ABSTRACT

Edward Downes (1911-2001) was a broadcaster, critic and teacher. For several days in 1994 and 1995, I sat in the “servant’s quarters” at the historic Dakota Apartment Building, Downes’ spacious six-room apartment under the eaves, with a magnificent view of Central Park, as he spoke into my old cassette recorder about his life and career. This project makes available for the first time Downes’ published criticism and these recent spoken reminiscences of more than a half-century of concert and opera going. Edward’s words will help the reader examine the development of music criticism in the United States, and its influence on audiences and music making. His clear memories of opera and concert life go back to the 1920s, and through them one gets a sense of what was available to audiences eighty years ago.

Transcripts of my conversations recorded with Downes in New York form the heart of this document. These personal reminiscences are complemented by reviews published by Downes in The Boston Evening Transcript from 1939-1941, when he was chief critic for that paper. Both performance reviews and “thought” pieces will be presented showing how cultural life was discussed in print in the years leading up to World War II.
A second aspect of this document is some discussion of music criticism in America’s print media between 1910 and 1960. Edward Downes was the son of Olin Downes (1886-1955), who from 1925 until his death, was chief critic for *The New York Times*. His ascension up the ranks of music criticism is examined through the writings of predecessors and contemporaries.

Edward Downes himself was given the largest platform of all when he succeeded his father as host of the popular *Opera Quiz* segment of the Metropolitan Opera Saturday afternoon broadcasts. On the air since 1931 to the present day, these broadcasts were opera to millions of Americans at a time when access to travel, public libraries and education was limited. Edward used this platform to entertain and to educate with considerable erudition, personality and charm.
To Linda and Kerry
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Edward Downes’ papers are housed at the Howard Gotllieb Research Library at Boston University. My thanks to the Library staff who welcomed me back to my alma mater after many years, for afternoons of wading through scrapbooks and documents complete with linen gloves! Bridget Carr, archivist of the Boston Symphony, made me at home in her basement quarters at Symphony Hall. My friend Marc Mandel, publication manager for the Boston Symphony, introduced me to Bridget and saw to it I didn’t break the Boston Symphony’s microfiche as I combed though concert programs and reviews going back one hundred years. Thank you, Uncle Jack, for the bed, board and encouragement you have provided for over fifty years.

This project would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of Martha Lattimore, Edward Downes’ treasured assistant and executor of his estate. Martha answered my barrage of emails and calls with patience, good humor and valuable information. Thank you, Martha. Edward Downes’ sister, Mrs. Dorothy Williams, visited with me many years ago in her brother’s company. Her description of Anna Pavlova dancing at the Hippodrome in New York sparkled sixty years later. Martin Bernheimer likes to be a curmudgeon but is really a pussycat. He’s the Pulitzer prize winning critic of the Los Angeles Times and the Financial Times of London, a fellow
Opera Quiz alumnus and dear friend of Edward Downes’. Thank you for your encouragement, Mr. B. Anybody who loves opera owes a debt to Father M. Owen Lee, the best mentor a person can have (I flatter myself). Father Lee offered encouragement and reminiscences and provided a lofty role model.

Two people not directly involved with this project have my eternal gratitude: George Jellinek, past president of WQXR Radio in New York and for many years host of the nationally syndicated The Vocal Scene, and the late conductor and coach Alberta Masiello. These two people supported me, a nervous and mouthy debutante at my first appearance on Texaco’s Opera Quiz (February 23, 1985). It was there I met Edward Downes for the first time, and from these three people I learned about grace, decency, and fun! Thanks as well to Robert Tuggle and his colleagues at the Metropolitan Opera archives.

At The Ohio State University, my thanks to my faculty advisor Dr. Karen Peeler, whom I was proud to call friend at the beginning of this process and now at the end still do! Thanks as well to my Committee: Professors Patrick Woliver, Alan Woods and Mary Tarantino. Alan Green, Michael Murray, Gretchen Atkinson and Sean Ferguson at The Ohio State University Music Library were always ready to help. My fellow students at Ohio State, all of whom could be my children, make me feel young again. Deniray Mueller’s editorial and formatting help was invaluable, as is her friendship. My WOSU colleague Joan Duffey provided patient and thorough help with the formatting. My colleagues and I agree that if we get to heaven and Joan isn’t there, we won’t stay.
My wife, Linda Rittenhouse, by her example teaches me every day what it is to be a great human being with a great soul. I’ll never measure up, but it’s a privilege to keep trying in her company. My love and thanks, Linda. Our daughter Kerry plays Rascal Flatts on her computer and disdains opera and Maria Callas. She, with her mother, gives me the reason to meet each day...with joy.
VITA

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Edward Downes came from a generation immediately exposed to profound musical criticism, and was himself only one generation removed from the fathers of modern musical prose writing: Bernard Shaw, Eduard Hanslick and Philip Hale. That Edward’s father, Olin Downes, was the nation’s most influential critic during his thirty years on the New York Times allowed Edward to see the range of criticism available, to be exposed to new music and re-examine that of the distant past, and above all to clothe discernment with compassion and wit. There was the responsibility that came with having a by-line in leading metropolitan dailies, in Edward’s case the New York Post, Boston Evening Transcript, and The New York Times: “I have never met a serious critic who felt he was properly equipped in all branches of his profession and who thought it was possible to be so equipped," he wrote. “Nor have I ever known a responsible critic who did not feel the tendency of the reading public to take what I print as gospel truth to be an oppressive burden for the critic.”¹

¹ Edward Downes to CP, April 4, 1995.
Through a career on three large metropolitan newspapers and thirty-five years as a radio commentator for the Texaco Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, Edward brought humility, charm and awesome musical knowledge to a public eager to hear and learn more. This influence is difficult to sustain today, as daily newspapers continually shrink arts coverage and the Metropolitan broadcast features go from charm and erudition to “Gong Show wannabe.” But when it was good, it was terrific! It was a vehicle to learn, and above all, to enjoy the music, the texts and the historical continuity. How did Edward do this for thirty years? How was he able to offer such an education leavened with enjoyment for so long? After all, all he did as host of the Metropolitan Opera Quiz was ask questions. He did not even write the questions. Edward’s magic was submerging his own personality so that the guest panelists could shine and offer the full range of their knowledge. For many years, people didn’t reach for a beer or mow the lawn during intermission features. They listened and enjoyed.

I sat with Edward Downes in his Dakota Apartment living room and got him to reminisce into my $29.95 cassette player. The apartment wiring had me resorting to batteries. My few questions prodded him into sharing memories going back to meeting Sibelius and Winifred Wagner. He reviewed works by Gershwin and Stravinsky when they were new music. Edward’s newspaper writings from the 1930 and 1940s, notes for a planned autobiography, and our taped interviews are the heart of this document.

Edward’s remarks on performances and artists he remembered will be presented unedited but put in historical context backed up by contemporary reviews. Notes made

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after opera performances in New York, Paris, Munich, Vienna and Berlin going back to 1927 will be fleshed out with information pertinent to those performances. We’ll examine a world where audience expectations had been heightened by hearing as a matter of routine Richard Strauss, Lotte Lehmann, Arturo Toscanini, Kirsten Flagstad, and Fyodor Chaliapin. Taken together, a man emerges who learned to gently influence the way a careful opera lover went from amateur listener to well-informed audience member who could listen for nuance, understand what was happening with no view of the stage, and whose appetite was whetted to know more. Edward Downes is the father of the modern professional listener. That would not have been his goal; he was far too humble to expect that he ever influenced anyone. We’ll examine Edward’s notes of performances in New York, Vienna, Munich and Bayreuth going back eighty years. We’ll read his critical writings in the press dating back to 1937 - a time when Serge Koussevitzky in Boston thought nothing of playing spiky new music to the Symphony Hall ladies before the Brahms and Schumann symphonies they thought they would like better. It was a time of daring programming, adventure, and of expectations of the audience, a time that fostered growth and curiosity in musical consumers, aspects that arts marketers know nothing of today, or from which they flee in terror.
CHAPTER 2

YOUNG EDWARD AND HIS INFLUENCES

Edward Olin Downes was born in West Roxbury, Massachusetts on August 12, 1911. His mother, Marion Davenport Downes, was from a leading Boston family; his father Olin Downes was a twenty-five year old pianist about to hit a big break. “I remember sitting under the piano in the West Roxbury house, listening to my father play, and I certainly remember the ordeal of painting the living room a color that matched exactly the Blue Hills outside the window. My father spent hours, days really, mixing the paints!”

Of his mother, Edward wrote, “She was unusually adventurous, an imaginative as well as affectionate woman. She especially liked people like my father who had unorthodox opinions.”2 As we’ll see, these opinions embraced the League of Nations, a scandal to the West Roxbury neighbors. Mrs. Downes was a resourceful woman who during lean financial times turned to inventing. A machine that combined a child’s toy with a record changer adaptable for 78s nearly earned her a patent. Marion Downes kept editors and publishers at bay when her husband found deadlines confining. During

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2 Edward Downes to author, April 6, 1995.
World War I, Olin Downes was offered a book contract to come up with something we’d now called “Music Appreciation.” This term only came into wide use during the 1930s, thanks largely to Walter Damrosch’s weekly radio broadcasts. Nearly twenty years earlier young Olin Downes toiled over outlines in order to accept the book deal. The publisher was coming to visit expecting a précis, and Olin didn’t have one. “Tell him whatever you like,” he shouted to his wife. “I’m going to bed!” Marion Downes soothed things over and gave her husband an idea. She had read that the Emperor Napoleon III, from his box in the Paris Opera, declared that one symphony by Beethoven was worth all the emperors in the world. With this “hook,” supplied by his wife, Olin Downes was able to get out of bed and get to work.  

Marion Davenport married a young man whose family had had its share of sorrow. The original family name was not Downes, but Quigley. Olin’s father Edwin Quigley was a successful stockbroker who provided a comfortable life for his wife and four children in suburban New Jersey. Residing at Orange, New Jersey, rather than New York City where ‘Neddie’ (Edwin Quigley) worked, the Quigley’s owned an estate that boasted thoroughbreds, carriages, coachmen, gardeners and other trappings of wealth. 

In 1895, this comfortable life came crashing down. Edwin Quigley was arrested for bank fraud and sentenced to sixteen years in prison. By 1896 all the family money was gone. The good life was over. Olin’s mother, Louise Corson Downes, changed her children’s names and moved the family to Boston. “My father always remembered the

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1 Ibid.  
day when he was a young boy, when the police came to the door and said, Mr. Quigley, you’ll have to come with us,” reminisced Mr. Quigley’s grandson years later.5

Edward’s grandmother was a formidable lady who wasted no time in cutting her husband loose, renaming her own children ‘Downes’ instead of Quigley, and leaving suburban New Jersey for Boston. Young Olin studied piano and became proficient enough to play the Grieg Concerto, but not so proficient as to make a career.

Olin Downes was a student of music and one hundred years ago, an intelligent young person with a passion for music needed look no further than the large metropolitan newspapers for an education in music and America’s concert life. The Boston Herald boasted the authoritative writings of a former attorney turned music critic, Philip Hale, a francophone who took to print as Debussy and Ravel were emerging. “My father absorbed everything Hale wrote” remembered his son. “I sometimes think he preferred reading Hale’s pieces than actually attending the Boston concerts Hale reviewed!”6 Hale provided program notes for the Boston Symphony from 1901 until his death over thirty years later. These notes, edited by John N. Burk, were collected and published as Great Concert Music, Philip Hale’s Boston Symphony Programme Notes. Burk nicely explains Hale’s style in the introduction:

When this critic wrote, with the very opposite of solemnity about Bach or Brahms or Wagner, his ridicule was always directed against a certain snobbish element in his public, a genius which sat at the feet of these composers. “There is, it is true, a gospel of Johannes Brahms” he wrote as long

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5 Edward Downs to author, April 6, 1995.
6 Ibid.
ago as 1896, “But Brahms, to use an old New England phrase is often a painful preacher of the word. Brahms is a safe play in Boston. Let me not be unthankful; let me be duly appreciative of my educational opportunities in this town.”

The ‘snobbish elements’ among Boston’s concert-goers one hundred years ago would be one of the reasons Olin Downes fled to New York in 1924. Meanwhile, in 1906, Downes landed a job writing for The Boston Post. Playing piano for ballet rehearsals wasn’t putting much on the table. In the posthumously published collection Olin Downes on Music, we get a view of the transition from amateur to professional:

It was necessary to get some steady salary. I thought of trying to get work as a music critic. I knew nothing of how newspapers were run, or what one did when aspiring to the critic’s position.

…I walked in one day, armed with one letter of identification to the office of E.A. Grozier, editor and publisher of The Boston Post. He was highly skeptical. ‘When I took over this paper,’ he said, ‘I fired Philip Hale… if I could get him today, I’d grab him. But as for you, young man, I don’t see that you have either experience or reputation to recommend you.’

But young Olin walked out of this interview with a salary of six dollars a week to write music criticism for The Post, “The most popular daily newspaper in Boston for over a hundred years before it folded in 1956.” Soon, Olin Downes was on the aisle for Boston Symphony concerts under Wilhelm Gericke and Karl Muck, performances by the

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9 Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
Boston Opera, the Metropolitan and Chicago Operas on-tour, and the plethora of artists from Paderewski to Geraldine Farrar who appeared regularly in Boston. His writing style reflected the punchy hyperbole of the day, and young Olin was a hit himself. One of his earliest reviews was of a performance of *Tosca* at the Boston Opera house that went down in history as the first show outside of Scollay Square to be shut down by the police. Mary Garden’s *Tosca* and *Salome* in Boston shocked the authorities, but Olin Downes told his readers:

December 3, 1912 - Miss Garden, never more beautiful, never such a mistress of tragedy, tore traditions to tatters and to the winds the precepts of singing teachers. To a public grown finical and avaricious of new sensations, she gave more sensations in the course of an act than the majority of them had experienced, in all probability in months of opera going. Conductor Moranzoni was likewise brutal, dramatic and nerve wracking. The opera is of that caliber.  

In 1912 Puccini was in his mid-career; Mahler had died the previous year but his grand symphonies were slowly making their way to the States. Olin Downes’ first impressions were enough to keep Mahler an occasional presence until Leonard Bernstein two generations later propelled these symphonies into full repertoire status. Olin Downes’ early reaction in Boston was not encouraging:

January 22, 1918—Mahler’s *Second Symphony*, given its Boston première seven years after the composer’s death, was thought to be not long for this world. A spirit of devotion was to be felt throughout the performance, which for its brilliancy and eloquence will be long

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remembered. As for the work itself, it does not make a very durable impression. Mahler the dreamer, Mahler the humanist, philosopher, the mystic was to be admired back of this music. But we believe the music itself will be shelved long before the memory of the man and his potent services to his art will be forgotten.\textsuperscript{11}

*The Post* was the popular morning newspaper, remembered Edward Downes in 1995:

It was the middle class, blue-collar paper. They gave Dad a good amount of space, and often with pictures, sometimes drawings instead of photographs. The attitude was that if Dad could write something of interest to the readers of *The Post*, it was okay, be it music or finance or whatever. There was no music critic when Dad came to the paper. A lot of critics in Boston had had a very solemn approach. My father liked color, excitement, and all kinds of things that were popular. Dad was very different from Theodore Parker, who was the great Brahmin critic in Boston.\textsuperscript{12}

While Olin Downes consolidated his position in the paper, Marion Downes looked after Edward and his sisters in West Roxbury, and proved to be a formidable lady with lots of color herself, and no fear. “Just before World War I, mother went on a grand European tour with her sisters. They found themselves in Austria where the Kaiser of Germany was expected for a grand reception. They thought nothing of crashing the party in their best bib and tucker. These ladies from Boston, unchaperoned and uninvited, were soon chatting up the Kaiser, until they were found out and escorted off the premises!”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Edward Downes to author, April 6, 1995.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
Edward must have been a precocious child, since he remembers writing his first piece of music criticism in 1923: the subject was the German soprano Johanna Gadski (1872-1932). After nearly five hundred performances at the Metropolitan dating back to 1899, mostly in Wagner, but also as Aida, Donna Anna and Amelia in *Un ballo in maschera*, Gadski found herself discharged with many fellow German artists as the U.S. entered World War I. Her operatic career didn’t recover:

In Boston, I reviewed Johanna Gadski. She was appearing on a vaudeville bill. I had heard her as Isolde, but she had to pay the bills. To appear at Keith’s *Orpheum* on a vaudeville bill! I wrote a review of this for myself. I remember going on about the ignorant audience that was giggling when they should have been listening respectfully. I was twelve at the time. Poor Gadski looked like the caricature of a diva out of *The New Yorker*. She could still sing. She sang Brahms’s *Wiegenlied* and Brunnhilde’s *Battle Cry*, but naturally the audience at Keith’s thought this was a joke. I remember my twelve-year-old sense of indignation being aroused that she was reduced to this. I read my father’s stuff regularly, and I remember my mother pointing out to me that one of the most important things in a news story, in a reporting sense, is to get facts straight: what, where, why, and how.14

Growing up, young Edward’s life expanded beyond music and into politics. The Irish political ascendancy in Boston was typified by the colorful mayoral terms of John (“Honey Fitz”) Fitzgerald and James Michael Curley. This was the era in the early years of the twentieth century where the gloves came off, and Hale’s snobbish elements were shocked at the rollicking goings-on at City Hall as reported in the press. Mayor

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14 Ibid.
Fitzgerald’s 1913 re-election effort was ruined by his affair with a lady called Toodles Ryan. Mr. Curley told the press he was planning to give lectures called ‘Graft in Ancient Times v. Graft in Modern Times’, and ‘Great Love Affairs from Cleopatra to Toodles.’ The electorate enjoyed a good laugh and Curley was elected mayor in 1913. The Beacon Hill establishment seethed, but the lines were more firmly drawn than ever between working-class Democrats and the Republican establishment:

Dad felt the villain of the hour was Henry Cabot Lodge. Dad was very passionate about the League of Nations. He wrote a letter to President Wilson during the 1920 campaign, in support of Wilson. It was a very eloquent letter. Memory tells me Dad did get a reply from the White House, in blue ink, addressed to Mr. Orin Downes. My memory tells me it was a perfunctory reply. I was told later by somebody editing Wilson’s papers that the President in fact had written a very eloquent reply, and Dad’s was one of the few letters he placed in his personal file. Evidently Wilson was to some degree struck by Dad’s sincerity and strong feeling.\(^\text{15}\)

Henry Cabot Lodge (1850-1924) was a Republican senator in Massachusetts who firmly opposed Wilson’s plan for the League of Nations. In a speech in Washington on August 12, 1919, Lodge made his feelings clear:

The United States is the world’s best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her powerful good, and endanger her very existence.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
Such was Lodge’s influence that when the League of Nations was chartered in 1920; it was without the United States’ participation.

Young Edward Downes got a political education early, when at nine he began leafleting his West Roxbury neighborhood:

As a kid I took fliers around to the neighbors, three or four pages printed on different tints of paper, one was blue, one yellow and one green, all about why we should enter the League of Nations. There was a caricature of each nation; the largest was Great Britain and the U.S. The U.S. wasn’t yet in place. It was being held back by ropes, by villainous people labeled ‘Republicans’ like Henry Cabot Lodge. On the next level there were France and Italy. This stuff I was distributing to neighbors in 1920, when I was nine years old. And I do remember the neighbors saying, ‘What a shame! Such a nice little boy!’ My guess is that most of the neighborhood was Republican. I remember my mother telling me that when she was a girl growing up she didn’t know any Democrats.17

Edward Downes remembered his father an ‘armchair politician’, but it was in music that Olin Downes made his living. Downes’ beat for The Boston Post centered on two halls a few blocks apart. The Boston Opera House was a jewel box of a theatre, built in 1901, two blocks west of Symphony Hall, on Huntington Avenue near the New England Conservatory and the Music of Fine Arts. It was in the Boston Opera House on Huntington Avenue that Olin Downes began reviewing opera, including the short-lived Boston Opera Company, the touring Metropolitan and Chicago Opera Companies, the

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17 Edward Downes to author, April 8, 1995.
San Carlo Opera and Friederich Schorr’s touring Wagner company among them. This is where in 1922, Edward saw his first operas, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Il Trovatore*.

The first music I remember from recordings was Ethelbert Nevin’s *Narcissus*. I graduated from this to the *Anvil Chorus* and *Miserere* from *Il Trovatore*. And I certainly remember hearing Azucena’s music sung on recordings, complete with trills by Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Louise Homer. When I heard *Trovatore* at the Boston Opera House, the Azucena had no trill. And I remember thinking “What kind of an opera house is this, where Azucena doesn’t trill?”

Musical life in Boston continued in the 1920s when Pierre Monteux (1875-1964) took the podium of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. “I don’t follow you, so you’ll have to follow me” Monteux would smile benevolently to the orchestra. According to Edward, the French born Monteux was frequently referred to as a musician’s conductor. His performances were marked by a beautiful balance and blending of sound, and the elegance of his impeccable musical taste. Musicians and audiences loved him. In appearance he was almost spherical, standing less than five feet tall and weighing one hundred and ninety pounds.

Olin Downes certainly welcomed Monteux to Boston in his writings for *The Post*. The Boston Symphony concert of November 27, 1919 featured contralto Louise Homer in arias by Handel and Bach, the premiere of Griffes’ *Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan*, and Chanson’s *Symphony in B flat*:

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18 Ibid.
The Chausson was given a wonderful performance by Mr. Monteux. The work had never before been heard in Boston to such advantage. Never before had the solemn introduction merged so inevitably into the calmly joyous allegro. Never before had the instruments been so beautifully clear and transparent, nor the flowing lines of the first theme of the allegro been done with such justice.\textsuperscript{20}

Monteux arrived in Boston in 1918 when anti-German feeling during World War I forced the departure of the venerable Karl Muck (1859-1940), music director of the Boston Symphony since 1912. Edward Downes heard Monteux’s early concerts as a young child, and recalled more than one scandal involving Karl Muck:

My first memories of the Boston Symphony are of Pierre Monteux. He had taken over the Boston Symphony in 1920. He was an awfully good musician and he could be very stirring. He had succeeded a distinguished German conductor called Karl Muck. Muck had been caught in an indiscretion with a Boston society woman, and since this had been during World War I he fell victim to anti-German hysteria. Mrs. Jack Gardner supported Muck, but even she couldn’t save his job. My father told me that Dr. Muck had been given a choice of either pleading guilty to being a spy or of having his affair with this notable lady published in the paper. Muck was a gentleman. He went to jail. It was a very brief sentence and Muck eventually returned to Germany where he became music director in Hamburg.\textsuperscript{21}

Edward explained Karl Muck’s downfall in more detail in his obituary for Muck, published in \textit{The Boston Evening Transcript} on March 9, 1940:

\textsuperscript{21} Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
Muck was accused of everything from being a German spy to sabotage activities, which cannot be described in print. Finally, at a concert in Providence, R.I., there was a request that the concert should be preceded by *The Star Spangled Banner*. The management refused the request on the insufficient grounds that the orchestra had not had time to rehearse it, and Muck was not informed of the matter until after the concert, on the train back to Boston. He was angry about not having been told, averring that he would have been glad to play the anthem. He did play it at subsequent concerts, but the public believed him guilty of the first refusal, and the storm of indignation culminated in an investigation. Muck was arrested and held as an enemy alien.\textsuperscript{22}

Monteux eventually returned to Paris, later serving as Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, and making appearances at the Metropolitan well into his eighties. Edward called Monteux “Wonderful, but in those days no conductor stirred me as did Monteux’s successor in Boston, Serge Koussevitzky.”\textsuperscript{23}

Koussevitzky’s tenure would be long, glorious, stormy and entirely newsworthy. His programming alone promised musical scandal as did his on and off-stage demeanor. Serge Koussevitzky arrived in Boston in 1924 for a tenure as music director that lasted twenty-five years. He was born in Russia in 1874 and brought with him a theatrical flair and an insatiable curiosity for new music. Here are three programs conducted by Koussevitzky with the Boston Symphony in Symphony Hall:

\begin{center}
\textbf{December 22-23, 1939}
\textit{Handel \hspace{1cm} Concerto grosso for strings \#12}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{22} Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
Lopatnikoff  *Symphony 2* (Première)\(^{24}\)
Beethoven  *Piano Concerto 4* (Rudolf Serkin)

**December 29-30, 1939**

Fauré  *Pelleas et Mélisande*
Dukas  *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*
Debussy  *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*

**January 5-6, 1940**

Foote  *In Praise of Winter* (Première)
Bloch  *Violin Concerto* - Boston Premiere (Josef Szigeti)
Brahms  *Symphony 2*

Speaking in 1995, over forty years after Koussevitzky’s death, and over fifty years after reviewing his concerts for *The Boston Transcript*, Edward Downes remembered:

Koussevitzky is under-represented today, perhaps because he had the reputation of being too much of a showman on the podium. His performances were not just the music, but ‘the music as interpreted by Koussevitzky.’ It’s reported that he once told a young Leonard Bernstein ‘Don’t forget that in conducting you are also conducting the audience.’ There was lots of talk about his tailor, and how particular he was, and the cut of his clothes. It was very clear that from the time he mounted the podium to the time he stepped down, he possessed a certain elegance, similar to what was later associated with Herbert von Karajan. With Karajan this didn’t carry the disapproval it did in Boston. Koussevitzky and Stokowski were both vivid personalities, and used this for their art.

Toscanini and Koussevitzky were very different. My guess is that the two conductors did not admire each other. Toscanini’s superb ear and technical mastery of the score commanded a broad, objective admiration which, for example, Stokowski didn’t have, although Stokowski was considered a great technician. I never realized the extent

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of Stokowski’s talent until many years later in Minnesota, when he came to conduct the Minneapolis Symphony. I knew the concertmaster fairly well, and he was a very good musician, and he was bowled over by Stokowski’s pure technical mastery. Stokowski traveled with his own orchestral scores, already marked up. He wanted everything exactly the way he wanted it, and he had an insight into orchestral effect that was extraordinary. But the general public’s admiration for Stokowski was based on technique. It came down to very calculated effects: the hair, the hands, the lighting.

Koussevitzky was famous for French and Russian music. This was the stereotype of Koussevitzky in his lifetime. ‘Wring the last drop of agony from the Pathétique’ But I remember a performance of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, the greatest performance of this work I ever heard. This ran very much counter to the reputation Koussevitzky had. He did not program for himself a lot of the core German repertoire. He conducted the Ninth with a great gasp of the big architecture. Koussevitzky brought a depth to this work, very different from the frenzied, hysterical kind of Russian interpretation, and a real emotional connection. He used form as a means of expression. I was always very impressed by this and I feel to this day, that this ability of Koussevitzky’s was underestimated.  

The rarity of Koussevitzky’s excursions into Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms made his concerts for the Beethoven Centennial of 1927 noteworthy. He led all nine symphonies, the overtures, and the five piano concerti for a three-week festival in Symphony Hall. The power of Koussevitzky’s Beethoven was duly noted by Edward Downes, writing of a performance of Beethoven’s Symphony 1 (on a program with Stravinsky and Franck) on January 1, 1939:

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Edward Downes to author, April 5, 1995.
The program opened with a deeply satisfying performance of Beethoven’s *First Symphony*, though it was possible to disagree with Dr. Koussevitzky’s tempo. There is perhaps no other orchestra in the world that could bring off that finale with such breathtaking delicacy, such sensitive precision and at the fleet pace Dr. Koussevitzky demands. It is a vertiginous pleasure to listen to. Whether the music might not profit from a less hasty unfolding is another question. The writer feels a pace one shade easier, a little more breathing space for each phrase, would add grace to this incomparable finale.\(^{26}\)

Koussevitzky’s performances in Boston made him the dominant conductor in the States. He never had the international fame of Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) or Leopold Stokowski (1882-1977), and his recordings today are in less demand than those two conductors. But the history of the Boston Symphony, and of orchestras in the United States will offer a lot of coverage to this dynamic Russian. Edward Downes would go from youthful fan to mature critic in writing of Koussevitzky’s performances in Boston. Koussevitzky’s musical ear and eclectic programming made him a tastemaker for American audiences. Critics and laypeople took note.

Despite the exciting bill of fare Koussevitzky served to Boston audiences, by the mid 1920s, Olin Downes was beginning to feel constricted in Boston: “My father got tired of the Friday afternoon symphony concerts, where the same women had been kissing each other in greeting for forty years,” Edward explained in 1995:

> This was the early 1920s, and Dad was becoming increasingly unhappy at *The Boston Post*. Aside from the low salary, he felt stymied by the stuffy atmosphere of

\(^{26}\) Edward Downes in *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 2, 1939.
musical Boston. Not the performances on stage, but the antics off-stage. Dad’s strong democratic principles and his devotion to the League of Nations didn’t make him popular. He was surrounded by people who didn’t share his view and his own worldview had never changed. Dad was a spunky, individual man. Totally unlike the stereotyped music critic.

Matters at *The Boston Post* exploded when Dad was asked to give a favorable review to the girlfriend of one of the paper’s managers who was about to make her debut in Jordan Hall. That kind of thing drove my father crazy. By this time he had already been interviewed by *The New York Times* for a job there, but nothing had come of it, and Dad was in no position to quit his job without another job waiting. But being told to write a favorable review pushed Dad over the edge, and he resigned from *The Post*.

That night, just before turning out the light, he said to my mother, ‘I resigned from *The Post* today.’ Mother replied, ‘Well, Ollie, I think you’ve been unhappy for a long time, so it was a good decision.’ He told me this years later, when my parents’ divorce was pending and he was very depressed.

Ten days later, with no job and a family to support, a letter came from *The New York Times* inviting Dad to join the staff. My father told me he rushed to the Jordan Marsh store in downtown Boston, where he was supposed to meet mother. She had a big armful of bundles, and he rushed up to her and blurted out that he’d landed the job of music critic for *The New York Times*. They stood there together in the rain laughing, with Mother dropping her packages all over Washington Street.27

*Boston* had Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It had fine choral singing with the Handel and Haydn Society. The Metropolitan Opera visited every year.

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27 Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
But when Olin Downes brought his family, including twelve-year-old Edward to New York, the musical capital of the world was waiting outside the front door. The radio would take music into homes, wealthy or humble, throughout America, and the demand for great concert music would grow. Music was about to become ‘democratized’. At twelve, Edward Downes landed happily in a new city.
CHAPTER 3

YOUNG EDWARD IN NEW YORK

Olin Downes moved his family to New York in 1925. They settled into a grand apartment building at 1 West 72nd Street, near Central Park. The ‘Dakota’ was opened in 1884 and was nicknamed after the largely uninhabited area in the midwest. The building was designed by Henry Janeway Hardeburgh. Edward Downes (except for a few years in the 1950s) never lived anywhere else until he died in the Dakota in 2001.

As music critic for The New York Times, Olin Downes was able to offer his precocious son unlimited access to New York’s cultural life. Olin Downes was brought to The New York Times to replace Richard Aldrich (1863-1937), who retired after twenty-two years as the paper’s music critic. Aldrich’s tenure coincided with the American premieres of music by Mahler, Richard Strauss, Stravinsky, and Debussy as well as Puccini’s The Girl of the Golden West, and the three operas of Il trittico. The endurance of this music in our concert halls today has more to do with their intrinsic worth than the words of one critic. Still, few of these artists escaped Aldrich’s intensity as carried in The Times pages. Here’s his take on Richard Strauss’s Elektra, surely one of the most complicated of all operatic scores, written the day after the American premiere, at the Manhattan Opera on February 1, 1910:
The music is written with a more reckless disregard for what has hitherto passed as tonal beauty and expressiveness than any other Strauss has produced. He put his motives together with absolute unconcern as to harmony and the preservation of tonality. It has been said that Strauss seems to seek a sort of neutral tonality, in which all keys may be found at will. It is, in other words, the negation of euphony, the acceptance for all purposes of any kind of cacophony. The excited descriptions of three kinds of tonality in which he sometimes writes at once, are only too true.

Harmony, as Strauss employs it, has little or nothing to do with the progressions, the discords, the dissonances that musicians have dealt with in all previous centuries. If he has a system by which anything whatsoever is to be excluded or any one combination of sounds seems preferable to another, he has not made it known.28

It’s interesting to compare Aldrich’s reaction to the most modern of music dramas, Debussy’s Pelleas et Mélisande, with the response of twenty-three-year old Olin Downes. Aldrich reported on the work’s American premiere, February 19, 1908 at the Manhattan Opera, with four members of the original cast: Mary Garden, Jean Perier, Louise Gerville-Reache and Hector Dufranne; Italo Campanini conducted. In April of 1909 the opera was introduced to Boston with the same cast, except for Charles Dalmares as Pelleas. Aldrich gave a clear, if stately account of Debussy’s music, writing in The Times on February 2, 1908:

In his harmonic substance, of which his music is largely composed, Debussy has penetrated into a strange, new wonderland. He owes no allegiance to any new harmonic system. Tonality, the very foundation of hitherto accepted

harmony, is almost non-existent in this music. He has gone to the very extreme of new and unfamiliar combinations, of progressions and juxtapositions that seem fantastically to mock the rules and axioms of musical grammarians. These discords, if the term of the ancients may be used in connection with this new art, have scarcely a name and a designation in those rules. And it has been said of them that they are so far from being justified by the grammarian that they cannot even be convinced by him. Yet they bear their own justification with their strange eloquence. The beauty of this harmonic flow is inexplicable but is irresistible.

Aldrich liked the opera, going on to praise the singers, and made a point of mentioning the audience’s reaction to this strange new work:

The audience, while it was not at first highly communicative, was closely attentive, restrained in its applause during the changes of scene, and at the ends of the acts; lest its appreciation find expression. This expression reached its highest pitch after the Fourth Act, in which theatrical effect is strongest. Here it became positive enthusiasm. All the principals were called out repeatedly.29

Olin Downes’ admiration was more focused and direct:

Now, in the red pepper hour, as the writer sits with pencil in hand, the helplessness of words descends on him with the weight of the Atlantic Ocean, and to put that experience on paper is like trying to portray three lands one visited in a dream. This opera is as new as anything under the sun. It must have - of course it has - its origin somewhere. So has eternity. A tinge, an echo of Wagner may be imagined here or there, but otherwise one tries in vain to indicate the source of the strange and rapturous art. Perhaps it would not have been as astonishing to the

Greeks as it is to us today.... One would think that this wistful and melancholy puppet show lacked dramatic force and a human note. It does nothing of the kind. With every tableau that the curtain silently gathers upon, one becomes more moved and engrossed. The music, too, glows with an inexhaustible inspiration, with cumulative power and appeal. This music is not music. It is simply a subtle aroma of the drama. It is always thrilling to contemplate the advent of a new genius.30

Closer comparison of Aldrich and Downes in these reviews reveals a scholarly, honest reaction from the former and an informed, if off-the-cuff enthusiast in Downes. Aldrich is informative, like hearing a free lecture in music at Harvard. Downes uses adjectives and short phrases and a variety of sentence lengths to give the reader a sense of place and an urgency to know more. For example:

The opera is as new as anything under the sun...

It must have - of course it has - its origin somewhere. So has eternity.

The music is not music. It is simply the aroma of the drama.

Olin Downes was a populist, and his son Edward often remarked on this. The inborn disdain of the Boston blue blood or any touch of pretension when describing music and one’s reaction to music is the heart of Olin Downes’ talent. Not that he didn’t admire his predecessor.

Richard Aldrich’s collection of reviews was published in 1942 as *Concert Life in New York*. Aldrich had died five years earlier at 75.

Olin Downes celebrated the new book with a column in *The Times*:

> He never attends a performance with the intention to prove a point. He is trying to find out not who is right, but what is right. He pursues the inquiries with the greatest of intellectual courage, without dogma, without browbeating, with an earnestness which scorns the coining of phrase as it does the wasting of space upon malefaction or incompetence in performance. Things that are manifestly outside serious consideration are quickly disposed of and dropped with some distaste from the end of a pair of tongs (”it would be a mournful task to enumerate the defects of his playing”). He is concerned with every aspect of technique, style interpretation which is pertinent to the main issues of music. He is neither impressed by an international reputation nor condescending in the presence of one to be made. In fact, he watches his younger artists and notes carefully their progress or weakness in successive seasons as if they were chicks.31

From high up in the Dakota it wasn’t that much of a journey by subway to Carnegie Hall at 57th and 7th Avenue, or to the Metropolitan Opera at 39th and Broadway, or Town Hall on 43rd near Sixth Avenue. It was a journey young Edward made easily. He heard Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*, performed by the Metropolitan in 1925 as follows:

- Feb. 26  *Rheingold*
- Mar 5   *Die Walküre*
- Mar 11  *Siegfried*
- Mar 19  *Die Gotterdammerung*32

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31 Ibid. pp. 310-313.
32 Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. [www.metopera.org/archives](http://www.metopera.org/archives).
The cycle was conducted by Artur Bodanzky, and starred Curt Taucher as Siegfried, Clarence Whitehill as Wotan, Rudolf Laubenthal as Siegmund, Elisabeth Rethberg as Sieglinde, and the Swedish soprano Nanny Larsen-Todsen in her Metropolitan debut as Brunnhilde. Edward Downes remembers:

I heard my first complete Ring Cycle at the Metropolitan in 1925. I had heard the Ring the year before in Boston, when Friederich Schorr brought a traveling company through. In New York, the Brunnhilde was Nanny Larsen-Todsen. She had a wobble in her voice that bothered a lot of people more than it bothered me. I thought she was a great singer, marvelous in the Ring and as Isolde. She had a lot of dramatic power, and I suspect that she represented the end of the Wagner tradition which had been insisted on by Cosima Wagner. There were the big gestures, which often looked foolish. Larsen-Todsen was very effective in the Gotterdammerung at the end of the prologue where they ring out the high Cs and Siegfried goes off. There’s a certain point where Siegfried plays his horn and the orchestra comes in with great sweep of violins. At this point, Larsen-Todsen gave the impression, from way in the back of the Metropolitan, that she had just caught sight of Siegfried. She made a huge gesture just as the curtain came down, but the thought behind it, the impulse was very moving.

In Siegfried at Brunnhilde’s awakening, Larsen-Todsen was likewise wonderful. The stage directions are just awful there. She greets the light. She greets the sun. But Larsen-Todsen managed to do it just right - big gestures with a lot of feeling behind them. It was very powerful. Larsen-Todsen understood Wagner’s text on a very subtle level and this came across in slight colorations and in little bits of rubato. Her voice was wobbly but very dramatic, and it had something even Flagstad lacked. While Flagstad had the most gorgeous voice in these roles, she tended to sound a bit matronly. Larsen-Todsen had a strong visceral
quality in her voice, similar to Lotte Lehmann. She was not the actress Lehmann was, but she was close.33

Nanny Larsen-Todsen (1884-1982) must have been a strong woman; she sang sixty one performances in two seasons in New York, mostly in Wagner, but also as Fidelio, Gioconda, Rachel in La Juive and the Verdi Requiem.34 She returned to Europe to record Isolde at Bayreuth in 1928 and lived to be ninety-eight. The conductor Antonia Brico told this writer in 1980 of visiting Larsen-Todsen in a nursing home outside of Stockholm shortly after the soprano’s 90th birthday, to find her sitting up in bed alert and happy to reminisce about old times and some of the performances they had done together in Berlin. Larsen-Todsen’s wobble might not have disturbed Edward, but it was noted by Oscar Thompson in Musical America, reviewing a performance of Tristan und Isolde at the Metropolitan on January 16, 1926:

Mme Larsen-Todsen sang with less fire than she did when her admirable Isolde was first revealed to American audiences a year ago, but there was much in her restraint that was welcome, especially since it is when her tone is driven too energetically that it takes on a disturbing shake. The impersonation remained an absorbing and highly vitalized one, particularly successful in the trying First Act, where rage, pride, grief, and desire so beset the character with tumultuous emotions that only an actress of much resourcefulness can contrive to distinguish between them. This the Swedish soprano did, in a manner to eclipse all Isoldes of a lustrum, save her own of last season. Vocally she was never disaffecting, and sometimes she was tonally as well as dramatically eloquent. In appearance she alone of recent Isoldes conveyed illusion and “vraisemblance.”35

33 Edward Downes to author, April 9, 1995.
34 Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. www.metopera.org/archives.
35 Ibid.
What about the demanding tenor roles in the Wagner Operas? The Viennese tenor Curt Taucher (1885-1954) made his début in New York on November 23, 1922, as Siegmund. In four seasons in New York he sang all the principal Wagner tenor roles, his only excursion outside Wagner was in the premiere of Max Schilling’s *Mona Lisa*, which quickly disappeared. Taucher’s début didn’t merit a New York review, but his Siegmund on December 18, 1922, with Margarete Matzenauer, Clarence Whitehill and Elisabeth Rethberg was panned by Oscar Thompson in *Musical America*:

Curt Taucher’s Siegmund had routine but little beauty of voice to commend it.\(^36\)

Things were little better for a Tristan sung at the Metropolitan with Florence Easton and Friederich Schorr on April 4, 1924:

An observer journeying through the world with a perpetual acidity in his moods might have found a good deal to annoy him. For example, why does Mr. Taucher refuse to forget his reputation as a mighty hero long enough to look a little tenderly at Isolde after she has intoxicated him not only with love potion but with a melting glance more sensuous and more bewitching than the one she describes to Brangaene! Any man who was a man would look hungrily at such a vision of loveliness as Mme Easton in the role of Isolde. But after all, Mr. Taucher is an honest and well-meaning Tristan and it is not his fault that the gods did not make him poetical.\(^37\)

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
In the years leading up to 1924, the Wagner tenors in New York had been Max Alvary (1856-1898), whom Wagner admired, Jean de Reszke (1850-1925), noted for his trumpeting voice and good looks, and Alois Burgstaller (1871-1945). Taucher clearly was an interim figure who could plow through the operas with enough volume to be heard, without distinguishing himself in any way. Edward Downes at twelve had no patience for Curt Taucher, as he recalled in 1995:

There were no great tenors in Wagner before Lauritz Melchior arrived in 1925. In fact, they were all horrible. There was one willing to attempt Tristan in the 1920s. His name was Curt Taucher. He had been quite famous in Vienna but by the time I heard him, he made an awful sound.  

Taucher returned to Europe in 1927 and earned himself a footnote in opera history by creating the role of Menelaus in Richard Strauss’s *Die aegyptische Helena.*

Even so, he was hardly appreciated. Strauss went over casting difficulties with his librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, writing on October 25, 1927:

Since I believe there is now no chance of getting Jertiza, I have definitely decided for Rethberg, whose somewhat bourgeois appearance has improved in America. She is not as tall as Jertiza, and will therefore go better with the short Taucher as Menelaus.  

Damned with faint praise, Taucher continued in lead roles with the Dresden Opera until 1934, and died twenty years later.

38 Ibid.
Lauritz Melchior’s (1890-1973) arrival in New York in 1925 began his 25-year association with the Metropolitan, as the world’s premiere Wagner tenor. Lucky New York! But if, like young Edward Downes, you loved Wagner above all then you’d better have loved conductor Artur Bodanzky (1877-1939), who came to the Metropolitan in 1915 and was the dominant conductor of the German repertoire in New York until his death in 1939, with over one thousand performances. His repertoire was almost exclusively Wagner with a few notable exceptions: *Le nozze di Figaro, Die Zauberflöte, Oberon, La Juive*, and intriguingly, Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Tauride*. Edward first heard Bodanzsky in 1925, conducting *Der Freischutz*, and seventy years later had a clear memory of the performance:

I never liked Bodanzky. The German wing then was Wagner plus *Freischutz* and *Fidelio*. I thought Bodanzky’s conducting was awfully routine and bloodless. There was enough general dissatisfaction so that eventually he was dropped, and they brought in Joseph Rosenstock. But he didn’t last very long, coming back many years later to the New York City Opera. At the Met I don’t think Rosenstock lasted more than one season, in fact I suspect that Rosentstock was hired deliberately because he was very young and inexperienced, a big nothing at the time. I think Gatti hired someone so inexperienced that there’d be a big clamor to get Bodanzky back. Whether there was a clamor or not, Bodanzky did come back, and reigned until his death. Bodanzky gave *Fidelio* with through-composed recitatives replacing the dialogue, my guess is that Mahler or someone like that provided the recitatives for *Fidelio* and *Freischutz*. The Met just decided to avoid the spoken dialogue in this way. But Bodanzky had the German wing at the Metropolitan in those years. Tullio Serafin was also a very fine conductor, and although Bodanzky was called
music director at the Met, I think it was more likely to have been Serafin. He was a wonderful conductor.\textsuperscript{40}

Bloodless or not, Bodanzky led over twenty \textit{Ring Cycles} in New York, and prepared the public for his outlook on Wagner’s music dramas back in 1915. Algernon St. Brennan, writing in \textit{The New York Telegraph} prepared the public for Bodansky’s outlook, including his making cuts to Wagner’s scores:

\textit{Götterammerung} was performed last night (November 18, 1915) at the Metropolitan Opera house with the new German conductor, Mr. Artur Bodanzky, conducting Wagner’s sublime music. This journal has pleaded for many years that under conditions prevailing in New York, conditions that have something to do with the state of artistic taste or ambition in the city, it is quixotic to attempt to give the larger Wagner operas in full. But neither Mr. Alfred Hertz not Mr. Arturo Toscanini would consent to reduce the scores that could be performed within the hours in which it was possible for the majority to hear them. The late Gustav Mahler, when he was here some years ago, very wisely took a step in the direction of common sense. But if he played the part of ‘Herr Cut’, Mr. Hertz, on Mahler’s departure, immediately assumed that of ‘Herr Restorer’, and for years the cause of Wagnerism suffered materially from the misplaced and quixotic devotion of its friends.\textsuperscript{41}

Mr. Bodanzky expressed himself very lucidly on the subject in the \textit{Craftsman}. He says:

I feel that in America the opera must be somewhat adjusted to the lives of the people, of all the people, not only the aristocracy, but the hard working people, who

\textsuperscript{40} Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
\textsuperscript{41} Archives of the Metropolitan Opera, \url{www.metopera.org/archives}. 
seem to be very serious music lovers here. Of course, the utmost cutting will not mean making short operas of \textit{Tristan} or \textit{Götterdammerung} and \textit{Rosenkavalier}, although in the latter I believe a lover’s time can be saved and with advantage. My aim is to shorten the opera only where the cut cannot be manifest, scarcely revealed. Originally the German operas were written for people who gave whole days to the joy of an operatic performance, as is done today at Bayreuth. The production of an opera in Wagner’s time was a festive occasion. There was no thought of adjusting it to dinner hours or work hours; the people adjusted their lives to the wonderful opportunity and joy of great music. It is a little different in Germany today, and totally different in America.\footnote{ibid.}

Wagner with cuts is still Wagner with cuts and Bodanzky’s were known to be brutal. The year after his death, the Metropolitan Opera toured a production of \textit{Die Walküre} with no cuts, every blessed note of the score. The cast is mouth watering today: Lotte Lehmann, Lauritz Melchior, Marjorie Lawrence, Frederic Schorr, Karin Branzell and Emmanuel List. Erich Leinsdorf, at 28, conducted. Edward Downes, also 28, reviewed this performance for \textit{The Boston Transcript}:

Our minds ringing with the magic of Wagner’s \textit{Magic Fire Music}, and our heart full of thanksgiving to Erich Leinsdorf for having given us an integral, uncut \textit{Walküre}, we were progressing slowly toward an exit of the Boston Opera house last Saturday afternoon (March 31, 1940) when a loud and obviously bored voice exclaimed behind us to her matinee companion “Did you ever hear such a long opera in your LIFE? Really, you know I don’t mind so much at night, but in the afternoon it all seems to take so much time!” Which of course is pretty dreadful, isn’t it? Unfortunately, \textit{Die Walküre} is just long, and even if we
were to slash it as mercilessly as does the Paris Opera, the good lady would still have to miss her tea.\textsuperscript{43}

But family life in the Dakota wasn’t all Wagner. Edward Downes retained lifelong memories of two great singers whom he heard as a teenager. Both are on the first page of the book of great artists of the twentieth century: Fyodor Chaliapin (1873-1938) and Rosa Ponselle (1897-1981). Chaliapin’s career began at Mamantov’s private opera in Moscow, and his fame soon spread to Paris and London. He arrived in New York in 1907 as Boito’s \textit{Mefistofele}, and was well received:

He is an elemental creature, like a bull, charging the opera singers of the world with the fuss and energy of a 60 horsepower motor and leaving a trail of fire and brimstone behind him.

Wrote WJ Henderson in \textit{The New York Sun}.\textsuperscript{44} But his second role, Basilio in \textit{Il barbiere di siviglia} brought some critical discontent:

It cannot be said that his Basilio is on the same high artistic level, either vocally or dramatically as M. Eduard de Reszke’s which was one of the things to remember of a lifetime. Mr. Chaliapin’s conception of the part is much coarser. He forgets that a man with such manners would hardly have been engaged by a Dr. Bartolo to give music lessons to his Rosina. But apart from this exaggeration there was much that was amusing. His gigantic stature as compared with the rest of the cast, was in itself a source of merriment which he utilized in many ways.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Boston Evening Transcript}, April 1, 1940.
\textsuperscript{44} Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. www.metopera.org/archives
\textsuperscript{45} Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. www.metopera.org/archives.
But the “coup de grace” was struck in *The Commercial Advertiser*:

It would be interesting to know on what ground Mr. Chaliapin justifies a conception of Don Basilio which makes personal uncleanliness and vulgarity essential to his constitution. Mr. Chaliapin elaborated his conception of the part with abundant graphic skill and with deadly consistency. And he sang the music respectfully, just that and no more.\(^{46}\)

Chaliapin left the Metropolitan in 1908, not returning until 1922 when he sang *Boris Godunov*, his most celebrated portrayal. He remained off and on until 1929, usually as Mephistopheles in *Faust*, Boris, Fillipo in Verdi’s *Don Carlo*, Leporello and in 1926 Massenet’s *Don Quichotte*, an opera written for him. Edward Downes heard him as Boris and Quichotte in 1926:

Chaliapin was fabulous. In some cases you noted the great liberties he took with a score. But his interpretations were so powerful this often scarcely mattered. I had a recording of him singing *Madamina*, Leporello’s aria from *Don Giovanni*. I didn’t know the opera well at the time. But I think for anyone following with the score the liberties would have been very noticeable. Well, it was illegitimate, but it worked. But with all the distortions in that aria, he’d be hooted off the stage today! He did often sing the notes as written. He had the natural organ in the sense, just like Ponselle, just his voice, the sheer voice was one of the most beautiful. I remember at the time thinking who else at the Met has such a beautiful voice?\(^ {47}\)

But it was in the title role of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* that Chaliapin made the most profound impression. He sang forty-seven performances of this work with the

\(^{46}\) Ibid. unsigned review *New York Post* review of performance, December 17, 1997.  
\(^{47}\) Edward Downes to author, November 5, 1994.
Metropolitan between 1922 and 1929. Russian opera was not performed in the vernacular in the 1920s. Only Chaliapin sang in Russian, everything else including the mighty choruses central to this work, were in Italian. Thus the repeated cries of ‘Slava!’ became ‘Gloria!’ Chaliapin’s Boris is thought today to have been over the top histrionically with tonal beauty sacrificed for the drama. And as Massenet’s *Don Quixote*, Chaliapin had an important vehicle for himself even though Massenet the composer was not admired among the critics. Writing in New York, Lawrence Gilman’s 1926 review of *Don Quichotte* published in *The New York Herald Tribune*, pulled no punches:

A maddening trickle of banalities, shallow, tepid, tasteless. If Massenet had not already gone to his accounting, horribly would the ghost of Cervantes haunt and reproach him for this miserable, degrading travesty.  

Edward Downes remembered in 1995 performances he heard seventy years earlier:

In *Boris Godunov* there was a lot of ranting and raving. But when he sang for beauty of tone, he had it. Not only in the middle range where it was highly controlled and voiced, but with high pianissimo, not easy for a bass. That was sheer vocalism. And again I thought, who at the Met has a more beautiful voice? Conceivably Gigli, but I still preferred Chaliapin just as sheer vocal sound. My father often called Chaliapin a great artist and a so-so vocalist. But with all the emphasis I can summon I can say that Chaliapin’s voice was among the most beautiful I ever heard live.

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48 Archives of the Metropolitan Opera, [www.metopera.org/archives](http://www.metopera.org/archives).
I also heard Chaliapin in *Don Quichotte* of Massenet. This last was written for Chaliapin, and characterized by Lawrence Gilman as a “piece of junk” and I’m quoting him charitably. Gilman was full of scorn for *Don Quichotte*. Chaliapin was an extremely moving performer, so that you cried at the death scene. Chaliapin was also an extraordinary make-up artist; he let nobody touch him. And his gifts for make-up extended not only to *Don Quichotte*, but also to the horse Rosinante, who is supposed to be kind of a ridiculous skeleton of a horse. Chaliapin enhanced the impression of a skinny old nag. He was very much a naturalist. It’s no surprise that he was very much influenced by Stanislavsky.\(^{49}\)

Rosa Ponselle’s is the great Cinderella story of opera. Born in 1897 in Meriden, Connecticut, Rose Ponzillo played the piano in silent movie houses and did a vaudeville act with her sister. The vaudevillian came from five shows a day on the road to the attention of William Thorner, a well-connected vocal coach who had the girl audition for Caruso. The Metropolitan was looking for a soprano to replace Claudio Muzio in the Met premiere of Verdi’s *La forza del destino*. Ponselle got the job; her operatic debut was the local debut of Verdi’s great, dark masterwork, opposite Caruso and Jose Mardones. The critics went nuts. The rave reviews were led off by James Huneker writing in *The New York Times*:

> What a promising debut! Added to her personal attractiveness, she possesses a voice of natural beauty that may prove a gold mine. It is vocal gold anyhow, with its luscious lower and middle tones, dark, rich and ductile. Her nervousness was evident, but after she sang the *Addio* in Act I she had the audience captured. Her scene and cavatina before the church were astonishingly mature for

\(^{49}\) Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
such a youthful debutante. Unless we are greatly mistaken, our opera has in Rosa Ponselle a dramatic soprano of splendid potentialities.50

Huneker (1857-1921) gets a chapter to himself (Golden Gage Gadfly) in Mark M. Grant’s book, Maestros of the Pen: A History of Classical Music Criticism in America:

(Huneker) is the only nineteenth-century American newspaper music critic who can be spoken of in the same breath with the great nineteenth-century European critics: Taine, Sainte-Beuve, Gautier, Shaw, Ruskin, and Pater.51

James Huneker of The New York Times wasn’t mistaken. Ponselle’s talent and career were among the most important on twentieth century American music. By 1927, at age thirty, she was ready to tackle the pinnacle of Italian opera, the title role of Bellini’s Norma. Fifteen-year-old Edward Downes attended the dress rehearsal:

The greatest early memory I have of the Metropolitan in New York was Rosa Ponselle singing in the 1927 revival of Norma. I was lucky in being able to attend the dress rehearsal. People who know her recordings know that Ponselle was a very great Norma. But that dress rehearsal, the first time anyone heard that splendid voice in Bellini’s opera, was unique. I knew I would not hear the like of it again. I tried to attend every performance of Norma that season.

I knew absolutely from the Casta diva, which she sang in F instead of G, that this was extraordinary singing. At the end of the first part of Casta diva, in the descending chromatic scale coming down over an octave and a half, every note was perfectly articulated and had a sense of

50 Huneker cited Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. www.metopera.org/archives. Downes told this writer that Ponselle’s was “the most amazing” voice he heard in the theater.
the flow of this gorgeous sounding voice. It was the kind of sound that just hits one in the midriff.\textsuperscript{52}

Olin Downes too, threw critical hosannas at Ponselle’s \textit{Norma}. The situation was very different in 1935, when Ponselle attempted \textit{Carmen} for the first time. Among Edward Downes’ papers is a note from Rosa Ponselle written one year before her death in 1981, embossed with her lipstick prints after a stroke made signing her name difficult. In it she makes clear to Edward her admiration for Olin Downes, who had panned Ponselle’s final new role, \textit{Carmen}, in the \textit{Times} back in 1935:\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{quote}
We have never heard Miss Ponselle sing so badly, and we have seldom seen the part enacted in such an artificial and generally unconvincing manner. Her dancing need not be dwelt upon, although in the inn scene it raised the question whether Spanish gypsies preferred the Charleston or The Black Bottom as models for their evolutions.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

If Ponselle and Chaliapin were admired from afar, at least in Edward Downes’ early years, conductor Arturo Toscanini and his wife visited the Downes family at home. Toscanini had been music director of the Metropolitan Opera from 1908 until 1915 of the New York Philharmonic from 1927 to 1936 and of the NBC Symphony, created for him by RCA Chairman David Sarnoff from 1937 until he retired in 1953. The press idolized Toscanini from his Metropolitan Opera debut, conducting \textit{Aida}, with Emma

\textsuperscript{52} Edward Downes to author, November 5, 1994.
\textsuperscript{53} Note from Rosa Ponselle to Edward Downes in Edward Downes papers, Boston.
Destin, Enrico Caruso and Louise Homer on November 16, 1908. Richard Aldrich reported the next day in *The New York Times*:

> The purely musical part of the performance was pitched in the highest key and the spirit that pervaded it was closely instilled by the new conductor, Mr. Arturo Toscanini. He is a strenuous force, a dominating power, a man of potent authority, a musician of infinite resource.\(^{55}\)

He had the performance at every point firmly and directly under his hand. If it was a criterion of his musicianship, he is a man that insists on clear-cut outlines, on abundant detail, on the strongest of contrasts, on vivid color. In fortissimos, the brasses could not blow loudly enough for him, nor could the crescendos be brought to climax fulminating enough. But there were other and finer points that could not have escaped the attention of the close observer; the fine modeling of phrase, the symmetry of musical outline in many places where brute force was not in question. It was a loud and strenuous performance at times, it was not rude or lacking in finish.\(^{56}\)

Toscanini’s years broadcasting nationwide with the NBC Symphony (1937-1953) made him America’s leading musical figure. His notoriety is closely examined in Joseph Horowitz’s book, *Understanding Toscanini*. But already by 1930, Toscanini, who had conducted the world premieres of the operas *I Pagliacci*, *La Bohème* and *Turandot* was world famous. When in 1930 he and Mrs. Toscanini visited the Downes family at the Dakota for dinner young Edward Downes was in no way excluded from the conversation:

\(^{55}\) Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. [www.metopera.org/archives](http://www.metopera.org/archives).

\(^{56}\) Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
The Toscaninis came for dinner. This was around 1930. They weren’t regular visitors; it was a very special event. My parents never excluded my sisters or me from the dinner table when entertaining distinguished guests. Quite the contrary. I was a bit tentative that night because I understood who Toscanini was. He was very considerate of young people. I was struck by the fact that when he came for dinner, a German friend of mine was visiting here and was at dinner with us. This was a kid my age who didn’t speak Italian. I don’t remember what language the conversation was in. I do remember that Toscanini didn’t speak German. I started some casual remark in German, thinking of course Toscanini speaks German, but he shook his head indicating he did not. This fellow didn’t take much part in the conversations. When the Toscaninis left, there was a great deal of handshaking and then they went out into the elevator. They’d been gone a few moments when Toscanini came rushing back into the apartment because he had forgotten to shake this young man’s hand. By then, in 1930 he was already the world’s most important conductor. At that point there was no particular reason to dislike a German, since Hitler then was rather distant on the horizon. It was just a matter of realizing that there was a young person there, and he, Toscanini, was sensitive to young people.  

Olin Downes and The New York Times provided the connections necessary for eighteen year old Edward to travel to Bayreuth in 1930, when Toscanini made his debut at Wagner’s festival. Young Edward had attended New York’s Dalton School and was preparing to enroll at Columbia University, but decided first to hear Toscanini in Europe and to visit Wagner’s own theater, the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth. College could wait.

57 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

A EUROPEAN EDUCATION

On June 22, 1930, Olin Downes wrote to his friend Jean Sibelius. Downes had been tireless in championing Sibelius’s music in the States and not surprisingly a warm correspondence ensued. After writing about Koussevitzky, after introducing Mr. and Mrs. Walter Naumburg (“He is a baker and an excellent cellist who plays string quartets once a week in his own home, and a generous patron who has instituted the Naumburg Prize for gifted young musicians in this city”) Olin turned to matters closer to home:

Have I told you that my boy, now aged eighteen is determined - God help him - to be a conductor? It is so. He is now, in his young years, an insane Wagnerite, knowing these scores better than I do. He begged to be allowed to go to Europe this summer, and so he has gone, on a tramp steamer, which will land him in Rotterdam. From there he will go, principally on foot, to Germany to Bayreuth where Toscanini conducts Wagner this season. He has his Tannhäuser, Tristan, Parsifal and Ring in piano and orchestral scores; they were the heaviest part of his baggage. Toscanini has invited him to the rehearsal as well as performances and I have given him a letter to Baron Franckenstein of the Munich Opera, asking him if he will give my son the same privileges. It will be sufficient for him
to study the different ways they do Wagner at Munich and Bayreuth.  

Edward Downes chuckled when recalling his 1930 trip to Europe, waiting tables on that tramp steamer, but Munich, Bayreuth, Wagner and Richard Strauss were his goals:

I first went to Munich in 1930, the summer that Toscanini was going to conduct at Bayreuth. Almost all of the music tours went from Munich to Bayreuth to Salzburg. I was on a very small allowance, but enough to get along. *Meistersinger* was one of the things I saw in Munich. I always thought *Meistersinger* was a damned bore, and here in New York it was. But I had a letter of introduction from my father to the Intendant of the Munich Opera.

He allowed me to sit in the pit. It was like Bayreuth, a sunken pit. But from where I sat I saw the whole orchestra, the conductor and the stage. Richard Strauss was the conductor. His Third Act of *Tristan* was the greatest I ever heard. I heard him conduct it in Munich, in 1931. He conducted the first two acts well enough, without a lot of involvement. But in the Third Act he took fire. You entered a different world with him. Quite extraordinary! Everything had an intensity that was tremendously focused, but it had kind of a feverish quality to it, which is part of the score. Tristan here is supposed to verge on madness, delirium, and it all combined of course with Strauss’s style of conducting. Strauss was a great conductor in everything. I remember being told that his *Cosi fan tutte* in the Cuvilliés Theatre was out of this world. *Fidelio*, French operas, Italian opera, everything. He was superlative in an astonishingly wide repertoire. He had a very tiny beat, but the enormity of the sound he produced, and his sense of ensemble and dynamics was just

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incredible. He seemed to make no physical effort at all, but oh how the orchestra played for him.

I looked up during *Meistersinger*, it was the *Festweise* in Act III, and suddenly realized that all of the people on the stage were having a wonderful time. I had never seen it done like this before. But their enthusiasm for the opera caught me, and I have loved it ever since. There was a lot of Wagner in Munich in those years since Munich was trying to rival Bayreuth.\(^\text{59}\)

Edward kept a notebook about the performances he heard during his travels.

Once in a while there’d be a quick notation:

**Munich 1930**  
August 14 - *Meistersinger*—saw this from the pit  
August 23 - *Elektra* with Anna Bahr-Mildenburg “thrilled”

**Vienna 1930**  
September 14 - *Rosenkavalier*  
September 17 - *Ariadne*  
No date - *Manon* (all with Lotte Lehmann; Alfred Piccaver as Des Grieux)

Tenor trouble was no better in Europe than it had been in New York, but there were advantages too.

Rudolf Laubenthal, sang at the Met but he didn’t sing Tristan.

Anna Bahr-Mildenburg sang *Klytamnestra* in Munich. She no longer sang Isolde or Brunnhilde by 1930, but she was wonderful. She was a big imposing figure as Klytamnestra.

\(^{59}\) Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995
Viorica Ursuleac was a very good soprano. Strauss favored her for years but she wasn’t a great artist. ⁶⁰

Ursuleac’s husband, Clemens Krauss, was a fine conductor who conducted a lot of Strauss operas.

Richard Mayr was a very famous Baron Ochs, and he was wonderful.

Alfred Piccaver was Scottish but he became so popular in Vienna he just stayed there. I remember him as good but not thrilling. I heard him as Radames. I wrote he was so-so, but the Aida, Maria Nemeth was lovely. ⁶¹

There was one singer more famous than any of these, a favorite of both Strauss and Puccini, the flamboyant soprano Maria Jeritza (1887-1982). “I only saw Jeritza at the Met,” Edward remembered in 1995. “She was very striking looking but I didn’t find her voice beautiful. She had dramatic temperament and was admired for her good looks, and as an actress. She tended to sing more Toscas than Sieglindes, if you know what I mean.” ⁶²

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⁶⁰ Viorica Ursuleac (1894-1985) was the unofficial prima donna of the Third Reich. She was active in both Vienna and Munich during the war. Extant broadcasts of Die Frau ohne Schatten, Der fliegende Holländer and Ariadne auf Naxos reveal a constricted, throaty sound with a splendid top.

⁶¹ Edward Downes collection, Howard Gottlieb Research Collection, Boston University.

⁶² Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
Jeritza’s great rival was German soprano Lotte Lehmann (1888-1976), and for her Edward had great admiration. Lehmann was born in Perleberg, Germany in 1888, and began her career in small roles at the Hamburg Opera. Earlier, after flunking out of Etelka Gerster’s Singing Academy she was told that she must never think of having a career. Eventually she got to Vienna, where in 1916 she went on at the last minute at the dress rehearsal of Strauss’s *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Strauss calmly said that Lehmann made a marvelous Komponist and that she would do the premiere. She became the foremost Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* and created roles in Strauss’s *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Intermezzo*, and *Arabella*. She was the toast of the German-speaking operatic world until she emigrated to the States in 1938. To this day, her nearly X-rated Sieglinde and her glorious Marschallin, both preserved in Metropolitan Opera broadcasts are hard to beat. Edward Downes remembers:

> Lehmann was the only singer I ever met who seemed to be exactly the same offstage as she was onstage. She always sounded spontaneous onstage, whether it was *Abseulicher!* or some casual remark. She was always totally *echt*... there. As if somehow it just happens in this way at this moment. That was very powerful. It was powerful enough so that it extended to her physical actions aside from singing. Particularly in *Tannhäuser*. One quite short moment was at the very end of Elisabeth’s role, after *Allmächtige Jungfrau*, when Wolfram comes on and says “May I escort you back to the castle” or whatever. She doesn’t answer with words but is supposed to gesture that the place she is going to is “up there” not “over there.” It’s a somewhat pretentious stage direction. But there are only a few bars left from that to her exit, and a relatively

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short distance back stage, where you saw her in profile, she made an exit in a diagonal, not singing, no gestures, just walking, and it was one of the most vivid moments I remember in opera. She was like this in every performance. This moment was always magical.

Very close to the end of her career, when I was briefly a music critic for The Boston Transcript, Lehmann came to Boston and gave a recital. It must have been one of the Morning Musicales. I hadn’t seen her in quite a long time. Since it was a morning concert, I didn’t need to rush away to write my review and I knew her somewhat. Not well, but I knew her well enough that I had been to her house for lunch. She was a warm and gracious woman, I decided to go and see her after the performance. I knew it was long enough so she probably wouldn’t remember me, but I had dined with her and her family a few times at the Salzburg Festival, and in New York I knew her well enough so that she asked me one time why I thought the Met didn’t give her more performances. My only answer was that they had this idea that for Italian opera it should be Italian singers, French for French and so forth. I didn’t really know the answer. In any case, I knew her well enough that she had asked my opinion. However, many years had gone by.

Now in Boston after the recital, she was sitting at a table chatting with people and shaking hands and autographing things and she saw me come in. Somehow, I knew she recognized me, but not sure from where. But she gestured and half got out of her seat and said to me ‘Sie hat nicht ewig lange gesehen!’ Which was very tactful but it was even with the little social fib implied, still a spontaneous and honest reaction. I think this was very characteristic of everything she did. Lehman herself mentioned in a talk she gave that when speaking to Richard Strauss he complimented her and she was doing the ‘oh, you’re so kind’ and she said ‘Aber meister, ich schwimme’ meaning I’m cheating through your music and Strauss said ‘Ja, aber sie schwimme so schön!’ Apparently, she knew him quite well - she was after all the first Composer in the revised Ariadne and the first Farberin in Die Frau ohne Schatten,
and she said “I sang that opera for ten years and I never figured out what was going on!”64

Lehmann was a regular visitor to Boston during Edward Downes’ tenure on The Boston Transcript. In 1939, he reviewed her Jordan Hall recital:

October 30, 1939—It is only artists of the stature of Lehmann who are able to supply that something new we demand simply by giving a great performance of a familiar composition. And she does it, not by making poor defenseless Schubert stand on his head, nor by doing something startling and sensational with Brahms. She does it by penetrating to the very core of the composer’s thought. What stands revealed to us then is not a clever idea that Lehmann had, but Schubert or Brahms himself recalled in all the freshness of primal inspiration.65

Edward’s love for Wagner began at an early age, and once in Europe in his late teens he wasted little time in getting to “The Master’s” home and theatre in Bayreuth. Fifty miles southwest of Nuremberg, Bayreuth wasn’t a remarkable spot when Richard Wagner moved there in 1876. Its very isolation and the effort it took to reach Bayreuth might have been one of its attractions. Paradoxically, not only did Wagner settle in Bayreuth with his family, Cosima von Bulow and their children, but he built there a Festspielhaus, a festival theater designed to his own specifications, for the sole purpose of presenting his music dramas.

The chatty society audiences that crowded the gas-lit opera houses wouldn’t do for Wagner. He insisted that the auditorium be darkened, that hierarchical box seating

64 Edward Downes to author, November 6, 1994.
65 Boston Evening Transcript, October 30, 1939.
be eliminated, that the interior of the theater be built entirely of wood, and that the orchestra pit be covered, with conductor and players out of sight. All attention would be on the stage at all times. The wooded interior guaranteed a mellow and slightly reverberant acoustic, treasured to this day. The covered pit prevents the singers from being swamped by the large orchestra. The Festspielhaus opened in 1876, under the patronage of Ludwig II of Bavaria, with the first complete performances of the Ring. Wagner did the musical supervision and the mise en scène. People may have been impressed. It also may have been too much too soon. The expenses daunted even King Ludwig, and Wagner was thrust into financial difficulties from which he never recovered. The Festspielhaus was closed.

1930, the year of Edward’s first visit, was a critical year for Bayreuth. Cosima Wagner died on April 1, at the age of ninety-three. She had long been incapacitated but lived on as a ghostly icon, the Master’s lady. Her son, Siegfried Wagner (1869-1930), had been carrying on as artistic director of Bayreuth for many years. He was a modestly-gifted composer of his own operas, a conductor, and a stage director. His sixtieth birthday would be commemorated later in 1930 - a year late - with a new production of Tannhäuser, a work Siegfried longed to produce. But money was a constant problem, and Siegfried accepted conducting engagements whenever he could. Back in 1924, he had toured America with little financial success. Olin Downes reviewed Siegfried’s concert at the Metropolitan Opera House, given at a special matinee on February 10, 1924:
Long and cordial applause welcomed Siegfried Wagner when he appeared yesterday afternoon in the Metropolitan Opera House as conductor of an orchestral concert of compositions by Liszt, his grandfather; Wagner, his father; and himself, and also as solicitor of funds to aid the revival of the Bayreuth Festival next summer... At the end of the concert there was again long and cordial applause for an amiable and modest musician who had said what he had to say without any particular enthusiasm and without illusion.

Siegfried died on August 4, 1930 while Arturo Toscanini was rehearsing the new production of *Tannhäuser* Siegfried didn’t live to see. The next morning at 8 o’clock, Siegfried’s wife, Winifred Wagner, sat down at her husband’s desk and took over the Festival. British born Winifred Williams had married Siegfried on September 22, 1915. The bride was eighteen and the groom forty-six. Four children were born in the next five years: Wieland, Friedelind, Wolfgang and Verena. Wieland Wagner (1917-1966) became one of the world’s great stage directors; Wolfgang runs the Festival today; Friedelind became a close friend of Edward’s. Winifred Wagner (1897-1980) became infamous as one of Adolf Hitler’s earliest supporters. The legend persists that he wrote *Mein Kampf* in Landesburg Prison on Bayreuth stationery sent to him by Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law:

> Before Christmas 1923, Winifred set up a collecting point for presents to send to Landesberg. Being practical, she asked the prison director what the prisoner particularly wanted. It turned out to be writing paper, and she later tried to defend herself on this account: “...so I sent him masses of paper. And for goodness sake, people now

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66 Archives of the Metropolitan Opera. [www.metopera.org/archives](http://www.metopera.org/archives).
accuse me of sending paper to write Mein Kampf, more or less accusing me directly of being responsible for the writing of Mein Kampf!"\(^{67}\)

Edward Downes went to Bayreuth in 1930, during that dramatic summer. Cosima and Siegfried were dead: Tannhäuser was being conducted by Toscanini, called “The Italian.” As the first non-German to ever conduct at Bayreuth, Toscanini aroused ire among the more nationalist of the audience, not to mention several members of the Wagner family:

The maestro demanded the highest virtuosity, and was angry when he did not find it. Instead of being grateful as a non-German for being allowed to conduct on the hallowed soil of Bayreuth, he complained -and in Italian, to boot - he did not like the way second violins played a particular passage, he brought his baton down so hard that it broke in half, and he threw the broken halves over his shoulder and stomped his foot... the musicians already grumbling about intense rehearsals. He sings, or rather croaks loudly with every part. It was embarrassing for Bayreuth that he corrected a number of mistakes that had crept into the orchestra's performance over the years, and that in doing so, he referred them back to the score, which he knew by heart. Suddenly the fossilized and barren tradition Bayreuth tradition had been exposed!\(^{68}\)

It must have been worth the aggravation. Siegfried Wagner’s posthumous production of Tannhäuser conducted by Toscanini in 1930, was a triumph. Frederick Spotts writes in Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival: “The great sensation was Toscanini’s conducting of Tristan and Tannhäuser. The Maestro’s intense devotion to


Wagner - his intimate knowledge of both the scores and Wagner’s writings - endeared him to Germans.”

It was upon that scene that Edward Downes, at eighteen first visited Bayreuth:

My father sent a letter to Winifred Wagner. He said among other things, “you will gauge his seriousness by the fact that he is traveling with the orchestral scores of the operas he’s going to see this summer” (and they weighted a ton!). I got to Bayreuth and it wasn’t difficult to smuggle myself in because there was a time and place when all the orchestral musicians streamed in, but one day I made the mistake of asking where Frau Wagner was. Then it became clear that I didn’t know her by sight, and I was quickly booted out. I found Frau Wagner drinking coffee in the Bayreuth restaurant. This was the year Siegfried died, leaving her as a widow with four children. She was English and had been orphaned, and was raised in Germany by acquaintances of the Wagner family. She became thoroughly German. She was very gracious to me, having read my father’s letter. She wrote in pencil on a slip of paper, “admit to any rehearsal.” I still have the slip.

I heard Siegfried Wagner conduct in New York, and I must say he was not a very good conductor. He had conducted the Ring at Bayreuth a few weeks before he died. Toscanini conducted Tristan und Isolde and Tannhäuser. It was a total revelation! I loved Tristan after the Ring, and then Parsifal. Meistersinger was the last one I knew because it had a dull production at the Met in the 1920s. The reason Tannhäuser was such a revelation was that I never realized it was filled with such great music. It took much longer to appreciate Tannhäuser and Lohengrin and the Dutchman. The others I learned to appreciate and love, but my attraction to the Ring was immediate. I knew there was something waiting to unlock itself. But with Toscanini at Bayreuth, I had expected his Tristan to be the highlight of the festival. And I was disappointed in it! I found his interpretation too precisely planned, balanced,
controlled and lacking in impetuosity, passion and
dramatic spontaneity I think a performance of Tristan
must have. But Toscanini’s Tannhäuser was a revelation!
The performance had all of the qualities I had missed in his
Tristan, and Siegfried Wagner’s sets, costumes and stage
directions seemed absolutely right. Everything about that
production worked!  

But for all the glory on stage, the early 1930s was a sinister time in Germany.

Winifred Wagner’s friendship with Hitler dated back to the 1920s. A lot of the early
relationship had to do with Hitler’s admiration for the British-born proponent of ‘racial
purity’, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), who was married to Richard
Wagner’s daughter Eva. By the early 1930s National Socialism was growing in Germany,
and not just in Bayreuth, which remained a second home for Hitler until 1940 (the
Wagner children called him Onkel Wolf). But even before Hitler was elected vice
chancellor in 1933, the Nazi menace was in the air. Edward Downes remembers:

In the winter of 1932-1933 Hitler came to power. I was in
Paris and I remember writing to a German friend “So
you’ve got Hitler now! Wie Teufel!” I got back a very
polite letter, and a firm one. By that time, all kinds of
reports were in the foreign press about violence and
murders. And Germans knew this. This friend wrote back
and said, “You don’t need to bother to write me anymore
about political things here, because we are much better
informed here than you are via the foreign press.” I got
the message right away. I avoided writing to any German
about political things. I was aware from that moment of
the threats to ordinary Germans. When I got back to
Munich, I remember there was a young professor named
Rehm, who was quite popular with the students, giving a
course on early 19th century German literature. He came

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70 Edward Downes to author, August 7, 1995. He showed me the slip.
to class one day looking pale and then angry. He started off by making a kind of speech. “Ladies and gentlemen, some members of this class have denounced me to the Gestapo for talking too much about Heinrich Heine (who was Jewish). I will continue to talk about Heine exactly as long as I believe it befits his position in German literature!” He went on for several minutes in a very brave and angry speech. There’s a custom among students to applaud professors in approval or to scruff one’s feet in disapproval. When Rehm finished, there was a roar of applause, a big demonstration that went on for several minutes. It was very clear that whoever denounced Professor Rehm was in a minority in this class.

Long before any official laws were passed, Jews were being attacked and arrested for no other reason than that they were Jewish. Hitler had written all about it in Mein Kampf, and he was doing exactly what he said he would do. My landlord in Munich was married to a half-Jewish woman, and even that was a crime. He told me about meeting in a beer hall an old school friend he hadn’t seen in years. This friend was a fervent Nazi and assumed the same of my landlord. This guy was a black shirt, and had arrested a Jew who was accused of having sex with a “German maiden.” He was boasting that he had taken a piece of iron piping and beat this man. And he was boasting! Think what this means! You meet someone you hadn’t seen in twenty years and confer status on yourself in this way. You could see that the horror stories were real. This was not just made-up stuff.

Because I was American, I felt protected by the fact of my U.S. citizenship. I was aware that if something happened to me the U.S. consulate would take action. The fact that my father was on The Times was an important factor in my feelings of safety. I knew my father felt very strongly against Hitler and if something dangerous was happening to me, my father would raise the devil. So if the Nazis had any reason to harass me I thought they would think twice.

The threat was all-pervasive, in the air. The anti-Nazi feelings were strong. I went to a sermon preached in one
of the churches in downtown Munich, a prominent priest, and he looked as if he was going to say something about politics. And the church was jammed. I was standing to one side. Somebody behind me tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘If you can’t behave properly in the house of the Lord, you should get out.’ This person thought I was showing disrespect for the sermon, this is a good indication of the tension. And the sermon turned out to be perfectly innocuous.

I went with a group of friends to a pro-Nazi rally. The attitude, the facial expression, the looks people exchanged were such that the group I was with was impressed, to say the least. They became very threatening and we left in a hurry. Soon it became normal to use the Nazi salute ‘Heil Hitler’ in greeting. It was expected everywhere and failure to do so labeled you an anti-Nazi. There was a street in Munich near the opera house where there had been a putsch in 1923, and there was a memorial to the Nazis - ‘the great heroes’ who had fallen. It became the custom when walking by this spot to give the Nazi salute. If you were an anti-Nazi there was a way you could walk around the block without passing this Nazi memorial. This became so well known and was named –doppelgasse - meaning ‘dodger’s alley...’ People were so aware of this spot that it became a sad joke. So there were enough dodgers to earn this name.71

Even with the worsening political situation, Edward Downes’ notes from these years indicate a stunning number of operatic performances in Germany and Austria:

**Munich**
June 11, 1932  *William Tell* Bored, left after Act II

**Salzburg**
August 26, 1932  *Fidelio* with Lotte Lehmann, Richard Strauss conducting

71 Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.
Munich
April 2, 1933  Parsifal, Prinzregentstheater  still bored by most of it
April 17, 1933  Rienzi, Never again! Noisy, hypocritical, boring!

Salzburg
August 3, 1935  Falstaff, Toscanini conducting. Fabulous ensemble and orchestra! No great voices
August 7, 1935  Fidelio, Toscanini with Lotte Lehmann  “Great performance, second act best!”

Munich
November 13, 1935  Tristan und Isolde  Richard Strauss conducting chamber music effects, technical mastery, last act very fast—often too fast
No real climax in Act 2 duet
Highly interesting and masterful, seemed to me truly great

January 1, 1936  Tristan und Isolde, Wilhelm Furtwangler conducting  Tempi slower than Strauss, especially for emphasis
Orchestra sometimes too loud
Excellent acting from (Margarethe) Baumer
(Carl) Hartmann honorable—(Ludwig) Weber best of all as King Marke

January 6, 1936  Lohengrin, Richard Strauss conducting - “seemed incredibly light and nimble”

Bayreuth
July 19, 1936  Lohengrin  Furtwangler conducting, Heinz Tietjen, regie I never realized Lohengrin could be so exciting!
Regie was tremendous
400 people onstage handled carefully
Fabulous lighting

But time was running out. “The lights were going out all over Europe.”

Edward Downes recalls his last trip to Bayreuth, not to return for over twenty years:

The last pre-war memory I have of Bayreuth was in 1936, fairly late in the day when Hitler was a regular visitor. I did
see him there. There was an episode typical of my father, at whatever performance we were attending if Hitler was there we knew he’d be in the Wagner family box, usually with Winifred on his arm. Hitler would be driven in from the Wagner family home, Wahnfried. There was a little square and a right angle turn up to the Festspielhaus. My father paid the cab driver to wait at this turn. He said, ‘Now then, when the Führer comes along there’ll be a lot of people ahead of him. He’ll come in at the end, and the house lights will go down immediately to begin the performance. Now I (and this was my father speaking) have to go inside when the lights go down. But I want to see the Führer go by, and I want to follow in right after him.’ So the cabbie said, Okay. The parade came with the usual shouting and salutes. Hitler never walked in just quietly, everything was in state. Three or four cars in front of him and three or four cars behind, with all the SS men. As they passed by, our cab swept right in, directly behind the entourage. All of the people were crowding and yelling and screaming, and they must have been wondering who these people in the taxi were. They were craning their necks. My father took off his hat and began bowing to the crowd. He got some very dirty looks from the cavalcade in front of us. My father thought it was all very funny and richly enjoyed every moment. If I had wanted to meet Hitler, it would have been possible with my father’s connections. The authorities were well aware of the advantages The New York Times could bring them.

Edward met with Friedelind Wagner (1918-1991) during his earliest visits to Bayreuth. Friedelind was the family renegade, described as “the most gifted of the Wagner grandchildren.” Friedelind’s adolescent rebellion led her to disassociate herself forcefully with her

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72 Notes in Edward Downes Collection, Howard Gottlieb Research Library, Boston University.
mother’s Nazi coterie at Bayreuth. She left home in 1940, as reported in

*Time* magazine on December 16, 1940:

One of composer Richard Wagner’s less important works last week stirred politico-patriotic debate in Britain. The work in question was his saucy granddaughter Friedelind, 22, who has a history as interesting as any of his operas. In 1923, ten years before the No. 1 Nazi became Chancellor, music lover Adolf Hitler first met the family of his favorite composer. Widow Cosima would have nothing of him, but Hitler struck up a friendship with English born daughter-in-law, Winifred Wagner. Aged five at this time was Granddaughter Friedelind. She was dandled on Herr Hitler’s knee while rumor that he was going to marry her mother rose and finally ebbed. When about the age of a U.S. debutante, Friedelind, by her own account, used to lunch now and then with the Führer and chirp all sorts of criticisms of Nazi doings, which sometimes put him in a rage.

Over a year before the war Friedelind had enough of Nazi Germany, and moved to Switzerland. At break of war she reached London just before France was smashed.

Miss Wagner soon produced a series of gossipy articles for *British Allied Newspapers, Ltd.*, “...Hitler riding through Berlin beside Mussolini,” according to Miss Wagner “gave the general impression of a fussy spinster beside the first real man who had come her way.”

Friedelind’s “gossipy articles” became a book called *Heritage of Fire*, a portrait of the Wagner Family during the Third Reich. The book makes no bones about Winifred’s devotion to Hitler that dated back to the beer hall *putsch* of 1923. Between her flight to England, and later Argentina where she placed herself under Toscanini’s protection, and

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73 Wagner Issue in *Time*, December 16, 1940.
her book, Friedelind was hardly the favorite Wagner grandchild. She spent most of her adult life in Switzerland and England, returning to Bayreuth to care for her mother before Winifred’s death in 1980. Friedelind’s exile in Europe and New York was hardly glamorous. “She worked as a waitress at Schrafft’s” noted Edward.

Friedelind eventually developed a series of master classes at Bayreuth, bringing together instructors in music history and regie at the Festival each summer. It was for these classes that Edward Downes returned to Bayreuth after twenty years. He reminisced in a letter to Friedelind Wagner, dated June 10, 1983:

I shall never forget my taste of the New Bayreuth. I arrive in town in July, 1959. You smuggled me into a lighting tower. It was the beginning of Meistersinger, Act 2, and that was a magical experience. It was Wieland’s earlier, stripped down Act 2, with almost nothing on stage. Just a raked middle section with cobblestones, a bench, the Fliedermond and of course the fabulous lighting. Even from the too-close proximity of the lighting tower, the opening of that scene had more fragrance of a summer night than any I ever saw. I do think over all Wieland is the greatest opera designer/régisseur I have seen in sixty years of opera going, and I have many memories that will last as long as there are memories.74

Edward’s participation in Friedelind’s master classes lasted until 1965, when he resigned over Friedelind’s lack of organizational skills: poor resources, lost luggage and sluggish paychecks. Edward’s return to Bayreuth for the Festivals and Friedelind’s classes presented one complication: Winifred Wagner. She was stripped of all authority at Bayreuth during de Nazification hearings in 1947. She was allowed to live on the

74 Letter in Edward Downes papers, Boston University.
property but ceded all of her rights to her sons Wolfgang and Wieland. In 1976 Winifred was the subject of a documentary film by Hans-Jugren Syberberg where she spoke freely about Hitler and her association with the Third Reich:

I never saw anything repulsive about him (Hitler); that’s what was so remarkable. He had this Austrian, tactful manner and warm heart. After all, I knew him from ’23 to ’45, that’s 22 years. I was never disappointed in all those 22 years, I mean, about from things that were going on in the outside world. But that did not affect me. For me he was simply the Hitler who came here as a Wagner fan and a friend of the family. I will always remember him with gratitude for the way he literally smoothed my path here in Bayreuth, and helped me in every way.75

Such talk on film thirty years after the fall of the Reich was greeted with derision.

Edward Downes made his own feelings clear about Winifred, reporting on his return in 1959:

After the war Winifred was in disgrace. She took the whole Nazi era in her stride. I got a message the first year that I went to the master classes at Bayreuth that Frau Wagner knew I was in Bayreuth and would like to see me. Friedelind's book was out (Heritage of Fire) and I thought, Oh Christ, what do I do now? I had never seen Winifred since that day in Bayreuth restaurant in 1930. And now thirty years later here she was! I sent back a note that it was very nice of Frau Wagner, and we only met once many years ago, she couldn’t possibly remember me. Back came a message. “Oh no, she remembers you very well, and she knows just who you are and she would like to see you.” So I went to Friedelind and said, What do I do now?

Friedelind said, “Mama receives on performance days, I’ll take you over tomorrow.” Frau Wagner was very chirpy

75 Quoted in Syberberg, Winifred Wagner und die Geschite der Hauses Wahnfried.
and urbane and seemed at peace with her life. In a long TV documentary shortly before her death, she said “Yes, I was Hitler’s friend, certainly, we were very fond of one another. If he came knocking at the door I would run to the door to meet him as an old friend.” She made these absolutely flat statements that Hitler never knew anything at all about the horrors that were going on. And I sat there thinking, does she think I’m totally stupid? Or is she pretending an ignorance she can’t have? She seemed a very bright woman, she was playing a role right up to the hilt. I never heard her apologize or repudiate Hitler in any way, and this went on until her death in 1980. She had quite the shot as we left. As she and Friedelind kissed and cooed she said to me “What do you think of our Wieland’s productions? I think he does it just to be different, don’t you?” I tried to be as neutral and as noncommittal as possible, since I thought his productions were just marvelous.\footnote{Edward Downes to author, April 7, 1995.}

Despite his resignation from her master classes in 1965, Edward Downes and Friedelind Wagner remained friends until she died in 1991. In a note dated August 12, 1987, Friedelind catches Edward up on some Festival gossip:

Prince Charles descended for \textit{Tannhäuser}, but as I have no paper I have no news. Diana refused to go; she likes rock. (I prefer it too, to many an opera performance these days!)\footnote{Letter in Edward Downes Collection, Boston University.}

But going back to the late 1930s, Edward’s German sojourn ended with this cable from his father:

\textit{War believed imminent. Advise instant departure.}\footnote{Letter to ED from FW, August 12, 1987, Edward Downes Collection Howard Gottlieb Research Library, Boston University.}
CHAPTER 5

THE YOUNG CRITIC

By 1939 Edward Downes was a man in his late twenties with no college degree. But he did have years of experience hearing the world’s greatest artists in the world’s greatest venues with a discerning ear. It seemed natural for Edward to try music criticism, the family business. He worked briefly as Samuel Chotzinoff’s assistant at The New York Post, before moving to The Boston Evening Transcript in 1939.

The Transcript was first published in 1830. Its fame today rests on a gently mocking poem by T.S. Eliot:

The readers of the Boston Evening Transcript
Sway in the wind like a field of ripe corn.
When evening quickens faintly in the street,
Waking the appetites of life in some
And to others bringing the Boston Evening Transcript.
I mount the steps and ring the bell, turning
Wearily, as one would turn to nod good-bye to
Rochefoucauld,
If the street were time and he at the end of the street,
And I say, “Cousin Harriet, here is The Boston Evening Transcript.”

Mocking or not, Eliot’s Transcript readers were the same people likely to crowd into Boston’s concert halls, and it was for an elitist, well-educated readership that Edward Downes was writing, recalling Olin Downes fleeing to New York years earlier.

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because, “He grew tired of being in Symphony Hall among the same ladies who had kissed one another in greeting in the same way for forty years.”

But if the readership was dry, Boston’s musical life certainly was not. In addition to the Boston symphony under Koussevitzky at Symphony Hall, there were plenty of performances at the Boston Opera House (although without a resident company), Jordan Hall in the New England Conservatory, Sanders Theatre at Harvard, and in smaller venues throughout the city. These were the days when artists and ensembles toured the country regularly: from the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic to Salmaggi’s Opera-singers, players, and conductors all lived an itinerant life. Boston was a prestigious stop, the head of the lucrative northeast corridor. Edward Downes had a lot on which to report.

Edward was introduced to the readers of *The Transcript* in an interview/editorial headlined *Return of a Critic*, published on September 30, 1939:

Edward Downes, only this fortnight arrived here through the minefields and submarine rescues from a study at the University of Munich for his doctorate. He was born in Boston, studied at Columbia, and spent many years abroad where he covered the music festivals at Bayreuth, Salzburg and other centers for *The New York Herald-Tribune*. He worked on *The New York Post* for a year under Chotzinoff, later contributed foreign music correspondence from abroad to *The New York Times*, where his father, Olin Downes, is the dean of American music critics.

‘I started going to Germany in 1930 because I wanted to hear Toscanini conduct at Bayreuth. That was really a marvelous year at Bayreuth. There hadn’t been such a

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Edward Downes to author, November 12, 1994.
constellation there in decades. It was the last year that Wagner’s son, Siegfried Wagner, had charge of the festival. It was the last year Karl Muck conducted at Bayreuth. Muck was supposed to have been the greatest of all modern conductors for Parsifal. And finally, it was the first year that Toscanini had conducted at Bayreuth. It took all the money I had saved up to buy me tickets for all seven performances of the Bayreuth Cycle. But money was never better spent.

At the time I was enrolled at the University of Munich, the university was a live and exciting place. The finest art historian in Germany, Pinder, gave me my first real appreciation of painting. There was the professor of theatrical history, Kutscher, through whom I got in touch with the modern German theater, and Karl Vorssler, the great Dante authority, had the chair in romance languages.

The last time I left Munich just in time after a cabled warning from my father. I spent a week in Brussels hoping the crisis would blow over and finally got passage back on the Holland-America Statesman. It was an exciting trip. Half the crew walked off in Rotterdam before we started and so passengers had to volunteer to take over some of their jobs. I was a waiter in the third class saloon all the way back. I felt awfully sorry for the people I waited on. But they were thankful, I guess, to get home at all. We had a blackout in the English Channel and had to dodge mines going into Southampton Harbor. We saw German and English submarines at sea, and about two days out we rescued the crew of a torpedoed English freighter.

Now here in Boston I have the delightful feeling of coming home. I was 13 when I left Boston to go to New York, but I had lived here long enough to always feel that my real home was here.

I haven't said anything about the Munich opera where standing room for students is cheaper than going to the movies, and where I so often heard Richard Strauss conduct his own operas. Nor have I said anything about
Bavarian beer. The Hofbräu is wonderful, but the little places are even better!\footnote{Boston Evening Transcript, September 30, 1939.}

It must have been a busy life, reviewing concerts in opera in Boston over forty years ago. “It was very pleasant, really” remarked Edward in 1999:

\textit{The Transcript} had a small circulation but an unusual one. The paper was known for its high level of commentary on business, financial, political and artistic topics. My father, who detested the Boston Brahmins, was doubly pleased at my appointment to \textit{The Transcript}, the Boston paper for which he had written was \textit{The Boston Post}. It had a very big circulation and was powerful but without much standing in intellectual circles. And people on \textit{The Transcript} had sometimes been rather snooty to my father. So Dad’s reaction was what a wonderful kick in the teeth to Boston to have his son as critic of \textit{The Transcript}. My salary was $2,300 a year. I was responsible for all the concert reviews and then I was given a regular Sunday think piece, up to 2000 words. I know what people mean when they say coverage of music is slipping, but back in 1939, the generation before mine wrote 2,000 words per review almost every night!

Those days were long gone even by 1939! But on Sundays you were given more space. I got myself a place just across the river, in Cambridge. You’d go into the office in the late morning and go through the mail; file the press releases and so on. Then there’d be a lunch at a local chop house, perhaps with a beer, all with other newsmen. Then it was off to the evening’s concerts, then back to the paper to write up your copy before eleven p.m. Then home to Cambridge to bed to repeat the whole process the next day. And with everything going on in those years, it was impossible to be bored.\footnote{Edward Downes to author, November 12, 1994.}
One of Edward’s earliest pieces was a review of a recital given by Lotte Lehmann, one of his favorites, at Jordan Hall:

It is only artists of the stature of Lehmann who are able to supply that something new we demand simply by giving a great performance of a simple composition. And she does it, not by doing something startling or sensational with Brahms. She does it by penetrating to the very core of the composer’s thought. What stands revealed to us then is not a clever idea that Lehmann had, but Schubert or Brahms himself in all the freshness of primal inspiration.83

“Think pieces” on Sunday allowed Downes free rein on a number of topics, and he offered opinions sometimes at war with popular taste. Nelson Eddy sang a recital in Symphony Hall on April 2, 1940:

Nelson Eddy, famous all-American baritone of stage, screen and ether waves, gave a recital last night in Symphony Hall which began with Albert Hay LaMotte’s The Lord’s Prayer, set to music by the same intrepid composer. The program informed us, “Of all vocal compositions, Malotte’s setting of the Lord’s Prayer is requested most often, a significant indication of the reverence of a people who know how to turn to God.”

This last confused us considerably. Does it mean that the real way to turn to God is to write a fan letter to Nelson Eddy asking him to sing The Lord’s Prayer? Or does it mean that the number of requests Mr. Eddy receives for this kind of ‘vocal composition’ is kind of barometer of the devoutness of the American Public?84

83 Boston Evening Transcript, October 15, 1939.
84 Boston Evening Transcript, April 3, 1940.
There was always room for opera. While not shy about expressing admiration for the voices of Flagstad, Lehmann, Melchior and Schorr, Edward also showed concern for an important cast member in Wagner’s Die Gotterdammerung:

Usually in the farewell duet of Siegfried and Brunnhilde, Grane is understood to be waiting in a convenient cave and is not brought out until the singing is over and Siegfried can lead him hastily off the stage. This afternoon the Brunnhilde, who was Kirsten Flagstad, in obedience with Wagner’s directions, brought Grane out halfway through the duet and held him gracefully by the halter while she sang. But Grane was restless, and the audience, with understandable concern, kept their eyes riveted in anxious attention on him. Pages and pages of Wagner’s highest inspiration, sung by the two greatest living Wagner singers, went half unheard because of a horse whose deportment grew worse and worse as Madame Flagstad’s high C and the crucial point of the duet approached. Flagstad was a miracle of dignity and self possession, and somehow she accomplished her climatic note. By the time Grane had left the stage, the audience had suffered as much agony as Madame Flagstad herself.\(^{85}\)

The African American tenor Roland Hayes (1887-1997) lived in Boston and had a distinguished career well into his eighties. Edward Downes admired him in the pages of The Transcript:

> Few have such a lovely pianissimo. In spite of the fact that his breath is sometimes insufficient now there are long passages of exquisite singing and a highly intelligent interpretation.\(^{86}\)

\(^{85}\) *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 21, 1940.

\(^{86}\) *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 8, 1940.
But of all the extant pieces from Edward’s *Transcript* days, a “think piece” titled simply *Opera* printed as a matter of course in February 1940 typified what was only expected at the time and is rare in mainstream daily newspapers today:

Opera was founded on a mistake. A group of Florentine noblemen and dilettantes got together to revive the classical Greek tragedy. They were extremely proud of the success of their revival, but what they had actually done was to invent the modern opera. The first prophesies of the death of opera followed quickly after its birth, when composers began using rousing tunes for their own sake. The reason? Rousing tunes had never been used by Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides! And thereafter, regularly, every time one type of opera superseded another with the Baroque, the Rococo, the Classical, the Romantic, the realist or the impressionistic, every time there was a change, somebody wrote that opera has died.\(^{87}\)

With Hitler’s annexation of Austria and the invasion of Poland and Czechoslovakia in September, 1939, it was prime time for a news beat, even in the arts. The stream of musical greats seeking asylum in the States included Lehmann, Toscanini, Thomas Mann and Bruno Walter. Edward’s “think piece” published on September 30, 1939 was titled *Music and Politics*:

Both history and our experience have shown us time and again that it is a practical impossibility to divorce politics from art. Yet the danger of allowing our artistic lives to be dominated by political passions is enormous. It could hardly be more aptly illustrated than by the program which Serge Koussevitzky has announced for the opening pair of concerts by the Boston Symphony Orchestra on

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\(^{87}\) *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 3, 1940.
Friday afternoon and Saturday evening, October 13 and 14.

One half of the program is Debussy’s tone poem *La mer*, and d’Indy’s rarely heard Symphonic Variations *Istar*. The other half is German and consists of the greatest of all symphonies, Beethoven’s *Eroica*. Many present day concert-goers resent the inroads that mistaken patriotism made on our musical repertoire and roster of artists during the last war. It is disquieting to reflect that we could, even here in Boston, get ourselves into a state of mind that would make us reject one half of such a program. It would not be the first time that such a thing has happened.

No one should deceive himself on this count. It was and is as difficult to separate politics and music as it is to separate religion and politics. The only people who really do it are the ones who are fundamentally indifferent to one of the two fields.

...Debussy never believed in the possibility of a true international détente. ‘There is no reason why the Germans should understand us,’ he said. ‘Neither should we try to absorb their ideas. The French forget too easily the qualities of elegance and clarity peculiar to them and allow themselves to be influenced by the tedious and ponderous Teuton.’

To Beethoven, his music and politics were but the practical and the artistic expressions of one and the same thing, his great social and humanitarian ideals. Is it therefore conceivable or would it have been desirable, that he should separate his political ideas from his music? And since people of the stature of Beethoven and Debussy neither wished to nor were able to dissociate their political views from the creative process, can we listeners continue to say that art and politics must never be mixed? Were it not better to accept the fact that they are continually being mixed whether we like it or not, and instead of trying to hinder a natural process, try to arrange that when the paths of music and politics cross it will be with a minimum of friction and disturbance. At least we should
be able to prevent a repetition of the havoc that unreasoned political passion worked in our musical life during the last war. There are even authorities, from Plato onwards who have taught that a meeting of music and politics may be mutually beneficial and pursue high constructive aims. These are a few of the questions and problems suggested by the opening programs of this season's Boston Symphony concerts.88

Another target audience for The Transcript were the Brahmins who regularly attended symphony concerts. Often Edward’s copy shared a page with society columnist Allison Arnold, who reported on the opening concert of the 1939-1940 season at Symphony Hall:

Many in the large audience have had the same seats for years, and will pass them on with the family portraits and the silver to future generations. Sitting in her usual seats was Mrs. Chares Goddard Weld, looking very patrician in black with which she wore luxurious sables…. with Mrs. Robert F. Herrick, Jr. in smart tan tweeds was her attractive sub-debutante daughter, Miss Romaine Pierce, who wore a cunning striped turban with her green wool frock89

Remember that Olin Downes soon tired of the Brahmin ambience at Symphony Hall, the father of a boy pitied by the neighbors for canvassing the neighborhood for the League of Nations!

The Boston Symphony’s 1939-1940 season was the first covered by Edward Downes for The Transcript. Immediately he and the ticket buyers were thrust into

88 Boston Evening Transcript, September 20, 1939.
89 Boston Evening Transcript, October 14, 1939.
Koussevitzky’s penchant for new, untried and unfamiliar music. A Festival of American composers was sponsored by the Boston Symphony in October, 1939:

The second of two pre-season programs of American music ‘in honor of the American composer’ was presented to a large and enthusiastic audience yesterday afternoon in Symphony Hall by the Boston Symphony under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky. It included a symphony by Randall Thompson that has worn extremely well, a piano concerto by George Gershwin that has not worn so well, an American Festival Overture composed especially for this occasion by William Howard Schuman, and Roy Harris’s Third Symphony. The popular success of the afternoon was Randall Thompson’s Second Symphony in E minor which came last on the program. There was actual cheering and stamping of feet when Mr. Thompson appeared to acknowledge the applause and Koussevitzky beamed at the success of the American music which he has so discerningly and effectively sponsored since his arrival among us. Many of the melodies have a jaunty American inflection without, however, the slightest suggestion of cheapness. And popular does not mean shallow.

George Gershwin’s Concerto in F is today a core orchestral repertoire; on a program of music by Harris, Thompson and Schumann, it was the Gershwin work that was dismissed. George Gershwin’s Piano Concerto in F, ingratiating as it undoubtedly is, appeared:

. . . yesterday more interesting than significant. There are entertaining moments in the concerto that could have been written only by Gershwin, but they remain moments. And one came away with the renewed impression that Gershwin’s greatest work was done in the glorious musical comedies.

90 Ibid.
91 Boston Evening Transcript, November 18, 1939.
William Schumann, later President of Lincoln Center, came off poorly as well.

The *American Festival Overture* was politely received but when repeated one month later even the reserved and gracious Edward Downes had had enough, at least in print:

Frigidly, politely and firmly, A Boston Symphony audience revolted yesterday afternoon at the very beginning of the regular Friday matinee symphony concert. All through the opening number, *An American Overture* by 29 year old William Schumann, there had been much dubious shaking of heads. But when Dr. Koussevitzky finished his exhilarating performance of the overture on a particularly strong discord, a shudder of disapproval ran through the hall and the applause was so weak that it constituted a negative demonstration. One felt that only impeccable manners and a certain instinctive restraint stood in the way of more positive expression of annoyance.  

Downes wrote a think piece on October 14, 1939, further illustrating Koussevitzky’s wide breadth of repertoire. The conductor announced performances of two works for saxophone and orchestra, Ibert’s *Concertino for Saxophone and Eleven Instruments*, and Debussy’s *Rhapsody for Saxophone and Orchestra*. Downes writes compellingly of both works and pauses to give the saxophone itself a local angle:

Debussy’s saxophone work dates from the beginning of this century when the instrument carried few of the connotations it has today. The late Mrs. Richard J. Hall of this city, for example took up the saxophone for her health. Today medical authorities are cautious about endorsing the therapeutic value of the saxophone, in spite of the fact that the brother of the inventor, Alphonse Sax published in 1865 a pamphlet, ‘Gymnastics of the Lungs:

92 Ibid.
Instrumental Music from the Point of View of Hygiene and the Creation of Women’s Orchestras.’ One can assume however, that Mrs. Hall was also moved by musical considerations in her choice, for she was an amateur musician of some standing.\(^\text{93}\)

No singer in recent times had made more of a sensation at her debut in New York than Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad (1895-1962). Today, nearly fifty years after her death, Flagstad’s voice is still recalled with awe. Dame Joan Sutherland called Flagstad’s “the greatest voice I ever heard, and that’s that.” Flagstad made twenty-two appearances on tour with the Metropolitan Opera in Boston, from 1935 to 1941. As the war in Europe went on it was rumored that Flagstad would return to occupied Norway to be with her husband. This she did, and her American career was slow to recover. Edward Downes heard Flagstad sing Isolde at the Boston Opera House on April 1, 1940 and wrote in The Transcript the following day:

If rumor is true and the performance of Tristan und Isolde which the Metropolitan gave last night in Boston Opera House is the last one in which Bostonians will have the privilege of seeing and hearing Kirsten Flagstad’s impersonation of the Irish princess, it will have been a worthy performance to remember her by and one which will go down in musical annals as a historic event. It was the greatest impersonation of Isolde we have seen Flagstad give, and the miraculous thing about it was the way in which her conception of the part has increased in depth and subtlety.

Two years ago, Flagstad’s Isolde, though the finest then to be seen on the operatic stage, was still lacking in passionate bitterness, the biting irony and sovereign

\(^93\) Boston Evening Transcript, October 14, 1939.
contempt which are part of Isolde’s emotions in the first act. At that time Flagstad still appeared too fundamentally sweet and amiable a character ever to be able to master and express the wild storms of destructive rage of the intense inward suffering which Wagner makes his heroine hide behind a mask of icy scorn.

One thing however, always remained true of Flagstad: her art continued to grow. To see her do the same role two years in succession invariably has meant being made to witness a fascinating development of dramatic instinct and music intuition. And today she has accomplished what to many spectators seemed impossible a few years ago. As always, since she has been at the Metropolitan, Flagstad has been the greatest Wagnerian soprano to be heard since the World War, but now her acting too, equals the greatest acting of Isolde that has been seen heard in the same period.  

Lotte Lehmann returned to Boston to sing her famous Marschallin in Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Boston Opera House. Edward Downes reviewed the performance in *The Transcript* on January 8, 1940:

In the ten years since this writer first heard the unforgettable *Rosenkavalier* of the Vienna State Opera; Lotte Lehmann’s Marschallin has changed. If it no longer has quite the same opulence of voice, her impersonation has grown in depth and subtlety. It has become even more intense and moving than it was. There are Marchallins who are more naturally aristocratic, but none more poignantly human. Last night Mme. Lehmann lived her part as did no one else on stage. The gentle dignity with which she covers her agony at the thought of growing old, of losing Octavian, her vision of herself as the old Princess, *die alte Fuerstin Resi*, the heartbreaking simplicity of the pantomime that closes the first act and the noble gesture of renunciation in the final trio - these are memories of

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94 *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 2, 1940.
Lehmann to be cherished, for we shall not see them again soon.\textsuperscript{95}

By 1941 Lehmann was a refugee in this country, and Flagstad had returned to her family in occupied Norway. With war in Europe leading Downes to create pieces on the arts and politics for Transcript readers, the war at home gave him a new direction and pointed him to a number of new careers:

I was opted out of the Army in 1942 because of poor eyesight. Instead, I joined the Office of Special Services. They needed someone who could write fast, who knew languages, and could scan quickly a large amount of intelligence material and newspapers. The OSS eventually became the Central Intelligence Agency! While I do not consider myself a founding father of the CIA, I could have stayed on for a longer period after the war. I decided against it because I was convinced that to be of long-term use in international politics would require knowledge of history and an understanding of economics and military affairs at a level it would take years to reach. I must also admit that in later years after reading about them in the papers I was glad about leaving the CIA and going back to music!\textsuperscript{96}

Edward’s commanding officer wrote at his honorable discharge…”he assumed full responsibility for all staff research in the extremely broad field of European political developments related to World War II. On the basis of this work, he drew up hundreds of intelligence reports on subjects of vital importance to U.S. policy. Many of the reports were prepared as briefing papers for the President of the United States, the Department of State and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Mr. Downes performed these duties with distinction. I scarcely need add I am sure that his

\textsuperscript{95} Boston Evening Transcript, January 8, 1940.
\textsuperscript{96} Edward Downes to author, November 10, 1994.
character and personal integrity were of the highest order.\textsuperscript{97}

“I decided to go to Harvard in 1947,” Edward said later:

I realized I had very little formal education. As a kid I had attended the Dalton School but had never graduated. I remember one of the instructors there liked to refer to himself as Sunshine because, as he actually told us, he liked to spread sunshine around. I later attended Columbia, but really instead of college, I headed to Europe in 1930, and made trips back and forth for a number of years. I worked my passages on tramp steamers. So it was time to get a degree, and since I knew Boston well and people remembered me from my Transcript years, Harvard seemed logical.\textsuperscript{98}

It was while studying for his Ph.D. at Harvard that Edward encountered Archibald “Doc” Davison, conductor of the Harvard Glee Club and Chapel Choir. Dr. Davidson made a vivid impression both on Edward Downes and another pupil a few years older, critic and composer Virgil Thomson:

...known as “Doc” (Davison) was thirty-four, smallish, sandy haired and balding. A Scottish disciplinarian of relentless mission, he had already transformed the college Glee Club from an adjunct of the Mandolin Club into a virtuoso choral society. And he was proceeding in the next few years to transform throughout America music instruction in the schools. Some years later he was to found today’s main model among music courses for laymen, known nationally as Harvard’s Music I.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{97} Edward Downes Papers, Howard Gottlieb Collection, Boston University.

\textsuperscript{98} Edward Downes notes for an unpublished autobiography.

What Thomson hints at, Edward made plain. Davison never left Harvard. The world came to Davison, to the extent that Edward recalled the Professor’s hearty greetings when Downes returned to campus after a trip, “Well Edward, how are things out in the field?”

The answer would have to be pretty exciting. Koussevitzky’s career was winding down and the Boston Symphony was preparing to welcome the Alsatian conductor Charles Munch as its new Music Director. Leonard Bernstein had gone from nightclub revues with Betty Comden and Adolph Green to the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall. The venerable Edward Johnson retired as General Manager of the Metropolitan, making way for Rudolf Bing, who would bring with him both stage directors from Broadway and the return to New York of Kirsten Flagstad. And Edward Downes moved to Minnesota.

“I had never been west of the Mississippi until 1952 when I took a teaching post at the University of Minnesota. I remained there for five years and was very happy.”

But New York is hard to resist. Olin Downes died in 1955. He and Edward’s mother had divorced, and Olin remarried. Father and stepmother lived in the same Dakota apartment. Olin Downes’ career took a different turn when he joined the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. It was a post made for the erudite Downes, the dean of America’s music critics by World War II, writing in “the newspaper of record.” In fact,

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Downes had been doing intermission commentary for the New York Philharmonic broadcasts for years. But the Met was different, and the *Opera Quiz*, a regular intermission feature, may likely have inspired such quiz shows as the *$64,000 Question* and *I've Got a Secret*. It was Papa Olin who made way for his son to hold a popular and high-powered post for nearly forty years.
CHAPTER 6

THE GRAND QUIZMASTER

No radio quiz show in the history of broadcasting has had a longer run than the Texaco Opera Quiz. Not Jeopardy. Not The Price is Right. There isn’t even a close second. – Anthony Tomassini, The New York Times 101

The Metropolitan Opera first broadcast a performance on radio on January 12, 1910 when Acts 2 and 3 of Tosca were transmitted from the rooftop of the opera house on 39th and Broadway to a few hundred listeners able to hear via telephone lines across the Hudson in New Jersey. The signal was apparently lousy, but the experiment was repeated the following evening, when some lucky and adventurous listeners outside the opera house heard Enrico Caruso sing his signature role, Canio in I Pagliacci. Here the experiment ended, not to be repeated until December 25, 1931, when all of Humperdinck’s Hansel and Gretel was broadcast live nationally. And from then on, the Metropolitan Opera has been on the air every Saturday afternoon from December-through April.

The Chicago Opera had begun broadcasting its performances in 1927, when listeners throughout the Midwest heard the garden scene of *Faust* with Edith Mason, Charles Hackett and Richard Bonelli. But it took a few more years until the Metropolitan’s General Manager, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, allowed himself to be convinced that an audience listening for free wouldn’t have a negative impact at the box office:

People thought the idea of putting opera on the air was “madness”. They saw no sense to it at all. There was one exception however, Mr. Mervin H. Aylesworth. He firmly believed that the opera belonged on the radio and he meant to get it there whatever the opposition. Time after time he spoke to Gatti and finally Gatti broke down to the point of explaining the reasons why the Met shouldn’t be broadcast… He was skeptical of the fidelity of a broadcast from the stage. He didn’t think the radio would do justice to his orchestra.102

In his indispensable history of the Met broadcasts, *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met*, Paul Jackson quotes *Opera News*:

Charles Gray, NBC engineer in charge of the technical aspects of the first season of broadcasts, was the man on the spot for the demonstration for Gatti. He brought his equipment to the opera house on the evening of 23 December 1931, for the performance of *Madama Butterfly* featuring Maria Muller, Giovanni Martinelli and Antonio Scotti. The equipment was the same as he used when broadcasting a dance band, nothing special about it. But Gray was well aware of the importance of the occasion.

I knew that if Gatti weren’t sold the first time he never would be. The opera started… and I was in constant touch with Mr. Aylesworth in his office. Soon he told me that

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Gatti wanted to hear more orchestra, so I increased the volume. Gatti still wasn’t satisfied, so I increased it some more. This time it was too much and I had to cut the orchestra down. But Gatti was convinced.\textsuperscript{103}

Generous sponsorships helped. Texaco’s sixty year relationship with the Met didn’t begin until 1940, but RCA’s David Sarnoff was an enthusiastic supporter and among earlier sponsors were the manufacturers of Listerine mouthwash! But in the early days contractual arrangements for broadcasts were made directly between the Metropolitan and NBC:

The Met was to choose the opera each week and to notify NBC of its decision no later than one week in advance of each broadcast. NBC agreed to pay the Metropolitan the sum of $120,000 per season for each of the two seasons, which is at the rate of $5000 per broadcast for twenty four broadcasts during each season in the amounts of $10,000 or $20,000 each month\textsuperscript{104}

Live broadcasts of opera performances offer unparalleled excitement to the listening audience, and hopefully moments, if not entire acts of musical glory. The day following the Met’s \textit{Hansel} broadcast, the public heard Act II and III of Bellini’s \textit{Norma} with the great Rosa Ponselle, conducted by Tullio Serafin. Thus the bar for artistic quality was set very high from the broadcasts’ first days.\textsuperscript{105}

How to fill the intermissions during live broadcasts? Downtime on commercial radio was unthinkable then as now. Early Met broadcasts were hosted by Deems Taylor


\textsuperscript{104} Jackson, op cit.

\textsuperscript{105} This elusive \textit{Norma} broadcast is still being sought out by collectors today.
(1885-1966), a student architect turned composer who had been a member of the Algonquin Round Table and had once briefly dated Dorothy Parker. Taylor’s opera *The King’s Henchman* premiered at the Metropolitan in 1927 and was given seventeen performances over the next two seasons. But it was as a *raconteur* and media “expert” that Taylor found his true calling on radio:

In 1927 the Columbia broadcasting system was founded. In one of its inaugural coast to coast transmissions, an hour of Taylor’s opera *The King’s Henchman* was broadcast from Newark, New Jersey. Deems Taylor himself explained the libretto over the air. It was the beginning of a new career for Taylor.

In 1931 he broadcast a series of music appreciation talks on the opera over the National Broadcasting Network and later appeared as a commentator on the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. From 1938 to 1943 he was the intermission commentator for the broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic. He didn’t stop there; he also emceed a number of non-musical radio programs and appeared as guest on the popular radio quiz show *Information Please!* He had earlier become an earlier prototype of that small club of intellectual and cultural luminaries who are accepted on radio and television as popularizing, media centric explicators to the laymen of serious subjects.\(^\text{106}\)

But it’s not Deems Taylor whose name is forever associated with the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, but Milton Cross (1897-1975) who hosted every Met broadcast performance from 1931 until 1975. In forty-four years Cross missed two broadcast performances, first following the death of his daughter and several years later

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of his wife. In fact, Milton Cross never retired and was preparing a broadcast of Rossini’s *L’italiana in Algeri* with Marilyn Horne when he died unexpectedly on January 2, 1975.

Edward Downes worked with Milton Cross for a number of years.

With Deems Taylor going on to other broadcast work, there was a need for a regular intermission commentator who could lend knowledge, class, and a bit of glamour to the proceedings. For one season only intermission commentary was provided by the most glamorous name of all in opera, the retired diva Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967).

Celebrated for her *Madama Butterfly, Tosca, Carmen* and *Zaza*, this Boston born daughter of a baseball player charmed the Crown Prince of Germany during her years at the Berlin Imperial Opera, and was second only to Caruso in box office appeal before her retirement from the Metropolitan in 1922. Rumors of affairs with conductor Arturo Toscanini, and a huge following from the silent pictures she made in Hollywood, when the opera houses were closed for the summer (including a 1915 *Carmen* that offers a lot of pleasure nearly 100 years later) guaranteed her popularity.

Farrar at fifty no longer sang publicly but retained a potent name for the public and a spectacular charm. Miss Farrar wasted no time in making herself comfortable in the cramped broadcast booth provided for her, “a little salon such as would please any woman in her own home,”¹⁰⁷ she reported, complete with a specially equipped piano at her disposal. There was a problem with the piano, since Miss Farrar preferred a different

brand than Knabe, an important sponsor of the Met broadcasts, and it was thought she would not only use the Knabe but promote it on air. The contretemps between diva and executives was of small consequence to the former movie star and diva who had long ago caught the eye of royalty. Metropolitan assistant Manager Edward Ziegler was called in to arbitrate. “In the end it was Knabe that was put straight.... with Miss Farrar where there was a will there was a way, and the way had always been hers.”

The most spectacular event in the earlier years of the Met broadcasts was the unheralded debut of a soprano from Norway. Kirsten Flagstad (1895-1962) sang Sieglinde on the February 2, 1935 broadcast matinee of Die Walküre. It was reported that Miss Farrar threw away her script and told the radio audience they had just heard the most exciting thing that could happen in the theater, the birth of a new star. This in a season that saw Farrar hosting such performances as Don Giovanni with Ezio Pinza and Rosa Ponselle, Lohengrin with Lauritz Melchior and Elisabeth Rethberg, and La traviata with Ponselle and Lawrence Tibbett. Small wonder these broadcasts captured the public from their earliest years.

Olin Downes took his turn as intermission commentator and host of Texaco’s Opera Quiz, the beloved intermission feature that began life in the 1940-41 season. Experts turned up to answer on-air questions put to the panel by the radio audience. This early example of interactive radio endures to this day. Conductor Robert Lawrence

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108 Jackson, op. cit.
took over for one season following Olin Downes’ death in 1955. Broadcast producer Geraldine Souvaine called on Edward the following year:

I was back in New York following my time in Minneapolis. My father had died and there was business to settle. The family apartment in the Dakota was sold and I moved to different quarters in the building. I had taken a teaching job at Queens College, and I was of course listening in to the broadcasts while Robert Lawrence was hosting the quiz. But Lawrence got an offer to go off and conduct in Ankara, and the quiz master job became available. It was all very simple. The Souvaines, who had produced the broadcasts for Texaco for many years, called me, and that was that.109

Many years later, Edward Downes was interviewed for *The New York Times* remembering his days on the Met broadcasts, and typically playing down his role. “The quiz was decidedly a side issue when I took it up. We used to call it “sugar-coated education”:

It is of course, but this characterization may underestimate the value the quiz has in making opera approachable. Buffs and neophytes hear opera experts, writers, historians, producers, conductors, as they recall memories of first operas or tell anecdotes of operatic mishaps. Sometimes the knowledge on the panel is awesome. But not infrequently the panelists are stumped by a question or exasperated by their inability to identify a familiar sounding excerpt. If the experts don’t know, how can a lay listener feel inadequate? The message that comes through is: we’re all in this together, learning, listening and enjoying ourselves110

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109 Edward Downes to author, April 8, 1995.
110 Tommasini, op. cit.
Edward’s position as quiz master brought him into contact with luminaries from show business, opera, academia and business, a wide assortment of types who sat in the “expert” chairs over the years: conductors Sigmund Levarie, Walter Ducloux and Robert Lawrence and the gravel voice and tart-tongued Alberta Masiello. Actors Tony Randall and Walter Slezak were regular panelists, along with Cornelia Otis Skinner and opera expert Mary Ellis Peltz. But it was never the mix of on-air guests that challenged Edward. In fact he was loved by all who sat opposite the mikes from him:

I know that most of the panelists feel that I am on their side. Although the role of quizmaster would lend itself easily to invite a hostile relationship, I have often been frustrated particularly during the so called warm-up session, when I have been at pains to reassure a nervous panel member and have those efforts thwarted by a thoughtless remark from Gerri.111

“Gerri” was Geraldine Souvaine, a former singer who took over all production responsibilities of the Met broadcasts following the death of her husband, advertising executive Henry Souvaine in the early 1950s. In fact, all broadcast business was conducted not in the Metropolitan itself – except of course at air time - but from the Souvaine offices in Rockefeller Center. On one thing can all those involved with the broadcasts agree: during Geraldine Souvaine's tenure, which lasted into the 1980s, she considered herself absolutely, 100 percent in charge and thought nothing of telling off even Rudolf Bing, the Met’s autocratic general manager. It was Gerri’s show more than it was Bing's, Downes', or even Verdi’s, Mozart’s or Wagner’s:

111 Downes, Edward, notes for unpublished autobiography.
Gerri would hold staff meetings in her apartment. This would be early on the Friday afternoon before the broadcast. She’d usually be in bed, and a bit the worse the wear for a few late morning cocktails. After Henry died Gerri had a companion called Eric. He was Swedish and many years younger than she was. He was a nice enough fellow, but his role seemed to be to hang around in as little clothing as possible. I’d say he was meant to be decorative.112

If Eric was diverting, it was often difficult to deal with Geraldine Souvaine.

Edward called her his ‘most difficult professional relationship.

If I disagreed with her, or if she thought I wasn’t giving her enough attention she would say, ‘You can’t possibly do this job and teach at Queens College,’ and I would reply, ‘Then I’ll quit and teach full time at Queens, Gerri...they pay me more!’ Like many men, a dictatorial woman can irritate me more than a dictatorial man can. But after my first Quiz she said. ‘Edward I want you to remember this because there will be a lot of times when I will be very disagreeable to you. But today you did a more professional job with your first broadcast than your father was able to do until his eighth or ninth broadcast.’ But it wasn’t many weeks later before Gerri said to me instantly following another broadcast, this time in front of the studio audience, ‘Edward you ruined everything!’ I forget what it was I was supposed to have done. I was startled that she could be so completely absorbed by her own anxiety for the program and her irritation at me for something that might have been real or imagined. Gerri was totally unconcerned about how I felt or how others might regard her outburst. Her strongest anxiety and her nastiest behavior are usually caused by an almost neurotic concern for the quality of the broadcast. No doubt she is extremely difficult to get along with and can be a person boiling over

112 Ibid.
with irrational hostility. This puts a burden on all her associates.\textsuperscript{113}

To those who wonder how hard it could be to host a live twenty minute radio show once a week, where all you have to do is read questions, Edward offered this lesson:

The work of the Met broadcasts initially involved much more than the \textit{Opera Quiz}. In order to be able to pay me my salary, the Souvaine office, which produced the broadcasts engaged me to write all of the continuity for Milton Cross. This included the opera’s plot, etc. I once asked Milton how much he understood of what he was saying every week and he laughed and said, ‘Not a godamned thing!’ Scripts for Milton had to be fresh and not routine. When I began, it had been the custom to write out every word of spontaneous conversations for Milton and his guests. But it all sounded silly and confused.

The job of quizmaster requires a broad knowledge of operatic materials. It involves not only knowledge in being able to find out quickly the correct answer to a question, but it also involves the ability to recognize the rightness or wrongness of panelist’s answer to a question that may have an unlimited number of correct answers. He will know a high enough percentage of the cases where the answer is correct or not, and if he doesn’t know, he must attempt to be as straightforward as possible about his ignorance without being an ignoramus!

For the quiz I had regular Thursday consultations at the Souvaine office for the entire day during which I go through a large amount of mail, which had been sifted by someone else and chose the questions from letters that seemed to me the most interesting. The selections were discussed with Gerri. Normally there is agreement, but sometimes there’s forceful disagreement. Then there have

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
to be rewrites and questions often rearranged so that sometimes very little of the correspondence remains.\textsuperscript{114}

Another perspective of the Quizmaster’s work, at least as Edward did it for forty years, comes from Edward Downes’ longtime assistant Martha Lattimore:

Edward was from the old school and never went on the air unless he was thoroughly prepared and knew every possible answer to the questions. He worked on those questions for three days before each Quiz. He chose the questions for each panel trying to make it entertaining and make each panelist shine. He was especially good at that. Because of his preparation he was able to give hints and joke with the panelists making them more relaxed. There was an art to letting people down for wrong answers. And Edward was the master.\textsuperscript{115}

Master indeed! Edward even let down, gently, Speight Jenkins who spent a number of years as music critic of the New York Post (1973-1981):

One Saturday morning, after the fourth version of typing the questions, Edward called to me and told me to go look up exactly where the pistol shot occurs in La Fanciulla del West. It was late, almost 11:45 and he was supposed to be at the Met at 11. I ran into the living room and pulled out the score ran back into the office and showed him the place in question. ‘Good! I thought so, but Speight Jenkins is on the panel today and what do you want to bet that he challenges me on it.’ I laughed and he ran out the door. As usual I taped the Quiz, so I was sitting in the office listening. Would you believe it, when Edward gave the answer Speight Jenkins challenged him. Edward laughed and said, ‘Mr. Jenkins, I think you will find that I am correct. You see, I looked it up just before I came over to the Met!’ There was a large burst of applause and

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Martha Lattimore email December 19, 2007.
Edward Downes chaired approximately eight hundred on-air presentations of \textit{Opera Quiz} between 1958 and his retirement at the end of the 1998-1999 broadcast season. No broadcaster survives for forty years unless he has earned the devotion of the listening public and the trust of his on and off-air colleagues. \textit{Quiz} panelists, those “experts” called upon to answer questions submitted by the radio audience were wined and dined before the broadcast, but aside from a sound check a few minutes prior to the on-air light, the panelists had no knowledge of the bulk of the questions and had no chance to prepare. The hardiest public figures, Tony Randall, Alberta Masiello, and Speight Jenkins, all of them used to facing the public, could be affected by nerves, or the lunch table wine or high ball. On-air train wrecks were gracefully deflected by Edward’s wit and charm. “Edward’s motto was to entertain,” remembered Martha Lattimore.

“And he felt if they learned something in the process, so much the better:”

He was a genius at making people feel at ease. But that was because of his preparation. He knew his panel and he knew which questions they’d be good at answering. He also had the knack of prompting a panelist so that they would get the answer and feel better about themselves. Edward made the quiz and opera more accessible to the average person. Even though he had all these facts and figures in his head, he wasn’t above telling the public that he had spent the time to look things up before coming to the quiz. He wanted people to understand what they were hearing. He often said to me ‘Martha, if there is something

\footnote{Martha Lattimore email, March 4, 2007.}
you don’t understand, let me know, because if you don’t, they won’t either.\textsuperscript{117}

In addition to being well prepared, a smooth delivery and a cool head are imperative for live on-air work. Each panelist or on-air guest brings a distinct personality with them, and either a surfeit or lack of on-air nervousness. Rudolf Bing was interviewed annually as General Manager of the Met. Edward read a letter on air from a grateful on-air listener, “May I compliment you on bringing to radio listeners the fine selection of operas you have over the past year. You have done justice to everyone’s taste, and I thank you.” Bing responded, “I don’t believe it. Would you read it again?” Edward joined in the laughter. In a quiz discussion applying the standards of the legitimate theater to the opera house, stage actor Tony Randall bravely suggested that Broadway might possibly learn something from the great opera directors like Gunter Rennert. “I’m all for bringing fat ladies to Broadway, for that matter,” he added. When the laughter subsided, Edward quietly asked, “Do you mean that only fat ladies sing opera?”\textsuperscript{118}

Asked to cite an instance of operatic song improvised on the spot, beloved panelist George Jellinek quite correctly cited ‘\textit{Libiamo}’ the first act drinking song from Verdi’s \textit{La traviata}. Edward quipped, ‘Yes, but I’ve always wondered, if that piece is supposed to be an improvisation by the tenor, how come the chorus knows it, too!’ A bride-to-be sent a question in asking the panel to suggest some operatic music that

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118} Father Owen Lee email, December 19, 2007.
would be appropriate for her wedding. An unfortunate panelist suggested the wedding
music from Verdi’s *Ernani*. Edward cautioned, “Well, I don’t think the bride would want
wedding music from an opera where the bridegroom kills himself!”

Occasionally Edward would cross the aisle to join the *Quiz* panel, and a guest
host would be brought in. In 1971 the pianist Ivan Davis posed this question to Edward,
sent in by Robert Evans of Wellesley, Massachusetts. “Have you ever had the urge to
argue with a panelist about his opinion? I have often wished you did!”:

I’m delighted that Mr. Evans wants to encourage me, because I am an argumentative cuss. But I’m afraid if I
started arguing with the panel we’d be arguing all night. I can think of a lot of opinions I would have liked to have
disagreed with. Last week when Tony Randall was on he was asked to name just one masterpiece he didn’t care
for, and he named about five. I was ready to murder him for each one he mentioned! Especially *The Magic Flute*. I
can’t see why a sensitive person like him, and an artist, could not admire it. I would have liked to go through *The
Magic Flute* number by number and tell him so. But in the role of quizmaster I had to rein myself in.119

But if Edward was famous for being behind the mike during all of his radio years
Edward Downes by no means stayed away from academia or the theater. His faculty
associations included Queens College and the Julliard School. During a 1996 interview
with WFMT Chicago broadcaster Bruce Duffie, Edward was asked about opera on
 television, supertitles, and the judgment of the opera going public:

TV opera is very dependent upon the technical director.
He is almost as important as the performer or composer!

119 Father Owen Lee, e mail, December 1, 2007
The camera shots, the choice of shots, and the sequences make the visual element much more powerful than it is in the theater. I’m a proponent of opera in the language of the audience. However nowadays most artists who are on the international circuit learn their roles in the original languages. I think this is an unfortunate development because those countries that have been really productive in creating new repertoire have been the countries where the audience understood the language.

I absolutely detest hearing an opera sung in a language I don’t understand. It’s a real deprivation, and I think that those who have not had the opportunity to hear opera in a language they understand don’t know what they’re missing. There’s a silly minority who claims they don’t want to know, who just want to hear the music but those people should just go to concerts or listen to records….. if supertitles are put on where they are not intrusive, I think they’re a wonderful thing. I even liked it when the opera being done was sung in English.

Asked if the public was always right in its judgment of opera Edward replied, “Oh heavens, no!”:

But often the public, given time, comes around to a better appreciation. There are lots of works that had rough beginnings, and I think it’s partly that audiences mature or become aware of what the author was driving at. Sometimes there are people who help form opinions. I will go back and listen to something another time if someone who’s opinion I respect says its great stuff. There are many works I’ve had to listen to many times before I enjoyed them. Lulu was one. I remember I heard Wozzeck for the first time in Vienna in 1930. It was very new at the time, and I don’t think I enjoyed more than about ten minutes of it, although I knew it was gripping drama. Then the war intervened and it wasn’t done, and heard again around 1950 and I wondered what it was I didn’t understand. My
ears had changed and been educated, and I think that happens to a lot of people.\textsuperscript{120}

Like his father, whom he called a populist, Edward Downes in forty years of broadcasts strove to make panelists feel comfortable and at home and to provide maximum enjoyment and information for the listening audience. That Geraldine Souvaine called the \emph{Opera Quiz} “sugar coated education” didn’t keep him from careful preparation nor for the realization that there was a huge listening audience. Producer Michael Bronson points to 6,000 questions on average, that are submitted each year by listeners, as the best evidence of the quiz’s success.

Edward Downes retired from broadcasting at the end of the 1997-1998 season. For a man who had spent his 75\textsuperscript{th} birthday walking the Great Wall of China, the next ten years had seen a decline in his health and energies. Still, it was hard for Edward to let go and harder for the public to let go of him. Since his retirement there has never been a permanent quiz host for the Met broadcasts, though the quiz is in its sixty-seventh season as of this writing. Over ninety years, Downes had met the original Don Jose in \emph{Carmen}, the then elderly tenor Lherie, he had been entertained by Sibelius and Toscanini, had heard Richard Strauss conduct Wagner and his own music from the pit, heard Ponselle, Chaliapin, Flagstad, Lehmann -who became a friend- plus Georges Thill, Melchior and Clarence Whitehill. Edward lived to hear operas by Philip Glass and John Corgiliano at the Metropolitan, and for forty years was a voice of decency, information

\textsuperscript{120} Interview with Bruce Duffie, WFMT Chicago, published in \emph{Opera Journal}, vol. XIX, Nov. 3, 1986. Used by permission of Bruce Duffie.
and humor on radio broadcasts that today reach every state and fifty countries. Edward Downes never lost his decency. Many years ago, a young man, scarcely qualified but who had been a Met panelist for several years, was told to take over the quiz master spot for one day only. Edward would join the panel. When the young man confessed to being nervous and intimidated, Edward replied over lunch, “Don’t worry at all. You’re among friends.”¹²¹

Edward died in the Dakota, where he lived off and on since 1924, on December 26, 2001 at the age of ninety:

But I’ve found that most of the time, he held his wit at bay and, like Sir John Falstaff, was the cause of wit in others. He clearly thought that that was what was expected of him as quizmaster. He served us who were on the panel.¹²²

¹²¹  I’m the young man.
CONCLUSION

Was Edward Downes influential? Does he have a lasting legacy? I’d venture a yes and a no. Speight Jenkins, today the General Director of the Seattle Opera writes that “his presence on the quiz was charming, but I think to listeners west of the Hudson he always came over as somewhat quaint.”

Martin Bernheimer of the London Financial Times tells us:

As quiz moderator and intermission host he was, as we all know, without peer. But excellence in that area does not reverberate far. In fact, people took him for granted. He made it all sound so easy, so natural, yet we know he spent long days in preparation to create the illusion. His achievements come into special focus, for those of us who still remember and care, when compared to the glib, unprofessional, off the cuff, golly-gosh efforts expended for the unwashed masses during intermissions these days.

I remember asking Edward how much mail he received over a given week during broadcast season, and being surprised when he said very little. Bernheimer’s point that years of excellence are taken for granted is well taken. Further, Edward came from an era when words mattered. Today, the electronic media gives us unlimited access visually and aurally to music and personalities going back nearly a century. Youtube can show us

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123 Email to author, December 5, 2007.
124 Email to author, November 10, 2007.
performances conducted by Furtwangler and Richard Strauss; there's even silent film of
Arthur Nikisch. Rosa Ponselle’s screen test for an MGM Carmen is on Youtube, so is
Flagstad’s Isolde. One can hear and savor performances of the past in film and on CD.
Edward Downes continued the art of describing music in words proving to us that words
count. Today, you’d expect to read that “Lotte Lehmann sang a recital of German vocal
music last night in Carnegie Hall” and not much else. Remember Edward’s review in the
Transcript nearly seventy years ago:

It is only an artist of the stature of Lehmann who are able
to supply that something new. And she does it, not by
doing something startling or sensational with Brahms. She
does it by penetrating to the very core of the composer’s
thought. What stands revealed to us then is not a clever
idea that Lehmann had, but Schubert and Brahms himself
in all the freshness of primal inspiration.

The tone of this review, printed in The Boston Evening Transcript in 1940 is the
heart of Edward’s legacy as a critic. With elegant language he explains why he finds a
performance great. In making printed criticism available after so many years, it is my
hope that people who wander over to Youtube will want to know more. Images and
sounds available today can be faded, but words remain fresh. That is Edward Downes’
legacy:  music is important, that artists are to be respected and to be encouraged and
that audiences must have access to the best performances and information, so they are
enchanted, and entertained.
Quotes from Edward Downes come from a series of oral interviews conducted with him by Christopher Purdy in New York in 1994 and 1995. Material from The Boston Evening Transcript is taken from Edward Downes’ scrapbooks held with his papers at the Howard Gottlieb Research Library at Boston University. I am indebted to the Metropolitan Opera Archives and its Director, Robert Tuggle for making reviews and performance annals going back to 1883 available on line at www.metopera.org/archives.


