


CHAPTER  
  
TWENTY-NINE

In the middle of August I received a letter from Christiane Nasser with an official invitation from the Palestinian Authority to perform the Haydn “Creation” as part of their Bethlehem 2000 series. She wrote that St. Catherine’s would indeed be the most appropriate place for holding this concert, and that she “hoped that the Latin Patriarchate would help us in securing that venue.” This last phrase struck me as strange. What resistance would the Latin Patriarch need to help us resolve? She was, she had told me, very close to Patriarch Sabbah. It was he who had sent me to her in the first place. To what could she be referring?

So I planned my return trip to Israel for September, eager to get to the root of whatever problem seemed to be brewing. Over the summer, the Camp David summit among the Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and American President Bill Clinton broke up without any clear resolution. It was world news, of course, but I had no idea just how much of it would alter our own Holy Land plans.

On my way to Jerusalem, I stopped in Rome to meet once again with Bishop Dziwisz, then doubled back to London to confer with Serge Dorny, the Managing Director of the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO), which had become our official pilgrimage orchestra, replacing the Philharmonia, whose schedule that fall made it all but impossible for them to continue.

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The LPO was an orchestra I had admired for many years. I had been assistant to Sir Georg Solti when he had recorded “La Bohème” with them during my student days. I had been a protégé of their Music Director Klaus Tennstedt, assisting him in the early 1980s on his legendary Mahler Symphony cycle. Then, in 1997, I had had the great pleasure of making music with the orchestra myself, recording excerpts from Wagner’s “Tristan,” “Tannhäuser,” and Siegfried Idyll with the LPO in a series of sessions that have lived on in my memory as some of the most satisfying music-making of my life. I was very much looking forward to setting out with the London Philharmonic on the next leg of our pilgrimage journey.

I flew from London to Israel via Copenhagen, which was a roundabout route that must have made sense for some tight scheduling reason or other. The choice proved extremely interesting, however.

I am well known for keeping to myself on flights. I get lots of work done, studying scores in the silence at 35,000 feet. On that day I would have been just as happy reading Beethoven as talking to my seatmate, a well-dressed Arab gentleman in his forties, but I answered when he asked, in strongly accented but fluent English, “How are you? And what takes you to Lod airport today?”

“I am on my way to plan a series of concerts in Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem,” I said.

“Ah, what kind of concerts?” he asked inquisitively.

“Classical concerts, to celebrate the year of the Great Jubilee. I will be there representing Pope John Paul. The concerts are being planned with the Vatican.”

The floret of my Pontifical Knighthood glistened in my lapel, and I noticed that my seatmate had stolen a look in that direction. I am not sure he knew exactly which rank or distinction it signified, but I believe he factored it into the next comment he made.

“I will tell you, sir. I have close connections with the Palestinian Authority.”

“Oh, yes?” I said. “I am working with them in Bethlehem. Minister Kassis is to be our host there, I believe.”

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“Minister Kassis, yes, I know him quite well. A fine gentleman. When had you been planning to hold these concerts?”

“It has not been finally decided, but I suppose they will take place in October. That is the period we’re aiming for.”

“Listen, sir, I don’t mean to interfere. I am sure these will be wonderful events, ones with deep meaning for everyone. But I don’t think you will be able to do them in October.”

“Why?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

“Just please remember what I say. You would be better off to avoid this next period.” He gave me a knowing look, nodded his head, and then went back to his book.

We said no more during the flight but bid each other a polite good-bye as we exited the plane.

The next morning I began my very busy day with a meeting with His Beatitude. From there I would go on to meet with the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambini, the Pope’s ambassador to both Israel and the Palestinian Authority; my new friend Christiane Nasser; Consul Generals Feierstein and Kealy, as well as an official of the Israeli government.

The Patriarch was as friendly and solicitous as he had been that last June. But as we discussed places for the Jerusalem concert now, in September, nothing seemed to quite work out. This place was too cool in October, that place too small to fit the orchestra and the choir. Instead of leading me to the “perfect” location, as His Holiness had done in 1994 at the Vatican, or even as Ulrike Hessler had in Munich, His Beatitude offered no solutions. None. He asked that we stay in touch and keep on looking for just the right places. His words seemed to imply an indefinite delay. The strange words of my flight companion started to rattle around in my head. Maybe this was not going to be possible after all.

I met Archbishop Sambini at the Nunciatura, the Vatican’s embassy on top of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. His Excellency was open and friendly, and he offered the full assistance of his office in “your wonderful project.” I liked him immediately, as Bishop Dziwisz had told me I would. We promised to stay in touch as things progressed.

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When I told Christiane Nasser what the Arab gentleman on my plane had said, she had no inkling of what it might mean. She was wanting to go ahead and figure out all the details of the Bethlehem event. The same was true for the British and American Consul Generals. As I've thought about it in hindsight, they either had no insight or more likely did not choose to share whatever they might have known as to why there might be any impediments to our plan for a series of October events.

The next day, however, at 10:30 A.M., I finally met with Father Battistelli. As we spoke in Italian, it seemed to free him up to be more candid in his assessment of our prospects.

"Maestro, I cannot say anything about Jerusalem. That is for His Beatitude to decide, if as I suspect, you are not requesting to perform in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. No?"

"No, of course not," I replied. Not only was it much too small, but it is shared by six or sometimes more Christian denominations, all with a claim of their own small part on that labyrinthine church.

"No," I repeated emphatically, "that is not in our plans."

"Well, I can tell you, Maestro, there are difficulties in Bethlehem and in Nazareth, in both the Church of the Nativity and in St. Catherine's, and in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. I don't see how those would be possible either."

"But Bishop Dziwisz had indicated to me that you might be able to render your assistance to this project ..."

"Yes, I know. But it is I who must manage the terrible difficulties we find ourselves in. I will explain to Monsignor Dziwisz when I see him next in Rome. I am sorry, Maestro, but this is just not the time." And with that, our conversation was over.

Father Battistelli's assistant showed me to the door, offering his apologies in beautiful, flowing Italian all the way out to the street. His words were calculated to soothe my painful disappointment.

"We know how much this means to the Holy Father. It is just not possible. Please, Maestro, do try to understand. Perhaps another time. *Chi lo sa?*—Who knows?"

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After my meeting with the Custos, I went off to a prearranged lunch with my friend Nahum Gelber. He and his wife, Sheila, own a number of homes throughout the world, none more beautiful than their home in the storied Jerusalem artist neighborhood of Yemin Moshe. Nahum was bringing along Zusia Rodan, the manager of the Jerusalem Symphony, whom he said I just had to meet. After my disappointing conversation with the Custos, I was in no mood to make small talk. The Jerusalem Symphony, while quite a good orchestra, was not then on my radar screen. Nahum is a wonderful good friend and a great fan of the Jerusalem orchestra. I did not want to disappoint him, so I went.

Over lunch, Nahum and Zusia enthused about the orchestra and did their best to entice me to consider conducting them one day. But through it all, I just could not pay much attention. My mind was in the clouds of darkness that had hung over the meetings I had just had with His Beatitude and with the Custos. I could not help thinking about the admonition of my Palestinian travel companion. “Just remember what I say. You would be better to avoid the next period.”

All this took place on September 27, 2000, the day I left the Holy Land for Kraków. On that very day also, as yet unknown to the world at large, a Palestinian security officer on a joint patrol with Israeli forces turned his firearm on his Israeli counterpart and murdered him. The very next day, Ariel Sharon, the leader of Israel’s Likud Party, accompanied by more than a thousand security officers, paid a most unwelcome visit to the Temple Mount, the Haram al-Sharif, to assert the Jewish right to visit that hotly disputed holy ground.

The uprising known as the Second Intifada had just begun, and with it, ended our foreseeable plans for peace through music—*pax per musicam*—through our Jubilee Creation concert in the Holy Land.

Matters only went from bad to worse. On October 12, two Israeli reservists were lynched by a Palestinian mob in a Ramallah police station. The image of the blood-stained hands of the killers being proudly demonstrated to the crowd below, as the corpses of the

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two Israelis were dragged through the streets, was as depressing as it was barbaric. How fast the seeming idyll of my June visit had deteriorated into chaos. I thought of my Palestinian taxi driver, who then had dreamt of buying a condominium in that same city of Ramallah. Where would his oh-so-normal dreams be now? I thought of Wadie Abunasser and his fervent wish for change through peaceful means. Of the Patriarch for whom nonviolence was a profound truth. I wept for Christiane Dabdoub Nasser and her whole family. Where would they ride out the storm of violence that would surely engulf my city of David, her city of Jesus, the world's Bethlehem?

On my way back to the United States, I met in Kraków with Cardinal Macharski, who in the intervening months had kept on with his preparations for a grand concert in St. Mary's Basilica. In my conversation with the Cardinal, I dared not talk about the violence in the Middle East. I'm sure it would have brought him terrible sadness, as I knew it would His Holiness. I could only imagine how great was the Pope's heartache for the land he prized as the origin of hope for all humanity.

When I returned to New York, I was spent. All of our Holy Land dreams were dashed. All that time and effort for peace that I and so many others had invested had, at least for now, come to naught.

A few days later, I was in the music room of our apartment on the East Side of Manhattan, preparing for my next engagement, when the phone rang. It was Zusia Rodan, the manager of the Jerusalem Symphony, whom I had just met in Israel less than a month before.

"Maestro, I know you will think I am crazy, but I had to give this a try. Our new chief conductor has just cancelled the opening concerts of our season. He says he is too scared to risk coming to Israel in the middle of all this violence. I know you are very busy, that this is such short notice, but would you consider coming and conducting in his place? We would do whatever program you wish. It would mean so very much to us, and to everyone here in Israel. Will you please come?"

"Zusia, I am so busy just now. And I only just got back from your country. I have so much on my plate."

“Yes, I know. I am sure this would be very complicated for you. But it would mean so much for us if you would come. Join us. Please, at least think it over!” Zusia implored.

“OK, tell me again the dates of the concerts. I will call my wife. And tell me where I can reach you. I promise, I will call you back one way or another. Zusia, you *are* crazy, but I will think about it.”

The truth is, I knew I would go the minute he asked. Somehow I believed that I had to be there, that it was my place, and that something good, very good, could come out of something that seemed on the face of it to be so terrible. I wasn't sure why, but I believed it was fated, *bashaert*, as we say. That I had met Zusia, and that he had called me now. All of it, *bashaert*.

I put down the phone and called Vera. Her reaction was swift and sure. “Are you out of your mind? Have you been watching the news? You know what's going on there. What can you do to help? Isn't there someone in Israel who can conduct these concerts? Call a colleague. Phone a friend. There must be someone in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv who can step in to help them out. Let's give them some money. Israeli orchestras are always in need of donations. There must be something else we can do. But please, this is nuts.”

“No, Vera, I know this sounds crazy. But I am meant to do this. I have to go to prove that even in this terrible time something can be done for peace. And for me, music is what I can do. Please, I won't go if you tell me absolutely no, but I really think this is the right thing to do. Trust me. It will be OK. I can feel it.”

At dinner that night we talked it through again. I even asked my sons, Gabriel and David. They were both very nervous, to be sure, but somehow they too knew I would go if I felt so strongly. Finally, Vera relented. I would be in Jerusalem, after all. Far, far from the West Bank. What could happen to me there?

“Go,” she said, “if you must. Just come back in one piece!”

The next morning I called Zusia, who I think had fully expected me to turn him down. He was shocked. Shocked, but happy beyond belief.

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"Maestro, Gilbert—may I call you Gilbert?—that's fantastic! Everyone will be so pleased. What program do you wish to conduct? We have a pianist, Daniel Gortler, engaged to play Mozart; I hope we can keep that on the program. He is very gifted. What else would you like to conduct?"

"Zusia, I have thought about it. I want to conduct Eroica, Beethoven's Third Symphony. To me, it is about the will of all human beings for freedom and peace. It is a universal statement. That is what I want to do."

"Done. We will do it. My staff will call about the arrangements. I look forward to seeing you in two weeks' time."

I hung up the phone, nervous and a bit scared, but also with a sense of great anticipation. I wanted to be there already, to stand up for peace in the middle of this war.

On October 20 I took the morning flight to London, over-nighted at the Ritz, and had a quick meeting with the London Philharmonic, hoping against hope that we could still agree to perform our Holy Land concerts later that month, which were still nominally on the books. I am not sure I was so very persuasive. In the end, the orchestra did indeed pull out. Serge Dorny's letter to my London assistant, the indefatigable Sue Banner, was sensible enough: "At the moment we are not sufficiently confident of the stability of the region. We would be thrilled to join Maestro Levine in Israel at a future date once the situation has stabilized."

I pushed on, again through Copenhagen, to Tel Aviv and then Jerusalem. At Ben Gurion Airport, it didn't feel to me as though the country was under siege. Life in Israel seemed normal; the cars jammed the highways; and people flooded the streets as they did on any ordinary day.

But Jerusalem was different. My rehearsal with the orchestra was taking place in a city very close to the "front lines" of the fighting. Zusia, members of the orchestra, and members of the orchestra's board of directors, including Haskel Beinish and his wife, Dorit, who was the Chief Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, all came to me at the beginning of our rehearsals, at the intermission of our concerts, and



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afterwards at their homes as well, to welcome me and to thank me again and again for being so brave.

In turn, I told the orchestra members and everyone associated with them that I was proud to join them in this terrible time. And as I had told Vera, I said that I felt I was meant to be there with them. That it was *beshaert*. I also said that I wanted to dedicate our concerts that week to the search for peace. The violence had to end, and to me, peace and nonviolence were the only answer to solving the difficult problems in the long term.

Some of the orchestra members lived in towns that were now under threat. Their cars were stoned as they came out of the tunnel that led to their homes. Their families were under siege. I felt it was the least I could do to stand by them and help them through these trying days.

The night of the first rehearsal, Nahum Gelber and his wife, Sheila, invited me to accompany them to a charity dinner to benefit Shaarey Zedek Hospital, one of Israel's finest. It was to be held at the Israel Museum in the heart of West Jerusalem. Everybody who was anybody in Israel was there, including high-ranking members of the government. About midway through the proceedings we all heard an extremely loud noise, a rumbling overhead that shook the building. Some of us rushed outside to see what it was. We looked up in the sky towards the noise, only to see massive helicopter gunships heading east towards the fighting on the West Bank; they were flying just a few hundred feet above us. The sound of these massive flying battle-ships was deafening. Their rotors whooshed the air as if they would blow the cars in the museum's parking lots around like toys. I watched in fearful fascination. Nahum came outside to drag me back in. Now I knew why the orchestra was so pleased that I had come. Now I knew why I absolutely needed to be there with them.

The night of the concert, four days later, was even more eventful. As I arrived in the parking lot in the back of the Henry Crown Concert Hall, I heard loud but dull pops, bangs, and thuds repeating over and over at fitful intervals. I looked around to see where the sounds were coming from but couldn't see anything. Zusia rushed me inside. Once

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we got into the hall and I was safely ensconced in my backstage dressing room, I asked Zusia what I had heard out there.

"Oh, don't worry. That was just garbage men. You know, moving their garbage cans back and forth over the ground. They are working late tonight."

I am no expert in the sounds of sanitation, but that just didn't seem right to me. Finally, Ruti Malach, another member of the Jerusalem Symphony staff, came into my dressing room, closed the door, and said, "Gilbert, I heard what he said. Zusia was just trying to keep you calm. But I think you must know the truth. Here where we are, we are very close to Gilo in the southern part of Jerusalem. Right opposite Gilo is Beit Jala, on the West Bank. The Tanzim, Muslim fighters associated with Yasser Arafat's al-Aqsa Martyrs' brigades, have taken over houses in Beit Jala, a Christian town, and are trading fire with the Israel Defense Forces in Gilo. The battle is horrible. Families on both sides, Palestinians and Israelis, are in their basements. It is chaos there. That is what you are hearing. I'm sorry, we really didn't want to scare you. Actually, we thought you might just leave."

"No, I am here, and I will stay. If you are here, so am I," I replied, with a bravery I barely mustered.

Then I thought about the details of what she had just said. Beit Jala. That name rang a loud bell. It was the home of the only Roman Catholic seminary in Palestine. It was where His Beatitude the Patriarch Sabbah had studied for the priesthood. And Father Raed and Bishop Bathish as well. My God, I thought, that is a Catholic town, and those priests, and Christiane Nasser, must have relatives and friends there. This must be a nightmare for them. I can only imagine what they are going through right now.

The following day I tried to reach Christiane on her cell phone. It was switched off. How frustrating! My only hope was that that meant she was out of the country, in Paris, perhaps, with her children. Anywhere, I prayed, but here.

I finished my concerts with my respect for the musicians of the Jerusalem Symphony growing with every passing day. Our *Eroica*, which I had conducted so many times before, seemed this time to be

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imbued with an exceptionally heroic cast, which the full house at the Henry Crown Concert Hall seemed to share. The second movement, the *Marche Funebre*, encompassed a fullness of sound that was not merely musical but spiritual. It seemed to cry out for peace as much as it mourned the losses of war. I had chosen appropriately, and the musicians seemed to feel that strongly as well.

As I came to know, the Jerusalem Symphony is a wonderful orchestra, and these Israeli musicians played marvelously at those concerts. I was so proud I had come to Jerusalem to be with them at this terrible time.

When I returned to New York, I received a call from a producer at National Public Radio. He said he had heard about my concerts in Jerusalem from the Israel Broadcasting Authority. NPR now wished to include our Jerusalem Symphony season-opening concerts on their *Symphony Cast* series. I was thrilled. The message of our music-making during those awful days would be spread far and wide. I asked whether they would consider calling their broadcast a “Concert for Peace.”

Yes, was NPR’s instant reply. The orchestra gave its permission immediately for this broadcast, and so would I. I believed there was a profound message from that crisis-torn part of the world, which needed to be heard above the guns. And now NPR thought so too.

And so our normal subscription concert, opening the 2000–2001 season of the Jerusalem Symphony, was broadcast all across America in the second week of September 2001, days before the tragic events that were soon to unfold.