

Classical Music on the TV Media and Film

I have always cringed whenever a classical music theme has entered a television drama or movie, Hollywood or otherwise. It is bad enough having to endure the idiocy of the way classical musicians are, with few exceptions, almost always depicted and interviewed in chat shows, without having the inaccuracy of the usual image painted of them - which many classical musicians encourage, by the way - brought into a storyline. I suppose what really bothers me the most is not the inaccuracy itself, but the way it makes genuinely great musicians seem irrelevant and insignificant if they who don't fit into the caricature painted for them constantly by the mass media. This inevitably affects public perception of what we classical musicians are - our personalities and our lifestyle.

Other Professions

In addition, it makes me wonder - does the depiction of a musician and a musician's life being so wide of the mark mean that the same applies to TV images of other professions? Do we assume that images of the medical world, espionage, industry and politics - to say nothing of the way family life and love are depicted - are also unrealistic fantasies?

I do realise that there is a big difference between the way the court system is depicted in 'The Good Wife' as opposed to 'Legally Blond', the way police are in 'Law and Order' vs. 'Die Hard', and doctors in 'ER' in contrast to 'House', but I still have the niggling feeling that reality is very different to any of them.

This is not to say that I don't enjoy those programs and films - in fact I enjoy most of the ones listed above rather a lot. But I do long for something American that is not such a fantasy. In the same way I have always been a great fan of James Bond, and I think the latest manifestation of him is as good as any. However, I think and hope that we all know it is in the end impossible fantasy.

I like even more the series and films inspired by John Le Carré, which are much closer to the real world. Where is the American equivalent? The films made of some of the John Grisham books are as close as I can think of.

The Legal System and the Police

I know from my own experience in 1995 as plaintiff in a court case in the USA [blog about that coming soon] that the reality of the country's legal system and court proceedings bears little resemblance to any depiction on TV that you care to think of.

The same goes for the American police. I am thinking of the superhuman dynamism, quick-wittedness and determination to get to the bottom of the case, whatever it takes, of the guys on TV. This contrasts alarmingly with the real-life dopey cop summoned in Seattle when we were mugged and had US\$10,000 stolen. To say that he was the antithesis of the image of the US police painted on the media doesn't really overstate the case. To be fair, he was a nice chap, and I am sure very honest. Beyond that, I regret to say that we might as well have reported the robbery to a City of Seattle traffic cone.

The All-American Super-Hero

No, I am not writing about Sly Stallone. Here I refer to the film 'Air Force One' - for sure a very exciting and well-made movie - depicting the bravery and determination of the US President in dealing with terrorists who have gained access to the presidential Boeing 747. This is after his government and the CIA have been responsible for the capture and imprisonment of the leader of a rogue ex-Soviet state.

For sure, it is a propaganda-filled film, containing many assumptions about the evil of ex-Soviet radical nationalist forces, and the patriotism of United States heroes. However, I have enjoyed it enormously several times over, and have been impressed with Harrison Ford's depiction of the All-American Super-hero President. He is the consummate super-brave, super-determined, super-patriotic, super-intelligent, super-family-man, with rock-solid morals and honesty, which he sticks to with the absolute integrity of Batman. At the same time, he has the fighting abilities of the best of the US Marines, and the physical stature of Mr Universe. ¹ [See footnote at the end]

Made during the Clinton era, one cannot help but compare the two characters; despite having great admiration for Bill Clinton in many ways, one cannot really help thinking he wouldn't quite match up to Harrison Ford's fictional President.

And then, in 2001, came George W. Bush.

The Classical Music World Again

Back to the way classical music is depicted: is it de rigueur that every character on screen who plays the piano or the violin has a Polish name or similar? There are few exceptions.

I believe that this syndrome is known as semiology. It is the same syndrome that makes us expect that all accountants wear thick spectacles, scientists are bald, conductors have unruly dark curly hair, and great chefs are universally French. We subconsciously assume librarians to be conservative dressers, their hair in a bun, and their specs to be horn-rimmed, with a raging desire to be wild just under the surface. We also think of evil little urchin schoolboys as having red hair [ooh... err... oops] - or perhaps the other way round.

Thus it follows that a great classical instrumental soloist is from Eastern Europe, and for some reason - perhaps because of Chopin - pianists particularly come from Poland. In the same way, conductors seem to be thought of as automatically Russian or Italian. For example, one thinks of the fictional Signor Pizzicato - the awesome maestro of whom everyone is terrified in Danny Kaye's *Tubby the Tuba*. One also thinks of the real-life Leopold Stokowski, who was not actually Russian at all, but an East End Londoner called Leo Stokes.

When the musician depicted is younger, they have always studied at Juilliard - nowhere else counts at all, of course. Curtis - forget it. Paris Conservatoire, Moscow Conservatory, Liszt Academy, Warsaw Conservatoire, Royal Academy, eat your hearts out. And as for Royal Northern College, Hong Kong A.P.A., Sydney Conservatorium, etc., etc., well, what can I say?

The Mentalist

However, we now get to the point of this tirade. [Not before time, did I hear you say?] :

They do not always fall into the same trap. Just occasionally they get a little closer to the realities of professional music-making. I draw readers' attention to an episode of a US TV crime series by the name of *The Mentalist*. It is one of those dramas that constantly veers on the edge of comedy, but purports to be serious crime drama.

We were recently watching an episode named 'Rhapsody in Red', in which the murder victim was a violinist. She had a part-Latin American name - Eleanor Artega. The conductor featured had a part-German name – Maestro Vincent Mannheiser. There was some semblance of a connection to the truth of the music world in the action. And there was a genuine classical piece of music throughout.

I say 'some' resemblance because it wasn't much more than that, but it did not fall into the more familiar media traps - it presented the classical music world as at least a serious profession, instead of being inhabited by an ocean of self-indulgent, eccentric alien beings, throwing temper tantrums and acting as if the universe revolved around them. [Oh.....]. The researchers could certainly have done better, but they had at least tried, and one didn't cringe with embarrassment at the evocation of the music profession anything like as much as usual.

Here is a little précis of the plot, highlighting the moments of realism as well as those of fantasy. I hope readers can spot the difference - if you cannot, I can only assume you to be from Hollywood.

The murder victim is described to the police by her mother as a concert violinist, who is also the concert master of the North California Symphony Orchestra based in Sacramento - 'second only to the conductor himself, and the youngest in Symphony history'. This lady is not only the victim's mother, but also her agent. [I hope my agents are taking note - artists' mothers are not always a credible and balanced source of info regarding their offspring. Perhaps the size of the commission this particular mother was making was realistically reflected in the fact that she also had a job as a shelf stacker at the local drug store. Maybe I have under-estimated the calibre of the researchers? No, maybe not....]

On the evening of the night that she was killed, she had played a solo performance at a private event to celebrate the purchase by a collector of a Brescian Stradivarius [When this was mentioned it came rather unclearly from the lips of a detective, and sounded like 'Russian Stradivarius'. I got ready to pounce, but upon replaying the moment with subtitles, it was indeed Brescian.]

Later the central character - *The Mentalist* (Patrick Jane) - is listening, whilst waving his arms about in the air like some people do when listening on headphones, to the murder victim's recording of the 'Brahms Concerto in D Major' on his MP3 player, and describes it as 'very good - very elegant rubato'. One can hear a snatch of the music as he removes his earphone, and it is indeed the Brahms Violin Concerto, as opposed to Vivaldi's Spring from *The Seasons*. I half expected the latter, as continuity in so many of these TV dramas could hardly be said to be on the ball, and the Vivaldi competes only with 'Greensleeves', Grieg's 'Morning', and Mozart's *Eine Kleine Genetrik Klassikmusik* as the most trotted out example of musical high art in the modern media. [This includes background music whenever a stately home is depicted on screen, or commercials for businesses that sell anything designed to make your home look classier - e.g. upmarket carpet stores, bathroom specialists, or general interior designers. Not to mention concert agents' telephone holding music....]

In another scene the investigator (The Mentalist) turns up just before an orchestral rehearsal to question members about the victim. His first contact, before the rehearsal starts, is a fat guy with spectacles, who turns out to be the principal oboist [a little more semiology?], and who tells him that everyone adored Eleanor (orchestra players always do love their concertmasters, as we know). He drops it into the conversation that the orchestra's principal conductor 'isn't very nice'.

A shot of the first violin part on the stand reveals part of the 3rd movement of Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony.

Maestro Mannheiser arrives from front of house, and strides through the auditorium shouting 'All right, let's get to work. Come on, people, we haven't got all day. Up! Up! Up! [chivvying the players up onto the stage]. Come on! All right!'

He successfully gets the players to jump to it with no resistance whatsoever. [I have heard it said that getting an orchestra onto a stage to start a rehearsal, or particularly at the end of a break, is like trying to herd ferrets into an SUV, but I wouldn't know; this guy certainly knew how to whip them into shape. In the real world, however, I suspect that the players of a modern symphony orchestra would tell his to stick it where the monkeys stick their nuts.]

[Addressing the girl sitting in number 2 position] 'Constance.'

'Yes Maestro?' says Constance.

'You will take Eleanor's seat as concertmaster. You've not got any of her natural gifts of leadership, but under the circumstances we will have to make do. Yes?'

Constance obediently moves into position, without any sign of taking offence at the conductor's open insult.

[Addressing the girl sitting in number 3 position]' Ariel. Your keen lust for advancement will be gratified. Second seat for you'.

[Any young inexperienced conductor reading this should consider experimenting with this kind of attitude when next rehearsing a professional orchestra, and seeing how far it gets him.]

Ariel is a beautiful girl with Far-Eastern features, and is obviously the sex-interest in the drama. She moves into Constance's seat.

[We do not get to see the rest of the first violinists moving up by one seat, which in reality would create complete mayhem on the stage for at least 15 minutes, but I guess we have to assume it, or Ariel's original position as No. 3 would remain empty. It is implied that No. 2 is in a superior position to No. 3, when in fact, as we all know, in most orchestras it is the loud-mouth towards the back who is superior to all of them.]

No one questions the Maestro's authority or his rudeness, and the rehearsal goes ahead.

'Right everybody. From the top.' [Note the 'in-speak'. None of your amateurish, 'Ladies and gentlemen, from the beginning, please', stuff.]

Maestro and orchestral members alike all turn out to be telepathic. He begins without telling the orchestra which piece they are starting with, and yet they all miraculously know that it is not 'from the top' of anything, but from the beginning of the 3rd movement of the Tchaikovsky, as featured on the music stand. A misguided subtitle comes up, informing us that it is Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.3, 3rd movement, rather than Symphony No.6.

Within two seconds he is shouting instructions, such as 'Tension!' 'Forte!' To be fair, this could have been 'Attention!' 'Forte!', but the subtitles definitely said 'Tension!' This, incidentally, during a passage that is marked pianissimo. The music has what appears to be a totally futile cut of several pages almost immediately the movement begins.

After a change of scene we then return to the rehearsal at the point that the march theme first appears in E major.

The conductor yells over the music, 'You are dragging, people!' - which they are not.

'Stay in tempo!' - which they are doing.

Regarding a legato phrase he points to the first violins and shouts 'off the string!' and then repeats it when they continue to play legato as written.

Then, after it has modulated into G major, and the first violins are playing continuous quick quavers in 12/8 'Stop! Stop! Stop! Ariel! It's B flat. It's ridiculous, even for you!'

'While we are on the subject, Ann and Carol, you are dragging.' [I do not know to what 'subject' the maestro was referring, or which instruments Ann and Carol were playing, but no one was behind to my ears.]

'Trumpets - measure 37 - soggy.' [Up to this point in the score (bar 37), the trumpets are tacet]. Soggy trumpets is an interesting concept, don't you think? Perhaps he was addressing Ann and Carol again [groggy strumpets?]

The Mentalist interrupts the rehearsal and, in front of the orchestra players, openly accuses the Maestro of murdering his concertmaster. This is just to test his reaction, you understand. The Maestro's response is stout denial, which clears him immediately of suspicion, and, of course, the scene doesn't undermine his authority with the orchestra at all.

A flower petal had been found next to the body, and somehow this then leads to suspicion that Constance may have been the murderer. She is heavily questioned, but The Mentalist instinctively knows she is innocent.

The next day is the opening concert of the 73rd season of the orchestra. There is, of course, no question of the concert being cancelled, despite the murder of the concertmaster and everyone on stage being a suspect. No orchestra worth its salt would dream of allowing that to undermine the event.

At the pre-concert reception, Constance wrestles Maestro Mannheiser to the floor of the upper foyer and tries to beat him up. This is because *The Mentalist* has put about a rumour that the maestro had been having an abusive relationship with the murder victim, Eleanor. This rumour is designed to flush out the murderer.

During the final seating rehearsal, in which they are still stuck on the third movement of the 'Pathétique' (again subtitled as Symphony No. 3), Jane has arranged for flowers to be delivered to the stage. These flowers are deliberately chosen as similar to those used to frame Constance. The plan is to put the murderer off his or her stride as he or she plays the Tchaikovsky during the rehearsal. Clever, what?

And what d'you know? The principal oboist suddenly contributes a series of fortissimo wrong notes, which proves he is the murderer. He is the fat guy who had, before the rehearsal, told Jane that the conductor wasn't 'very nice'. [I would be very interested to know what a real-life Counsel for the Defence would make of that : 'Members of the Jury - the principal oboist was not only in love with the victim, but in the last rehearsal he played wrong notes in the Tchaikovsky 3rd - err 6th - Symphony, and not only that - he is also fat. All these things combined remove any reasonable doubt, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury. There is only one verdict that you can possibly return.']

Actually, I am being disingenuous, because the wrong note routine rumbles him to such a degree that he confesses. It transpires that he had murdered Eleanor because he was in love with Ariel, whom he considered to be leagues ahead of Eleanor, so that she could become concert master. Ariel had known nothing of the oboist's love for her, and was thus not in on the murder plot. As Ariel is only number 3 in the first violin section, it had also been essential for him to get Constance out of the way - hence his use of a flower petal by the body with which to frame her.

Constance is then cleared but doesn't get to return to her position as acting concert-master - we don't see her again. [I guess wrestling your principal conductor to the floor of the bar in front of your public, and then being framed for murder would rather put one off one's stride.]

We don't see the concert going ahead, but it is implied that Ariel gets to lead, despite, not only that the conductor obviously regards her with contempt, but also the discovery that the oboist had committed homicide for her benefit.

The musicians are, of course, a desk of first violins and a principal oboe down, but the North California Symphony Orchestra evidently rises to the challenge, and it is a great success. Mind you, it appears that there is only a seven minute movement from a Tchaikovsky symphony in the concert program.

Afterwards *The Mentalist* shows his musical talent by appearing on stage as the musicians are packing away their instruments; picking up one of the orchestra's double basses, he starts play the theme, pizzicato, from the Tchaikovsky again. You would expect them by now to be somewhat pissed off with that tune, particularly under the circumstances. However, there are no moans that they get to hear that damned march theme yet again, and no cries of 'Get your hands off my double bass'.

Now, dear reader, if you have any experience of being in or working with an orchestra, please visualise the scene: one of your colleagues has been murdered, everyone has spent the day

under suspicion, you have been rehearsed by a misanthropic maestro endlessly and incomparably rudely in that movement of the Tchaikovsky, found that the murderer was one of your workmates, and despite all this, you have given your all in the performance. Then at the end of the day, the detective who has been throwing his weight around the place, including accusing your conductor of the crime, come on to the stage uninvited and casually picks up one of your colleagues' double basses and starts in with cheapening your favourite Tchaikovsky march tune. Would you not simply kick him off the premises and tell him not be such a presumptuous arsehole?

However, on the esteemed TV media, despite a day of murder, mayhem, accusations galore, fights in the bar with the M.D. and apparently not being able to play anything other than a single movement of a Tchaikovsky symphony with two numbers, no one in the orchestra is fazed. They all smilingly join in with Jane - the man who has thoroughly investigated them all for possible homicide - in a New Orleans-style jazz version, miraculously totally rehearsed to perfection at some previous point. The instrumentation includes a side drum with wire brushes that just happen to be lying on the drum - wire brushes do not feature anywhere in Tchaikovsky's oeuvre, and neither does a side drum in either Symphony 6 or 3, but nevertheless they are conveniently on stage.

The program ends.

The real-life orchestra providing the music on the soundtrack is not credited, unlike the cameraman and his assistants, the casting director, and indeed the music director etc., as per. However, like the North California Symphony Orchestra, they only have to play a very small section of one movement of a Tchaikovsky symphony with M.P.D. endlessly throughout, plus a nice bit of Norlans-style jazz at the end, so it is probably not a bad deal.

I really did enjoy this episode, and indeed enjoy the series. But please, for goodness sake, why not ask a real-life professional musician what the realities are when researching such a storyline? Not doing so is almost as silly as building a concert hall without consulting musicians. [Oh.....]

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He puts his family first, placing himself in the most appallingly dangerous situations, and takes on the multiple highly trained maniacal terrorists in several unarmed combat situations, facing them down many times over, and eventually fights to the death with the terrorist leader on the open ramp at the back of the plane. This results in him saying through typically Fordesque gritted teeth 'Get off my plane', throwing him off to his death from thousands of feet above the ocean.

Because the plane has been fatally damaged by the attack, he then finishes everything off by getting everyone else off the plane on a rope onto another plane before he, himself, leaves the doomed Jumbo. At the point when there is only one more guy on the plane other than himself, it transpires that he has unwittingly flushed out the traitor in his entourage who had made the attack possible. There is a possibility for only one of them to survive, as the rope is about to give up the ghost. He manages to grab the rope just as it comes loose, as he fights with the traitor. Hanging on to the end of the rope like a spider at the end of its thread, and travelling at 560 m.p.h. over the Atlantic, he is wheeled into the other plane by some lesser All-American Super-Heroes from the US Forces, just in time before the 747 crashes into the sea with only the traitor on board. As he is wheeled on board the second plane to safety, we notice that he is still wearing his suit and tie, albeit with somewhat wind-swept hair.