

ALAN RICH - A personal appreciation of the music critic and my sporadic friend

Alan Rich didn't make small talk. If he liked you an ironic quip was often his way of responding to the question, how are you? Whether intentional or not, the ball was in your court, and it better be interesting, or barring that, express the sincerity of your friendship. If he didn't like you the words might come out like a spray of weed killer. He didn't dress to impress and during the last several years after the *LA Weekly* stupidly terminated America's dean of music critics to save a few bucks, he might not even bother to wear a really impressive set of newly-minted dentures. Nothing about Alan was easy.

Most of the obituaries cite Alan's moment as a 21-year old student shaking the hand of Bela Bartok at the 1945 premiere of the *Concerto for Orchestra* not long before Bartok's death in the Big Apple. Next to that is often mentioned his good fortune to hear Artur Schnabel before the legendary pianist's passing six years later. So it was that Alan had authentic roots and direct experience of the titans of 20th century composition and performance. His long career of prominent positions in a succession of important or influential publications cannot fail to impress, but it was Alan's ability to notice details, evaluate the big picture and share in ways linked to enduring standards, while being personally expressive — eccentrically so — that was his gift.

I was among many in this city who would habitually seek out stacks of the *LA Weekly* on Thursday afternoon with a singular purpose, paging quickly through the bombast and self-importance of its features, or taking the back way through lurid tattoo parlor, kink and bondage ads to find the delicacy — *A Lot of Night Music* — only to discard the nibbled carcass like a Japanese seafood plunderer.

That was my relationship to Alan before we met in 1988 one afternoon in lower downtown Los Angeles. The 50th anniversary of *Kristallnacht* was being observed in an auditorium in the Transamerica building. In my position as the coordinator of a new experiment in aligning high school humanities with cultural institutions, I had brokered a collaboration of the Los Angeles Education Partnership with the Arnold Schoenberg Institute, Goethe Institute and KUSC-FM. A live radio broadcast produced by Sheila Tepper and hosted by Gail Eichenthal was the centerpiece of events including panel discussions, a film screening, exhibitions and an architectural tour.

Alan was the only critic present to hear the newish Angeles Quartet with a very brilliant young pianist Gloria Cheng and Hector Vasquez before his Metropolitan Opera debut in a chamber music program

of Schoenberg and Erich Wolfgang Korngold. The bussed-in audience was made up of elderly Jews from the Fairfax district and refugees from El Salvador. The civil war in that country had raged on for the entire eight years of President Reagan's reign and would continue throughout the depressing sequel — George H.W. Bush, elected just weeks before. That afternoon the level of engagement by these displaced Salvadorans, however, belied the prevailing anti-immigrant stereotypes of a media circus still attuned to the notorious Willie Horton ad.

After the concert followed an off-air spoken presentation delivered in German — a young woman's emotional account and reading from her newly published book *Children of the Perpetrators*. The highly empathetic and sometimes halting English translation by Margit Kleinman, representing the Goethe Institute, stunned the audience as we learned about delayed revelations of the truth to a whole generation of young Germans regarding their parents involvement in the holocaust.

Such events were what made Los Angeles, Alan's wholeheartedly adopted city, a source of complex vitality to which he was an eloquent witness. Thoroughly steeped and appropriately educated in the traditions of classical music, he nonetheless had an unerring sense of shifting cultural contexts around him — politics, film, pop-culture, history, and food.

For the *Kristallnacht* anniversary, a self-published illustrated anthology of writing about émigré culture titled *Mirrors & Hammers* was assembled by teachers in the Humanitas program under my editorial direction. The premise came from Berthold Brecht's famous question — is art a mirror held up to reflect society or a hammer with which to shape it? Four pairs of artists were chosen to exemplify this question since the vagaries of their careers had undergone dramatic changes over a roughly 50-year period: architects Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler, composers Erich Korngold and Arnold Schoenberg, filmmakers Fritz Lang and Oskar Fischinger, and writers Thomas Mann and Berthold Brecht.

Alan was astonished by the whole enterprise, especially the teacher involvement, and offered to write a forward in the event of a commercial publication of the book. Unfortunately, rights clearances and finding a publisher were well outside of my job description, and I regret to this day not asking Alan to fulfill his generous offer, as well as pursuing its implications. Years later he would remind me that the book was among his most valued resources on the subject of Los Angeles émigré culture.

That same year the 80th birthday of Olivier Messiaen was being celebrated mostly elsewhere in the

world. Los Angeles hardly noticed. Like Mahler less than twenty years earlier, Messiaen had been a perennial favorite object for the scorn of most music critics, especially hard-headed Jewish intellectuals who were made uncomfortable by the explicit Catholicism of his inspiration, often described in overly vivid prose, and an unfettered sensuality. For the self-appointed keepers of the Beethoven-uber-alles flame, the excesses of the Mahler and Messiaen sound worlds were well beyond the pale.

Long before Alan's *LA Weekly* period and our first meeting, the critic first endeared himself to me with a review, accompanied by a photo, in a national weekly magazine, no less, of the 1983 Paris Opera premiere of *Saint Françoise d'Assise* by Messiaen. After the obligatory caveats about the length and excesses (there *were* six Ondes Martenots in the original 5-hour production, which included a 45-minute sermon to the birds!) he heard through the obvious to a work of major significance, not only for the composer's evolving career, but also for the state of opera. Seven years before, Alan had been a champion of the critically-maligned but wildly popular *Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass.

Alan knew history in the making when he saw and heard it. Glass was a bohemian son-of-a-Lithuanian Jewish record store owner with a flair for math still working at the time of his Metropolitan Opera debut as a New York cab driver. Alan recognized that just as Glass owned a unique synergy with the great physicist, so the biography of Saint Francis of Assisi was the inevitable property of Messiaen, a church organist and son-of-a-French Catholic translator of Shakespeare and the most prominent woman poet in Paris at the time. Clearly, biography and opera were made for one another. In a few years John Adams' *Nixon* followed with Alan enthusiastically shouting the good news.

Some three years before the French import CD of Messiaen's opera came to the U.S., and I could actually hear it, Alan was telling however many, or few others like me who cared about new music among that magazine's huge readership, that the latest chapter in the life of my favorite composer had just begun. Ah, the days before the internet.

This insightful news hardly gave Messiaen a pass from this self-described bellicose critic. Alan had to be convinced anew with mostly everything. That meant even his most damning and seemingly obdurate op-inions were subject to revision at a moment and without shame. Yards of column inches expressing loathing for Sibelius was undone one night by a ravishingly fresh and committed performance of the *Violin Concerto*. Once the cellist Timothy Loo sat with Alan in Disney Hall for the Bruckner' *Seventh Symphony*. On the drive ac-

ross town Alan was grumbling and resentful of the torture he was sure that awaited him. However, during the glowing adagio □ a luminous dome dwarfing the passage of a lonely soul □ Tim turned to Alan only to see tears streaming down his face.

For the most part, Alan felt that the works of too few composers had become overly familiar commodities traded in a business culture of jet-set "star" soloists and "star" conductors leading well-paid orchestras in big halls too expensive to operate. Nonetheless, he adored Walt Disney Concert Hall, the LA Phil and Esa-Pekka Salonen. He understood that if the classical music malaise was to be remedied the team downtown was best suited to do it.

Last fall he wrote on a subject about which Alan's opinion consistently rankled his critics:

I am not in the habit of linking the lumpy clods that are the music of Johannes Brahms to words like "exquisite," but hear me out this once. Meandering among the clods of the Second Symphony at Disney Hall last weekend, in a Berlin Philharmonic performance of uncommon elegance and clarity, my attention was engaged by a sudden burst of music truly exquisite. I love it when the soothing theme that begins the first movement returns, miraculously unscathed after surviving some brutalizing during the development section, its wounds now gently swaddled in remembrances of a somewhat useless, lacey countermelody that had first been found, then lost some time before. It's actually a familiar Brahms trick, turning the dramatic return of a long-awaited main theme into an angelic, rhapsodic moment; he pulls the same trick in the B-flat Piano Concerto, but never as purely exquisite as in this Second Symphony, where it comes on as sweet release after entrapment in mud. You go around deploring the overcooked-meat-and-potatoes of those four symphonies, with a special cringe at the gray-wool stuffing of the First, but then there is Papa Brahms, his warm hand raised against the chill that has beset your spinal column that day, and suddenly life isn't merely okay... it has become, well, exquisite.

Jacaranda gave its first performance October 4, 2003 several weeks before the long-awaited and much ballyhooed opening of Disney Hall. This town was in a delirious state of Frank Gehry fever. With Alan's help a lot of people were finally recognizing the astonishing conducting talent of Esa Pekka Salonen and were about to grasp his brilliance as a composer. Alan was usually too busy attending concerts around town to write advance pieces or do inter-

views with celebrities to focus the public's interest on something upcoming. When he was not writing notes for concerts and recordings, more often than not he was sharing his actual experience. The afternoon of the gleaming hall's inaugural concert, Alan's *LA Weekly* column appeared. In it he shared about another recent musical debut that happened across town at the edge of the Pacific Ocean:

In Santa Monica there was *In C*, Terry Riley's first great work, now approaching 40. Were our pathways not already illuminated by the presence of this smiling, soft-spoken, supernally wise gnome, he would be impossible to invent. *In C* has always been a piece apart, an ingenious trick to test a hearer's perception, a whimsical spinning of substance out of nothingness. That's all very well, but the performance earlier this month at Santa Monica's First Presbyterian Church – the first event in a nicely concocted new chamber-music series called "Jacaranda" – struck me as being about more than mere tricks. It seemed to me as if the work has now settled into the repertory as a milestone in the onrush of music over the past several decades. The 45-minute performance in Santa Monica – nine players, led by Mark Hilt on the church's excellent small organ – was spirited and forward-moving, but it was the work itself that provided the evening's luster: the right music in the right place at the right time.

And so it began, the chronicling of Jacaranda's rise by a critic with the freedom to attend almost all of the nearly 50 Jacaranda concerts presented in the last seven years of his life. After Mark and I, with the Denali Quartet as the house band, proved that Jacaranda was not a fluke, Alan was asked to write a story for the KUSC newsletter based on a visit to his house. To break the ice, Mark recalled seeing a photo of the young Alan sitting on a sofa with Maria Callas in a deluxe LP set issued long ago by EMI. Alan was not particularly skilled at putting his subjects at ease. Despite the years that had passed between us, I was still not a little intimidated. He seized on a comment I made in passing about a period of several years when I kept a diary for the purpose of jotting imaginary concert programs.

During Jacaranda's 2006 displacement when First Pres of Santa Monica was being renovated, the series held a Pan-American music marathon, three concerts in Barnum Hall with breaks for dinner and dessert by Border Grill. Alan offered to write a forward to what he knew would be extensive notes spanning the 20th century, as well as North, Central

and South America. This generous gesture helped draw attention to the importance Jacaranda places on thoroughly researched and culturally relevant notes that rely very lightly on technical analysis but instead emphasize context.

Alan's late-in-life, but headlong Messiaen conversion happened at the midpoint of the first year of Jacaranda's two-year 100th birthday celebration, The OM Century. Two performances of the *Visions de L'Amen* for two pianos within the a month elicited Alan's most extreme language:

"My deep-purple words written under the spell of Olivier Messiaen's *Visions de L'Amen* in our last week's visitation were written under the spell of music of similar color at the last "Piano Spheres" concert; those who have teased me about them, and were not at the concert, have only themselves to blame. [*What am I to do with this music? For the better part of an hour I am pinned against a wall of seductive flame, flayed alive with these violently twisted strands of human emotion, drawn seductively across willing flesh. This is music beautiful beyond human permissiveness. Its ingredients are pure; not a false note disturbs the serenity of its surface; its cadences are exactly well-placed, yet every step forward seems sinful, a violation of the most basic laws of beauty.*] Beyond their just desserts, they have been accorded a reprieve, since that astonishing work formed the major substance of last weekend's Jacaranda Concert ...the Double Edge performance, on disc and at the First Presbyterian Church last Saturday, rank among my sublime experiences."

Like the phenomenally generous Betty Freeman and many others, Alan had become a Jacaranda addict. Where else could he slake his thirst for Schubert and Mozart performed by many of the same musicians who could also commit themselves one-hundred percent to Lou Harrison, Iannis Xenakis, H.K. Gruber, Peter Maxwell Davies, Schoenberg, Glass and Debussy? Unfortunately during these last seven years Alan and Betty had a serious falling out. Her tastes had become more and more limited to living composers. Even those whom she had championed and supported quickly lost their standing once they were dead.

Perhaps Lou Harrison's star fell farthest causing Alan to take deep umbrage to the point of grief. He had championed Lou to an uncomprehending East Coast elite and was beginning to feel vindicated as Lou's music was now blossoming post-humously. It was not in his nature to take Betty's revisionism of his hero's importance lightly.

After Betty's death in January 2009 Alan seemed stunned. As Spring arrived Mark and I took him to Joshua Tree for the desert flowers and to visit for the first time Lou Harrison's last important work, a straw bale house with a striking Southwest stucco profile and unusual acoustic properties. On the way he was ebullient. We told stories, laughed and made a pit stop at a desert diner. The conversation got so animated that we all missed the turnoff and added easily an hour to the trip by having to turn around half way to Twenty Nine Palms. After lunch in the sun-splashed courtyard of Lou's House with Eva Soltes, his documentarian and director of the house, we visited something of a desert oasis, a garden abutting the monumental rock formations and incorporating a meandering pond. For the trip back Alan broke out his recent Nonesuch box compiling their Elliott Carter recordings to celebrate his 100th birthday. He was a composer Betty was very passionate about and he is alive to this day.

The greatest casualty of Alan's rift with Betty was the loss of a book they were working on together for some years. Alan had been entrusted with the transcribed audio of Betty's legendary salon The Music Room since he had instigated it. A who's who of contemporary music worldwide convened among her priceless collection of contemporary art until her husband, the Italian sculptor and painter Franco Aspetto, died in 1991. His pasta dish was the evening's centerpiece. Betty captured it all with her camera.

Despite the urging of Alan's close friend Vanessa Butler, who also had access to Betty, and my pleas for the historical value of the enterprise, an irreconcilable difference grew between them over the balance of photos to text. What now remains of this stillborn collaboration are the elements. Residing in separate academic institutions are Alan's edited draft in a currently unknown state of completion, and Betty's sizeable photo archive with, I presume, the raw audio and transcriptions of The Music Room conversations and concerts.

Alan's legacy is well preserved now due to the loving care and executive expertise of Judith Rosen, the other angel at his shoulder, who upon Alan's urging carried on The Music Room at her home well into the nineties.

Alan's behavior could be truly confounding. He had many detractors. I certainly make no excuses for the meanness toward those who suffered his insults, but as you have read, my experience of Alan Rich was one of extraordinary understanding and generosity. He knew how long I had struggled at the margins of the music world where formal musical training in theory and performance is prized to a level

of exclusion. He saw the audacity of Jacaranda and recognized that the stars had finally aligned for a new musical organization to take its place in the Los Angeles scene.

About Jacaranda's very ambitious OM Century finale concert in which three of Messiaen's major orchestral works were given their LA premieres at Barnum Hall □ *La Ville d'un Haut*; one of the eleven movements from *Éclairs sur l'au-delà*; and *Chants des Déportées* (with 185 performers on stage) □ Alan celebrated the convergence of super-talented high school and college students, the all-volunteer Verdi Chorus, and some of the finest professional choral singers and instrumentalists living in Los Angeles:

Someday when the ink supply starts running low, and there's still enough left for one last tabulation, last Saturday's Jacaranda concert will rank among the best musical events I will ever want to remember. Ever. It's not just because of the music; there was no Mozart, after all, and no Schubert. There were a few truly great performers, but the majority were recruits from local schools – well-trained, to be sure, and basically held to their task by the sense of dedication that enveloped the whole undertaking. The concert drew its excellence from a deeper well, from the depth of musical enthusiasm, tempered with imagination and pure love, that have driven Jacaranda's guiding spirits – the musician Mark Alan Hilt and the man-of-all-the-arts, spirited amateur (in the best sense of that word), Patrick Scott, since the series was dreamed up and brought to a state of improbable but tangible deliciousness over the past decade or so. Their work has inspired their community as their community has inspired their work.

Those who are dedicated to the performance of music and strive for its unattainable standards need those who dedicate their lives to hearing how close they might come. That is how I remember Alan Rich.

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