



TACET TIMES – 10

A wonderful experience this weekend – we visited Castle Farm between Shoreham and Eynsford. As the farmer himself explained, they had been an arable farm with some hops but over the years have had to evolve to maintain the viability of the business. Having had great success growing flowers for drying, they had to change tack as the fashion waned and now they are the biggest lavender farm in the country. Producing both lavender and lavandin – the latter is a naturally occurring hybrid – they distil their own oils and produce flowers for culinary use.

For us, it was just an amazing sight, reminiscent of the fields in Provence even if the pale English sun did not allow the oils to scent the air quite so strongly. We picnicked surrounded by shimmering purple, and were most amused to note one rogue white bush in the midst of it all. It was lovely to be out in the fresh air somewhere other than our garden.

It did make me think about how we all have to evolve as to cope with changing circumstances. Our travel plans, along with those of many others, have been trashed for this year and possibly next, so we are discovering more about our own county and country. We have had to learn about technology in order to ‘zoom’ our friends and family, and indeed, to have our very successful AGM. And your ExCo have been meeting in the same way on a monthly basis so as to try to keep things together.

More evolution, too, in ExCo itself as the newly-appointed postholders start to take up their responsibilities following election at the AGM. Rosie takes a small step away from the front line as she becomes Deputy Chair and Robert Skone James takes over from her. This happens officially at the end of August.

I thought it would be a good idea to find out what Rosie sees as the high and low points of a very challenging period of tenure, and so you can read the answers she gave to my questions in this edition of *Tacet Times*. It made me think of the oft-quoted imprecation attributed to the Chinese philosopher, Confucius: *may you live in interesting times!* We have been lucky to have such an encouraging and professional person to lead us through the tumult and we showed our appreciation after the AGM with a card and a gift of roses for her lovely garden.

Joanna Mace

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News update:

- **Restrictions on Musicians:** it seems that the Government has forgotten how important music-making is to the thousands of amateurs taking part around the country. Following the lead from Making Music, ExCo has written to all the MPs in the area to solicit their efforts in bringing the need for some scientific consideration to the restrictions imposed on us at the outset of the pandemic. We shall let you know when they respond
- **Things to watch/listen to:** some wonderful and illuminating new programmes on music and musicians and free concerts – find the details on the last page
- **Patient plays violin during her brain surgery**

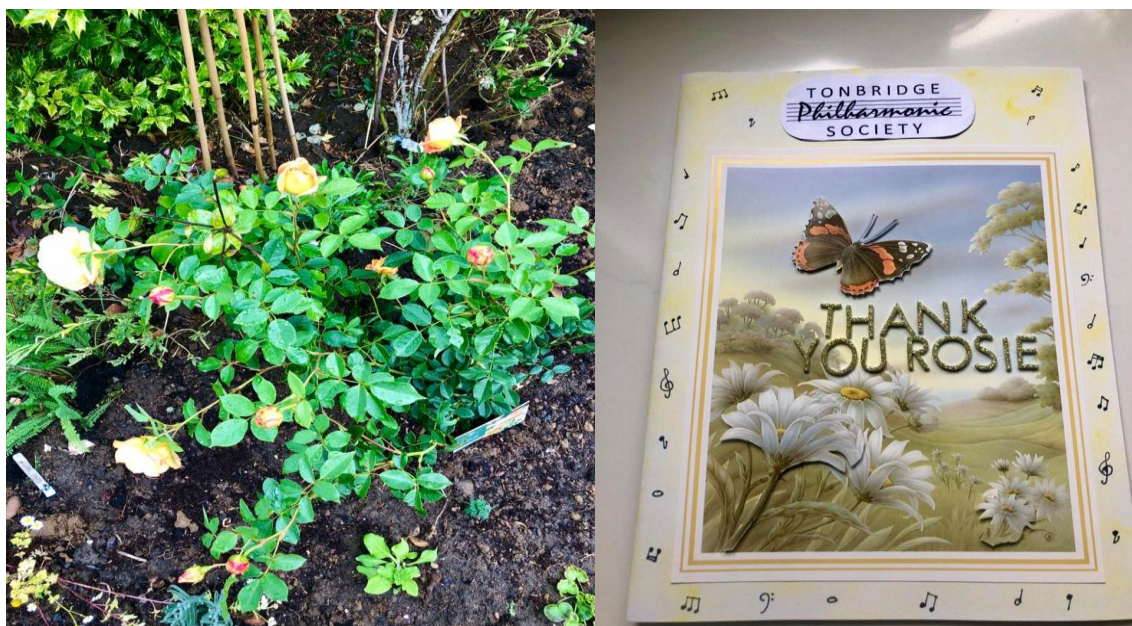
From the BBC website 15.02.20: A patient at King's College Hospital in London played the violin while surgeons operated on her brain to remove a tumour. Dagmar Turner, 53, played the violin so surgeons could ensure parts of the brain which control hand movements and coordination were not damaged during the millimetre-precise procedure.

Ms Turner, from the Isle of Wight, was diagnosed with a brain tumour after suffering a seizure in 2013. She was concerned over losing the ability to play the violin. Her tumour was located in the right frontal lobe of her brain, close to an area that controls the fine movement of her left hand.

Look at the BBC news website and type in Dagmar Turner to see a film of the operation!

A little bird tells me:

- that Rosie has planted her roses: here are the pictures to prove it, together with the card so beautifully made by Jean Mills:



Memories are made of this

Mendelssohn in the Hebrides

In mid-July I was in Ireland and decided to visit the Giant's Causeway on the North Coast, with its remarkable basalt hexagonal columns. Preparing for the journey, I was listening to Radio 3 at about 7.45 a.m. when the announcer said that Mendelssohn's 'Hebrides Overture' had been requested by a lady from Luton. She wanted to be reminded of a holiday she and her father had taken on the Isle of Mull, some thirty years before in the early 1990s. In July Radio 3 had a theme of music choices to recall past holidays and so escape the lockdown.

The lady from Luton wrote that her father was a fan of Mendelssohn and had brought with him a cassette containing a recording of the famous overture. When the boat arrived at Staffa to view and enter Fingal's Cave, her father took out the cassette and played the Hebrides Overture at its loudest level, filling the cave with Mendelssohn's evocation of the wind and sea. All on the boat were struck by the way the music complemented the natural features of the cave, with its majestic basalt columns. These columns lift out of the sea again 75 miles south at the Giant's Causeway, where viewing and clambering on them is much easier.

Mendelssohn saw the cave in August 1829, when he was twenty. He came to Scotland because he liked the writings of Sir Walter Scott and was much taken with the story of Mary Queen of Scots. Also one of his friends, Klingemann, was living in Edinburgh. He had very good English and was willing to be Mendelssohn's companion and guide. Klingemann wrote long letters describing the friends' time together in Scotland.

Mendelssohn was a very good sketcher and artist and accurately depicted many of the place they visited, such as Scott's home, Holyrood Abbey in Killiecrankie. He did not draw Fingal's cave because the sea was very rough and the weather stormy. The passengers begged the captain to put in at Iona for an hour's calm and protection. When I went to Iona and Staffa in 1971 we had a calm sea and 'prosperous' voyage but, like the people from Luton, I find Mendelssohn's music brings the islands back to life.

This year the Giant's Causeway did not have as many visitors as usual - only 600 allowed because of social distancing. I am sorry that Mendelssohn and Klingemann did not visit the area. They would have been awestruck by it - especially the Giant's Organ, formed on the cliff face from the basalt columns. As the wind from the sea meets the column/pipes they create a Mendelssohnian maestoso.

Brian Stevenson bass



Not so much goodbye as *au revoir!*

Our Chair, Rosie Serpis, is relinquishing her role after possibly the five most tumultuous years in our Society's history. She has led the Executive Committee through Robin Morrish's evolution to President, Matthew Willis's arrival and departure, the months of ever-changing conductors and, now, the suspension of all our activities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. So how does she feel as she moves to supporting our new Chair, Robert Skone James, as she takes up her new role as Deputy Chair for a year, covering for Adrian Twiner?

Rosie and I sat down for a socially-distanced chat on a rainy morning this week, and I asked her about the past and the future of TPS, and how she is coping with the current situation. My first question was, very logically, how did she come to join the First Sopranos?

Music has figured in all the various stages of my life, and I spent time in my teens and twenties singing and playing the viola in amateur choirs and orchestras. Motherhood (two girls: Harriet and Eleanor, known to all as Hattie and Elle) got in the way for nearly twenty years, but it was Elle and her friend Emma who encouraged their mothers, Jane Lazell and me, to add our voices to the 'top line' of the music. Hattie also joined our ranks for a couple of years whilst she was studying in London.

I contacted Eileen Best, then Choral Chair, to ask about joining, and was charmed by the warmth of her welcome and encouragement. Less encouraging was Hattie's insistence that her mother sang too loudly on occasions, and even now I sometimes find scores with her notation pipe down!

So how did you come to be Society Chair?

Singing in the choir is a great metaphor for how I like to live my life – as part of a team, rather than as soloist.

[However, and although she will be too modest to admit to the truth, it did not take long for her many non-musical strengths and talents to shine through, and for her to be approached by Jane Minton to stand for the post of Deputy Choral Chair to Adrian Twiner as Choral Chair in 2012 - ed].

I had only been Deputy Chair for two years before Adrian's health meant he was unable to carry out his duties, and I was persuaded to step up to fill the breach. This was an interesting move, which brought me closer to the challenges of working for the Society. David Robins volunteered to serve as Deputy, and I greatly appreciated his support and guidance – we seemed to work so well as a team. When, only a year later, Peter Westley stood down as Chair the members elected me Peter's successor. My experience to date and my belief in teamwork led me to suggest we introduced a new role on ExCo of Deputy Society Chair, and I encourage David to stand for this role and join me as my deputy once more. When he was interviewed in 2018 about the role of Deputy Society Chair, he said of me: *'The Chair, Rosie Serpis, and I work as a team. We have different strengths which complement each other.'*

Tell me about the challenges that have faced you over your time as Chair?

When I joined I much enjoyed singing under Robin Morrish's encouraging, intelligent approach to music. Ever a gentleman, he wanted to ensure that he was bringing everyone along with him to the greatest possible enjoyment of what we were doing. As we came to the end of our first

70 years of existence, I was anxious to maintain his legacy of fine music making as we moved forward, and I was so pleased when he accepted the post of President – one he has carried out magnificently.

Of course, we then had to recruit a new Music Director – and here I had much appropriate experience, as my whole career has been, and still is, in HR. A team from ExCo helped with the process, and we were all gratified at the numbers of applicants, from whom we selected Matthew Willis. What a change he wrought in us all!

None of us were surprised, although all were disappointed, when he announced that he would be leaving us in November 2018 and we had to find a replacement. I know everyone will remember how frustrating it was when Mark Biggins' arrival was delayed, and then he had his accident and stood down from his contract. We learned a lot from Michael and Matt and Julian, and we so enjoyed the beginning of our work with Ben Westerman.

What do you feel got you through these turbulent times?

I am so lucky in the support of the members of the Executive Committee. They are, I have discovered, a group of incredibly talented and committed people who work so hard to make sure that things go well. We do enjoy our meetings, and there is a lot of laughter to go with the seriousness of some of the subjects. The incredible regularity of attendance seems to me to indicate that my ExCo colleagues find their responsibilities are lighter as a result of having such mutual respect and goodwill.

Tell me about the legacy you leave as Chair

I believe that I am handing on to Robert a Society that is in a good and viable state. We have worked hard as a team to ensure TPS will be there for another 75 years by bringing in strong compliance policies and practices, broadening the music we perform and continuing to be welcoming to all who are serious about making music with us, regardless of who they are or what stage of life they are at. I am proud that our reputation is for making music at a high standard, and that events such as our wonderful Family Carols, such a highlight of the Christmas period, are as important to our community as to our members.

What will you remember as the musical highlight?

This has to be our performance of Britten's *War Requiem* in 2018. This was not just a concert, but with the talk and the staged reading of some of the poems from the libretto, and with three amazing young soloists, it became a real, almost theatrical experience. It was an incredibly emotional performance in which to take part, heightened of course by a sold-out full house and the fact that it was Matthew's last outing with us.

What is your hope for the future for TPS?

I want TPS to get past the current difficult situation that COVID-19 has thrown at us and to continue to have a reputation for making great music. I hope that the Society will be one that musicians – whether starters or experienced, amateur or professional – will want to join, one that is highly inclusive and not in the slightest elitist.

I would also love to see lots of sold out concerts, which means getting future generations involved as members and audience and showing them that classical music can bring such joy and fulfilment to all.

How have you been coping without being able to make music with your fellow members?

Well, I am enjoying Ben's weekly Zoom sessions, and actually, I have gone back to playing the piano; I don't know why it has taken me so long to do so. I am lucky to have a wonderful instrument but it is a bit of a beast, somewhat unforgiving, and quite challenging to play well. Nevertheless I feel that my ability to play is like an underused muscle, and I am having great fun working it back into shape and reminding myself how amazing it is to get to grips with a new piece – Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, prompted by listening to last week's *Soul Music* on Radio 4!

What advice do you give to your successor?

First and foremost, ensure you have a great team around you, delegate by making reasonable requests of people and they, typically, will step up and help – you are not alone in this – and then like a parent, remember you can only ever be as happy as your unhappiest child/member. We have many happy members, and can only listen and learn, and do our best to keep our Society in good shape.



Poetry corner

This very appropriate poem is a favorite suggested by Chris Brooks who loves it in Schubert's wonderful setting:

An Die Musik

by Franz von Schober

Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden,
Wo mich des Lebens wilder Kreis umstrickt,
Hast du mein Herz zu warmer Lieb entzunden,
Hast mich in eine bessere Welt entrückt!
Oft hat ein Seufzer, deiner Harf entflossen,
Ein süßes, heiliger Akkord von dir
Den Himmel besserer Zeiten mir erschlossen,
Du holde Kunst, ich danke dir dafür!

To Music

Beloved art, in how many a bleak hour,
when I am enmeshed in life's tumultuous round,
have you kindled my heart to the warmth of love,
and borne me away to a better world!
Often a sigh, escaping from your harp,
a sweet, celestial chord
has revealed to me a heaven of happier times.
Beloved art, for this I thank you!

Translation © Richard Wigmore from *Schubert: The Complete Song Texts*
Pub: Schirmer Books and provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk)

Short Story

Soupe à l'oignon

Annie's got *Elizabeth David Classics* on the work surface, a mug holding the pages open because it wants to keep closing and this recipe is near the back of the book. .

For 4 people, slice 6 onions very thinly; on this depends the success of your soup!

She's thinking as she chops, the knife rhythmically rolling back and forth on the board just as she was taught in Lyon all those years ago. She tucks a strand of not so grey hair back behind her ear, and mops at the tears with a clean tea towel. With the side of her hand she pushes the letter out of the way.

Her thoughts don't take her too far, just a couple of miles to where her mother lies in her bed in the Hospice. This is the last stage of an uneventful eighty-six years for Jean, spent caring for her two children and the husband who died three years ago. She knows her mother is not fighting, she just wants to get it over with. Annie suspects that the old lady has stopped eating to hasten things along but she isn't there all the time, so she can't be sure.

She throws the diced vegetable into the hot oil, releasing into her kitchen the wonderful, essential smell of cooking onions. Before she started she opened the balcony doors and her bedroom window. A sharp spring breeze whisks some of the aromas away and outside to tease the passers-by.

In your casserole melt two tablespoons of beef dripping; cook the onions, stirring fairly often so that they turn gently brown without getting crisp, and finally form an almost amalgamated mass ...

Who uses beef dripping today? She's using olive oil instead. Good olive oil, but not extra virgin - that shouldn't be used for cooking, or so she was told most emphatically by Rafaello, whose olive groves produce a peppery green unction to be drizzled in benediction over artichokes and lettuces and big red tomatoes, and whose dazzling smile she has no difficulty in picturing. And no-one she knows has a stockpot on the go in their kitchen these days, but she has made a vegetable stock from scratch as a concession to doing things properly.

Her mother always used this book, but Annie sometimes finds it frustrating. Ingredients are often given in imprecise amounts and don't take into account the restrictions of a limited income. But she perseveres with it, loving the way it can conjure up memories of interminable lunches on sun-drenched terraces, overhung with vines and mimosa. Or suppers in tiny candlelit city restaurants with too many tables squeezed into the space and where the *patron* and the *chef* are one and the same. She smiles now, thinking of her favourite place on the île St Louis in Paris, where the cast iron steps down to the loo are

circular and vertiginous, and not to be attempted after the third glass of wine (when the descent might be most needed).

Mostly when she's in Paris she's working, in Geneva and Hamburg and New York and so many other places, often shut into a little soundproofed booth, headphones clamped to her head, translating the words of politicians, experts, journalists, people who want to be heard. She is listened to, not heard. She is merely an impersonal mouthpiece, a disembodied conduit. They'll do away with translators eventually, she thinks, when they've got the software sorted so that it copes with nuance and colloquialisms. So that it doesn't start armed conflict with an unintended phrase or sentence.

... season with salt and pepper, and pour over heated stock, adding water if there is not quite enough.

She does like to do things properly even though it takes time and effort. Her mother was the same, insisting that Annie learn to do the basics in the kitchen when she was old enough to hold a saucepan and to understand what was hot and what wasn't and why that was important. There is still a little scar on her left arm, evidence of a very hot pan too close to the edge.

Annie always visits Jean when she gets home from a long stint at conferences and other events. There are usually tales to tell, of Annie's search for a laundrette in strange cities as she moves from one job to the next without going home, or of eating solitary meals in cheap cafes. She's a great people watcher and holds the pictures of those she's seen in her head. Like photograph albums, the pictures seem to stay with her forever. It is curious, therefore, that she never seems to be able to see her mother in her mind when she's away from home.

In earlier days, Jean would sit and listen to each tale, and then urge her daughter to take another spoonful of *poule au pot*, or a slice of summer pudding. Jean was grateful to have someone to cook for. Her daughter understands that it's such a bore, cooking for one.

'Sleep on it,' was often Jean's advice when Annie shared some problem that was worrying at her, 'it'll be clearer in the morning.' Annie's not sure it works, but she will try it again. It is going to be a big decision, perhaps the biggest she's ever made. Could she do it? Can she do it. Yes, of course she could/can, but will she?

Cook for another 10 or 15 minutes; always supposing there is no oven or grill with which to gratiner the soup,

The phone is ringing. She's been waiting for the call, knowing it's going to happen eventually. She puts a lid on the saucepan and turns off the gas.

'Hello,' she says.

'Is that Annie Robson?' an unfamiliar voice asks.

'Yes.'

'This is...' Annie takes a deep breath. Is this woman going to say what she is expecting to hear? What is unavoidable now? How will she feel? She knows how she felt when her father died. It was three years ago and she is still raw, abandoned, bereft. Things are different with her mother, though, as it often is between mothers and daughters. But she doesn't see anything of her brother these days, so her mother is really all that is left of her family.

'... Natwest. We're calling to tell you that we think someone may have cloned your credit card. Can we just ask you a few questions?'

Annie lets out the breath she didn't know she was holding in.

'Yes, of course.' She feels for the chair behind her and sits down heavily. The woman must have sensed something, and she asks whether Annie is all right before she continues with her litany of enquiry.

'Do you have your card with you or could someone else have used it?'

Annie pulls her purse out of her bag.

'Yes, I have it here.'

'Thank you,' the woman goes on, 'I'd like to go through some security questions with you. If you have any concerns about this call, you can find our Security Department's contact details on the Natwest website and you should call them direct.'

When Annie puts the phone down, she sits there for a while. She's not going to worry about the card, the bank will look after the problem. She cannot worry about her mother, it will all happen when it happens. She pulls the letter from the work surface onto the table and looks at it once more. It has taken a while to get her because it has the wrong postcode on it, and there's another Courtney Road not very far away. She runs her thumb over the colourful Italian stamps. 'Dearest Annie,' it starts, 'will you ...' and then she remembers the soup.

Prepare a thick slice of toast for each person, lightly buttered and spread with grated cheese

She clears the debris off the table and sets her place. She knows she has made far too much soup for one person, but it will keep and she can heat it up for tomorrow's lunch. She pops the slice of bread into the toaster. She finds a napkin, salt and pepper. She looks at the 'phone, and wonders if it will ring again today. Often there are no calls at all. Nobody expects her to be home, her friends always ring the mobile. She goes through some days without speaking to anyone, she for whom words are her livelihood. Not that she is without occupation. She is working as a translator with a publisher for the time being, but the work comes in and goes out on computer, not via a real person. It means that she doesn't have to travel, that she can be here for her mother.

Place each one in a soup plate and ladle the onion soup over it.

Her slice of toast is done so she butters it and covers it in cheese. Pouring the hot soup over the top causes the bread to rise to the surface and some of the cheese to float as it melts. The smell is wonderful, comforting and rich. They put wine or brandy in it in some places, but this version doesn't require either, and she has made up her mind to do it properly, just as she has made up her mind about the decision that has been hanging over her for so long. She is sitting down at the table just as the doorbell rings.

Annie opens the door and sees a man standing there, his face obscured by a huge bouquet of flowers.

'Ciao, cara,' Raffaello says. 'I've spent so long waiting *for* you and your decision that I decided to come and wait *with* you.'

Joanna Mace
July 2020

There are lots of opportunities to carry on making music and listening to it. Here are just a few together with some other things to interest you:

- **BBC's Music Magazine** – has a website www.classical-music.com with lots of amazing resources, including chances to join virtual choirs and orchestras
- **BBC4 (and iPlayer)** – *Being Beethoven*: the conductor Marin Alsop heads up a group of musicians and passionate lovers of Beethoven's music over a three part series. Given five stars by the 'i's reviewer, Sarah Hughes.
- **BBC4 (and iPlayer)** – *Tunes for Tyrants*. Another three part programme with some compelling snippets of music put into the context of their time. Suzy Klein is a very intelligent presenter who roves over recent (for most of us) history in Europe and how music has been put to sometimes malign purposes. Shostakovich and his fellow Russians were surprising omissions, but if you only have three programmes over which to cover such a wide premise, something has to give.
- **BBC Proms** – selection of music from the *BBC Grand Virtual Orchestra*, and also broadcasts of archive concerts. 350 musicians will be brought together electronically to perform the Beethoven 9 on Friday 17th July at 19.00: rather more technologically demanding than we can manage at the moment!
- **Royal Opera House** – wonderful operas and ballet available for watching and listening
- **London Philharmonic** - fortnightly streamed performances with something for everyone. String players on 15 July at 7.30, Wind on 29 July, Brass and Percussion on 12 August and Beethoven 250 on 26 August
- **Classic FM** have a wonderful collection of live-streamed online concerts and performances listed by date

I'm sure that there are lots more like this – if you send them to me I'll add them to the list – secretary@tonphil.org.uk