



Albert Hurwit - an example to us all

On Sunday January 24th, 2010 I conducted the “Remembrance” Symphony by Dr. Albert Hurwit - a remarkable piece of music on many levels. But made even more remarkable by the fact that the composer, “Alby” Hurwit barely reads music!

Now the story of how Alby came to write this symphony is best left to his own words on his website: www.alberthurwit.com. Let me talk here about the remarkable lesson I took from this music.

How many times have you heard someone say that someday they were going to write a book? I think I have said it myself from time to time! But the follow on to that is how many times have you heard someone say that they have not only written their book, but had it published as well? And that is the lesson I learned from Alby Hurwit - that with enough hard work, with enough determination, and an honesty to sit back and differentiate good from bad, one can produce a real work of art.

There are all sorts of cliches and anecdotes about hard work: “Hard work never killed anyone.” “How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice!” “Talent is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.” Certainly all of them are true - I learned this the hard way acting in “ ” recently. I discovered once again what it means to put yourself out there testing your limits and working towards a result. But to see the embodiment of these cliches in a composer’s work is a remarkable thing.

What struck me most about the music, as we performed it, was the genuine honesty of the expression in the music. Here, for all the world to hear, is a work whose melodies are wonderfully clear, whose counterpoint serves to support those melodies, whose orchestration is delicate, and whose overall construction is well proportioned. The composer was not trying to be clever, he was not trying to overstate things, he was not trying to outdo anyone. He was determined to write pure music that would speak to anyone, and in doing so would encompass an idea (in this case about family history and their struggles etc) that everyone could relate to.

Now Alby himself will tell you that he didn't do it all himself - he allowed himself to be guided and mentored by the conductor Michael Lankester. At no time did Michael compose a note, change a note, or edit the harmonies etc. He was there as a mentor; making suggestions regarding structure, helping Alby determine which melody (that Alby had written) would work best as a transitional phrase etc. The important lesson there to me was that we need people to help us, to guide us, to be our honest critics - but still allow us to be ourselves!

Having the determination to sit for hours in his study and write music - much of which was thrown out or rejected as he put the work together - takes a special level of dedication! Many of us have creative impulses which we find our own method of expressing. But often times we put down that first thought that comes to mind and leave it at that. We don't always sit back and ask ourselves if it is as good on paper as we thought it was when we heard it in our heads (or whatever). But here, Alby took much time with his self evaluations and his honest self-criticism, and the result was something beautiful.

But even that is not the end of the story! Then there was the determination to put that music into permanency - to find a way to make sure that the world would get to hear it, beyond just that first performance. So there was the contacting of recording companies, copyright lawyers, publishers, orchestra managers etc. all of which was a new area of complication that was outside of Alby's previous experiences. And yet he remained undeterred! He went and pursued those dreams, overcame the obstacles, figured out what needed to be done, and then put whatever resources he needed to towards the project. The result was a CD, recorded by the Bulgarian National Symphony Orchestra which he got distributed and is available on amazon.com, and which eventually made its way into my hands while at a convention in Nashville in 2007. I finally got around to listening to it in January of 2009 and immediately decided we needed to perform it.

At its heart, music can (and perhaps should) be a very simple and pure thing. When we go back through the history of musical evolution we find that initially music was simple melodic lines, and that simplicity, purity and honesty is often lost in compositions of the modern age. Beethoven sought after that essential kernel of music. Schubert could hardly contain himself with all the melody that lived inside him. But somewhere along the way, I think composers began trying too hard - they sought to achieve more by pushing the limits of harmony, by intellectualizing their work, by trying to represent too many complex ideas through sound. The results often leave me less than enthusiastic.

It is hard to compose original thoughts anymore - after all there isn't a single combination of two or more notes that one can write today that someone else hasn't put down on paper before - but that shouldn't mean that we stop trying. What Albert Hurwit did by constantly trying to put together pure, straight forward, honest musical lines was create an object of beauty! And his lesson to us all in achieving this remarkable work, is to never stop learning, experimenting, and self-evaluating until you are completely satisfied

with the result - and then, have the guts to go further until you know that your achievements find a permanent home.

I have conducted many symphonies over the years, but few of them stand out in my memory as having such a powerful impact on my daily life as this one. I have learned a lot from my new friend - Alby - about the power of your convictions.

And to any conductor out there who may read this I will say this: Program this work!
You will not regret it, and your audience will thank you!!

Thank you Alby for your music, your inspiration, and the life lesson you have taught me.

Brendan Townsend, conductor of the Laredo Philharmonic Orchestra.
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