



## The Maestro: A Singular Life | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN



So, the Swedish maestro Herbert Blomstedt is turning ninety in July, and conducting ninety concerts a year with the world's great orchestras, and the *New York Times* is asking: "Was it difficult for you, as a Seventh-day Adventist, to tell orchestras you would not rehearse on Saturday, the Sabbath?" The question is friendly; the interview audience is one the rest of us could never reach. I'm suddenly thanking God (again) that someone like Blomstedt is one of us.

Unlike ministers and teachers and healthcare executives in church institutions, this man has never thought he'd have to remain Adventist as a condition of employment. He is Adventist because he wants to be. In the 1970s, the Berlin Philharmonic told him that if he could not adjust to Saturday rehearsals, the orchestra would have "no interest" in his services. He did not budge, and looks back on what happened as "an important experience." What is more, he told the *Times* reporter, that issue, now, is "never a problem—I play every year with the Berlin Philharmonic."

Once, I heard Blomstedt conduct in a great hall. Having finished a conference at Friedensau Adventist University, we participants made our way by bus

to Leipzig, Germany, where we heard the Gewandhaus Orchestra play with him at the podium. Earlier he had been the orchestra's music director (as had, among others, Felix Mendelssohn), and he had held similar posts with orchestras in Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Dresden, and San Francisco. On the way to Leipzig, my Swedish bus seatmate remarked that Blomstedt was eighty-seven and "fully booked" a couple of years or more into the future.

Amazing.

All the while, he has been worshipping with his fellow Adventists, preaching Sabbath sermons, considering his music through the lens of faith, and his faith through the lens of music. Nor has he veered from study of his beloved Scripture, and also of literature and art.

The *Times* interview, which appeared in February, made me recall a theory my graduate school teacher put out in a pioneering book entitled *Biography as Theology*. I stumbled over his title at first, and then it began to seem as lucid as it was provocative.

In any community, and certainly any religious community, certain people—certain "lives"—stand out. Their characters develop under the influence of individuals who precede them, and of the im-

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ages and narratives that their communities emphasize. These influences, my teacher argued, make a difference for everyone, but within each community special, or “singular,” lives emerge that *generate* insight and inspiration. Just think of J. N. Andrews or Desmond Doss from the Adventist past, or from a wider circle think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Desmond Tutu.

It has become commonplace to suppose that ethics is about deciding what to do in the face of moral quandaries. It is said that you start with moral principles, and from these think your way to a morally proper course of action. But what we notice about singular lives is the rock-bottom importance of character. The people who stand out don’t spend their daily hours consumed by moral analysis. Most often, they act from habits and attitudes built up over a lifetime—and their actions move us. In admirable, and often surprising, ways, they embody the community’s way of life, and they also call it into question.

Consider Martin Luther King. For people who thought Christian life could be summed up as a “personal relationship with Christ,” King provoked re-evaluation. Perhaps Christian life has a social component; perhaps struggling for what Amos called “justice in the gate”—political and judicial justice—matters as much as securing forgiveness or finding hope. Singular lives not only inspire us, they function as embodied theology. Such lives raise questions about convention and suggest pathways to deeper faithfulness. Jesus, of course, was the singular life that mattered most, but singular lives today, though always flawed, keep his story alive and help dislodge us from our self-deceptions.

For us, surely, Herbert Blomstedt’s is such a singular life. Besides his achievements in music and devotion to Christ, there are his accounts of himself and his conviction shared in interviews and sermons. These, too, present pathways to deeper faithfulness.

Wary of self-regard, he himself would blanch at this. I have looked at two interviews he gave, and at several of his sermons and talks, including ones my friend Yvonne Oster (the bus seatmate I mentioned) has just sent me. Blomstedt dwells often on the importance of humility. When the *New York Times* reporter asked him the “secret” of pulling off such a conducting schedule at his age, he said the reason is *not* that he keeps the Sabbath or is a vegetarian. His health is simply a “gift,” something his own life cannot explain. Churchill “drank lots of whiskey and smoked enormous big cigars,” he noted, “and he lived to be 90 or so.”

In the interviews and sermons, Blomstedt comes across as

someone who is at once grateful for his Adventism and secure enough about it to offer constructive criticism. He loved the ministers (including the “fundamentalist” father) he knew in his youth. He loved the music he heard in church, and loved discussions of the Sabbath School lesson. But he is by no means chained to convention.

“The Bible is so incredibly rich—there’s nothing like it in literature,” he says. “I never tire of it.” But he bristles at the sort of literalism that overlooks the Bible’s “poetical language,” found not just in the Psalms and the prophets but also, for example, in the Genesis creation stories and in the book of Revelation. Such literalism misses “the deep mystery” of it all.

For him “present truth” (that time-honored phrase) entails “past truth.” Such an idea, he remarks, may be “annoying,” but it’s “nothing to be ashamed of.” Due “modesty” about whatever happens to be in favor smooths the way to second thoughts, a good thing. So he worries, for example, about the “banality” and “sentimentality” of much of today’s worship music. He says that at some points—not least her misunderstanding of art—Ellen White falls short. He wishes the church would place a higher value on “creativity,” and declares that “conformity” gets in the way. A community has to “protect its identity in order to survive,” he adds, but “if it is overprotective it becomes a jail.”

In short, Blomstedt is an Adventist who lives with questions and uncertainty as well as deep conviction. Truth, he said in remarks from his Charles Weniger Society lecture (that appeared later in the *Adventist Review*), “should never be treated like a possession.” So he reads widely, even in theology. Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and Barth matter to him. Heschel gave him a more fulfilling take on the Sabbath experience. If “the eternal one remains out of reach,” we should still try to grasp as much as we can.

We who cannot abide Adventist drift into authoritarian fundamentalism—who fear the way it numbs the mind and threatens mission—may think of Herbert Blomstedt as a gift. He stands out for excellence, passion and humility, for thankful devotion to our community, for eagerness to improve understanding and enhance faithfulness.

So, it’s not too much to think his life is singular. It’s not, certainly, to deny the fragility and imperfection of every human walk with God. The point is only this: to be grateful and attentive when, with our high calling always compromised by self-deception, we stand before a shining light. ■

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