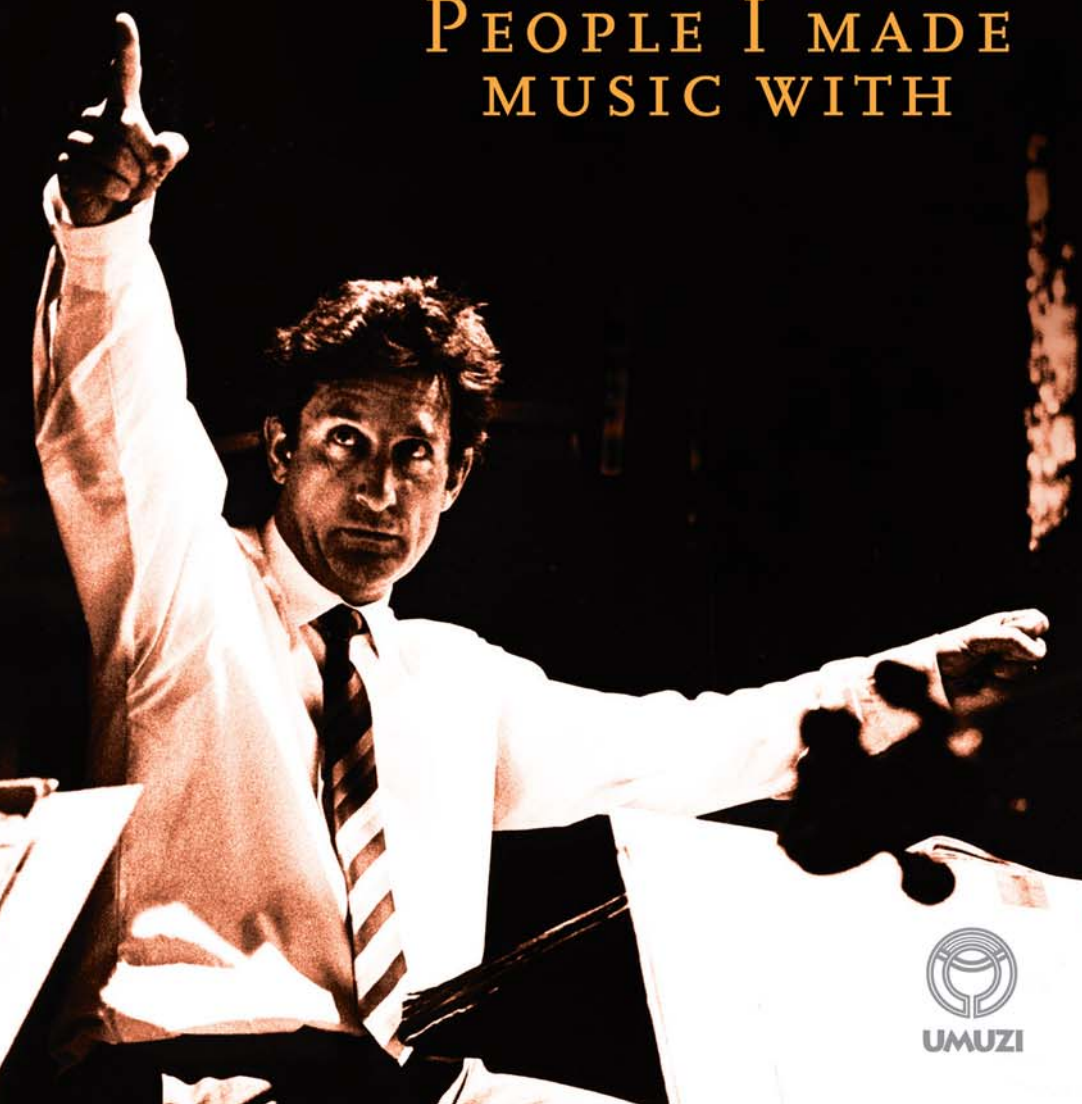


candid memoirs **David**
Tidboald

PEOPLE I MADE
MUSIC WITH



David Tidboald

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For Tjaart

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INTRODUCTION

When one has been privileged to have had a career in one of the arts (in my case as a conductor), which involved working with, and in many cases getting to know, some of the leading artists of the last half century, it does seem something of a waste to make one's departure from this planet without recording impressions of these remarkable people. Though numerous other names appear from time to time in what follows, I have confined myself in general to those I have known personally, some more intimately than others.

They comprise conductors, pianists, composers, dancers and singers, a famous actress and a great writer, the order of their appearance being dictated generally by when I first made their acquaintance, either by way of their work or in person. Sometimes one memory triggers another, so that the narrative moves backwards and forwards, even on occasions sideways.

The first part relates to the years before I took up the first of three permanent posts in South Africa, the second to the years thereafter. The first two pianists appear in the van of the parade because of their association with my earliest awareness of music and music-making.

Two pianists



MOURA LYMPANY 1916–2005

Moura Lympany was the first pianist I ever heard in a concerto – well, hardly a concerto, it was Vincent d’Indy’s *Symphony on a Mountaineer’s Song*. I was ten or eleven. The orchestra was Plymouth’s amateur group and, like many such, they had no fears as to the music they tackled: in the same programme as the d’Indy was Strauss’s *Death and Transfiguration*. Their conductor was a medical man by the name of Weekes. He used to come to my preparatory school in Plymouth before the concerts to talk about the music we were soon to hear, illustrating the items on the piano that usually accompanied hymns at our morning assemblies but on these occasions had the hell knocked out of it as the good Doctor sought to indicate the thrills we had in store. A party of us Mount House students were taken, together with a bevy from a girls’ school nearby, in a special bus, and one of those obscure but indelible memories one has of one’s early days is of the bus starting up before bearing us off to the concert, the degree of excitement at the prospect no doubt abetting the vividness of the memory. I don’t recall the date of this particular concert but it must have been before the Second World War, for it took place at the Guildhall, an early casualty of the blitz. We sat behind the orchestra and, of course,

I found the impact of that wonderful piece of human machinery overwhelming. Moura was by way of being a local girl, having been born in Saltash, just across the river Tamar from Plymouth. During the war one often heard her on the 'wireless', especially in connection with the Khachaturian Piano Concerto, of which she was one of the earliest interpreters. Her recording of the piece helped to spread her name around the world.

I first came to work with and get to know Moura in 1962 when we did a concert together at the Royal Festival Hall in London (Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3). This was only the first of many collaborations, as she often visited South Africa during the years I conducted first in Cape Town and then in Durban. She was one of the early soloists with the Natal Philharmonic Orchestra in Durban in the eighties in the newly transformed Playhouse, one of the mod cons in which there was a lift in the orchestra pit that could rise to become an extension of the stage and which accommodated the piano for the night. On one occasion when Moura was the soloist (Saint-Saëns Piano Concerto No. 2), the lift stuck and she was obliged to play some six feet below the level of the orchestra. Good sport that she was, she coped with the situation, but it must have rattled her somewhat, for in the last movement where Saint-Saëns indulges in a seemingly endless succession of trills up and down the keyboard, Moura got hopelessly lost; lost but undaunted, round and round she went, thrashing her way through a jungle of keys until (to mix one's metaphors) she found dry land. Backstage afterwards we fell into each other's arms in helpless laughter.

During the last years of her working life, Moura was engaged to entertain guests on the Queen Elizabeth II on worldwide cruises, a job which, given her sociable nature, suited her well. These cruises often included South African ports, and on one of these occasions, in Durban, she called on us. Sitting by the pool, she unburdened herself of a gripe or two that had been hanging round the back of her mind. Noël Coward's diaries had been published quite a few years before, but a statement to be found there still niggled her. He wrote of a visit that Moura and her then husband, an American television executive by the name of Bennet Korn, had paid to his Jamaican home. She had played for him and he'd come to the conclusion that she was an

excellent pianist but not a great musician. ‘What did he *mean?*’ she demanded, more than once. It also annoyed her that, though she’d recorded the complete Rachmaninoff Preludes (twice), most commentators had merely deplored the fact that Rachmaninoff himself had not been invited to do so. It is indeed scandalous, but scarcely her fault. But she was not really the moaning sort. In fact, she remarked once that she’d never have need of a psychiatrist so long as a glass or two of Moët & Chandon were still available.

She often spoke of giving up her ‘ruinously’ expensive Monte Carlo apartment and ‘relocating’ to South Africa. Unfortunately she never did.

BENNO MOISEIWITSCH 1890–1963

As a schoolboy, I had in my collection two concertos recorded by Benno Moiseiwitsch, the Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto and Beethoven’s ‘Emperor’, and by a happy coincidence it was these two pieces he played with us in June 1962 on his fourth and last visit to South Africa.

James Agate, the great theatre critic, who was a close friend of Moiseiwitsch, described in his diary entry for 23 November 1937 how he attended the recording sessions of the Rachmaninoff:

The London Philharmonic with a young German called Walter Goehr conducting. The concerto runs to eight sides, each of which was rehearsed three or four times before it was recorded. They did the fugato in the last movement six times before fiddles and piano could get it together. Good fun to watch, Benno in his shirt-sleeves, the conductor in a sweater and everyone smoking, the double-basses indulging in pipes and wearing bowler hats.

How times change! The eight sides to which Agate refers were, of course, played at 78 revolutions per minute. In those days, one’s home-listening to music was divided into either four-minute slices

if it was a twelve-inch record or three-minute slices for a ten-inch. To this day, when I listen to music I lived with as a youngster it falls automatically into this time structure and I can remember precisely where, for instance, in the *Romeo and Juliet* Overture one had to turn the sides.

The whole magic world of twelve-inch and ten-inch discs was a refuge from school and its horrors, and, as a way of getting closer to the magic, I used to serve during the holidays behind the counter of a local record shop where could be found, rare birds in provincial England at the time, people who were interested in music. Or, in one case, more than merely interested. This was Kenneth Alford, composer of the 'Colonel Bogey' March who, under his real name of Ricketts, was conductor of the Marine Band in Plymouth. He was a regular customer, and through the goodness of his heart, got me into concerts that were supposed to be exclusively for the armed services. Among these was a show by Glenn Miller and his band. I can still visualise Miller ambling around the stage with his trombone. US Army engineers set up a platform at our local Odeon, and the place was full to overflowing with American troops stationed around Plymouth at that pre-D-Day time (the whites barracked on one side of the town, the blacks on the other).

Another customer of note was Isaak Foot, grandfather of three distinguished figures: Michael, one of the bright stars of the British Labour Party; Sir Dingle, who became a prominent civil servant; and Hugh, who had a brilliant diplomatic career and ended up as Baron Caradon. Isaak was a dour lay minister with a well-nigh impenetrable west-country accent and nil interest in the arts. I had the job of helping him to choose some records for a broadcast. He asked me what the best-selling record in the shop was, and I told him we had difficulty in keeping up with the demand for the Tommy Dorsey version of 'On the Sunny Side of the Street', but he didn't very much like the sound of that. About the only record in my collection that my father enjoyed was Sibelius's *Karelia* March, so I suggested that, and it proved more acceptable. Then, of course, there were hymns and the 'Hallelujah Chorus'.

Moiseiwitsch was one of the artists, almost all of them pianists, I as a teenager used to cycle from Plymouth to Torquay on wartime summer Sundays to hear. I find it hard to believe that I actually did schlep those thirty-odd hilly miles and back on my three-speed bike, getting up with the sun and arriving home as the light of the double-summer-time twilight was fading, but it's the truth. My parents thought I was mad.

The Torquay Municipal Orchestra's Sunday-afternoon Celebrity Concerts involved a concerto and also a group of solos, and the leading pianists of the day, among them Solomon, Pouishnoff, Myra Hess, Moura Lympany and Eileen Joyce were engaged. Moiseiwitsch was famous for his poker-faced mien and his impeccable technique. In 1962, only the former was still in evidence, and the more inaccurate he became, the more benign his expression.

After the concert in Cape Town, there was a mayoral reception. The mayor, Bill Peters, and his music-loving daughter Inge were proficient at entertaining visiting artists, who, instead of having to stand around with snacks talking to strangers, found themselves seated in the corner of the mayor's parlour before a proper meal and a well-chosen bottle of wine. Moiseiwitsch, being a lover of such things, was particularly appreciative of this treatment. He was sweetly apologetic about what he termed his 'vagaries' in the course of the evening, saying it was 'nonsense' for the organisers of the concert (African Consolidated Theatres, the people responsible for bringing Beryl Grey and myself to South Africa in 1957) to insist on two concertos. 'I can barely manage one,' he said. 'You and your orchestra deserve better.'

He was seventy-three at this time, and died the following year.

A tale of two cities



BERLIN 1945-1946

Being a mere Writer, a rank in the navy as humble as they get, it was incongruous that I should have arrived in Berlin in August 1945 in the grandeur of a vast car that had belonged to a Nazi bigwig. The journey through the Russian zone was punctuated by stops at Russian control points where we were solemnly saluted. ‘Shall I salute back?’ I asked the driver. ‘Better not,’ he replied. ‘They might think you are someone important, and take a pot-shot at you.’

We also passed through towns that had been totally devastated. Hannover in particular sticks in my mind: it reminded me of Plymouth where I spent my childhood, the centre of which suffered a similar fate.

It was therefore something of a surprise that, in the western part of Berlin, there were many buildings intact; in fact what was remarkable was how much was left rather than how much had been destroyed. Two of Berlin’s surviving theatres had become instant opera houses: the Admiralspalast in the Russian zone became the Staatsoper (state opera) and the Theater des Westens in the British zone became the Städtische Oper (municipal opera). The Berlin Philharmonic had its base at a glitzy place in the American zone called the Titaniapalast.

It was astonishing that all this had been organised so soon after the end of the war, but the German hunger for music was urgent (as it still is today) and it was the one hunger that the occupying powers found easy to satisfy.

The naval 'barracks' was situated in the leafy suburb of Grünwald, the state of which had been little changed by recent history. The house we occupied resembled the home of the rich Landauer family in the film of *Cabaret*, and contained a Steinway concert grand which came in handy when I started to take serious piano lessons soon after my arrival in the town.

In the Kurfürsterdamm, cinemas and night-clubs flourished. At one of the former, *Blithe Spirit* was showing, Coward's comedy 'pulling them in' in kaput Berlin as it had done for years during the London raids. Most of the German opera houses, the Städtische Oper among them, reopened after the war with *Fidelio*. The conductor was Robert Heger, well-known in London for his conducting of Wagner at Covent Garden, and throughout the musical world for his conducting of the abridged recording of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* with the classic ensemble from the Vienna State Opera, including Elisabeth Schumann, Lotte Lehmann, Maria Olszewska and Richard Mayr. In his autobiographical *Looking for a Bluebird*, Joseph Wechsberg describes his days in the claque at the Vienna State Opera and how the leader of the claque used to while away his time in, from the claque's point of view, 'easy' operas (that is, operas without arias requiring individual attention), at a bar across from the opera house. To get back on duty to lead the applause at the end of acts, the claque leader needed to time things accurately. When *Tristan and Isolde* was on, he knew he had eleven minutes longer in the bar when it was conducted by 'fish-blooded' Robert Heger. This is perhaps a shade unkind, but the fact is that Heger really was rather dull.

With a production of Verdi's *Otello* in the Städtische Oper, things brightened up considerably, for Leopold Ludwig was in the pit. I knew his name from 78s I had of the Overture Leonora No. 3 with the Berlin Philharmonic on yellow-labelled Polydor. This great overture had the habit of turning up on significant occasions in my life. It was, for instance, the first thing played at the first rehearsal (and first

public concert) I conducted of the newly-formed Natal Philharmonic Orchestra in October 1983, the wonderful moment when the musicians we had recruited in Europe, the United States and Israel played together for the very first time. In April 1987, we played it when the University of Natal bestowed on me an honorary doctorate. I had been asked to make the address, but suggested that instead the orchestra should play this significant piece, doubly significant in that it had to do with the liberation of a political prisoner, a category of being not unknown in South Africa at the time.

The Städtische Oper presented sixteen performances of *Otello* in Berlin during the time I was there, and I attended them all. The first *Otello* was one Boris Greverus, but after a premiere that was a painful experience for the poor man (and his audience), as he was clearly not equipped for the role, his place was taken by Ludwig Suthaus, famous for singing Tristan in the Flagstad/Furtwängler recording of *Tristan and Isolde*, and later by Günther Treptow, who, for me, was wonderful both as singer and actor. (Treptow did sing Walter in Knappertsbusch's famous recording of *Die Meistersinger* but didn't really make the career he deserved.) Iago was always Josef Metternich, an impressive artist. Among the Desdemonas was Elisabeth Grümmer, who made her debut at the Städtische Oper at this time. She can be heard on the Karajan *Hänsel und Gretel* recording with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, an ideal performance.

Unfortunately, by the time Treptow took over *Otello*, Leopold Ludwig had been removed from the scene to be 'denazified': subjected to the bizarre process whereby prominent people who had been members of the Nazi party were forbidden to continue in their professions until they they had appeared before a court and were permitted to continue with their work – or not, as they case may be. Sheer luck or the ability to find the right strings to pull decided whether a German was allowed to continue working after the occupation forces had taken over in 1945, for during the Nazi era everyone in the public eye had been obliged to become a member of the party. Artists of high reputation had a choice, the less exalted did not. Ludwig went on to pursue a successful international career, so his removal from the Berlin job did him little damage.