

A Righteous Person

By Daniel N. Leeson
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On the tenth of December 1996, I went to La Honda, California, a small, isolated town on the spine of the last mountain range before the Pacific Ocean, and planted a redwood tree in memory of Hugo Burghauser, taking care to select a Sequoia that would someday produce the largest, most noble, longest living member of the species, and choosing a site not likely ever to see a lumberman's chainsaw. Since I don't know Burghauser's exact date of birth, I chose the anniversary of his 1982 date of death for the ceremony, one at which I was the only attendee. My effort was not as a result of some formal action but was self-motivated because of my conclusion that Burghauser was a righteous person, deserving of the honor. His behavior in 1938, though modest in scope, required great personal sacrifice and strength of character. Let me tell you about him.

Before moving to California, I lived in New Jersey and, on one Saturday morning in 1966, I received a call from the personnel manager at the Metropolitan Opera House asking if I were free to play that afternoon's performance of Richard Strauss' one act opera, *Elektra*. When an orchestra member gets sick at the last moment, as had the orchestra's bass clarinetist, someone must be engaged to fill in and, since I played at the Met from time to time, my name was on the substitute list, which is how I came to be called that day.

Accepting the engagement, I called Herb Blayman -- my friend and then first desk clarinet at the Met -- in the nearby town of Tenafly to ask if I could ride in with him to the matinee. He agreed but with the caveat that he was playing both matinee and evening performances that day and would not be able to leave until after 11 p.m. That meant I was either to wait until he finished or take the bus home.

"What's the second show?" I asked.

"*Così fan Tutte*," he said.

I needed to know nothing else. A day when one can play *Elektra* in the afternoon and then

see (and hear) *Così fan Tutte* in the evening, is a gift from God.

It was while warming up backstage that Blayman introduced me to Hugo Burghauser. He was a neatly dressed man who appeared to be in his mid-seventies. "There will be a seat on your left for Hugo to occupy and watch the opera. He used to play bassoon with the orchestra but is now retired," said Blayman.

"I'm very glad to meet you," Burghauser said to me, his German accent noticeable at once. "I hope you don't mind me sitting next to you, but since your seat looks directly at the conductor's right hand side, it is a good place for a view of the stage. You recognize, of course, that in the pit, the closer one gets to the lip of the stage, the less one sees of it. I will be sure not to inconvenience or disturb you."

"Mr. Burghauser, the pleasure is mine," I replied. "You realize that I am kept very busy during the opera so I won't be able to see much of it with you."

"I know," he said. "One really works hard in *Elektra*. I once told Strauss that the work exhausted the musicians physically, emotionally, and intellectually."

That stopped me cold.

"Mr. Burghauser," I said, respectfully. "You knew Richard Strauss?"

"Very well," he replied. "I was privileged to work with him many times in Vienna and elsewhere. He was a marvelous conductor."

Pausing for a moment, Burghauser added, "though a terrible card player." Much later I was to learn that Strauss' *Concertino for Clarinet and Bassoon with String Orchestra and Harp* was written for and dedicated to "Hugo Burghauser, dem Getreuen."

At that point the orchestra began to file into the pit, tuned up, and got ready to open with the muscular "A-GA-MEM-NON!" theme that pervades the entire opera. On my left, with his chair turned 90 degrees -- placing his back directly against the audience separation wall which gave him a face-front view of the stage -- sat Burghauser. The lights dimmed, the conductor made his entrance, we rose and bowed to the audience, seated ourselves and, with a flick of the wrist, were into the story of matricide amongst the ancient Greeks.

For the next hour and thirty minutes -- the length of the opera -- it became obvious to me that Burghauser knew every detail of the work. He flicked a finger when Klytemnestra missed an entrance by an eyeblink. And when, for the arrival of Orestes, a trumpet overshot a cue by a millisecond, Burghauser's hands, folded and resting on his lap, imperceptibly rose up, as if to give the player a helpful cue. It was just a tiny movement, but I saw it out of the corner of my eye.

After the performance, I asked him if he might join me for supper, explaining that I was finished playing but was coming back for the evening's performance. And that is how I got a small piece of Hugo Burghauser's remarkable story. It took a long time to get all of it. He was so modest and self-effacing that he chose not to speak of himself. The details came from others much later.

It is not wild hyperbole to state that, until 1938, Hugo Burghauser was the most powerful musician in the world. During that time, he was the President of the Vienna Philharmonic -- as well as the principal bassoon -- which means that he was the most influential person in the world's most influential symphony orchestra. Ergo, he was the most dominant musician in Vienna, in Austria, in Europe and, therefore, in the world.

There is no orchestra quite like the Vienna Philharmonic. Proud, haughty, brilliant, though, by today's standards, unforgivably sexist and inflexible. But in early 1930, it stood at the pinnacle of symphony orchestras, a law unto itself. The VPO is completely self-governing. Unlike the vast majority of professional orchestras, one does not find two faces; i.e., the musicians on one hand and management on the other. On the contrary. The orchestra manages itself, inviting who it wishes, ignoring those with whom it chooses not to be involved. As royalty is not told what to do, one does not dictate to the VPO. They can be pressured, to be sure -- as was the case of the recent scandal caused by their obstinate refusal not to hire women -- but they are a law to themselves, with vast record sales, a large government subsidy, completely sold out subscription concerts, and the world's most prestigious summer festival (Salzburg). Thus, the VPO can and does thumb its nose at demands that, in any other orchestra, would be political suicide.

It is a private club. (I do not defend their attitude, only report it.) And in the 1930s, Hugo Burghauser was the President of this most influential body.

After the "anschluss" or occupation of Austria

by Germany, Burghauser was requested to appear at the headquarters of the Austrian Nazi party. There he was directed to dismiss all Jewish players from the orchestra and, further, to prevent the hiring of all artists and conductors who were Jewish or whose politics were not in accord with Nazi philosophy.

Burghauser, a Roman Catholic with no Jewish ancestors -- but married to a Jewish woman then on tour in South America -- refused to comply, stating that he would not participate in such an immoral act. Storming out, he went back to work. Burghauser was called in for a second meeting where he was threatened, and again he refused.

Ordered to appear a third time, he refused to go. Two days later he was summarily fired from the Presidency of the VPO and his more amenable replacement immediately terminated the employment of every Jew in the ensemble. A later and very public disagreement with a Nazi party member in the cello section resulted in Burghauser's resignation from the orchestra.

Burghauser did not have to do any of this. Had he concurred with the request that he fire all the orchestra's Jews, he would have continued in his important and well-paying job, perhaps facing criticism at the end of the war, but who knows? However Burghauser's ethics were such that he gave it all up rather than be a prisoner to the Nazi view of who should not be permitted to play in Austria's most important symphony orchestra.

Now, being without a job, he approached his friend, Arturo Toscanini who recommended him to Sir Ernest MacMillan, then conductor of the excellent Toronto Symphony, an orchestra that was then searching for a principal bassoon. Burghauser, on the basis of Toscanini's endorsement, was offered the position.

Burghauser had no idea where Toronto was and thought that he had been engaged to play in Taranto, Italy. Since his mother was Italian -- his grandfather had played flute under Verdi -- he was fluent in the language and looked forward to living there. But soon, the misunderstanding was clarified and he was on his way to Canada with his bassoon and exactly ten marks, the maximum allowable on leaving Austria.

Arriving in Paris on his way to Cherbourg where his boat journey was to begin, it was his intention to finance his trip from a French bank account he maintained. However, a bank moratorium, caused by expectations of an imminent war with Germany, prevented any withdrawal. Overnight Burghauser had gone from being the most powerful musician in Europe to being indigent in a foreign country. He was also

advised by the French police that, without a steamship ticket, his tourist status would be revoked in one week and this would be immediately followed by expulsion from France. Alone and without resources, Burghauser chose the only avenue available to him: he joined the French Foreign Legion. By the most incredible of coincidences, on the day of his induction -- the last day before he would have been expelled from France and the day before his scheduled but unpaid-for boat trip to New York -- he ran into Mrs. Carla Toscanini on a Paris street. Like Burghauser, the Toscaninis were abandoning Europe and scheduled to take the same boat from Cherbourg, for which he was ticketed but without money to pay for the trip. Mrs. Toscanini lent him the amount needed for the boat fare and he was on his way to New York and Toronto, sharing the ocean voyage with his old friend, a conductor who also had thumbed his nose at fascism.

Ensnared in the first bassoon chair, Burghauser spent three seasons in Toronto before departing for New York where he played first with the NBC Symphony and later assumed the second bassoon/contrabassoon chair at the Metropolitan Opera House. A vignette about an event during his time with the Toronto Symphony reveals the magnitude of his prestige. The TSO had hired a world-famous guest conductor who appeared for rehearsal at the appointed time. He took one look at the orchestra, saw Burghauser, and left the stage, ashen faced.

"Do you realize who it is you have playing first bassoon?!" he said to the orchestra manager. "That is the most powerful musician in all Europe. What is he doing here?!"

"He is playing the bassoon," came the response.

Hugo Burghauser was a righteous person. Unlike Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg, Burghauser did not directly save lives, but his actions and behavior in the face of a hostile, ferocious, and oppressive government were consistent with the highest ethical principles of mankind. The behavior of a few people like him saved whatever honor Austria retained following the events of 1938-1945.

The last time I played *Elektra*, it was with the San Francisco Opera and, as I played it, I thought of this gentle, kind, brave, and righteous man. It was later that I decided to plant a tree in his memory. ❖

(Hugo Burghauser died on December 10, 1982. —ED)

About the Author ...

Dan Leeson is a former bass clarinetist with the San Jose Symphony and Ballet. He is a retired businessman who teaches mathematics at the local community college. Though he no longer performs, he writes a great deal on Mozart. He has edited the *Gran Partita* for the Neue Mozart Ausgabe, as well as all the Mozart wind serenades.