

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

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On Greatness

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Suddenly there was an announcement from the little box in the northwest corner of my room that Rubinstein was about to play Beethoven’s Sonata in F-Minor (the Appassionata)... I have long felt that of all contemporary pianists, even including Horowitz and Richter, Rubinstein is the greatest... But here, as so often, I was again confronted with the mysterious question: Why?... Why greatness anywhere, anytime?... What are the necessary ingredients — in a soufflé, a singer, a pianist, a writer, a painter, a teacher, a mother... even a priest... I tilted my post-modern chair and tried to draw the problem into my consciousness...

Gradually my wayward mind turned back to a dark, cold November night almost twenty years ago when Kirsten Flagstad — now dead a year — came to our forlorn Indiana campus... We could afford to have her come because her fee reflected the fact that she was beyond her absolute prime and sang under the shadow of the rumored Nazi involvement of her husband... it was her last American tour...

But the great voice was still here... It came now, however, as one critic said, from nearer the heart... It has survived war and hate and the erosion of the years ... I talked with her for a half-hour behind the curtain of our ancient auditorium because the crowd was slow in coming over the roads and streets heavy with snow ... As I remember, we touched on many things — war, the evil of Nazism, music, the coming of winter to Oslo, her triumphant Wagnerian roles — especially her early Sieglinde, and above all, her Isolde — the strange ways of opera conductors... and the sad death of kings...

The signal lights blinked, and I left the stage to sit in the front row no more than twenty feet away from her immortal voice... She began slowly with a few simple Lieder... one could tell that she needed a warming-up period...

Then suddenly something happened... I sat up straight and listened with my whole being for I knew, beyond thought, that I was only twenty feet away from greatness... What really happened is hard to tell... one of life’s little

THE CRESSET

resurrections... a certain ultimate surge of power, a nearness to perfection... an awareness that this music and this voice were far beyond the gray level of human experience... Her eyes were closed now because the audience did not matter now... This was a communion on a different level — a mystic and mysterious rapport between the singer, the composer and the perennially ineffable in life and history... Once more I was aware of that hushed moment before the applause when an audience draws itself back into a world of snow and boots and furs... Very probably few knew where they had been... It was enough to know that they had been elsewhere and were coming back with a cosmic nostalgia for things unseen and seldom heard...

Perhaps this is the final measure of all true greatness... The surge into life of a new dimension — a fourth, fifth, sixth, and on into infinity... this gentle shattering touch of the infinite... I looked out of the window into the gray winter day... In all these years when had I touched this ultimate experience?... In Luther on the Psalms... Tschaikowsky's Pathetique — as close as the Russians have come to the truth about life. . John Donne's sermons — which often come from his own cloud of unknowing... Bach's D-Minor, a study in unearthly contrasts, and, of course, the B-Minor Mass — the drawing of a simple creed into listening distance of the Golden Gates... Hamlet on the platform of Elsinore, listening for the football of the supernatural... the coming of dusk over St. Mary's in San Francisco — the near beating of dark wings at the edge of the Western World... Flagstad singing far from home on a winter night...

I had come full circle... As I turned back to the desk I remembered that thirty years ago Dorothy Kissling had said all that I was trying to say:

Thine altar candles light the night,
The hosts of heaven dissolve and pass,
In the abundance of thy light,
I see the world as in a glass —

All time in every hidden thing
That was, and is, and is to be,
All mysteries past imagining
A moment stand revealed to me;

THE CRESSET

And not as I have known before
I know them now, but as they are,
Bright motes and dark and nothing more
Against the shining of thy star...

So Kirsten Flagstad died a year ago... May she rest in the peace which our
world was never able to give her...

