



By Roy Branson

On Sabbath, March 31, 2001, members of the Spectrum Advisory Council worshiped with Herbert Blomstedt in San Francisco. The following article is based on a presentation by him and on an interview with Roy Branson, both of which took place during the service.

Your father was a minister, and you have an older brother—Norman—who went into medicine. Those are two tracks that we are familiar with in the Adventist Church. But you ended up being a musician. That must have been somewhat traumatic within the family, even in your own soul. Did it seem at some points that becoming a musician was a frivolous thing that you were going to do, as compared to your father or your older brother? They pursued truth and mercy—and you were going to pursue beauty?

HB I never thought of music as frivolous (laughter), not the kind of music that I make. I often find frivolous music in church, but that's another story. Going into music was not an easy decision. But I had a big help. My mother was a musician. She became crippled by arthritis, but she still played the piano even when her hands were affected. She helped us boys to develop as musicians.

My father wanted me to be a preacher—just as he was—and I could imagine that as a possibility. But I eventually had my moment of triumph. Years later, when I was conducting the Danish Radio Symphony in Copenhagen, one Sabbath I was invited to visit the widow of a Dr. Erikson. She showed me the class book of the Broadview College class of 1921, the year my father graduated from this college for Scandinavian Adventists. There was a chart there for the graduating class of six or seven people. "What is your favorite expression?" "What is your aim in life?" And so on. My father was at the top—because you start with B, you know.

What caught my attention was his aim in life. He was graduating with a B.A. in theology, but his aim in life, it said, was to be a singer. He was really musical, my father. I'm sure that was one of the reasons he admired my mother so much, because she was a musician. Of course, when he said singer, I'm sure he didn't mean an opera singer; he meant singing evangelist. He was a very, very fervent Bible student, and he was a wonderful preacher, but to be a singing evangelist, that was perhaps his ultimate goal. He said to me, "Son, you are choosing the second best thing." When I read his aim in that class book, I thought, "Well, he wanted to be a musician, but he didn't make it!"

I was, of course, convinced that the audience in the concert hall was in many ways an ideal audience to preach to. The message of music can be very powerful. I knew many Adventist preachers in Sweden, where I grew up, and they were all my friends. Preachers seem even more musical than other people.

Did they encourage you to go into music as a profession?

HB They were older than me, and I had enough to do to manage my father and mother. I always took part in their services. I played the piano or the violin together with my brother and mother. We played trios and tried to embellish the evangelistic services. I remember one pastor of the Stockholm church had a wonderful tenor voice, a really beautiful voice, but his taste was still undeveloped. Once he even came to one of my concerts on a Friday evening—that was quite revolutionary at the time—and when we met at church the following day, he said, “I think you had more people at your services than I had at mine.” So he got the idea.

How early did you have to make a decision in the school system in Sweden that you were going to be a musician?

HB In the late high school years and junior college I was crazy about playing. I practiced three, four hours every day, in addition to schoolwork. I had a wonderful violin teacher who was a concertmaster of the Gothenburg Symphony, and he told me, “You have to finish college. Otherwise you will not be a complete musician.” That was what I did.

I am very grateful to him for that kind of advice. It is one thing to train your fingers and your musicianship, and another thing to develop as a complete person. In the long run, that defines what you can do with the music. I think all important musicians I know are deeply cultivated and spiritual persons. It’s not enough to know all the symphonies and string quartets and operas, or whatever. You have to know also about the painting and literature of the period, and so on, to make possible a more complete view.

Did spiritual nurture during this time come from the Adventist community—your father, mother, and brother? Or were you also being nurtured by the religious tradition of Sweden because you were performing with different groups in the state church that were putting on large musical works?

HB In my early years, the state church played very little part. But later on when I entered the conservatory in Stockholm, of course, it was more and more prominent. Many of my teachers were church musicians. They were organists in the great churches in Stockholm and wonderful people.

There’s a long and wonderful tradition of church music in Sweden, and it’s even more remarkable today. You can hear in the Stockholm Protestant churches

Herbert Blomstedt

Herbert Blomstedt is conductor laureate of the San Francisco Symphony (SFS) and music director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig. In his decade at the helm of the SFS (1985-95), he led the symphony to worldwide recognition. Its recordings have received some of the world’s most important awards, including France’s Grand Prix du Disque for Nielsen’s Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, Britain’s Gramophone Award for Nielsen’s Second and Third Symphonies, Japan’s Record Academy Award for Grieg’s *Peer Gynt*, and Grammys for Orff’s *Carmina Burana* and Brahms’s *German Requiem*. In 1996, he assumed the post of chief conductor for Hamburg’s NDR Symphony Orchestra. In 1998, he became music director to the Gewandhaus Orchestra, one of the world’s most revered ensembles.

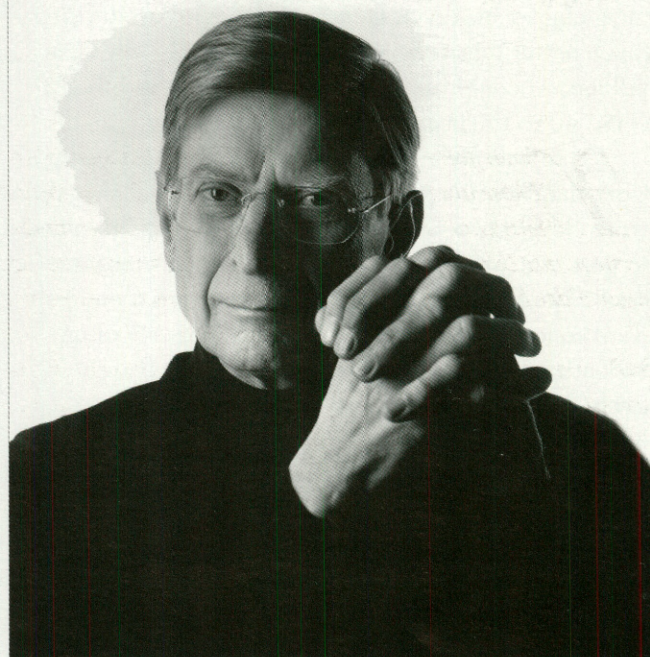


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amateur choirs that sound better than many professional ones. Of course as a student, I earned a little money by singing in these church choruses, where my teachers were conducting on Sunday. And in studying musicology, you also study church music. Of course, that’s not possible to do in our church because church music practically doesn’t exist in it.

Was it a struggle or was it very easy for you to understand yourself as being your father’s son, a participating Adventist, but also in some way a part of the Church of Sweden? I mean were you synthesizing all along, or were

you feeling you were leading a bifurcated life?

HB I had no conflict. The conflict was at best artificial, and the conflict was with other people, not with me.

In Chaim Potok's book, The Promise, which is about a boy from a Hasidic sect who breaks a lot of ties because he feels an obligation to a talent, the thing I remember thinking was that I had never felt that feeling of necessity. I was brought up to decide what to do on the basis of service, but here's somebody who was deciding on the basis of talent. I was wondering, during this period as you were deciding your identity, did you have a feeling that you had an obligation to a kind of God-given talent or set of talents, and did that embolden you to do whatever was needed to develop it for the Lord?

HB Yes, very much so. But it was more-or-less unconscious, I might say, and here I had the complete support of my parents. There were never any discussions about me going to an Adventist school. For my parents, it was much better for me to stay at home—that's the best influence I could have had, in our home—and then I could go to the best public schools around.

There was always friction of course about being a Christian boy in a public school, especially at that time, when Saturday was a regular school day. I always had to go to the principal of the school and present my case. "You see, I am a Seventh-day Adventist and I want to keep the Sabbath. I cannot go to school on Sabbath." I did that for the first time when I was twelve or thirteen.

Before that, my father did it, but then I had to grow up. Do it yourself! That was very good for me. It helped me many times in future years—a kind of schooling, just as the cubs of animals get used to fighting to develop their muscles and hunting instincts, so I had to get used to frictions with the so-called world, and that was very good for me. I always had to stand alone anyhow. And then I had this unusual interest in music, practicing all the time. Strange fellow! I never really had any problem with my comrades, but I always felt I was kind of a loner, and I think that developed some spiritual muscles.

Why is that good?

HB Because you learn to stand by yourself, to decide for yourself, not do what everybody else does.

Have you gone through life feeling that you are an alien

from a lot of different groups that you have to be with? The life of a conductor going around the world, has it ever been really lonely?

HB Not lonely in the negative sense. I enjoy being alone, but I enjoy people also when I choose to see them. I enjoy them very much, and then I cannot get enough of them. But the work is so big and the amount of study necessary so enormous that you never really get through. You always leave your work not fully done. That's why many musicians continue until they drop dead. There is always more to learn. We hope to do still better.

I think everybody has to be alone in order to develop. Otherwise, you will just copy other people, and that's not what I want. I admire other people very much; I don't think I'm very special in that way. But I need time for myself with my text, and my text is the score. Also, I need time with the Bible. This is the source, not the writings of pastor so-and-so, as much as I enjoy them and they sometimes stimulate me. But the source is the most important, and I can be very close to the source only when I am alone.

I know from past conversations that if you hadn't been a musician you might very well have become a theologian. I also know that you have bought the works of different theologians. Could you share with us the names of those who are in your canon of theologians, those who have spoken to you the most, and in what way?

HB There are many, many. Of course, I hunted in my father's library as a young boy and found many wonderful things. Two of the first books I remember reading were ones by J. N. Loughborough and W. A. Spicer about the providence of God, *The Hand that Intervenes*. They gave me great inspiration. How these two men tested God in the mission fields and with few means achieved big results!

These books were for me a sort of prolongation of Bible stories that fascinated me most: Joseph and Daniel. These were people who were alone and who fought for their ideals amidst a more-or-less hostile environment. I was receptive to that kind of spirit. These two Bible stories have continued to be models for me. There are many similar ones, of course, in our Bible.

When I got more independent in my thinking as a young boy, I had some severe arguments with my father. I did not really understand the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary—that was a big question mark, to put it mildly. When he sensed that, of course, he was

very afraid that his son was going to the . . . what do you call it?

The dogs

HB Going to the dogs. Wonderful. One of my father's students, Pastor Eric Erenius, who was without question the best evangelist in Sweden in my young years and at whose meetings I often played, made a

sonal Christians.

Kierkegaard was a very radical Christian, as indicated even in the title of his first book—*Either/Or*. The book is especially interesting reading for us Adventists because it was published in 1843—what a date!—and his reaction to the Danish state church was more-or-less the same reaction that the young Adventist movement had to the established churches of its time. “They don't have the complete light. We

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strange request of me late in life. We had summer houses close to each other. He asked me to visit him, and he said, “I want to ask you to write my obituary when I die, and I want to tell you something about my life.” He then told me some amazing things that he never would have discussed in public.

He confided in me that he never believed in the story about the heavenly sanctuary. And that was never a problem for him. I thought that his admission was good to hear; perhaps I was not alone. The heavenly sanctuary was not a point of conflict for him. He just kept quiet. He loved his church and did not want to sow dissension or strife. His church was not ready for that discussion.

So there were theological questions like that. But they never estranged me from Adventist Christianity. They were never problems because I make mistakes as a musician. Why can't a theologian make mistakes? It's just normal—you develop. What is frightening is just to say no, I don't want to develop. And that, at the very least, is neither sincere nor artistic.

You still haven't told us what theologians were important for you.

HB I tend to paint a broad picture. It's good that you push me a little bit. Very early, I started to like Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. I bought his complete works—twenty-three volumes. I discovered that half of them were sermons that he never preached, because he was not a clergyman. He studied theology, but he stopped when he saw that the Danish state church was not doing things right. The clergy were just officials of the state. They used God as a commodity to earn their living. They were not per-

must look for more.” So this book is a wonderful compliment to the Adventist movement, this awakening of consciousness to ask what Christianity really requires of me.

Kierkegaard also had a wonderful sense of art. One of his first stories was about Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. *Either/Or* starts with about thirty pages of aphorisms, short thoughts, stories, ten lines or less. Kierkegaard said, “Today I was sitting in my room, studying, writing, and I heard music, and someone was playing out in the street, and it was the Minuetto from *Don Giovanni*.” He had to leave what he was writing, went to the window, and looked down. There were two teenaged musicians clad in rags. It was cold outside. To protect themselves from the cold, they had gloves on their hands, with openings only for their red fingers. They were both blind, and there was a little girl leading them, collecting some money. Little by little a small crowd assembled: a mailman, a street worker, all came to listen. And Kirkegaard said, “You poor young artists, you don't know that you carry in your hands the glory of the whole world.”

Were there other theologians who influenced you?

HB The Swedish university system requires one main subject and two ancillary subjects. I wanted to take church history, but that was not possible because church history was taught only in the theological

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faculty. I was in the humanity faculty with musicology, so I could not choose church history. The closest I could come was the history of religion. That was in the humanity faculty, strangely enough. I studied about Islam and about old Persian religion and cults from the time of Christ, and so on. And that set me even more afire.

My favorite reading since then has been by Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann—even if Bultmann was a great adversary of Barth. To read their correspondence, by the way, is extremely revealing. Another favorite has been David Friedrich Straus, who was at the beginning of the biblical criticism movement, also in the 1840s!

Which books within Scripture do you find you are most attuned to?

HB The Bible is so incredibly rich—there's nothing like it in literature. I never tire of it. This is not just a shallow statement that anybody can make—and would make—when asked a similar question. I'm constantly reading it; I constantly think of it. It molds my thinking. If I must choose one book, I might choose the Psalms. Perhaps, also, out of protest—that's a little bit in my nature. You already heard a little bit of my biography—out of protest, I had to be different—and I have to defend my position here.

We had a Sabbath School study some years ago, a whole quarter about the Psalms. Do you remember? As usual, I was traveling around—in a new church almost every Sabbath. Everywhere—whether in Japan or Switzerland or Germany or America—there was so much misunderstanding about the Psalms. The studies didn't understand the poetical language. The Sabbath School lessons even tried to make dogmatics out of it.

I especially remember Psalm 22 being so important because it was understood to be about Christ on the cross, when he said "God, God, why hast Thou forsaken me." Was that a fulfillment of prophecy? No, it rather means that Jesus lived in the atmosphere of the Psalms. When he wanted to express his utmost agony, he found no better words than what the Psalmist already had found. That was Christ's book, the Psalms. There's no book he quoted more often in his teaching than the Psalms. He quoted much less from the law and the prophets than the Psalms, probably because more than any other book the Psalms tell about the unfathomable nature of God.

Anyway, you cannot know about God, you can only experience him. You can only develop an image of him,

try to find him, to experience his greatness, and you cannot do that in factual words or in computer language.

I just thought the other day how unthinkable it would be for Jesus to live today on earth. What would we do? The TV stations of the world would compete in giving him prime time, and there would be the super, super talk show with Jesus Christ. Impossible thought! Everything he would write—if he wrote something—would be headlined, "Jesus said today!" Horrible thought. He was absolutely right when he said, "It's good that I go away from you. It's good for you that I leave you." Because otherwise they would have worshiped him as a star. He would have been an idol, and that would have been the worst of all.

The Psalms are also very musical. We haven't talked yet about music, and I am particularly interested in your thoughts on church music.

HB Music is really a mirror of life. It's a parable. Bad music is a parable of bad life—bad thoughts. I hope I'm not going to offend anyone by saying that. Most people listen almost solely to bad music. It's all over, all over. It's in the homes, in the streets, in the elevators, in the shopping centers. Even in churches, there's poor music all the time. There's some good music, too—thank God—but bad music is everywhere. People don't pay attention, that's part of life, that's our daily bread.

It need not be so. The hymn "If You But Trust in God to Guide You" is an example of really good music and a strong text. The same author wrote both music and text, and that makes for a very strong impression. If you look at the song in the hymnal, notice that the two last lines are the ones where the music goes up high and gets exuberant. (Sings) "For those who trust God's changeless love." This music coincides with the high point of the text; it comes from the same convincing emotion. We can trust that it is really so.

Why is this such a good hymn? You'll notice the progression is note-by-note. It starts with a simple and free skip, but then goes note-by-note. There are no big jumps; it is made for a congregation to sing. But many other hymns are quite jumpy and sound awful.

This is a song in a minor key, but it is not sad. If you count the harmonies in the minor and major key of this hymn, you'll notice the following: The two first notes are in the minor key, but the next one is already in the major. It's a mixture, as in real life. At the end, there are practically only majors. What an elation! Suddenly the hymn goes up high and gets bright. All brightness. Then it sinks down—not in desperation,

but in trust.

This is like a picture of life. Life is not only sweetness; there's variety. The life of a Christian is not just—you know—"sweet Jesus." It's also strength; God leads and you can trust in him. You need to feel that tension also in the music, and that tension is wonderfully present in this hymn. Just begin your song going up with a swing, especially the last line. It's so exuberant.

This is a marvelous hymn. Neumark, the composer,

of the third. If the melody constantly rests on the third, as in this song, the sweetness gets excessive and we become passive. "It is not good to eat much honey" (Prov. 25:27). In hymns from the olden era of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the melody is more the root or the dominant of the harmony, not the third. But during the Romantic Era, composers liked the third very much in revival music like this; they emphasized the third.

This arrangement is like resting your head on a

Our spiritual lives...are being trivialized by everyday commonplace things.



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was the court poet in a small German court during the Thirty Years War, which was a religious war, as you know, between Protestants and Catholics. That was a difficult time—it was horrible. On both sides there was much killing and burning. Armies that were successful burned down the cities of the other side, tore down its castles, and then moved on to the next city and tore it down—and people had to live during those times. There was, of course, lots of sickness and pestilence, and Neumark was in the middle of all that.

People who lived at that time knew what it meant to need somebody to trust. They had difficult lives. Their music mirrored their lives. Look at the third stanza; we sing, "Doubt not, your inmost wants are known." Those wants are known, you can be sure, so that's where the melody goes high. As for the last stanza, "God never will forsake in need," God will never, absolutely never forsake—you can be sure. This is wonderful music; it just moves me so much because the text and the music really coincide. That is why the music is there: to emphasize and elaborate the text.

Of course, if the text is banal, then there is nothing to emphasize, and that happens very often. Sometimes, though, the text is very good, and the music doesn't cover it. We should be sensitive to that.

Can you give us an example?

HB One of the great dangers of our time in the religious music field is sentimentality. An illustration of this is "How Great Thou Art."

Why is this so sentimental? Can it be described? Well, it is possible, though I don't want to be too technical. One of the tests is the role of the "third." The most "sweet" harmony is passed on the interval

cushion. It has no action. It does not give you the idea that you must do something. You love Jesus, and he is here, and you lean on him. You put your head on his lap and it feels good. There's nothing wrong with this—Jesus is certainly our comforter. We need somebody to lean on—that's absolutely legitimate. But to do it every time, all the time, cripples you; you never stand up, you never grow up.

But what about the refrain? At last, the melody gets exuberant; it gets to high points. You could say, "Well, the composer meant to have a more neutral beginning just to prepare a background for the joy he will describe when he goes up high." But the problem is, what does the text say when it goes up high? "Then sings my soul." My soul is singing—it's me! My feelings are important. "Then sings my soul how great thou art." You're singing about God, then keep low, almost murmuring: "how great thou art." He does not sound great here.

But to top it off, the worst is at the end. There's a fermata here. (Sings) "How G-R-E-A-T thou art." The text says that God is great, but the person who really sounds great is the singer. He can sing high, he can sing loud, he can hold the note long. That's completely the opposite of being Christ centered. And people don't notice it—how sad! The text is not bad. You remember it: "Oh Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands have made. I



see the stars, lofty mountains, the cross. When Christ shall come with acclamation. He bled and died.” Wonderful—the whole story of Jesus Christ is there. But it’s all described in this low key, murmuring, and only when my own feelings come, then the hymn goes up high. It should be the opposite. Our hymns should elevate God. My own feelings are secondary; God is great.

Again, music is a parable, a parable on life. It has a beginning; it has an end. It starts off with a theme, and develops a theme. There is some conflict; there are some resting points; there are some high points and low points. It comes to an end. It is born, and it dies. It’s a perfect mirror of life. It’s a parable. That’s why you can preach with music. It’s as good a parable as many other parables because it can be understood regardless of what language you speak. It can speak to you regardless of your musical capacity or experience. You don’t have to be a musician. You don’t have to know the difference between major and minor to experience it. You don’t have to know anything. Just let the music speak to you. Good music can speak to you on so many levels. It will do you no harm to know more, but if you know less, that’s perfectly all right.

Our image of God, I think, is getting too small. He’s getting trivial. That’s the parable set in the Nielsen symphony you heard yesterday. The drum playing—lop, ta da la da tte, lop ta da la da tte ta—is not just a disturbance. It’s more than that. This little phrase by the drum is utterly trivial. A most commonplace march rhythm. Neutral. It can be used in any march. It’s a good element for a march, but it’s trivial, it’s commonplace, it’s banal. First it is soft, sneaks into foreign territory, then grows. At the end, it kills us. It gets loud; it gets to the main thing. The score says that the drummer should play as loud as possible, as if he absolutely wanted to kill the whole orchestra.

And so it is with our spiritual lives; they are being trivialized by everyday commonplace things, by banal things. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, “Let first things be first. Seek first God’s kingdom.” All these small everyday things—the clothing, eating, and so on—are secondary. They’ll take care of themselves. But these things in our society are increasingly getting to be the main things. We buy bigger cars, bigger homes. There’s nothing wrong with that per se, but if they become the main things, they kill the spirit, the really important thing. So it is with music in church. If you indulge this very sweet kind of sentimental hmmm music, it makes you passive. It has no ethical push to it, and that, I think, is dangerous. The awesome grandeur of God is painfully absent.

Is there a hymn that does God justice, in your opinion?

HB One of my favorites is Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress,” You’ll notice that the name of the Mighty Fortress, which is our God, is mentioned only once, and what an effect it makes then. “Christ Jesus it is he.” You speak about him in powerful metaphors, and then you identify him. This is his name. Unforgettable! Compare that with songs where you say Jesus’ name twelve times, twenty times. That, for me, is to break the Third Commandment.

My brother told me about a sermon in which the pastor had everyone stand up and say twelve times, “I love Jesus, I love Jesus, I love Jesus, I love Jesus.” Unbelievable! Naming a name many times often blots out that name. Have you read the memoirs of Joseph Brodsky? He tells of being in a Russian concentration camp. During his interrogation, the most painful thing he had to do was to say his own name, as long as he was conscious. So he would say “Joseph Brodsky, Joseph Brodsky, Joseph Brodsky,” until he fell apart. That’s the most effective way to blot out the personality of the person. A name means nothing when you repeat it too many times.

You don’t elevate God when you name his name twelve times or, better, twenty or twenty-five. Or, if you love him more, fifty times. Completely the opposite. Name him once with meaning and it’s unforgettable. The song is a sermon. In fact, when “A Mighty Fortress” was first published, all the related Bible texts were printed in the margin so readers could look them up. They said that Luther won more converts through his songs than through his sermons. His hymns were powerful, full of art, so to speak, but the art was concealed, never for its own sake. They made everybody in the whole congregation artists. That is how it should be. That is true art.

Let us work toward selecting our words—whether in song or sermon—to convey the message that we have a great God. He’s infinitely great. He’s my Creator. That is the message; that is the gospel. That is the gospel of the first angel. The eternal gospel is not that Jesus died for our sins, however true that is also. According to Revelation 14, the eternal gospel is “Fear God, because he is your Creator.” This means “Bow down for him in humility. Stand up for him in bold action. Trust in him.”

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