

CHAPTER



SIX

The musician who met the Pope in February 1988 had considerable experience as a conductor but nothing that could have prepared him for his first Papal event.

After the Pope's parting remark, "See you at your concert," I didn't hear anything from the Vatican for months. I was perfectly willing to believe that the experience I had had in that astonishing private audience with His Holiness was complete unto itself. I had encountered the man whom I saw as the greatest spiritual leader of our time; we had exchanged meaningful words; I had received his blessing; and then I had been sent on my way. And if it had been left at that, it would have been enough.

But in August 1988, I was invited to Castel Gandolfo (a small hilltop town twenty-three kilometers south of Rome, where the popes spend the summer months) to meet with Monsignor Dziwisz. He wished to extend the Pope's invitation for me to conduct the concert to commemorate the tenth anniversary of His Holiness' Pontificate in the Vatican that coming December. Monsignor Dziwisz said, "Maestro, you are our artist." What an incredible phrase, I thought, and one that didn't sink in at first but that would come to have great resonance in the months and years ahead.

This was my second meeting with Monsignor Dziwisz, the first since I had met him prior to my audience with the Pope. Castel Gandolfo is very different from the Vatican and not just because of the soothing, cooling wind that blows there or because of its beautiful

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setting, high above a lake, with lovely gardens where the Pope loved to take his summer walks.

When I arrived, I was welcomed as an expected visitor. It was an entirely different atmosphere from the Apostolic Palace. Castel Gandolfo is very well guarded, to be sure, but it has the feeling of an Italian palazzo, grand yet intimate at the same time. That is something one could assuredly not say about the Vatican.

At Castel Gandolfo, once you are past the Swiss Guards at the entrance, there is a huge white awning that protects the entire interior courtyard from the blazing Italian summer sun. It billows like a sail in the gentle breeze. It puts a visitor immediately at ease.

When I met Monsignor Dziwisz in a small sitting room on the second floor, I was there to discuss the business at hand. It was very different from "How are you feeling in Kraków?" In fact, I was being introduced for the very first time to the workings of the Appartamento of the Pope, the Vatican term used to describe His Holiness' innermost circle of advisors and trusted confidants, of whom Monsignor Dziwisz was the closest of all. This was the man who, as the Pope's Private Secretary, assisted the Pope in overseeing the entire range of affairs as leader of the largest Christian church in the world.

The upcoming concert was an important occasion. The Pope clearly had decided from all he had heard in Kraków and from our first meeting that I was the person to conduct on this occasion. This was not only a wonderful surprise but also something of a shock. The tenth anniversary concert would be *the* concert for the year at the Vatican. High Vatican officials, leaders in all walks of life, and political dignitaries, including the President of Italy, would also attend, and it would be broadcast throughout the world. I both cherished and was humbled by this degree of Papal trust.

Before a standard concert, there is a little bit of back-and-forth about the program. I would have a conversation with the artistic administrator of an orchestra. I would then submit three programs, and they would come back and say which one works for their upcoming season. It's fairly straightforward. But the conversation I had with Monsignor Dziwisz was only the beginning of a two-month process

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about what should be on this Papal program and, even more delicately, which orchestra and chorus should participate. I was being led into a world in which every decision has all kinds of unseen ramifications.

My guide in all this was Monsignor Dziwisz. The requirements of a Papal Concert are very strict, from the length to the selection of the works. The works to be performed had to be appropriate for a concert before this Pope, John Paul II. However, Monsignor Dziwisz was not literally organizing, nor was the Vatican paying for the concert. That was the honor of the RAI, the Italian television network, which was offering this concert to His Holiness in honor of his tenth anniversary. Monsignor Dziwisz told me at the end of our meeting at Castel Gandolfo that I would be receiving a call at my hotel from Dr. Biagio Agnes, the Director General of the RAI, who would take over the preparations for the concert on the RAI's behalf.

In fact, the RAI was astonished to hear that the Pope had selected the conductor for this annual concert, which was the network's pride and joy. The RAI had always held this concert out as a plum for a major conductorial figure, a Zubin Mehta or a Carlo Maria Giulini, who would have loved to conduct the RAI's very best orchestra on this august Vatican occasion. The Pope's selection of me, the Music Director of his hometown Kraków Philharmonic, was unprecedented.

Because I would be leading it, all the musical elements of this event were now in discussion, including which orchestra would have the great honor. Naturally, I wanted the Kraków Philharmonic to participate. I knew they would have done anything to perform for their Polish Pope. And I, their Music Director, couldn't imagine not bringing them with me in December. But as I soon learned, Papal Concerts can become huge political footballs. They are the ne plus ultra of musical prestige in Rome. The RAI, the broadcasters, and sponsors would not hear of bringing in the Polish orchestra for the concert. A fight ensued: the Kraków orchestra versus the orchestra of the RAI Roma.

Unexpectedly, I received an invitation to conduct the RAI Roma Orchestra in September. I came down from Kraków to lead them in the Tchaikovsky Fifth Symphony and the Penderecki Viola Concerto.

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The RAI saw this September event as paving the way for our working together in December, and this preliminary concert allowed me to develop a relationship with the orchestra, which otherwise I would have been conducting for the very first time before the Pope.

Eventually, a compromise was worked out. The chorus from the Kraków Philharmonic would be invited for the Papal Concert to be accompanied by the orchestra from the RAI. There was a balance. For the Church, the choice of chorus is certainly at least as important as the choice of orchestra. Everybody got to save face. Judicious wisdom, that was always the way with Pope John Paul.

Then, after much back-and-forth with the RAI, the program for the “Concert to Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of His Holiness Pontificate” was set. We would perform the enchanting Brahms Ave Maria, a rare work based on a Catholic text by the great Protestant composer from Hamburg. Then the Penderecki Stabat Mater, perhaps the greatest portion of his greatest work, the Passion according to Saint Luke. And the concert would conclude with the Dvořák Mass in D, a composition of deep devotion written for a small chapel in his native Bohemia, which he later expanded for full orchestra to be performed in the huge Crystal Palace Exhibition Hall in London, an auditorium not unlike the Sala Nervi, in which we would perform it for the Pope.

The setting would be grander than anything I had ever experienced, the occasion historic by its very nature. But most of all, it was the musical program that would make it so extraordinary.

John Paul was a Marian Pope, which I learned meant that he held Mary as a very special figure in his religious devotion. Thus, it was important to have the Ave Maria and the Stabat Mater, both Marian prayers, on the program. And the Mass was the most natural piece for us to perform as the main work on the Papal Concert.

Up until that time I had been a symphony conductor from New York, for whom all music was art music—beautiful and worthy of the investment of all my musical powers. But this performance for the Pope would be made up entirely of Christian liturgical music. It was held at the Vatican, with all the Church listening and watch-

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ing my every gesture. It would challenge the very basis of my cultural understanding.

How, I wondered, would I invest these works with the proper devotion, the proper reverence? How would I return the extraordinary trust of the Pope in selecting me for this honor?

If you have studied Mozart or Beethoven or Haydn, then you know the great works: the Mozart C Minor Mass, the Haydn Nelson Mass, and the monumental Beethoven Missa Solemnis. These are compositions which reach the highest level of artistic achievement. But they are more than that. They were, I now know, for their creators expressions of a most profound Catholic faith.

In 1988, I was only just beginning to understand what they meant. Up until that time I had never set foot in a Catholic church other than to visit the great cathedrals, Notre Dame de Paris, the Duomo in Siena, Wawel Cathedral in Kraków, or so many others around the world, just to admire their beauty. Indeed, for many of my colleagues, myself included, conducting a Mass in concert, however beautiful, was just another musical assignment. That would not be nearly enough for this occasion. I knew that right away. I was being called upon to conduct the Ave Maria of Brahms, the Stabat Mater of Penderecki, and the Mass in D of Dvořák under sacred circumstances. The Pope had set me quite a test.

When December finally came, I left a German tour of the Kraków Philharmonic Orchestra after our last concert in Munich. I felt bad that I was not bringing my orchestra with me to Rome. But if they were angry or resentful, they did not show it in the Beethoven or the Tchaikovsky we performed on that tour. Our concerts were filled with wonderful music-making. I was sad to leave them behind as I boarded my flight south to begin my rehearsals for this most important Vatican concert.

The RAI Roma Orchestra had been performing these annual Papal Concerts for a number of years and was, by now, accustomed to them. For the Kraków Philharmonic Choir, on the other hand, this would be a huge occasion. It was the first time they would perform for their Polish Pope in the Vatican. They were simply in awe. I think they

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would have had a hard time opening their mouths to sing, if not professionally required to do so.

It is safe to say that this was by far the most important concert I had conducted in my life. It was the first time I had conducted an entire concert for international television. And though I had performed many works by these composers over the course of my career, I had never conducted any of these particular works before. But this alone is not so unusual for experienced conductors. We are always called upon to broaden our repertoire, to expand our artistic horizons. No, it was the sheer magnitude of this Papal occasion that made it so different.

When we were finally all assembled in the Vatican, the Kraków choir and the orchestra from Rome, and four excellent international soloists, the rehearsals went as in a dream. No language barrier, no political differences could prevent the unity we all felt in preparing for this great musical occasion. We would all be ready to make music for the Pope.

I anticipated that I would somehow be meeting His Holiness at the concert. My mother-in-law had joined me in Rome, together with my wife and my son, David. Vera and Margit were now getting ready to attend the concert that evening. At the intermission of our dress rehearsal, though, a priest from the Pontifical Household came to my dressing room. The priest said that the Holy Father wished to see me that very morning, together with my wife and my mother-in-law. I asked, only partly in jest, if he saw the way I looked. By the time the rehearsal was over, I told him, I would have sweated through every garment I had on. Conducting requires more vigorous physical exertion than many people think. My question, of course, was rhetorical. Even I knew that one doesn't go to an audience with the Pope looking like that.

I immediately called our hotel and told Vera and Margit about the unexpected honor of our audience with the Pope. They needed to come along to the Vatican right away, and I asked Vera to please bring me a fresh shirt and a suit, so that I could get out of my sweaty rehearsal clothes.

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At the end of the rehearsal, Margit, Vera, and I were led by that same priest from the Sala Nervi to the Apostolic Palace through the back way for the first time. We went behind St. Peter's Basilica, directly to the courtyard of the Apostolic Palace, and up, past the Swiss Guards and the Sediari, into the same private library as before. I couldn't imagine what this last-minute request to see the Pope on the day of the concert might mean. All three of us were filled with great curiosity and nervous anticipation.

When we were shown into the Pope's private library, His Holiness was already there. Instead of sitting at his desk as before, the Pope was standing in the middle of the room. There was a wonderful sense of inclusion in his welcome. He greeted me with a huge grin, as if this were a great day for us—for me and for him. He cordially welcomed my wife and then my mother-in-law. As soon as he and Margit came together, it was clear, there were at least two purposes to our meeting that morning. One was to see his conductor on the day of the concert; the other was to meet and spend a bit of time with my mother-in-law, about whose suffering during the Holocaust he already knew.

His Holiness approached her gently, and asked her very quietly, in English, where exactly she was from. She answered him in Polish, which I did not understand. She would later recount the conversation to us word for word.

"I am from Moravian Ostrava," Margit said, diffidently, almost inaudibly. She seemed so very nervous.

The Pope looked intently and calmly into her eyes, and said in his native language, "Oh, from Silesia, like myself, but from the Czech side."

With these words, he acknowledged that they hailed from the same tiny part of the world. Their stories began to entwine.

His Holiness put his arm on her shoulder and looked deeply into her eyes. Margit had not known what this Papal meeting was to be about. I am not sure she was at all comfortable. She had always told us that she waited for someone, anyone, to tell the world to stop its madness, all the time she had been at Auschwitz. But no one ever did. Now, this Polish Pope had invited her son-in-law to conduct a concert

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in the Vatican. That in itself was surely a great thing. But what did this have to do with her?

"Why does he want to see me?" she had asked as we hurried on our way to the audience.

The answer came in the profound empathy the Successor to Saint Peter was showing towards her now.

It was very clear from the moment he addressed her that the Pope wished to be in deep communion with her. He wanted somehow to reach out to her, to touch her soul. I didn't understand everything they were saying. They spoke very softly. But I could see from both their faces that the brief conversation was extremely serious and meaningful for both of them, meant for their ears alone. The atmosphere in that Papal Library was now very intimate, filled with deep meaning. They gestured and spoke to each other in a language, beyond words, that only those who have seen the greatest unimaginable evil could possibly understand. The rest of us in that room could only look on in humbled awe. Vera stood off to the side of her mother. She had tears in her eyes. She could tell how emotional her mother had become.

Suddenly, the mood in the Papal Library changed. Leaving my mother-in-law's side, Pope John Paul came over to me and put his arm around me conspiratorially.

"Have you had enough rehearsal time?" the Pope asked.

"Why, Your Holiness?" I replied.

"It's a very important concert, you know. I hear the Pope is coming this evening." The Pope smiled broadly as he told his joke, and it made me laugh out loud.

It was so wonderful because up until that moment I had indeed been extremely nervous. Especially watching him with Margit. Even before that, though, I had been tied up in knots. I am not normally very nervous before concerts, but this was something so very different. Worldwide television. A new orchestra, new repertoire, and yes, a momentous event being celebrated in the Pope's honor in the Vatican that very night. Somehow, whether it was because he had been an actor himself in his earlier life, or just out of extraordinary human empathy, His Holiness knew just how I felt, knew exactly what to say to calm

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me down so that I could do my best for him, for myself, and for the world that would be watching. He clearly appreciated my laughter and returned it with a warm smile of his own that lit up his whole face.

Now that the audience was over, the warmth of the Pope's visage told me that he was feeling that he had accomplished the two things he had wished to do that afternoon. The three of us left the Apostolic Palace walking in silence. Margit, the Pope's Silesian sister-in-spirit, looked somewhat bewildered by what had just occurred but with a sense of a coming peace that she had not known in the decades since the war. The Pope had indeed begun the healing of her soul.

I returned to our hotel with renewed confidence in the performance, and I set about the remainder of my concert-day routine: lunch, nap, and score study.

After our dress rehearsal, after my Papal audience, I was certain I could pass on to my orchestra and chorus a part of the humanity and warmth that the Pope had shown to me that morning. We would make wonderful music together. Everything was going to be just fine. I couldn't wait for this special concert to begin.

The event was to start at six o'clock. As I entered the Paul VI hall and made my way to the podium, I heard only a smattering of applause. That evening, people were there to enjoy the music surely, but even more, they wished to be in the presence of their beloved Pope. They felt honored to be there with him to celebrate this tenth anniversary of his Pontificate.

When His Holiness arrived, I realized I had never before seen him up close in a public forum. The hall was electric. The applause began to swell from the very back of the hall, when people in the last rows saw him walk in from the foyer at the rear of the Sala Nervi, almost a hundred yards away. People rushed to the edges of the aisle. It was like a rock star making an entrance. Normal people, middle-aged or otherwise, acted as if an incredible, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime event was at hand. And for many, it would be just that. For many people, but for Catholics especially, just being in the presence of their Holy Father is an unheard-of privilege. If they could touch him, be touched by him, they believed, their lives would be changed.

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The Pontiff began to shake hands with as many as he could, walking vigorously, as he was still able to in 1988. For the full ten minutes it took him to walk down the aisle, the applause didn't stop. The orchestra, the chorus, the soloists, and I were all standing there, watching with smiles on our faces; many of us joined in the applause ourselves in a show of respect and affection for the singular personage for whom that audience had gathered that night.

It was awe-inspiring to give a concert under those circumstances, knowing I was adding to the aura of an evening already made historic by the presence of the Roman Pontiff. What he meant to these people was very powerful. It inspired me, and it must have had the same effect on everyone on the stage. I could especially see the effect Pope John Paul had in the faces of his Polish chorus. They were straining to get a glimpse of him, and they were glowing just to be in his presence. This was their countryman, and he had reached a height no Pole, no king, no general, no great artist had ever reached before. After ten years of his Pontificate, they could still not get over their national pride that one of theirs had reached the pinnacle of their Holy Church.

The Pope sat down and we started our music-making. It was like we were in a zone, reaching heights far beyond where we had gone in our rehearsals. The Kraków chorus performed the Penderecki choral work—crisply, accurately, and confidently with all its atonally challenging elements. The rarely performed Brahms Ave Maria had a lilt, a sweetness, an unaffected aspect that fairly floated on the Roman air. And the Dvořák was delivered as the reverential country devotion that it was, yet all dressed up and made grand as the composer had finally wished. The Czech master would have been so proud that his exquisite Mass in D was being performed at a command performance for the Pope in Rome and for viewers and listeners around the world.

As each work ended, I turned to bow, and His Holiness looked back at me. The Pope caught my eye as if to say, "Well done, and thank you. Now, Maestro, let's go on to the next." By the end, after the Dvořák had finished its pianissimo *dona nobis pacem*, there was utter silence in the Aula. As well there should have been. It was as if the whole audience, all seventy-five hundred of them, wished to preserve

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the sacred atmosphere of the evening before disturbing it with their applause. Finally, the ovation began, led from the outset by the man sitting on the Great Throne in the middle of the hall.

A microphone was brought to His Holiness, and he began to speak simply and directly in his beautifully intoned Italian. He noted with what efficacy our music had entered into the heart and soul of all who had listened that evening. Music, he said, is truly a language of God. Then he thanked all of us for celebrating this wonderful anniversary with him, and wished those lucky enough to be there and everyone watching around the world, *Buon Natale a Tutti!*—a very Merry Christmas to All!

There was great anticipation that the Pope might be coming up on the stage. As the audience continued to clap, he got up from his chair, and with both hands clasped in front of him in a sign of approbation, he began to walk towards the podium. As he approached the bottom of the stairs, I descended from the podium to meet him. He held my hands in his and repeated over and over, “Wonderful, wonderful.” Simple words, but under the circumstances, he could have been the *New York Times*: there was only one critic in that house whose review would have mattered, and the Roman Pontiff seemed pleased.

The Pope walked with me up the stairs and onto the stage, put his arm around me for all to see, and then whispered in my ear, “Thank you so much for going to Kraków. And thank you for bringing Kraków to me.”

It was clear from that expression of Papal gratitude that this concert was important to him because of the presence of the American conductor who had gone to Poland, to his beloved hometown, and because of the Polish chorus that had come to the Vatican, to make music for him on this special day. He shook the hands of the front desk players of the RAI Orchestra. Each one was proud, joyful, and seemingly speechless in his presence.

Just before I walked him downstage, the Pope stopped, whispering again in my ear. “Where is your mother-in-law?” he asked, gesturing faintly with his finger towards the large audience in front of him.

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"Holiness, I'm afraid I don't know," I answered.

The Pontiff seemed genuinely disappointed that she was somewhere lost in that crowd, and unable to be located at precisely that moment. I think the Pope had actually wanted her to come on stage, or perhaps he wanted to greet her in the hall. He seemed to have been so touched by his meeting with her that morning that he wanted to greet her once again. In the end, he just looked at me with a smile of deep satisfaction, knowing that just by asking after her, he had clearly expressed his deeply caring interest.

The Pope walked out of the hall, shaking hands again as he went. The chorus of hurrahs only ended when he got into his car and drove off. I walked back to my dressing room to change and greet my family and friends who had come from America and from Europe to share this day with me. Among the first to reach my room were Vera and Margit. (Our son had stayed in the hotel with a babysitter to watch Daddy on the television.) When I told Margit that the Pope had asked after her, she looked at me in complete disbelief—which, of course, was totally appropriate. Until that day, she could not have imagined ever meeting a Pope. And now, twice in one day, His Holiness had reached out to her, cared for her, wanting so much to make right things that had once, many years ago, gone so terribly, awfully wrong.

Also coming to my dressing room that evening were two most unexpected guests, who had dined with the Pope that day: the great Saint Louis Cardinal ballplayer Stan Musial and his close friend, the wildly popular American author James Michener. Stan the Man offered his congratulations, and the most valuable player's trophy he had at hand—an autographed ball signed "To my biggest fan, Maestro Gilbert Levine."

Michener, for his part, held forth in the middle of the Persian rug in the center of the room, describing vividly just how important this evening had been. He would later include his account of the concert in his memoir, *Pilgrimage*, which chronicled a trip that had begun the week before in Poland and was ending that night in the Vatican at the concert for Pope John Paul.

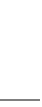
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Everyone had left, and our postconcert dinner was a pleasant memory; I had had the experience of a lifetime. I was sure that my almost unbelievable association with Pope John Paul was now over. There was nothing more fantastic any artist could wish for: a Papal command performance broadcast throughout the world.

What had begun at the audience in February 1988, had completed its circle. I had had the unique experience of conducting for the Pope. I had had the joy of bringing His Holiness and my mother-in-law together in a way that was meaningful for her and, now clearly, for Pope John Paul.

I had brought the Philharmonic chorus from Kraków to the Vatican to perform for their Polish Pope. I felt a tremendous sense of completeness and satisfaction at all that had taken place. Little did I know that this was just the beginning. And if you had told me then, on that special night, I would not have believed you.

I would be going back to Kraków now to an uncertain future. The all-powerful Penderecki would surely be jealous that it was I who had conducted for his Polish Pope on this momentous occasion. I was willing to encounter those difficulties, and any others that presented themselves, because of the incredible gratification this Papal Concert for Pope John Paul's tenth anniversary had given me, and the peace it had begun to afford my family.



PART



TWO



Kaddish