

War Stories

1991 - Persian Gulf War

I have been privileged in my oboe life to be forcibly connected numerous times to music through very powerful and personal ways. During the first year of my Masters degree at Juilliard I was assigned to play principal oboe with the Juilliard Orchestra for Mahler's 4th Symphony with Mahler expert, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, conducting at Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center. Quite nervous and worried about the opinions of my peers, I went out on stage right after intermission to warm up. Right after the lights went down and I gave the tuning 'A,' the President of Juilliard, Joseph Polisi, walked briskly and stiffly onto the stage and up to the microphone on the podium. He left an awkward silence at his unexpected arrival hanging in the hall while he cleared his throat and seemed to search for words. He solemnly announced in the middle of this concert to the stunned audience and orchestra that President Bush had declared war in the Gulf. His wonderfully diplomatic segue was to say "The concert will continue. There is nothing better than music to sooth us and unite us."

There also was not a better piece to perform after such a statement. The second movement of Mahler's 4th Symphony is a sinister scherzo. The movement sounds like a dance of death because the solo violin line is tuned a whole note higher than the other surrounding violins making a clash of sounds. However, the most haunting part of the concert was the last movement, entitled "Die himmlische Leben" ("The Heavenly Life"). The entire concert ended with this song about celestial life after death originally written for a boy soprano.

After the last notes, I could feel the audience and the musicians collectively begin to dread what was to come from the war. The audience seemed suspended with a swelling silence that burst into applause of gratitude for our gift of connection. Musicians are able to communicate through music when words are not adequate.

Many times, as professionally-trained musicians, we strive for perfection in our performances. Getting it right and doing it well are noble goals. However, ROCO is an orchestra of allowing: allowing these wonderfully trained professional musicians with years of practice behind them to take chances in this live performance to really express the music, not just the craft. You are not only invited to come into our world, we want to reach out and touch yours.

-- Alecia Lawyer

War Stories

1944 - World War II

Why is ROCO Red?

My great-grandmother, Lynda Northam, was a very nurturing woman. In the 1920's in the country outside of Paris, Texas she was a midwife to many of the women on the farms. When her own daughter, Golden, my grandmother, was about to give birth to my mother, Jeannie, she was ready and quite equipped to be by her side. She had to be, too, because this was 1944 when the men were at war. In Paris, though, the baby ward was filled to capacity since Camp Maxey was nearby and men could be stationed there. When Golden was admitted to the ward, Lynda visited often with food and care. Many of the women in the ward were so lonely and sad that she began to adopt them, bringing them the same treats and sharing the same pats and assurances she was giving her own daughter. Since Lynda was so petite, one of the new mothers in the ward said, "You must be a Big Mama to take care of all of us!" As she was teased with the new nickname it seemed to fit. From then on Bigmama was her name with her petite frame and daily makeup and hose and hats. I knew her for more than thirty years when she passed away at age 99 - only one month shy of her 100th birthday. I remember distinctly when she told me how excited she had been when her hair turned gray. I was so confounded and asked her why. She replied, "I love the color red and had always wanted a red suit but could not wear it well with our strawberry-blond hair color. When I turned gray I could buy that wonderful color suit!" When she passed away, I inherited all 27 of her hats (many red ones!). I know I also inherited her love of red and since I cannot wear it well, the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra wears it for me.

-- Alecia Lawyer