

Swearing Under the Cross

My last performance with the pro chamber orchestra was both a glorious and a damning affair. I had recently stepped down, voluntarily, as associate conductor, because my relationship with Sax Man had so seriously deteriorated that, in spite of the glorious opportunities he was giving me, I just couldn't stand working with him anymore. But I agreed to keep playing viola until I trained this other guy I was working with.

This final gig was a concert with a local community chorus—the program consisted of a cantata, a mass, and one solo orchestra number—I believe it was a concerto grosso by some obscure Italian baroque composer. I was just hired to do the side-man thing: play principal viola—no conducting involved. However, the Sax Man became suddenly stricken with a debilitating medical attack, and I was asked, at the very last minute, to step in and conduct the concerto. I was to have one 20-minute run-through with the orchestra: that was all the rehearsal I got. Nervous about sight-reading, I nevertheless rose to the occasion and began the run-through.

We were all set up in this big Methodist Church, an appropriate setting for the religious music we were presenting. We had just finished our run-through of the long choral pieces, and we were tired to be sure; but the orchestra was unusually lame on the concerto, probably because the piece had not been very well prepared in previous rehearsals.

I was feeling the pressure of time, and when the orchestra made several screw-ups in a row, I blew up. At the top of my lungs I shouted, "I throw cue to the French horn—nothing happens, I throw cue to the oboe—nothing happens, where the hell are you people, Mars? I'm sight-reading this piece, and I'm playing it better than you are! From now on when I point at one of you, **PLAY SOMETHING!**" There were a few G--D---s thrown into this speech for seasoning.

To fully appreciate the scene you must remember that we're surrounded by about 80 choir members who are quietly leaving the auditorium, church members all, and I'm standing directly underneath a cross. So, when the ruckus begins, this large bevy of three-bean-salad matrons all turn to witness some madman screaming angry swear words underneath the cross of their lord and savior. Interesting.

Well, the performance that night was electric. The orchestra was terrified of what I might do, so I had their complete attention. My movement was quite inspired that night too, and I really acted out the piece with high drama. At one point I had to climb off the podium to waive my

stick in the face of a delinquent cello, but other than that it was very clean, very high class, and very, very high energy.

The audience went wild! They gave me five call-backs. To be called back to the stage once during the applause is fairly standard, twice is pretty good, but five times is unheard-of. It is a sign that something extraordinary has happened. Backstage the choral conductor was pumping my hand, and saying, "Richard, you're incredible!" Even the orchestra showed signs of being pleased with their performance.

But they never forgot the swearing under the cross, they never forgave me, and I never conducted another chamber orchestra concert.