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DOING ART



All Photos Courtesy of Herbert Blomstedt

"Too loud!" (Rehearsal in Dresden c. 1975)

A CONVERSATION *with Herbert Blomstedt*

WRITTEN BY BONNIE DWYER AND ALITA BYRD

When the pandemic struck, Maestro Herbert Blomstedt was in Chicago, finishing the last concerts of a six-week tour of the United States. He caught one of the last flights back to Switzerland, as concert halls worldwide were all closed down. About twenty of his scheduled concerts in Europe were cancelled.

Blomstedt, who turned 93 on July 11, was scheduled to conduct ninety concerts in 2020.

He has been in isolation at his home in Lucerne in Switzerland for more than three months.

“I have used the extra time to study the new scores I am planning to perform next season, and the two seasons after that as well. I study every day as if I had a rehearsal the next morning,” he says.

Now, orchestras are beginning to play again, via live online streaming, or in concert halls with restricted audiences, and Blomstedt is slowly resuming his hectic schedule.

On Sunday, February 2, 2020, Herbert Blomstedt conducted the San Francisco Symphony in Davies Hall, playing Berwald Symphony No. 1 and Brahms Symphony No. 3. Following the concert, Spectrum editor, Bonnie Dwyer, interviewed the Maestro at the concert hall. The interview was broadcast on our Adventist Voices podcast, and published on the Spectrum website.

Blomstedt gave a wide-ranging interview about finding God in powerful music, what he learned from his fundamentalist father and his pianist mother, his philosophy of the Sabbath, the problems with music in Adventist churches, and what ingredients make a truly worthwhile composition.

Bonnie Dwyer: That was an exciting concert. You talk about truth being in the actual performance. Did you hit truth today?

Herbert Blomstedt: Yes, some truth. And if I come close to the truth, I am happy. The closer you come to truth the happier you become. What is truth in music? Truth is when the message comes through. That is never 100%, but you are happy when it comes close.

Were you happy with today?

Sure. Yes, I am happy. I am never fully satisfied

though. That is part of my profession. But still I have to keep happy. That is a tricky balance.

Was this the best concert of the weekend? I believe you conducted three or four?

Friday was also very good. There was a marked difference between Thursday and Friday. We learn all the time. We learn even more in concerts than in rehearsals. To learn the maximum you have to have absolute, complete concentration.

I think Friday was an especially fine performance. Afterward I thought, “Why was it better?” Privately, I thought maybe because it was Sabbath. I often have that experience—that Sabbath concerts are better. I am more relaxed myself. My work is done. I feel freer.

Why do you think some of your best concerts are on Friday nights?

I ask myself that. There can be several reasons; maybe we become closer to the center of the music. But I often think: God was in the hall in a special way.

When I was a student in Basel [Switzerland], studying music from the medieval age, Baroque, and Renaissance, I stayed with the [Adventist] pastor there, who ministered at the church where J. N. Andrews had

been a missionary 100 years before. The pastor was a wonderful, philosophical man.

One Friday evening, as we were eating supper, he said: “Tonight my wife and I are going to hear three string quartets by Beethoven. Would you like to come?”

I was dumbfounded that a pastor was going to a concert on Friday night.

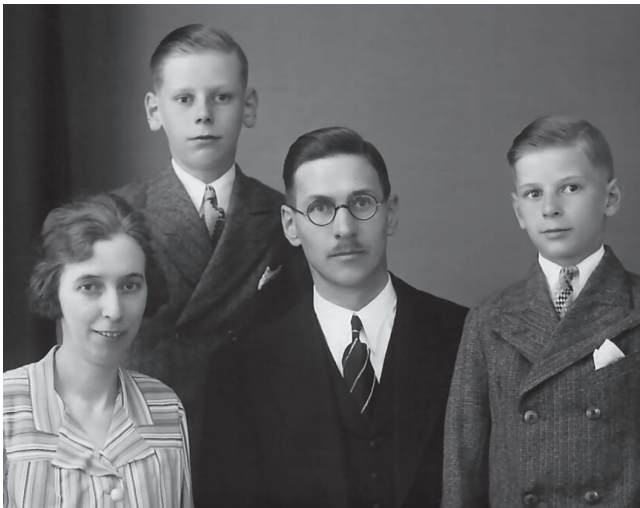
I told him I would rather stay at home, because attending concerts for me at that time was like part of my schoolwork, and I listened with a critical ear, but that really made me think.

Other moments were even more decisive for me, as I made my own decisions about Sabbath-keeping.

The CEO of the Philharmonic in Stockholm knew



Blomstedt with Sir Yehudi Menuhin, who spoke the Laudatio at Blomstedt's inauguration as music director of the Gewandhausorchester in Leipzig, 1998.



A family photo from Finland where Blomstedt's father was conference president from 1932 to 1937. "My pianist mother used to play a movement of Beethoven or Chopin before my father lectured on Revelation. My brother Norman [left] served our denomination all his life as a medical doctor."

that I would not conduct on Friday evenings. But he said to me: "You say that you play music for the glory of God—don't you want to glorify God on Sabbath?"

I had no answer to this, and it put me into several months of reflection and prayer. I couldn't ask my father—I already knew what he would say. I couldn't write a letter to the GC President. I had to decide for myself.

So, I read the Gospels through once again. I knew them very well, and have known them from childhood. But I read them again, paying special attention to how Jesus acted on Sabbath. He got angry at the Pharisees for the way they acted. He healed a man who needed help, making the Pharisees angry at him. The next time he healed, it was again on Sabbath. He did it on purpose. He wanted to show the Pharisees that Sabbath is the Lord's Day, and a day of joy and peace. You are not made to keep the Sabbath—the Sabbath is made for you to enjoy God's presence.

So, I started to conduct concerts on Friday and Sabbath.

Along with the Brahms Symphony No. 3, you also conducted Berwald's First Symphony tonight. I believe it had been a long time since the Symphony performed that one?

Yes, the Berwald is not part of the regular repertoire. I think Franz Berwald is one of the really interesting composers from the 1840s. People around him did not understand his music. It was so new and original. He was not really appreciated in his home country, in Sweden,

until one year before he died. Before that he spent most of his time abroad, in Berlin and Vienna. Back home they thought he was odd.

Berwald's idol, without him saying it, was Beethoven. Beethoven was a master of symphonies, for all the nineteenth-century composers. Including for Brahms. Brahms did not dare to write a symphony until he was 50 years old. Because he felt you could not surpass Beethoven. And, of course, you could not copy him. If you just copy someone, it's worthless.

Berwald, when he became professor of composition at the conservatory, he wrote this little manual for his students, which is quite cute. If you compose something, it has to pass a test. Ask yourself:

Is there something original and something new in this that nobody else has yet tried?

Is there something in the harmony that is out of the ordinary?

Is there something special in the rhythm that not everybody does?

Is the invention fresh?

Is the balance between the different parts okay?

If you say no to all of this, throw it away in the ocean where everything is forgotten.

Berwald himself is completely original. He doesn't sound like Schumann or Mendelssohn or Beethoven or anybody else. He sounds like Berwald—completely original. And yet, the music is still not just taken out of the blue. It's all traditional. But the balance between the different parts is different. I think that is a wonderful lesson. The central lesson is this: You have to deny or renounce many things that we think are normal in life, in order to reach your goal.

What do you feel you have had to renounce to reach your goals?

My father was a pastor and a very rigid moralist. For my sister, who was 11 years younger, it was quite painful. But though he was very rigid, my older brother and I never suffered. My father taught us to ask ourselves, before we would venture on anything: "Does it have any eternal value?"

We lived in Finland when we were boys. My father was head of the Finnish/Swedish [Adventist] conference. We had some friends who started to play chess. Our father let us understand that was not good for us. Not that chess playing is sinful, but it takes too much time. It is so engaging, and you get so interested, that you don't do what you are supposed to do: lessons at school, violin practice,

whatever you are meant to do. So, whatever detracts from your main purpose is not good for you.

We never played chess.

I am a little bit like that. I am built of the same material as my father, and I recognize I get more and more like him the older I get.

But I don't share his theological views in all respects. He was a typical fundamentalist. He was a follower of M. L. Andreasen. [One of the most prominent Seventh-day Adventist theologians during the 1930s and 1940s.] That was his god, symbolically. And that almost drove him crazy. Because our mother, his wife, was very sick with rheumatism.

My mother was a pianist—a very fine pianist. She studied with the best teachers the country had. She played only classical music, of course. (Music for us is only classical—the other is just trash.) She was a real musician. But she never concertized because she got rheumatism when she was 20 or 21 years old. Her hand had become crippled and she had to be in a wheelchair.

My father thought that if he prayed, she would recover. Because that is what Jesus says: "Ask and it will be given." But he prayed and nothing happened. According to his philosophy that meant something must be wrong in him. I can still hear his voice, locked in his study, crying out to God: "Show me what is wrong in my life! Why don't you hear me? You promised to heal my wife! Please show me, show me!"

But she didn't get better.

If you are that rigid . . . that can kill you.

My mother died in 1957, when she was 58 years old, from Spanish flu. And he was the one who infected her. My father was at a pastor's conference in Norway where they had a bad type of the flu. He came home, and my mother caught it and she died within a month or so. She died in the hands of my brother, who was a doctor. That was a very difficult experience for my brother. She came to him, to his department in the hospital, but he couldn't save her.

But you saved her music. You kept her music alive.

Well, from my standpoint, I cannot really evaluate her playing. But I can still hear her playing—the playing that I heard when I was a small child. She told me that sometimes I would refuse to go to bed until she played a certain piece.

She was a very romantic musician. Her musical gods were Schumann, Beethoven, Chopin, Franz Liszt. She used to play the "Revolutionary Etude," which is a piece with very difficult fingerwork, by Chopin. She told me I loved the "Raindrop Prelude," I don't know if you know it? In G flat major . . . [Blomstedt hums]. I thought that was so beautiful.

But she lived long enough to see me in my first position as a conductor. We lived in the same city, and she was able to come in her wheelchair to the concerts that I was conducting.

But I don't remember even now how she reacted. She was too inhibited. We never talked about music on a professional level. When we played together, of course it was all about the music. She would accompany us, and she could simplify things on the piano. She could still sound wonderful even if she didn't play all the notes. She was a magician in that way. We played Haydn.

But I cannot remember asking her opinion about this music or that music.

I would love to talk to her today.

When we came to Sweden, my father was in charge of the pastoral training college, so he taught a whole generation of pastors. And my mother taught them to play the piano. Because in these small congregations that they were founding, in small cities in Sweden, you could not count on having anyone to play the hymns. So she taught all these pastors how to play simple hymns. Not all were equally talented! But some were, and that was also very good for me because these pastors had some idea about classical music.

Did your father talk about the importance of music for a congregation? Was that a conversation in your house?

We did not converse about that. I was a rebel when I was a young, when

I can still hear his voice, locked in his study, crying out to God: "Show me what is wrong in my life! Why don't you hear me? You promised to heal my wife! Please show me, show me!"



Blomstedt and his wife Waltraud welcome their firstborn child, Cecilia, in 1958, in Norrköping, Sweden, where he had his first orchestra.

it came to the music of the church. And it was nothing compared to the awful things they sing today. It was just that the songs that they were singing—the solos, the duets, the pastors and their wives—were cheap and sentimental. From a musical standpoint, it was worthless. It had a function. It was not terrible. It was just sentimental. And very early on, I hated that. Because it is not sincere.

A typical example is number 86 in our hymnal: "How Great Thou Art." It's a very popular hymn. Everybody likes it. [Blomstedt hums the tune.] If you sing it simply, it passes me without making me sick. But when I hear it in some of our churches, and they sing it like this: [Blomstedt hums with great exaggeration, very romantically] it makes me *mad!* Sentimentality is like a virus—it turns even the best intentions into deadly poison. They are singing about a great God, and they make God into a little teddy bear.

I felt this way as a boy. I feel the same way now. But I can control myself. You have to be very tolerant in our church. I don't judge them. They do their best. Not everyone has the musical background.

What is your favorite hymn? Is there one you really like?

Most of the ones I like are from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those are great hymns. They will live forever. In our present hymnal these are the best hymns, but unfortunately they are rarely sung. Many of the most popular hymns sung today are pretty



Blomstedt's daughters Cecilia and Maria at the harpsichord in Norrköping, 1961.

worthless musically. Some are even detestable. Like the march tunes. We are singing about God's love on the cross and how he died for us, and they are set to a march tune! They don't match. There are many songs like that. I try to swallow it, and I try to behave myself! And when I choose the hymns myself, I try to choose different hymns, and set an example.

I will tell you something funny. I think it was 1965. Andrews University, or Emmanuel Missionary College at that time, had an extension school in Norway. They had the strange idea to invite me to come and talk about music. I went for a weekend in the summer, and I thought this was a great opportunity. I used my vacation time beforehand to go through our hymnal and evaluate it.

Now, I like to collect mushrooms. I am sort of a forest person—I love to be out in the forest and pick mushrooms. And there is a system for evaluating mushrooms using stars, from five stars down to poisonous. I used this system for the hymnal. Some were poisonous, and worthless. Mostly I gave the hymns three stars. Sometimes the music was good but the words terrible; sometimes the words were good but the music terrible.

I copied out this list, and shared it with the young pastors at the school. Some pastors kept this list that I made their entire lives!

I studied not only violin and conducting at the conservatory, but also church music. Church music in the Scandinavian countries is of a very high quality. Many hymns are from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A few of these are in our Adventist hymnbook in the US.



Blomstedt's wife Waltraud on Mother's Day 1984 in their home in Stockholm, with their four daughters (from left to right): Maria, Elisabet, Kristina, Cecilia

Is it time for a new hymnbook?

I think so. The hymnbook as it is, is a development of what was before. They included quite a few hymns from the early Protestant church. These are wonderful hymns, but the way they are written in the hymnbook we use now is not the way they were written originally. There is a reason why these hymns were not very popular with musicians of the twentieth century. It's because in the nineteenth century, people started to sing them slower and slower and slower. They had this idea that the slower a hymn is, the more sacred it is. So they drew them out, and they became very heavy. Then the songs lose all their rhythm. They dressed in black and had this idea that it's more religious. That is not true! We are a happy religion. It should not be dance music, but for instance, a song like "A Mighty Fortress" [Blomstedt hums the tune], in Mrs. White's day, it would have been like this [and Blomstedt hums the tune in a slow and dirge-like way].

But then they sped it up a little for our hymnbook, though the notes were still the same. [He sings the tune a bit faster.] But originally, it would have sounded like this [and Blomstedt hums the tune with dotted notes and a much more creative rhythm]. The rhythm was very lively. A beautiful hymn. That is the way it should be sung. Some modern hymnbooks are going back to that. Not our hymnbook. We are not that advanced. But I think in the new German hymnbook of our denomination it is that way.

Has a new Adventist hymnbook in German been published recently?

Yes, about five or six years ago, a new hymnbook in German came out. But it's typical of the theological division in our church in Europe that the Austrian Adventists don't accept [it]. They are much more conservative. Even in Switzerland, where I live, the pastors are trained in Austria and are very conservative. The German pastors are trained in Friedensau [Adventist University] and are much more open. So this wonderful new hymnbook is used in northern Germany and



Blomstedt conducts Brahms' *Requiem* at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, June 23, 2005. "It must have been at a dramatic point—probably when the chorus sings 'O Death, where is your sting?' 1 Cor. 15:55."

central Germany, but not in Austria. They have their own, more old-fashioned, hymnbook.

What do you use in Switzerland?

Every church is a little bit different. In Lucerne, where I live, we have a wonderful church. Not big—about 105 members. It is a lovely church, basically conservative, but also very tolerant. That creates an especially warm atmosphere which everybody appreciates. But in other parts of Switzerland there has even been propaganda against the new hymnal: "Thirteen of the hymns are written by Catholics! This is the way Satan is trying to sneak into our church. Don't use that one!"

We have to learn how to deal with things like this.

I like my conservative brothers and sisters very much—in fact I am rather conservative myself. And we can always learn from each other. But at some other churches, especially in the South, some members are unusually rigid and intolerant in their attitude. Some Adventists will not visit certain churches because they are so fundamentalist and the people feel frozen out—they might drive 50 kilometers

to attend other churches that are more open.

I have a very good friend in Germany who doesn't feel welcome in his own church anymore. I have a good friend in Munich who is a physicist and a music-lover. He told me that when he was baptized, an older lady sat down with him and asked him what he thought about the sanctuary doctrine. When he said he didn't know very much about it, she said: "Then you don't belong to us."

There is a church in Austria near where I visit to conduct every year. I cannot remember hearing a sermon there that has not been about Revelation. It's a very sincere church, with wonderful people—just very focused. Once, a pianist in that church who teaches the young people asked me to come and speak to them when I next visited. About two weeks later, I got a letter from the pastor asking me not to speak after all. He had heard I was playing a concert with the Philharmonic on Friday evening.

I replied that I understood. But I couldn't help telling him about a concert I conducted once in Copenhagen on a Friday evening. We played Beethoven and Sibelius. A guest at the concert (who was a youth pastor at that time, and later went on to be president of the South American Division) came to my dressing room after the concert, took both my hands in his, and told me he had not felt so close to God in thirty years.

The pastor in Austria still did not permit me to speak to the young people.

You grew up with your mother teaching you piano and violin. Why did you decide to become a conductor?

It wasn't my dream to become a conductor. I loved classical music—I loved only classical music. As youngsters have sometimes, I had a very definite view. It was highbrow music that I loved. What was more popular was trivial for me.

Especially when I got this good violin teacher, I loved playing violin.

I was very impressed by

the first symphony concert I ever heard. I was a teenager, and my music teacher was conducting. I loved the music because it spoke to me. It was so beautiful and so intelligent. I heard a drama and I understood the story without anyone speaking a word.

Then I went to symphony concerts twice a week, every Thursday and Sunday. We had a wonderful concert hall in Gothenburg [Sweden] with some of the best acoustics in Europe. I had to buy a season ticket, but for young people it was quite cheap. I remember it cost me 42 crowns for a whole season. But of course, we didn't have that money, so I earned those 42 crowns myself. I sold the *Signs of the Times*. I got 10 cents for each copy I sold.

My parents did not object to that. They sent me to music lessons. They supported that, though they had no money for it. At that time, pastors were not so well paid. And my father was also very strict in that way. He lived on the minimum. He felt that our money belonged to the church, and to the Lord. He never asked for more. So he never had a car. He walked or took his bike. He had wonderful, old-fashioned morals.

When my father was conference president, the younger pastors did not always like him, because he would come down upon them. "Buy a car? It's the Lord's money! You can walk!" One of the older pastors was retiring and bought a house. My father said: "It's the Lord's

money! You can live in an apartment!" That was his type. Very strict. But he was a wonderful pastor and wonderful scholar. He was maybe the only one in the whole of Scandinavia at that time who had an academic degree.

My father went to the Broadview Swedish Seminary in Illinois. At that time, it was an Adventist college for seminary students from Scandinavia living in America. That's where my father and mother met.

My father graduated with a bachelor's degree in theology at age 21. But

I was very impressed by the first symphony concert I ever heard. I was a teenager, and my music teacher was conducting. I loved the music because it spoke to me. It was so beautiful and so intelligent. I heard a drama and I understood the story without anyone speaking a word.

I found out much later, from a woman who had been a classmate of my mother's, that my father had wanted to become a singer. That was new to me. I knew he had a good voice and loved music, though he had no formal training, but I had not known he had wanted to make it as a musician.

My father wanted me to become a pastor, too. But because he loved music, he agreed to let me study music. It helped that he accepted my interest in music.

I went to the conservatory in Stockholm where we lived at that time and started a broad education in music. Little by little I understood that this was what I really wanted to do.

I learned from my father, and in many ways, I am a copy of him.

For instance, he had a big library. I loved to be among his books. I loved school, I worked very hard, I practiced my violin, but on Friday nights we put it all away. We still played music, but we didn't play etudes. My father stopped reading. He just listened.

When I had to make my own decisions about Sabbath-keeping, I had my father as a model. My father worked hard on his sermon during the week, but on Sabbath, the sermon preparation was done. When the Sabbath day came, he preached.

With concerts, I prepare everything beforehand, but on Sabbath I give to the public. I give music. And I think God blesses it, even if some pastors who don't understand music very well don't understand.

At the conservatory, they always had concerts on Friday evening. I explained that I couldn't conduct because after sundown was Sabbath. The director had a wonderful sense of humor—he said: "But we are preparing for a concert in October, and it's full of fog at that time of the year, and we will never see the sunset, so I think you can conduct!"

When I was younger, I never went to Adventist schools because there were no Adventist schools. And the state schools held classes on Sabbaths. When we moved to a new town, my father always went to the principal and explained that we were Adventists and that I couldn't go to school on Sabbath. I always had to study especially hard so that I didn't miss anything, and had to show that I could keep up.

Conducting seems so physical. How do you keep



Recording session in the Lukas Church in Dresden, c. 1982. "We recorded about 130 works of classical music together. Here it is a huge piece of music for 125 players, lasting about 50 minutes, the 'Alpine Symphony' by Richard Strauss, which he dedicated to the orchestra in 1915. We recorded in a church, the 'Lukas Kirche', because of its excellent acoustics."

fit enough to do it?

Bringing in my father again, he had good health and a good physique. He could not go slowly. He always walked fast. He was very sporty. He didn't play games and so on, but he ran fast. He even had a nickname among his fellow pastors. He was called "The Flying Jehu." He told me that when he was young in Stockholm, 10 or 11 years old, he used to impress the girls by walking around the block on his hands. I think I inherited some of that.

Do you train?

I like sports. I played lots of soccer when I was a boy, after school. I used to play soccer for two hours after school. But not in an organized way—just for fun. My father did not like that—he thought it was too much. I remember I had a school comrade who was also an Adventist boy and we played together. But both of our fathers were a little bit annoyed that we played so much soccer and thought we should be working hard on school things. My father used to say: "Will that ball never be kicked for the last time?" The father of my friend used to lament: "What will become of you boys?" My friend became a doctor and I became a conductor!

But when I got a really good violin teacher, I had no more time to play soccer.

I was well trained. The first time I was in the newspaper was not as a musician, but as a sportsman. I was the one in my class who could jump the highest and run the fastest, and when we held our school championships, that was how my name first appeared in the newspaper.

I loved it. But I was also a little bit conceited. As I



Blomstedt speaks to a crowd assembled at the statue of Carl Maria von Weber, on the 150th anniversary of his death, June 6, 1976. "Weber, the composer, was one of my most famous predecessors as music director in Dresden. It was a Sabbath morning—my driver picked me up during Sabbath School, and drove me back in time for the service. In Communist East Germany!"

felt my body was growing in strength, I dreamed of doing fantastic things. I read that in India, people could even float above the floor by sheer concentration. I tried to do that, I tried really hard, but it didn't happen. Slowly I understood that there was a limit. But such ideas I had: that if you train and concentrate hard enough you can do it.

I don't do sport any longer, but I do try to walk every day. Otherwise I get pain in my knees.

Of course, when you conduct you have to be very relaxed. If you are tense, you get sick. And I don't use more movements than necessary. The orchestra doesn't need big movements.

I think that is what most conductors learn—they start out using big, energetic body movements, but as they get older, they understand that isn't necessary and the movements get smaller. There must be clear signs, but all this dancing is detrimental to the music.

The orchestras love it. Big movements all over the place distract the orchestra. Especially in America it's not popular to conduct like that. They think the energy comes from the conductor. That you have to push them and make them play. But that is completely wrong. The energy certainly comes from the conductor, but it is a mental energy that spreads immediately. Physical energy is detrimental.

I studied with Leonard Bernstein. When I saw the

brochure to celebrate his hundredth anniversary, I saw that the picture used was him as a young man, and the way he stood was like this [Blomstedt demonstrates] but that is the wrong message to young people! I tried to learn this from him.

Was Bernstein the most influential teacher you had?

No, the least. Igor Markevitch was the most influential. Markevitch was the opposite of Bernstein. He did not express the emotion. He taught a mellow way of conducting. And that above all, you have to learn the score. When I studied with Markevitch at the Summer School in Salzburg we were not even allowed to have the score on the podium. You had to know the music by heart. Markevitch was so rigid—a bit like my father.

I had an incredible experience with Markevitch, near the end of his life, during a six-week course I was taking in Salzburg. He asked me to conduct the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto by Bach. This was a great opportunity for me. But the rehearsal was on Sabbath. I always skipped the classes on Sabbath, as the school had agreed to beforehand. So I had to tell him thank you for this wonderful opportunity, but I can't do it, because I can't be there on Sabbath. Markevitch said: "Can't you ask your priest for special permission?"

I told him: "No, that's not the way it works. It's between God and myself."

Then he got angry, but he arranged it. He talked to the orchestra for me, which included some students and some professionals, and they agreed to have the dress rehearsal on Sunday morning instead. Markevitch came and told me: "I think they are much better Christians than you, because they want to help!"

That was very hard for me to hear. He told me: "You are just stubborn."

But that is only one part of the story.

In 1983, I think, I was conducting his orchestra in France. Already he had organized the dress rehearsal for Sunday. Markevitch came to my hotel on Monday morning before the first rehearsal, and asked: "Do you remember Salzburg?" I knew immediately what he meant. He began talking about my Sabbath, and I understood that he was worn out. "I think differently today. Stick to your Sabbath, it is the secret of your success." I always liked working. I am prone to working more and more. Without the Sabbath, I

would be worn out. Markevitch was worn out because he had no Sabbath.

How and when do you choose the music for a program? In the concert you just played today with the San Francisco Symphony, did you choose the music?

Yes, I choose the program, but they have to accept it. It's a two-way discussion. I will not play anything that I don't agree with. I have the ultimate decision. But to take a practical example: I might say that I want to play the Brahms Third Symphony and they might say I have to pick something else, because they just played it last week. Or they might ask me to conduct something specific, and then I can consider that. Usually we choose at least two years ahead.

Do you have contracted concerts through 2022?

Yes.

How many concerts are you doing this year?

About ninety. That's normal now. When I was music director with this orchestra and others, it was about 100 concerts a year.

So you have cut back—to ninety?

It's good. Eighty to ninety is a good number. It keeps me in shape. When you are as old as I am, you have to have challenges, or else you rust.

You have the music all memorized? That is how you conduct?

Yes, most of it. My repertoire is enormous, so I cannot do everything. But most of it, I always did it by heart, even when I was young. I was trained like that. I was not allowed to have a score in front of me. You have to know everything. But if it's some repertoire I do rarely, or I do a really big work, like maybe the Bach B Minor Mass (a two-hour work that I only do maybe once every ten years), then I cannot spend that much time preparing for that. But when you are used to using your eyes for the musicians, then you are not so bound by the score, even though you know it is lying there.

I think that is what most conductors learn—they start out using big, energetic body movements, but as they get older, they understand that isn't necessary and the movements get smaller. There must be clear signs, but all this dancing is detrimental to the music.

So, you are playing ninety concerts. In how many cities?

Well, I am in America for six weeks, playing with the San Francisco Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony. Three concerts with each, and different programs.

The week before I came to San Francisco, I was with the Vienna Philharmonic. The week before that I was in Paris with the Orchestre de Paris, and before that with the Berlin Philharmonic.

I am awfully busy.

When do you take a rest?

Sabbath.

And where do you go when you finish this US tour?

I will go to Washington and stay with good friends of mine. I stay with Karnik Doukmetzian [General Counsel for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists], who is a great music lover. You know, he travels a great deal, so I send him my schedule, and if he can come to a concert, he shows up. Karnik has asked me to come and give a presentation on Sabbath at the Spencerville Church in Maryland.

Do you enjoy doing church presentations?

Yes. I give about four sermons a year. This one at Spencerville is for Sabbath School.

I believe you will soon be preaching in Palo Alto. What will you talk about there?

Jesus walking on the water. This is a wonderful symbol for me. It is about the importance of doing the impossible. In the Bible, it was only Peter who dared to do the impossible. If you have heard Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, you can hear Peter's enormous remorse for denying his Lord, when he goes out and cries bitterly. It is very moving. But Peter then remembers that it was Jesus who saved him and helped him to walk on water. The other disciples only knew Jesus when he was in the boat. The boat could symbolize

the church. And Jesus was outside the boat—Jesus was out in the world. That is where my work is.

I think we need to be more open with our mission to the world. We must be aware of the center, which is Christ. But we cannot stay in the boat. No, God is working in the world—in music, in business, and everywhere.

So you rest on Sabbaths. Do you also take other time off? August? Christmas?

I try to have a week off every month to prepare for new concerts. I have a very good manager, who is also a Christian. He understands. He looks after me.

I take a few weeks off in the summer to spend with my girls. I have four girls—one in Norway and three in Sweden. My daughters also love music, and they come to my concerts. The two oldest are medical doctors, and the third is a librarian. The youngest daughter is an undertaker. I have seven grandchildren.

But it can be so difficult today to make sure young people know real music.

What can we do to educate them?

I wrote a letter to Andrea Luxton [president of Andrews University] last year to make some suggestions. She answered very nicely.

Last year, during a week off, I went to a church in New York City where the music students used to go. What I heard was guitar, piano, drums—of course it was amplified. It was rock music from beginning to end. I almost had to go out to save my ears. They were singing about Jesus in ecstasy, crying “*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!*” celebrating their own emotions instead of their Master. Jesus asked for a worship ‘in Spirit and Truth.’ What I heard was far from it. I wanted to hear the sermon, which was good, but the music was so grating!

In my concerts, what I appreciate is when, at the end of a piece, there is no applause right away—instead there is a moment of silence. This is typical of the public in Leipzig and Dresden. In America they immediately jump up and shout. But here they let the music sink in. They don’t move at all until they see the conductor has dropped his hands. I think that silence is wonderful. There is awe in silence. Here is where God speaks. He has the last say. You can only hope that each person listens to his or her own inner voice. But when the music is just loud noise, it doesn’t work. If we just produce these loud voices, we are acting like there is no hope. This makes me really scared.

I do believe in the sound sense of young people. If



Blomstedt rehearses in Berlin, 2014.

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they are given the opportunity to hear something good, they will respond. But if they grow up thinking that this is the way to do things, they will mature much later.

I work in Japan every year for three weeks. We have three [Adventist] churches in Tokyo. We have maybe 15,000 members in Japan, as compared to South Korea with 280,000 Adventists. But in all three churches in Tokyo there are pipe organs, and they are played mostly by young people. It's not that they are cleverer, but they have made a choice. They are not blocked by a culture like we have in America, with this nineteenth-century, sentimental music, so they can choose what they think is the best. And they have chosen Bach.

It's like the pastor who felt close to God while listening to Sibelius and Beethoven at my concert in Copenhagen. This is only possible when you know something about music. Then you can let the music speak to you. You can understand the message of the music and find an atmosphere that is close to God.

This is the aim of my life. To help to create a situation where God can speak to people. I may not be able to teach my public about the heavenly sanctuary. But I can certainly teach them about having awe in front of God. To be quiet. To just listen and let God speak to you. Music is a wonderful means to accomplish that.

Editor's Note: We have also included in the transcript above a few additional details that Blomstedt shared with the Sligo Legacy Sabbath School class in an interview with Charles Sandefur on June 6, 2020.

Herbert Blomstedt, a devout Seventh-day Adventist, is one of the world's most preeminent conductors. Born in the US to Swedish parents, he was brought up mainly in Scandinavia. He lived in many different places as a child, as his family moved around following his father, who was a dedicated Adventist pastor and administrator. Blomstedt first studied at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, and went on to study at some of the world's most famous

music schools and with some of the most renowned musicians of the twentieth century. He made his conducting debut in 1954 with the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, and then served as chief conductor and music director of some of the most distinguished and revered orchestras in Europe, as well as of the San Francisco Symphony in the US. He is now Conductor Laureate of the San Francisco Symphony, and holds the title of Honorary Conductor of orchestras in Denmark, Sweden, and Germany and the NHK Orchestra in Tokyo, Japan. He conducts all of these orchestras regularly, and is also invited to many other orchestras all around the world. When he is not traveling, Blomstedt makes his home in Lucerne, Switzerland. Wherever he goes, Blomstedt attends Sabbath School and church in the nearest Adventist church. He does not rehearse on Friday evening or Sabbath—he only conducts concerts. Herbert Blomstedt, with his vast accomplishments and towering reputation, is a humble and thoughtful person, according to all those who know him. The Adventist Church is blessed to number someone of Herbert Blomstedt's gifts and stature as a member of its flock.



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ALITA BYRD is interviews editor for the *Spectrum* website, and has been writing for *Spectrum* since 1995. She holds a degree in English and journalism from Washington Adventist University and an MA in history from the London School of Economics. She recently moved with her husband and four children to Santiago, Chile, where they will live for the next several years.