

TELEFAX

From/De/Von: Astrid Várnay

To/A/An: Igor Kipnis

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30.5.92

Dear Mr. Kipnis,

It was with great pleasure to receive your letter regarding the planned biography of your distinguished father.

It was a stroke of fate that I had the opportunity of appearing with him in "Die Walküre", replacing Madame Lotte Lehmann, in the role of Sieglinde on December 6, 1941.

You can imagine my feelings at stepping out on stage in this broadcast performance, with two great singing artists, namely your father and Lauritz Melchior, both of whom I had respected and enjoyed as a standee for years. These feelings can only be felt and not described.

Fifty years later, this performance is considered a historic event. A CD of this "Walküre" was recently released by Music Lovers, as a result of the avid research and technical craftsmanship of the late Jürgen Grundheber. The CD came out; with my name as the "come-on", but especially featuring the crème de la crème of the Wagnerian wing at the Metropolitan Opera in those days - in addition to the aforementioned luminaries, we also shared the stage with Helen Traubel, Kerstin Thorborg and Friedrich Schorr, with the young Erich Leinsdorf conducting.

Getting back to Mr. Kipnis: as a standee, I had been watching "Ring" performances for several seasons. The sets were the same, and the staging likewise. I knew what the protagonists were going to do, which gave me a good handicap. This is why I was not astonished at your father as Hunding dutifully "bellowing" at me to "carry out his instructions" as Sieglinde. He was harsh with me on stage, but, after the curtain fell, very kind and complimentary. For a beginner, it was like getting a medal. This collegial cordiality is an attitude I have tried to extend to qualified newcomers throughout the many years of my own career.

Mr. Igor Kipnis - May 30, 1992 - 2.

Besides this experience, I soon had an unwitting lesson from your father in a completely different frame of reference. It was a performance of "Götterdämmerung", in which your father's magnificent voice came to full blossom in the taxing role of Hagen. I was his Gutrune. He immediately showed what it meant to be his stage sister, over whom he exerted a great amount of authority, an authority which manifested itself in his domination of the stage action.

In this production I had been instructed to put my hand on the table and lean forward, showing my keen interest and curiosity, when Gutrune asks Hagen about Siegfried's exploits. "Mr. Hagen" put his hand firmly atop mine, making it virtually impossible for me to respond histrionically to anything he was doing. For that performance I was checkmated.

I happen to be a Taurus, who, every once in a while, shows its horns, and I spent days contemplating how gently but unmistakably I might counter this ploy in a coming performance.

The next time we found ourselves across the table from each other, I repeated the stage director's instructions, and your father, true to form, again set his hand firmly on mine, but this time I simply took my free hand, placed it upon his and held on for dear life. I still remember the graciousness with which your father realized that I may have been young, but I had a certain resourcefulness that was not to be trifled with. We remained good acting and singing friends for all the years it was my privilege to perform with him.

It was fascinating to observe your father, with his many years of background and experience, when the tables were turned on him by an equally experienced colleague.

They speak of times when giants walked the earth, but no greater giants ever appeared than the two basso giants who walked the stage of the old Metropolitan in those halcyon days. Of course I'm referring to Fasolt and Fafner, the two giants in "Das Rheingold", in which your father was partnered by an artist of equal vocal stature, but not quite the sophistication, as Mr. Kipnis. I am, of course, referring to Emanuel List.

Obviously they were not the closest of friends. As a matter of fact, Mr. List, who suffered from a stammer, had great difficulty enunciating the name "Kipnis", often referring to your father as "Ki... Ki... the other one." This was common knowledge in the theatre, which added a bit of spice to every one of the rare performances when two artists of their calibre were called for.

Mr. Igor Kipnis - May 30, 1992 - 3.

I'm sure you've seen "Rheingold" often enough to know that there is a fair amount of sibling rivalry between the two "giants". Both gentlemen played that rivalry to the hilt, to the great joy of the audience.

I was doing the one and only "Freia" of my career, and thus was able to witness this rivalry first hand. What ultimately ensued may have been the reason I never sang the part again.

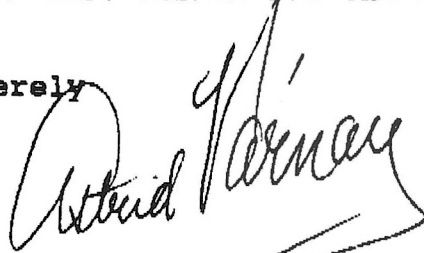
Anyway when the time came for Fafner to obliterate Fasolt towards the end of the opera, Fasolt usually slipped off the stage rapidly with Fafner, armed with a club which looked like an oversized baseball bat, in hot pursuit, so that the actual fratricide took place off stage with the drums in the pit supplying the requisite mayhem. In this specific performance, Mr. List had such an evil look in his eye that Mr. Kipnis as Fasolt broke every sprinting speed record as he lunged to the safe cover of the wings in mortal anxiety. If this was acting, then it was of the highest quality!?!

Of course, when anyone recalls the artistry of Alexander Kipnis, the first and foremost memory is one of the noblest sounds of that thrilling generation of vocal artists. Every Kipnis performance, whether enjoyed from the audience or shared on stage, was always a high point.

I hope this answers your question, and I close with kindest regards and warmest wishes for the success of your book.

Yours very sincerely

Astrid Várnay



P.S. My very dear friend and former young basso, Donald Arthur, whose knowledge of the bass repertoire has formed a focal point of his life, has kindly volunteered to send this letter to you on his fax machine as a silent tribute to your father. Please feel free to communicate with me at Mr. Arthur's fax number.

P.P.S. Would you be kind enough to acknowledge receipt of this fax whenever convenient. Thank you.