



## TACET TIMES – 8

*The quality of mercy is not strained;  
it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath*

For many of us at the moment the rain that I can hear quietly falling is a real mercy, and made me think of this quote from *The Merchant of Venice*. If you don't like the heat, you won't much have liked the past few days – and certainly our rapidly browning grass will be as grateful as many of us.

Much of the world seems to think our recent emergency is at an end. I cannot think that this is so, and thus will maintain my regime of masks, gloves and handwashing as elements of any excursion. I have noticed much more traffic when out walking and many more groups of people together, so I'm crossing my (gloved) fingers that they are not taking too many risks.

Exciting things are still happening, even if our worlds are much smaller than before. Ben has held his first zoom singers class, focussing on breathing and breath control. These are so necessary, especially – as he reminded us – for those long lines in the Duruflé *Requiem*. He has agreed to take longer sessions each Wednesday (19.45 on Zoom) to which all are welcome, especially those orchestral members who would like to exercise their vocal chords.

Work is continuing apace on the new website. Those of us who attended the AGM had a brief glimpse, and we hope that we will be able to canvas your thoughts before it goes live. As Rosie said at the last ExCo, 'our members might see something that has escaped our notice up 'til now'.

On Wednesday I presented Rosie with the splendid card that Jean Mills had made (shown at the AGM), along with three beautiful roses for her garden. She was very touched by the messages from the few members who had signed the card before everything stopped. There are lots of blank pages, so I hope we will soon get the chance to fill them up with messages from those who wish to express their personal thanks for all she has done.

Later that day it was Rosie's last meeting as Society Chair. We took a moment to reflect on all she has done over these last five tumultuous years, and how ably she has steered us through some perilous minefields. She hands over to Robert Skone James at a challenging time, but remains at his right hand as Deputy Chair for a year, so he will be able to rely on her guidance and encouragement

**Joanna Mace**

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## News update:

- **Lockdown activities:** Ben will be hosting a session for all singers every Wednesday at 19.45 via zoom. He will be taking us through some simple music and also working on something a little more demanding over four weeks. Music will either be what we know we all have, or something that you can find online. We'll make sure that you know where to find it, but he's starting with works that are all in the *European Sacred Music* book. Watch for an email with the pieces on pdf files if you haven't got the book.  
The sessions will work by Ben having his microphone open but everyone else being muted – which is essential if there is not to be a total cacophony! Those participating can use the 'chat' facility if they want to ask a question. There will be chance for a general chat at the end.  
We are working on the options for recording these sessions, but it is a little complicated.
- **Things to watch:** I have revamped the information on the last page, so do read all the way through and see whether there is something you might like to do!

### A little bird tells me:

- there is a 'guilt-free' (or almost) way of enjoying a G&T! I tried it yesterday and thoroughly enjoyed it. *Clean Gin* by the Clean Liquor Co is about the same price as a premium gin, but has only 1.2% alcohol by volume (ABV) compared with 38-40% in ordinary gin. As a long drink with a good tonic, ice and lemon, it is one of the best 'spirit replacement' products on the market.
- the stash of wonderful material sent in by members (esp Brian Stevenson and David Price – thanks, chaps!) has almost all been used in various TT editions. I'm sure there are more people out there who could write a short piece about something interesting in their lives, could share a favourite poem, or who could add to the archives something about the history of TPS. All contributions gratefully received – soon, please, otherwise your editor will have to fill up all the spaces!



## Memories are made of this .....

*More of David's experiences of life as a diplomat:*

### Opera nights

I was an ambitious, Polish-speaking opera nut at the British Embassy, Warsaw in 1967-6, and I soon sought out the opera house. The People's Theatre (Wielki Teatr) was a huge, brutal Stalinist lump, but inside it was French, romantic with a vast stage and 3000-seat capacity. I was Third Secretary (Political) whose job was to cultivate the students, media and intellectuals. (The Foreign Office Third Sec was as expendable as a second lieutenant in WWI.)

The opera house was subsidised so the tickets were cheap – top price £7. The programme was conservative and patriotic. Lots of Russian and Polish stuff, some Italian and French but unsurprisingly no German.

Performance standards were consistently high; in each production three artists covered each principal role. That night's singer was underlined in pencil in the two-page programme. I went often and, being a junior diplomat with a regular routine, I was always followed by the Polish/Russian goons.

One night, for Boris Godunov, I sat in a luxury £7 seat and the two goons sat behind me. But the theatre also filled up with peasants from the countryside. The state believed that all workers must have Kultur, so it regularly bussed in hundreds of farm workers to see the opera. As you can imagine, the life and times of the Polish countryman in the 1960s was far removed from the opera world and Boris's medieval court.

The theatre darkened, the opera began, it was warm, comfortable, and within minutes, a swelling, sonorous wave of snoring rumbled all around me. The workers were sound asleep. My protecting goons were honking away too. The singers sang, the principals killed off each other, the soprano despaired, the robed clergy boomed and praised each other and called on some Slavonic god to save them. Then the opera ended.

The embassy Land Rover and minder collected me and drove me home. My goons slept on.

David Price  
April 2020



## Music Quiz

*I hope you enjoyed this quiz, in spite of some of the formatting difficulties that you may have experienced in the last edition's section. Here are the answers:*

1. Water Music (Handel)
2. Tenor
3. The Birds (Respighi)
4. Bach [in German Bb is written as B and B natural as H]
5. William Tell (Rossini)
6. Four last songs (Richard Strauss)
7. Handel [H and L]
8. 42nd Street
9. Harold in Italy (Berlioz)
10. Enigma variations (Elgar)
11. Minute waltz (Chopin) [the waltz was typed tiny ie minute]
12. Grease
13. Turandot (Puccini)
14. Stravinsky
15. Three little maids (from Mikado)
16. War and Peace (Prokofiev)
17. Double bass
18. Air on a G string (Bach)
19. Unfinished symphony (Schubert)
20. Elgar
21. Rhapsody in Blue (Gershwin)
22. 4'33" (Cage)
23. Fur Elise (Beethoven)
24. Little night music (Mozart)
25. West Side Story (Bernstein)
26. Cymbals
27. 1812 (Tchaikovsky)
28. Fauré
29. Clarinet
30. TPS [teepees]

***If you enjoyed that, we'll try to have another one***



## Poetry Corner

*A favourite from Chloë Witchell:*

### **BRIGHT STAR**

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art -  
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,  
The moving waters at their priestlike task  
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,  
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;  
No - yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,  
Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,  
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever - or else swoon to death

*John Keats*

*And Chloë has shared some thoughts about how she ended up as part of TPS, to which organisation she has given much both musically and in programme production etc:*

### **Coming down to earth - joining the *Tonbridge Philharmonic Society* -**

Newly married, living in Sevenoaks, working - wanting to join a local orchestra (still travelling to the Barbican Orchestra) - heard about SSO - made enquiries - told 'sorry - we don't need any 'cellos' (how I got in there is another story!), then heard about Tonbridge Phil.

Can't remember much about the recruitment process except that there was no audition - great relief! Conductor John Cullen. A very serious-minded man, Scottish, very decent, but oh so meticulous! Detail, detail, detail. And he was careful, slow. I, at fourth desk, didn't have many dealings with him. Section leader Mary Laing, teacher at the School, also Scottish, also quite dour (I should mention that being Scottish I understand all about dourness!). Occasionally her shouted instructions reach me at the back - pencil ready! Orchestra Leader Penelope Morrish (always known by her maiden name which escapes me). In those early days I didn't have much to do with her either, but always admired her for her beautiful playing and professionalism.

Coming from a family where my mother was a pro viola (Scottish National Orchestra) I was then rather self-conscious about my playing, not very confident, but always realising that music was a vital part of my life too and I must stick at it.

Every orchestra has its own culture, and I am involved in several. Each different in its own way. The conductor is a big influence. Tonbridge Phil orchestra at that time was very

much an adjunct of the Choir. Most of what we did was choral - Passions, Requiems - always pretty serious. Never imagined that one day we'd be playing pure orchestral music before an audience. Rehearsals always require acute concentration from everyone. That never changes - but in the 70's this orchestra sat up straight, never spoke, NEVER interrupted the Conductor, never had a break, came, played, took up the music, went home.

That was how we were. All very well-intentioned but quite fearsome in its way. Yet I took all that for granted and am still here - several conductors later (esp more recently ) players possibly much younger overall - a most refreshing aspect - everyone very talkative - at the appropriate moments - and a joy to be part of.



#### **Some musical quotes, sent by Chris Brooks**

- 'Without music, life would be a mistake' *Nietzsche*
- 'The music is not in the notes, it is in the silence in between' *Mozart*
- 'Music can name the unnameable, and communicate the unknowable' *Bernstein*
- 'If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know' *Louis Armstrong*

*Thanks Chris, and here's a favourite one of mine:*

- 'My personal hobbies are reading, listening to music, and silence' *Edith Sitwell*

# Short Story

## *Overture and Beginners*

My fingers twitch. In my head I run through the solo passage, the really exposed one. There's always a risk that my mind will go completely blank as I lift the bow. It's like a musician's *blue screen of death* on the pc. Or a real life version of those terrifying dreams – only in those I'm usually naked as well, and standing in front of an orchestra somewhere huge like the Festival Hall!

My violin weighs down my right hand; I hold my bow lightly in my left. I've had this instrument for years now. It would have to be my luxury on a desert island, in spite of the harsh conditions. Just like it would have to be the Bruch Violin Concerto that I'd save from the waves. Corny choice, I know, and I won't ever be playing it somewhere like here, but I have done it in less exalted places and it's just the most fantastic piece. I'd probably take the Perlmann recording, a bit more meaty than Benedetti, though I know Zoe wouldn't agree.

We're gather in the corridor now and there's that particular smell – dust predominantly, overlaid with wood and metal and fear. The space is cluttered with music stands, chairs, cables. Noisy, too, clattering of feet on hard surfaces, whispered chatting bouncing from side to side so you pick up snippets, but never hear the whole conversations.

'I nearly missed that entry, stopped counting when ....'

'... and did you see what she's wearing ....'

'Where d'you say we're going after ....' (bound to be a brass player, that one)

We shuffle forward, an orchestra of crows ready to murder tonight's programme of classical music.

A flautist has just prodded me to move further down. We bunch up at the door that leads onto the stage and I glance at my watch. When she'd explained the problem, the conductor gave Zoe permission to be late, but this is cutting it a bit fine. Fifteen minutes to go. We'll file on in about five minutes so we can get everything sorted out, tuned, settled into place. Our other nightmare is that you get on stage and find an empty music stand when you know you left the score there after the afternoon rehearsal. There's no chance you'll remember what you're supposed to be playing, however often you've practised it. And what about the guy next to you who shares that score?

I stretch my fingers, working them until they're warm. It'll be the arthritis that gets me in the end. My old teacher used to say we needed something like W40 to put on the joints when we wake up in the morning. I've tried soaking my hands in warm olive oil, supposed to be good for those hard pads that come from pressing down on the strings all the time. Last time I saw Maman she ran thin, cold fingers over my hand. *Il faut souffrir pour créer la musique*, she murmured, as if I hadn't spent hours watching her suffering in order to create her own music. I was back to that freezing room where she stood over me as I sat at the piano and made me go through yet another exercise. I guess she's probably saying the same thing to some heavenly choir now.

I was that worried about Zoe I couldn't sleep much this afternoon. On concert days I have to sleep after lunch, otherwise I find myself drifting off during the performance. The siesta's become such a habit now we do it even if we haven't got a gig later, and anyway, we never go to bed before one or two in the morning. It had its advantages, too, time together is so precious.

We're going on now. Still no sign of her. The doctor couldn't see her this morning, so the appointment had to be between the rehearsal and the performance. I'll know what he said from her face when she finally gets here, I'm sure I will, but I'll have to wait until the interval to know for sure.

We've been together for three years now. I found it hard at first, being with someone so much of the time. When I was young, there was just Maman and me. That was all. Maman's family were all in France, Dad was a Barnado's boy, died on his thirtieth birthday when I was only two. I did go to Lyon a few times to see my aunt and uncle, Tante Anne-Louise and Oncle Hubert, and they really did try to make me welcome, but I didn't really know them or them me. We didn't share that family history that makes it work.

I made a few friends at college, still see some of them. But apart from that, there was just me and my violin for hours on end. They say you have to practise at something for 20,000 hours to be really good at it. Feels like I do twice or three times as much as that, but I don't mind. How lucky am I to get to do something I love, and it pays me a salary? And I've been to some great places to play. It's easier to accept a booking for somewhere exotic if you've no ties, you can just pack a bag and go.

The thing is, it's the live performance that really gets to you. It's being with lots of other people as you create music, the synchronicity of it. I even love being out there in the audience, watching it happen, watching the effect it has on other people.

The audience become part of the performance, since they can make such a difference. Physically, a small audience in a big hall equals a change in acoustics, since there is less absorbance or energy. A big hall full of people generates a buzz that raises your game.

Unless they're coughing, of course. Someone told me recently that the conductor Michael Tilson Thomas was in Chicago one winter and walked off right in the middle the first movement of Mahler's Ninth, only to come back with cough sweets and throw them into the audience. That guy's got balls. But then, the people who pay to watch are only human. I live off Fisherman's Friends for rehearsals, the dust often gets in my throat, but it's funny, I find once we go out there on the night I stop coughing, my tooth stops hurting, my headache goes, whatever. Which is just as well, really.

My hands are cold. Clammy on the neck of the violin. I can smell the garlic, it wafts over to my noses as I flex my fingers. Still no Zoe. I wipe my hands down the shiny strips at the sides of my dress trousers. Eight minutes to go. Lucky she plays the double bass, so she can sneak in at the back without making too much fuss.

Her brother George was at one of our concerts last month and remarked, for the umpteenth time, how funny she looked, this tiny blonde thing, barely five foot tall and with little hands, playing the biggest instrument. She manages really well, though, has worked out her own technique to make up for the hands thing; it helps that her teacher is a smallish woman too.

We're on. Holding my violin high against my chest I thread my way through the chairs, narrowly miss a harp, relax a bit when I see music there on the stand. I sit, pushing the bottom of my jacket out of the way. Well. Think about it, you sit on the bottom of your jacket, you're never going to get your arms up and free to play, are you? I breath in deeply, hold it, breathe out slowly. And again. Slows the heart rate. I place a clean white cotton handkerchief on my should and lean my chin into the violin. Raise the bow and play some trial chords. Tuning hasn't slipped much from before we left the green room. Play a few phrases of the solo passage, turn around and look at the double basses. No Zoe. Ask the guy to my left if the angle of the stand is okay for him to read the music. He nods. Turn round again. Still no Zoe. Simon is tuning up her instrument. That's good of him. I can see the conductor and orchestra leader standing in the doorway out of sight of the audience. The leader is looking at his watch. Then I can hear distant footsteps clattering down the corridor. The two men stand aside. Zoe whirls past them, all long blonde hair and black sweeping gown. She slows abruptly, walks to her place and leans down for her instrument, calm as you like. Picks up her bow, checks her music, lets the double bass fall gently back onto her shoulder. The conductor raises his baton, the whole hall falls silent. Waiting. Anticipating. She's half turned away from me to whisper her thanks to Simon, and now she turns back and searches for my eye. She smiles. She's wearing that bright red lipstick and one huge smile. Biggest I've ever seen.

Oh, my God. We're going to have a baby.



**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:**

- BBC4 (and iPlayer) – *Opera Italia*: Antonio Pappano takes us through the development of opera in Italy from its beginnings with Montiverdi to the end of its richest period with the death of Puccini. Sumptuous scene of Italy together with clips of famous films and some sections showing him workshopping with well-known singers
- Radio 3 (via iPlayer) – *Voices of the Air*: Anthony Burton relates the history of the BBC Singers (of which my great-aunt Ethel was one) from the 1920' to today
- Radio 3 (via iPlayer) – *Symphony Question Time*: Tom Service and Sue Perkins examine the history of the symphony
- 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](mailto:secretary@tonphil.org.uk)**