

Horn Concerto

CONCERTO FOR A LOST LOVE

Jeff Lyon, Feature Writer, Chicago Tribune, June 2, 1983

SHE REMEMBERS how their love began. The words, the weather, the very time of day.

It's that way with people. No matter how many years may have passed, we always seem able to unshelve from memory a perfect picture, down to the last detail, of the moment we fell in love. It is the thing in life that's most worth remembering.

With Betty Butler, a Chicago schoolteacher, and Harold Skopin, a Cleveland engineer, it happened as the poets would will it. Under a canopy of Caribbean night, with the dark sea whispering its song and the scent of bougainvillea everywhere and the plaint of marimbas floating across the dining room.

Later, naturally, he would blame it on rum. The policy of Club Med in Guadeloupe is to serve a complimentary glass of white rum to every guest at dinner. All the other women at Harold Skopin's table simpered something about it being unladylike to drink hard liquor neat. The stranger from Chicago was the only one to down hers. It was this elan that attracted him, he later said. One way or another, men are always trying to blame strong drink for their falling in love.

Betty doesn't try to blame anything. She just knew instantly he electrified her, this tall, animated, slate-haired man in his late 50s who kept trying to talk to her through the dinner chatter.

In the next three days, they would swim together, sail together and talk on deck with the sea stinging their faces. They would sense something shifting within them, fault lines moving, as if temblors were about to shake their comfortable worlds.

HERE, IF THE poets were writing it, the two of them would have blindly followed their hearts. But it wasn't to happen that way. They each had a spouse and children, a house and friends, the accumulated framework of a lifetime. Sometimes it looms so impressively high, like the Eiffel Tower, that we cannot see it is only made of matchsticks.

For three years, they conducted a long- distance romance. He sent her letters, sometimes up to seven a day. The feeling began to be more than they could manage. It battered against them with the force of steam.

Inevitably they succumbed. There came the summer day in 1974 when, both having finally filed for divorce, Harold Skopin came to Chicago to be with Betty Butler.

She remembers he was like a new man. He started calling himself Hal, telling her that Harold was his "Cleveland" name. He grew a beard, learned to cook, took up poetry, nature study and sports cars. He had always been a reader, but now he smothered himself in books. Eastern philosophy, the works of Henry Miller, poetry, mysticism, the structure of language. Art and music fascinated him. He roared with life like a furnace.

This enthusiasm leaped to her. It had the effect on her of a philosopher's stone, altering her in fundamental ways.

"I felt my mind expand," Butler recalls. "It was the most interesting period of my life.

"We enjoyed each other tremendously," she says. "We'd sit up till 3 a.m. and battle ideas back and forth. He was the kind of man who would jump out of bed in the morning, even if it was stormy, and say, 'Wow, what a great day. What are we going to do today?' "

But their time together was short. Perhaps a fire such as Hal Skopin's must inevitably burn itself out.

ONE JUNE morning in 1978 the 65-year-old Skopin was coming back from his daily jog when he started get chest pains. He collapsed on the front porch of the Evanston home he and Betty had purchased only two months before. She heard the noise of his fall all the way upstairs.

Rushing down to find him, she began to scream. Across the way, a neighbor they had never met, Jim Berkenstock, heard her calls and came running. But Hal Skopin was beyond mortal help.

They held a memorial service two days later. A lot of things were said about Hal's vitality and his love of learning. He was described as a Renaissance man, which is something like being a jack of all trades, except you're a master of them all. They praised Hal Skopin, drank to him, patted Betty's shoulder and then left her alone in that strange house, surrounded by Hal's books, his record albums, and the thousands upon thousands of words he had penned to her over their years together.

He had written her postcards. Goofy postcards, like the one with the aborigine masks on the picture side. "Just got back. Had a great time," he wrote, and signed it "Harriet." For no reason, just for fun.

He had once covered an entire symphony program with comments about the performance. Interspersed were little love notes to her. He had doctored all the advertisements in it, too. A bank ad featured a blank check. He'd filled it out to Betty Butler for \$1 million.

He'd sent her a thick parcel containing dozens of little packets. Each packet was filled with coins from a foreign country and a note reading, "I'd love you here." The last packet was full of American coins. "And I'd love you here as well," the accompanying note said.

And once he'd written her some personal philosophy. She still carries it with her in her wallet. "Now we should love when the pulse of life is still strong," it reads. "Time cannot be stopped. Life is a tenuous thing. Fragile. Fleeting. It has to be seized. Now! ... Don't look for tomorrow. Be here now, Be here now, Be here now."

AS THE MONTHS passed and her loneliness grew, Butler began to think of doing something to honor the memory of this impulsive, free-spirited, humor-loving man. But what?

"I wondered, 'What can I do to preserve that man's life force, his energy, his love of living?' she she says.

"I thought first of giving money to the Art Institute, but then his name would just be one on a long list. Then I thought of music. Perhaps I would commission a piece of music."

This would certainly fit Hal. He had loved classical music, grown up with it. In his Cleveland incarnation, when he worked designing pistons for the TRW Corp., he was a subscriber to the world-famous Cleveland Symphony. Yes, a musical piece would be perfect.

But how does one go about this? It is rare for private citizens to commission music anymore. The practice went out with the counts and archdukes who used to support the likes of Mozart or Beethoven. Today orchestras and foundation grants underwrite the composing of music.

What business would a 63-year-old ex-schoolteacher, who manages a gift showroom in the Merchandise Mart three days a week and clerks at Saks Fifth Avenue on nights and weekends, have commissioning a concerto or a symphony?

Uncertain, she went to Berkenstock for advice. He happened, by coincidence, to be the principal bassoon player for the Orchestra of Illinois.

THE ORCHESTRA was formed in 1978 by the musicians of the Lyric Opera Orchestra to allow them a forum for performing the year around. Its concerts at Pick-Staiger Hall, First Chicago Center, and in Grant Park have earned it wide acclaim. Its other mark of distinction is that it is America's only self-governing orchestra. The musicians run themselves.

Though they talked it over on many occasions, Berkenstock and Butler reached no conclusion for a long time. And then one day Berkenstock told her that his friend, composer Jan Bach, was interested in writing a piece for her.

Now it was getting serious. Bach is no relation to Johann Sebastian Bach, but he is one of America's more notable young composers. He has been up for a Pulitzer Prize four times, and his opera, *The Student from Salamanca*, was performed by the New York City Opera, under the directorship of Beverly Sills. His *Piano Concerto* was performed at the Grant Park bandshell by pianist Sheldon Shkolnik.

Bach, who is 45 and a professor of composition at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, had some definite ideas of what he wanted to do for Butler.

'He didn't want the piece to gather dust,' she says. 'He wanted it performed.'

Moreover, he intended to write something to highlight the talents of his friend and former student, Jon Boen, principal French horn for the Orchestra of Illinois.

ONE DAY last summer Bach came to Butler's house, and she spent the afternoon describing Hal Skopin to him. Bach felt it would help him write something consonant with Skopin's personality.

And then he set to work.

It was agreed that Butler would put up \$2,000 and Boen \$1,000, which sounds small for a commission. "but very few composers can get more than \$10,000," notes Bach. He adds: "That's a lot more than I commanded just a few years ago. I've written pieces for as little as \$200."

It is a great deal of money to Butler, however, whose personal savings are quite limited. She and Skopin had never married because, she says, "we had a strong commitment to each other and felt that at our age we didn't need the government or church to hold us together." As a result, she received little in the way of an estate after his death.

Paying for the commission has taken "a lot of sacrifice and work," she says. "But I can make it. I don't spend much on food. The house is paid for."

Bach worked all summer and fall on the piece, putting in an estimated 840 hours on a work that will last only 30 minutes. He turned the composition over to Boen last February. It is entitled, *Concerto for Horn and Orchestra*.

"It's definitely a 20th-Century piece, in terms of its rhythms, but it's basically fairly traditional, says Bach, in answer to the question "How modern is it?" Several people had expressed concern that the modern musical idiom, which stresses dissonance, would not be appropriate to a eulogy.

"It's very melodic," he says. "It has a number of tunes you could almost whistle."

HE ADMITS, however, that "a couple of odd things will happen onstage." One of these calls for the four supporting French horns to come out of the orchestra at one point and jam with Boen near the footlights. The five instruments will battle back and forth, "sort of like 'Dueling Banjos,'" says Bach, while the rest of the orchestra stops playing and claps its hands in time.

There will be three movements. Only the second could be construed as elegiac, Bach says. And even here, Bach included some fast, rather than funereal, passages.

But while it's a jazzy concerto, on the whole, Bach believes "that sort of epitomizes Hal, from what I've learned about him."

Now it's all over but the rehearsing. Butler has deliberately avoided hearing any part of the concerto yet. She wants to get the full effect at its world premiere on Saturday night at New Trier West Auditorium in Northfield. It also will be performed Sunday at Pick-Staiger Hall in Evanston [Music critic John von Rhein's review of this performance will appear in *Tempo* on Monday.] and again on June 23 at Orchestra Hall, in conjunction with the national conference of the American Symphony Orchestra League. June 23 is fifth anniversary of Harold Skopin's death.

Says Betty Butler: "Commissioning this work is probably the most important thing I've ever done in my life, outside of meeting Hal, getting married or having babies. It gives me a marvelous feeling.

"You see, my life really broadened with Hal. I became more knowledgeable, stronger, more secure. To lose him was like taking that away.

"HE ONCE took a series of aptitude tests. They told him he was more suited to being a professor of literature than an engineer. He always wanted to write something, but he never got around to it. Well, maybe this is a way of saying he didn't live in vain."

"In the last year of his life," she recalls, "Hal wanted to change his name to Ulysses. He was very serious about it. Not Ulysses Skopin. Just Ulysses. He loved the idea of wandering, traveling."

In the ancient legend, Ulysses' memory was kept alive for 20 years by his beloved. The parallel is inescapable.