

De Profundis

Prussian conductor, Otto Rheinfahrter died on the podium at age 87. He was rehearsing Brahms' Requiem and naturally assumed that he would be going directly to Heaven. When the smoke cleared, he was surprised to find that he was in the other place.

He wandered around for a time and began to feel a bit lonely. He was used to loneliness after years on tour when he sat alone in his hotel suite while the players from the orchestra were out in friendly groups drinking and playing cards. But, it did bother him when he began to see some other people and realized that they were all members of ensembles that he had conducted over his 65-year career. Furthermore, they were all contrabass players, bass trombonists, bassoonists, timpanists, and tuba players!

After a time he met Hermann Funfventil, the tuba player in the very first orchestra he had conducted at the age of 22. He walked over to the old gentlemen and started to speak. To his surprise, Funfventil said "Hello, Hermann. I haven't seen you since Leipzig in 1902." These were the very words on the tip of Rheinfahrter's own tongue! They continued a brief but very disconcerting exchange. Each time the maestro was about to say something, Hermann would utter the conductor's words in advance.

For months this experience was repeated with every person that Rheinfahrter engaged in conversation. They all seemed to know his thoughts before he could utter them. He tried including nicknames for his childhood pets and even his most private opinions of the symphonies of Bruckner into the dialogues but was never able to fool these demons. Each syllable that came from their mouths preceded those from his own lips by a clear but almost imperceptible interval of time.

Otto became so discouraged that he fell mute, unable to speak to anyone. One day, he emerged from his depression long enough to recognize a small group of fellow conductors that included Toscanini, Stokowski, and the first great master of the baton, Lully. He hurried over to join them and was delighted to find that they were able to carry on a normal conversation.

They discussed the music of Lully's time and the developments of the intervening centuries. Toscanini spoke of the coming of radio and Stokowski reflected on his adventures with Stravinsky, Bartok and Disney. They all wondered about the new music and the new instruments. Most of all, they celebrated the elevation of the conductor to the paramount position in the music world. At last the horns were in the back and - you know the rest of that story.

Finally, Otto decided to tell of his dreadful experiences since coming to Hell. He described the musicians he had met and their rude habit of speaking out of turn. "They always seem to know what I am going to say before I say it," lamented Rheinfahrter. Stokowski nodded sadly and said, "Yes, we taught them too well. They have finally learned to anticipate!"

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