

**“O.G. the Incomparable”:
Memories of Ossip Gabrilowitsch**

**By
Russell McLauchlin**

**Music and Drama Critic
For *The Detroit News*
until his retirement in 1955.**

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JOHN McCABE

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Dear Kevin,

I have the vague idea that I might have mentioned my good friend, and close buddy of Gabrilowitsch, to you—a great drama critic, Russell McLauchlin. Russ was the dean of Detroit drama critics, having been one for over 40 years for *The Detroit News*. He was also the News's music critic, and reviewed OG many times over the years. OG in turn was delighted with both Russ and the reviews. They became fast friends. They had the same sense of humor, liked the same foods, etc. and palled around a very great deal through at least two decades.

In the fullness of time, Russ and I became rather the same sort of friends, indeed we even wrote a play together which was produced at The Lambs Club in New York. After Russ died, his widow, Grace, gave me all of Russ's papers because they had no children and because I was as close to being a son as Russ would ever have. Now has come the time for me to dispose of those papers because there just is no one around that has the same interests and background Russ and I shared. With this exception - the enclosed. The anecdotes Russ wrote (for an aborted memoir) of OG are enclosed for you to use as you see fit.

And one more which Russ did not see fit to put down on paper because it was (at least for that time) rather indecorous. I will tell it to you now.

OG had an office in one of Detroit's few skyscrapers on a top floor of same. He also had a telescope because he enjoyed looking down at the freighters on the winding Detroit River close by. One day in adjusting his telescope he inadvertently aimed it at an adjoining skyscraper, and saw in an office on a top floor a man and woman engaged in sex. There was nothing at all prurient in OG's having done this. It was all accidental. He turned the telescope away and looked at other things. But by now he was intrigued and very much in the mood and spirit of Jimmy Stewart in the Hitchcock film, REAR WINDOW, he inspected that office from time to time. He figured out a scenario for those people: it was an obvious case of a boss and his secretary having an affair. And a rather long-lasting one. He told Russ of all this, adding that he had looked up the name of the office in the Detroit directory, and was now set to have a little fun. Would Russ like to watch? Would he not. So, OG having obtained that office's phone number, called it at a moment when the guilty were caught in flagrante delicto. He dialed the phone number. All the while having Russ watch on the telescope. The phone was answered. "Hello?" said the man in the office. With solemn tones, OG said, "This is God. Your sinning must stop. NOW!" This last said thunderingly. A gasp from the man on the phone. From then on, OG told Russ, there was no more "sinning"—at least to public view.

Best wishes,

Jack

Russell McLaughlin was music critic and drama critic of The Detroit News for more than 30 years, until his retirement in 1955. Here he shares cherished memories of old Orchestra Hall, for 20 years the home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, from the seat on the aisle he occupied there for so many years. This article appeared in The Detroit News in September, 1970.

ORCHESTRA Hall: A Critic Remembers

By Russell McLaughlin

It was probably inevitable because, as some great philosopher has shrewdly remarked, we live in a changing world. But just the same, it carries a pang. I mean the impending tearing-down of Orchestra Hall.*

For such Detroiters as have come here lately, it may be that the words “Orchestra Hall” mean little, if anything. For their instruction, it is the ancient building which, since 1919, has stood on the northwest corner of Woodward Avenue and Parsons Street. It was the home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra for 20 years.

And to a number of us, whose chore it was to report on musical events for the daily prints, it was virtually our home, too. It is a fact that there were weeks not a few, when I sat in Orchestra Hall, seven evenings out of seven. And Ralph Holmes of the *Times*—remember him?—sat two rows behind me.

And shall we briefly grow statistical? *The Detroit News* seat, which I occupied for so many years that it almost became a physical appurtenance, was Number H-20. And, that being also the chemical formula for a familiar liquid, was the well-spring of more bad jokes than a reasonable man would believe.

It was a good seat. From it I obtained an excellent view of the fantastic shirt-collars and disorderly coiffure of Ossip Gabrilowitsch, as he stood on the podium. I was also able to examine, across the hall, the box occupied by William H. Murphy and the next one where sat the comfortable figure of Jerome Remick. Mr. Murphy was the orchestra’s principal angel.

There were 26 boxes, pursuing a great horseshoe from stage-left to stage-right and some genius had thought up the idea of designating them with the letters of the alphabet. At the Thursday evening concerts they were all occupied by Detroit’s rich and rare. It was what, I suppose, you would call an “era.”

The architect of the building was Howard Crane, famous in his generation, and he evidently took a European opera-house as more-or-less of a model. From the point of view of a listener, the acoustics are, of course, one of our modern mysteries. Everybody talks about them, but nobody knows anything about them. A former Metropolitan basso said to me, not long ago, “It was a hell of a place to sing in.”

But for the listener, they seemed okay. I remember once when all the world was young, Victor Herbert came to be guest-conductor at a couple of concerts. For some mysterious reasons, almost his whole public thought that magnificent Irishman was German. But they never heard him speak. On this occasion, he addressed the audience in these words:

“Ladies and gentlemen. The Detroit Symphony is second to none.”

That may have been a bit of Blarney; unless one were to urge that putting a man of Mr. Herbert’s architecture in a position to kiss the celebrated Stone was a considerable engineering feat. He probably meant it.

He was but one of a long and illustrious line of guests of renown. But the cherished holder of the stick was Ossip Gabrilowitsch.

He was not, contrary to a wide belief, the founder of the Detroit Symphony. That was a chap named Weston Gales, who never reached much celebrity. It was not a great while before Messrs. Murphy and Remick and their like—and their resources—determined to bring to a town what it called a “name.”

Gabrilowitsch certainly had a name, but it had not been as a conductor. He was a pianist and one of the foremost in this world. But our leaders of thought and taste believed that they discerned in him a great potential on the stand. This proved true. So, for a number of seasons, he conducted the burgeoning orchestra in a building somewhat to the south of where its ancient home now stands: a place called the Arcadia, which was chiefly devoted to the light, fantastic toe. I don’t believe that Gabrilowitsch ever danced in the Arcadia, but he conducted here for several years.

And then the orchestra’s parent-corporation bought an old church, just up the street, and the Symphony had a home of its own. For Orchestra Hall was built to replace the church.

I said that its impending demolition carries a “pang.” Here is one reason why:

Gabrilowitsch had an office on the second floor in the front of the building and one of its furnishings was, naturally, a Steinway. One unforgotten day I went up to interview him on some subject or other and the office was where we sat. The subject was, naturally, music. He interrupted himself. “Just a minute, I’ll show you what I mean,” he said, going to the keyboard. And for about a half hour, he played and played and there sat the McLaughlin boy, a completely spell-bound audience of one, while one of the mightiest pianists of this or any other age played whatever came into his head. When the boys begin destroying that office, they will shed several pints of my heart’s blood.

Detroiters generally called the great man “Gabby.” But the whole orchestra, and we who dealt therewith, called him “O.G.” Does this community need to be reminded that he was the son-in-law of Mark Twain?

The great days of Orchestra Hall were the days of O.G. Its history since has been, alas, a tale similar to those of many of Detroit’s noble structures, and not only noble, but of a vast importance to a city that wishes to be deemed a metropolis in something besides population.

Woodward Avenue, near which highway I was born, began a leisurely and dreadful history of decline. And Orchestra Hall stood exactly in the wrong place—neither downtown or up. Parking became one of the paramount demands of the whole human race and parking near Orchestra Hall was far to seek, in every meaning of the word. It commenced a dreary history.

For a while it was called the Paradise Theater which was a developing misnomer. Celebrated bands were its tenants and possibly O.G. turned over in his grave, for he held that kind of music in abhorrence. Finally, it became a church, a place of worship whose name was the Church of Our Prayer.

And then the celebrated Nederlander family came into the picture, first intending it for a legitimate theater, for the housing of musical shows. David Nederlander, father of the present four energetic and gifted sons, examined the situation with a shrewd eye—and there never was a shrewder—and decided, with sound judgment, that it would be a greater undertaking to restore it to its former physical condition than to pull it down and build something from scratch. So, for 11 years, there it stood, owned by the Nederlanders but hardly one of their assets.

And now it has been sold and on its site will be a restaurant for the accommodation of all the hungry doctors who inhabit Detroit’s new Medical Center.

It is now empty. Many of the seats have been removed and what has happened to the elegant boxes, you know as well as I. As long as it stood, it was a symbol, peered at curiously by newcomers and smiting the hearts of the dwindling lot who once knew it as the center of their lives.

*In 1970, following a series of marches and sidewalk benefit performances, musicians and friends of the DSO succeeded in saving Orchestra Hall from the wrecking ball. A year later it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1989, after a painstaking nineteen-year restoration, the DSO moved back to its historic home. Today the hall is considered to be one of the nation’s finest acoustic structures.

In 1996, the DSO announced a three-phase plan for the Orchestra Place Development Project, an educational, performing arts and office/retail complex on eight acres of land surrounding Orchestra Hall. Phase I, now complete, is a five-story office building and 800-car parking structure. Phase II is a new Detroit High School for the Fine and Performing Arts, to be constructed adjacent to Orchestra Hall on land donated by the DSO.

Phase III is the Max M. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, which will include new patron amenities and a second performance hall. Anchoring the expansion will be the new Jacob Bernard Pincus Music Education Center, providing music learning programs for people of all ages. The new facilities are slated to open in the fall of 2003.

Source: Detroit Symphony Web site: <http://www.detroitssymphony.com>

O.G. THE INCOMPARABLE

Ossip Gabrilowitsch, than whom there was never a more popular pianist or a more delightful human being, was for many years conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He was, of course, a Russian by birth. He acquired English to perfection and taught himself to use it colloquially.

“That new horn-player of ours is a peach,” he would say, in completely unaccented words.

He became an American in every detail but the pictorial. He had what is sometimes called “wild hair” and he wore the highest starched collars ever seen. We all wondered where he bought them. There was one theory that his wife made them in her sewing-room. He was tall and slender, with strongly-marked features and an outsized nose.

That wife of his was the daughter of Mark Twain, to whom her husband always referred as “the old gentleman.” He wore the old man’s watch-chain across his waistcoat and he held him in what you might call jolly veneration.

All the musical and journalistic professions in Detroit cut the stately Russian entitlement to “O.G.” Generally, his nickname was “Gabby.”

Mrs. O.G. was a beautiful woman and it was sad that their daughter inherited her father’s cast of countenance, instead of her mother’s. There is a story that once, long before the Gabrilowitsch marriage, a musical afternoon was held in the Mark Twain home. The old gentleman introduced the participants, among whom were the youthful O.G. and David Bispham, the baritone, who is, alas, forgotten nowadays.

The feature of the program was Clara Clemens, who insisted on being considered a musician. But she didn’t fool her father.

“We shall now hear from my daughter Clara,” said the old gentleman. “She is, they tell me, a mezzo-soprano. She is not quite so good a musician as Mr. Gabrilowitsch and Mr. Bispham, but she is much better looking.”

In the long years of O.G.’s incumbency with the Detroit Symphony, the wife of his bosom was occasionally presented as soloist, not at the weekend “pop” but to the stately audience of subscribers. What domestic pressures fruited into those events, I cannot say. All I can say is that they were exceedingly tough on the working press. Mrs. Gabrilowitsch, who was always billed as “Mme. Clara Clemens,” was not a good singer. We all felt the utmost respect and affection for her husband. In our few encounters, we found her a woman of breeding and charm. But the fact remained that her vocal gifts were several kilometers short of great. The problem was, how report on Mme. Clemens without wounding O.G.?

I was kind of proud of what I did, once. I wrote all around Robin Hood's Barn and then I appended some words of Brutus' Portia, in the second act of "Julius Caesar." And what a friend we have in Shakespeare!

Says Portia:

"Think you I am no stronger than my sex,

"Being so fathered and so husbanded?"

You remember that Portia's parent was Marcus Cato, the famous senator.

After one of those ghastly occasions, I was riding downtown with Ralph Holmes, my opposite number on the *Detroit Times* and my beloved friend. I have never ceased to mourn him.

We rode for several blocks in silence. Then Ralph heaved a great sigh.

"I've always heard that love was blind," he said. "But I never knew it was deaf."

HIS WAYS WERE WAYS OF PLEASANTNESS

Mr. Gabrilowitsch's career as a conductor was preceded by and became co-terminous with his career as a pianist. It was an age of giants in that field. It was, for instance, the age of Paderewski, artist and statesman, who turned the piano into a symphony orchestra, all by itself.

But our O.G. was a poet. Under his wonderful fingers, the piano became the most romantic of instruments. I sat with him, one time, in his office in Orchestra Hall, and we were speaking of the repertory of the piano.

"Just a minute. I'll show you what I mean," said O.G. He went to the piano and played for more than a half-hour, to an audience of one; me. I don't know whether I shall ever get to Heaven. After that, which I remember as if it were this morning, I suppose I don't really care.

His favorite piano-story, also a joke on himself which he enormously relished, involved a dreadful young woman in New York, who had an ambitious and determined mother. The damsel herself could hardly strike the chord of C-Major. But somehow or other the mother managed, whenever O.G. went to New York, to make him listen to this graceless girl. Being the kindest and gentlest of men, he always did.

He was there one day, in town to play with the New York Symphony, under Damrosch. The formidable mother brought her daughter to his hotel-room and the poor man was forced to sit, in spiritual agony but with a smile on his face, while the girl drew

and quartered standard music, for 45 minutes. The ordeal ended at last. He bowed them to the door.

In the hall stood a woman who had been right there, listening to the whole, awful affair. She was, it seemed, one of his fans.

“Oh, Mr. Gabrilowitsch!” she cried. “Never have I heard you play so gloriously!”

THE GRAND INHERITANCE

There is a temptation to go on and on, telling stories about Gabrilowitsch. He had a sense of humor exactly like Mark Twain's; which is a curious demonstration of hereditary processes.

Once he and Leopold Stokowski, then conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra, were going to Europe together, on a Cunarder. Stoky asked O.G. to make reservations in the dining-room. “Get them as far as possible from the orchestra,” Stokowski telegraphed.

O.G. immediately wired back, “Don't you like music?”

The Gabrilowitsch family spent their summers on Mackinac Island, the incomparable spot which lies between Michigan's two peninsulas. Non-Michiganders may not know that the last syllable of the island's name is pronounced “aw.”

Once in the early autumn, just after the family's return, I went over to get an interview from the returned vacationer. When I got back to the office, Bill Kelsey said to me, “Well, did you see the Deus ex Mackinac?”

I don't know how much money I'd give to have thought of that one myself.

One early autumn, just after the family's return from the North, a meeting took place in Detroit, for the behoof of symphony managers from far and near. There was a luncheon at the Detroit Golf Club. I sat next to the manager of the Seattle Symphony. Jeff Web, one of Detroit's leading citizens and then the Detroit Symphony's manager, arranged the whole show and presided over a brief speaking-program.

O.G. was there and I pointed him out to Seattle. “Gosh!” said Seattle. It was no wonder he said it. O.G. was a remarkable sight to one who had never seen him before, what with the collar and the hair. And now he was burned a deep brown from his northern summer.

As the final speaker, Jeff presented O.G. He arose. Seattle took a good sight-line and wondered in my ear what sort of oratorical material we were to hear from somebody who looked like that.

“Don’t worry,” said I. “Mr. Gabrilowitsch is one of the wittiest and most entertaining speakers you’ve ever heard.”

With that, so to speak, tip-off, Seattle roared with laughter at everything O.G. said, even when he hadn’t the least intention of being funny. Finally, he reached the point in his remarks when he invariably told a Mark Twain story, of which he had hundreds.

“I remember once,” said O.G. “When Mark Twain—my father-in-law—“

“He’s killing me!” screamed Seattle, preparing to fall out of his chair.

“Quiet, for God’s sake!” I said. “That’s true!”

Speaking of Stokowski reminds me of the last time I interviewed that enormously gifted man.

He conducted his share of the dialog with a heavy accent, which surprised me considerably, as I had been interviewing him, off and on, for 20 years or so, without ever thinking of an interpreter.

Finally he reached what seemed to be an impasse. He gestured widely with his beautiful hands.

“What is it? How you say in English?” he asked.

I’ve always thought that was kind of an odd question, from a fellow who was born in Dublin and went to Oxford.