

## The Musical Society

By F.B. Hotz

Translated by Michele Hutchison

michelehutchison@gmail.com

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ONCE I'D HEARD MIFF MOLE PLAYING trombone with Red Nichols' avant-garde band in the mid-'20s – on a record of course – there was only one thing I wanted in life: to be a musician. Even if it was the death of me.

I bought my first trombone in the summer of '42 in Leiden, the city close to where I lived. An old woman in a narrow house on the Papengracht brought out the instrument like it was a religious relic. 'My son didn't even play it once,' she said sorrowfully. It was wartime and I didn't dare ask further. I paid the forty-five guilders the ad in the *Leidsch Dagblad* had stipulated, and left.

I was eighteen and arrived home overjoyed with my acquisition. My mother happened to be in a giggly mood and said, 'What a terrifying object! It looks like a vacuum cleaner!' I withdrew to my study, offended, and looked for a good place to keep the instrument safe.

Later on, it was my mother who said I should take lessons if I really wanted a career in music. If I didn't mind getting less pocket money, we could afford it. (There was no point going to my dad and his new wife for more money; he'd already given me the forty-five guilders, an unmerited gift, he said, since I'd 'never succeeded at anything' in life.)

When I heard that I could get private lessons at Leiden's Musical Society from none other than Lodewijk Schweitzer, the Royal Orchestra's first trombonist, the choice was made. The tuition fees seemed alright to Mum.

One Tuesday afternoon in September that same year, I walked to the Rapenburg, Leiden's stately central canal, for my first lesson. The long Rijsburgerweg, the city's access road, was grey from the rain and already dusky at three thirty but the weather didn't dampen my mood. Even the war scarcely counted. Carrying my instrument, I imagined that passing German soldiers would have extra reason to consider me unsuspecting: *Böse Menschen* don't make music. On top of that, my trombone gave me an invisible connection with the world of the good guys: of our Anglo-Saxon allies. That was where 'my' music came from.

I strolled along with an insouciant step and tried to adopt the same intellectual sneer that Miff Mole had in the one picture I had of him. The road was pretty; Bosman the industrialist's house with its vast lawn looked as majestic as it had in peacetime. And closer to the station, Storm van Leeuwen's large ventilation shaft, high on the roof of his asthma clinic, was a monument to neutral science, towering above the sickness of ideologies. God, may I never get asthma, I thought, that would be fatal for a wind instrument player.

With time to spare, I climbed the limestone steps to the entrance of the impressive Music Hall. I rang the bell; fear of the new had the upper hand now, particularly when no one opened the door. But the big double doors turned out to be unlocked; I entered a dark vestibule and hovered there uncertainly for a long time. A passing teacher sent me upstairs.

I found Lodewijk Schweitzer's room and waited in the corridor because inside I could hear the terrible gusty sound a student was making. It stopped at exactly four o'clock and a plump country lad came out. I carried on waiting.

'Yes, do come in,' crackled an old man's voice.

I went in. Adolescents have a funny aesthetic when it comes to faces. I was startled by Schweitzer's. Perhaps I had imagined him as a jazz orchestra trombonist in a dinner jacket, clean shaven and with a good haircut. Before me stood an old man with hollow cheeks, an old pair of glasses and a revolting bristly haircut like prime minister Colijn's. The trouser legs of his drab brown suit hung loosely. He had an unpleasant look in his eyes and moved atop sagging knees. 'And you are?' he asked me. I gave my name. His tired face didn't feign any interest at all.

And then he pronounced the word 'trombone' with a French accent, which I found pretentious. He looked at my instrument, which was hallmarked 'B&F'; the brand didn't have a particularly good reputation in the profession, it seemed, because he shook his head pityingly. 'Well,' he said.

He asked me whether I could already play a note. I said quaveringly that I'd try, but my mouthpiece was so cold I couldn't produce a sound. 'Never leave your mouthpiece in your instrument but keep it in your trouser pocket when you're not playing,' he said. 'It will always be at the right temperature then.' It was the first of a long series of practical tips he would give me.

Although I didn't warm to the man and the feeling seemed to be mutual, everything changed after a chilly quarter of an hour. Because when he asked me what had attracted me to the trombone in particular, I managed to convey my maniacal interest in the instrument, albeit in stutters. I spoke enthusiastically of my admiration for Mole, his clear, precise tone and mysterious technique. I said I thought the trombone was the most beautiful *and* the ugliest wind instrument, it depended on who was playing it. I didn't want to produce a blubbery sound like the student before me, I added tactlessly. Schweitzer nodded with almost something of a smile. He didn't know Mole of course, but the mere fact that I cherished an ideal seemed to soften him.

Since I didn't know if I could trust Schweitzer's views on music, and to gain time, I asked whether he'd play me something first – almost as if he were auditioning to me. He said he wouldn't swell his tone to Wagnerian proportions, took out his ugly trombone and played a solo passage from Weill's Threepenny Opera, with the required *douceur* and vibrato. It was a nod to my tastes. He played wonderfully and I thanked him with a blush. Filled with nerves, I tried to play the melody from 'I've got a Feeling I'm Falling'. An almost symbolic title, but when I'd finished, Schweitzer nodded forgivingly and we became friends.

We even became such good friends that at five o'clock, at the end of the lesson, he asked me which way I was headed. I pointed. 'Great,' said Schweitzer, 'you can walk to the station with me.' He put on his coat and, to my horror, a light grey corduroy cap. Now he looked like an elderly American tourist without a camera. No doubt he'd refused to become a member of the Nazi *Kultuurkamer* and was forced to make ends meet by teaching beginners. Maybe the cap was a memento of his previous life as an orchestral musician, travelling around Europe.

Embarrassed and flattered, I walked through the rain at the tall man's side. I searched for a topic of conversation in panic, but it was unnecessary: he mumbled on incessantly. About music and musicians. About the Royal Orchestra. About conductors and guest conductors. And so on, until the dingy little station came into view. 'See you next week,' he said on the broad pavement in front of Café Zomerzorg, before crossing the square to the station. I had reconciled myself to my teacher and forgave him the cap. Just one thing continued to annoy me: he traipsed around the city with his trombone case facing the wrong way.

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I practised at home with insane dedication. Eight hours a day. Looking back, I pity our patient neighbours. My bedroom was unheated but I didn't feel it, and it barely mattered to me that food became scarcer and ever blander. The only thing I worried about was the upper register on my instrument. The upper B-flat, even if I attempted the note twenty-four times in a row, was never more than a rattle or a screech. I repeated my attempts to the point of absurdity but I couldn't manage it. In a rage, I had Mole lightly tap out that upper B-flat on my records. He didn't have any trouble with it at all. Finally I began to understand that it must be down to my cheap, tacky trombone. I decided to ask Schweitzer what I should do.

Despite the war, which still mainly consisted of the drone of airplanes and rumours, my thoughts were focussed entirely on my gramophone records and my lessons. The music that inspired me was forbidden by the occupiers but I continued to look for records in second-hand shops. There was one in the Burchtsteeg, a shop that smelled of cold vulcanite, the scent of kings. The little owner, who wore one of those brown trilby hats on the back of his head, sometimes refused to let me in because I would look through hundreds of records and seldom found anything. I would plead and beg. Or promise to buy at least one fifty-cent record. 'Whad'ya looking for then?' he often asked peevishly, before launching into his standard lecture: 'There's just three kinds of moozic: singing moozic, violin moozic and organ moozic.'

Tuesday came around again and I climbed the Musical Society's steps with a lighter tread. Schweitzer had me play scales. 'Don't blink at the start of every scale,' he said, 'it reduces your concentration.' He also forbade me from tapping out the beat with my foot. It involved too many muscles and joints. That was distracting. 'You have to think the beat, with your head.' I made a mental note of his instructions and followed them.

A week later, we were working on a simple two-part etude I'd been given as homework. Once we'd run through it, my teacher said nothing but left the room and went downstairs. He returned with the director. I greeted the man in shock. Was I going to be thrown out of the school? Hadn't I practised the etude enough?

The men said nothing. Schweitzer sat down with his trombone and said, 'Again. I'll count down.'

We played. Due to the staring director and my confusion it went badly. I played off key and missed three or four notes. The director, annoyed, turned around and left. Schweitzer had been

made to look a fool by me. I understood too late that he'd wanted to demonstrate my progress. 'Nerves,' he muttered; 'oh well.' His expression was unfathomable. I was embarrassed and didn't dare bring up the high B-flat.

Sometimes I think back to those years with amazement – how intensely we lived and desired, with so much death around. The maniacal sense of fulfilment. The abundance of each minute.

The listening. I could hum along to all of Mole's complex solos in grateful recognition and understanding. There wasn't a helmeted German so carried away by his fatherland, the party or the Fuhrer, as I was by Mole, I thought.

Oh, those early, avant-garde years of the twentieth century, when everything became new again and the world opened up! My records belonged to that time. Although fifteen long years had passed since the recordings, I knew that this music was more modern than the dead 'swing' of the '30s and '40s. Spirited, technical and harmonious.

Why do new movements disappear once they've broken through? What kind of downwards spiral caused it? Crisis and war had wiped away many things, but not in *my* bedroom, I thought. My passion was a fruitful starting point. I wanted to know everything about those years, and about other movements in other art forms. On Saturdays I looked through the book stalls on Koorn Bridge for information.

Once I was planning to rent a suitcase gramophone and take it with me to Rapenburg, along with a couple of well-chosen Mole records. But I was just old enough for realistic reflection. Schweitzer didn't speak that music's language and might just shrug. I wanted to protect Miff Mole's spirit from Schweitzer's harsh ignorance.

I knew how much magic Mole had needed to allow the trombone to grow into a solo instrument; Schweitzer didn't. Hence the nineteen year-old beginner sometimes feeling not even that inferior to the sixty year-old hotshot.

Once, I transcribed one of Mole's spirited passages with great difficulty. I slid the stained piece of paper across to Schweizer, my heart thumping, and asked whether he could play it.

He played it, to the letter but not the soul.

'Is that what you had in mind?' he asked without a smile.

'No,' I replied, turning red, 'not *that* way.'

He asked me to explain what was wrong but words fail when it comes to music.

The loathing I felt for the German enemy also applied to the crass stupidity of the kind of brash marching music that filled our streets. And for the songs on the German radio with a big L for Liebe. And let's not forget the Wagnerian brass bands with the extra news broadcasts when another hundred GRT of English shipping capacity had been sunk. Those ham necks would never be able to understand 'my' music.

The war became more ghastly, the rumours and reports more unsettling. The fear of being arrested grew worse. In early February '43, my mother turned the radio on for Goebbels' speech hoping to hear signs of weakness in the enemy. But Goebbels shouted that the setback at Stalingrad was '*Nur ein Alarm*' – just a call to arms for total '*Kriegsanstrengung*'. The applause in the *Sportpalast* was like a hurricane. But the Allies were determined too and their first big air squadrons were already on their way to Berlin.

Despite these events, Schweitzer and I didn't exchange a single word about the war. His room on the building on Rapenburg street was unassailable neutral territory, even though the panes of glass sometimes rattled with the anti-aircraft gunfire. He played passages from forbidden composers to me and I was allowed to talk about my records without fear. Here there was peace.

Outside we were more careful. We continued our walks to the station together, though Schweitzer talked the entire way along Prinsessekade, Blauwpoortsbrug and Steenstraat, but these were only innocent anecdotes about the Royal Orchestra. One time he said, perhaps to please me, 'I was ill the day Ravel's *Bolero* was on the programme in the Kurhaus. We hired a jazz musician just for the trombone solo in that piece. He played the solo with all those high notes without the slightest effort. Afterwards, backstage, he quickly ran through the passage again, three notes higher!'

I laughed triumphantly. 'What was the musician's name?' I asked.

'It was someone called Lambrechts,' Schweitzer said.

'Of course,' I said cockily, 'From Melle Weersma's orchestra. He's got talent.' Schweitzer nodded curtly.

After that story in particular I was prepared to do anything to play the upper B-flat. This was why I had a small dent knocked out of my instrument at Guldemond's on Harlemmerstraat. It was possible it would help. Then I asked Schweitzer to buy a better mouthpiece for me. I wanted – perhaps unnecessarily – to keep the acquisition quiet from my family and so I 'lost' the good wristwatch my grandmother had given me for my nineteenth birthday. That's to say, I took it to a dealer on Nieuwe Rijn and got fifteen guilders for it.

Schweitzer brought a professional mouthpiece with him a week later. 'You don't have to pay me back right away,' he said good-heartedly, but I paid him, eagerly, as though I could buy the high B-flat. It was all for nothing. The upper B-flat remained out of reach. I was furious.

The next lesson I brought up the matter immediately. I complained about my primitive trombone. 'It's no good,' I said, 'it's absolutely impossible to play an upper B-flat on this cheap thing.'

'Are you sure?' Schweitzer said patiently.

‘Yes,’ I snapped. ‘I’ll give you ten guilders right here and now if you can play a upper B-flat on my trombone.’

‘Give that thing here,’ he said. He took the instrument, put on his own mouthpiece and played a perfect, full upper B-flat.

I blanched, smiled stupidly but quickly said, ‘No, I mean with my mouthpiece,’ I nervously dried off my new mouthpiece on a clean handkerchief and gave it to him. With this too he played a beautiful tuneful high B-flat. He played the note every which way: long, short, skinny, broad, loud and soft. A vague smile appeared on his skinny cheeks.

I sat there struck dumb in admiration. And also in dread: I only had two guilders in my wallet.

Schweitzer gave me back my property. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I won’t hold you to your word. But I wouldn’t be so quick to make bets, if I were you.’ He also reassured me: the upper register would come, later. Lipspielen had needed years of training for it.

He taught me many things you can’t find in textbooks. He shared with me his notion that the spirit can reside in silver- or nickel-plated copper and do as it pleases. The upper register began to come.

But the day came when a notice was put up on the building in Rapenburg street: at the end of the month, The Musical Society would close. Fuel was getting ever scarcer and the large rooms could no longer be heated. They hoped to reopen again in May.

My mother was happy with this. Everything was getting more expensive and frankly she could no longer afford the lessons. As far as she was concerned, I had to quit music school.

A kind of panic washed over me. I wanted to learn to master the instrument and I needed Schweitzer for that. I was determined to go back in May; there were all kinds of things I still had to ask him.

I had two months to get together the tuition fees. I didn’t have anything left to sell but I came up with something else. I offered to chop down trees in the gardens of relatives and saw up the logs for their fireplaces. I sawed in the rain and mist but people only gave me some small change at most and sometimes only a handshake and a sandwich. After that I toyed with the idea of asking my father for money again, and if he refused, stealing a bottle of Dutch gin from his alcohol supply: the price of spirits was going up by the month. Nothing came of it but in the end I had an idea that seemed feasible.

One afternoon I waited full of impatience for my mother to go out; she was going to visit a friend for a couple of hours. I went into the sitting room to check whether she still hadn’t left. She was sitting at the table, patting her cheeks rapidly with a powder puff, war or no war. She pursed her lips as she did so.

When she’d finally closed the front door behind her, I ran upstairs, rolled up the small carpet in the hall and started to pry open a trapdoor with a screwdriver. I prized away, shaking with guilt. The shutter rumbled loose and I hurriedly felt around in the dark space. I took an antique copper candelabra from among other stuff which had been hidden there since the summer of ’41 when all the copper was supposed to have been handed in to the occupiers. I hid it in my own room. If I could get fifteen guilders for it on Nieuwe Rijn, I’d be able to continue my lessons in May.

At my last lesson for the time being, in late February, Schweitzer and I played with our coats on, and my old teacher looked grey with fatigue and cold. I proposed stopping but he carried until five on the dot. He walked down the stairs, his back bent, and called for a taxi in the vestibule. It was snowing. We waited there shivering. My heels felt like shards of stone and his cap looked like it had grown too big for him. We grinned.

Talking was impossible in the taxi. The car ran on gas and the extra fuel tank rattled around. The half-empty gas balloon on the roof fluttered like a large flag.

We had to stop on Steenstraat for marching NSB men who were singing, 'We're the black soldiers.' The driver and I looked away but Schweitzer gaped at them, his mouth open wide.

In front of the station, my teacher got out with some difficulty. I picked up his trombone, intending to carry it into the station, but he took the instrument from me.

'Well, until better times, shall we say?' he said; clearly he wasn't counting on the school reopening in May. He offered me his hand for the first time, it was cold and bony. Then he disappeared into the station, his trombone back to front as always.

Schweitzer was right. At the start of May, all the men had to sign up for employment in Germany. Hitler's stricter regulations for forced labour began. Most people didn't give themselves up but hid. I did too. The Musical Society remained shut.

I left my home and our city. But before that time, I broke open the jamming shutter again and put the candelabra back in its place.

On my way to the station, I saw that the asthma clinic's massive ventilation shaft had been dismantled. It left a strange empty place but it reassured me, as though asthma had disappeared from the world.

I didn't manage for long without my instrument and ventured home, hoping for the best. Once there, I practised day in and day out again, but in the attic and with a damper so that the Enemy wouldn't hear me. That's how I got through the war.

Then I became oddly tired and often went for little lie-downs on my bed. I thought it was malnutrition but a lung specialist prescribed complete rest. There could be no question of playing the trombone for the time being, but fortunately I didn't have asthma, he said. Asthma didn't go away, this did.

I never saw Schweitzer again. Two years later I was back on my feet and tried out a scale on my still forbidden trombone. It was hopeless, after so much rest my lip muscles had become as weak as those of a beginner. I searched in panic for Schweitzer's address in The Hague and learned that he had died.