a photo. Next to the picture, in bold type, I read, “Nicholas Johnson, 22, of Montreal, majored in operations research.” What made my heart leap was that the word “operations” was hyphenated: opera-tions. For a split second, I thought how amazing it was that this young man had majored in opera—and at Princeton! My hopes were dashed when I got to the next line and “tions” brought down a symbolic gold curtain with a crash—or was that cymbal-ic?

I need to go to work ... ☹

John Mauceri is a conductor and educator whose most recent book is [For the Love of Music](#).

Illustration: Heritage Images/Topfoto. Photos: Walt Disney Productions/Photofest (*Fantasia*); David Dietz (Mauceri)