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Singing the #metoo Classical Music Blues

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Heather Kurzbauer

Singing the #metoo Classical Music Blues

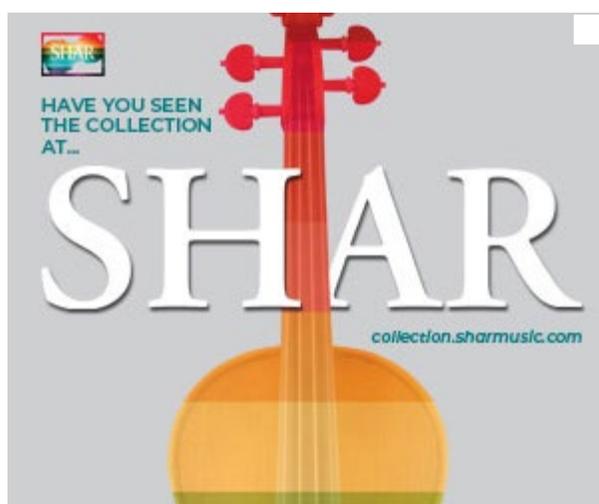
MEMBER

August 3, 2018, 1:32 PM · The announcement that Bill Preucil, a leading pedagogue and the Cleveland Orchestra's consummate concertmaster since 1996, renowned worldwide for his impeccable performances, would play concertmaster in Mahler's monumental Third Symphony brought a flush of excitement to many participants at the 2018 Grand Teton Music Festival. In anticipation of a week in 'his' violin section, I knew a YouTube listen-to-Preucil was in order. In surround sound mode, it was easy to waft away on the wings of mellifluous melody: he is a great musician who possesses a gossamer sound, the magic to soar above the orchestra and lead with finesse.



Inside the Cleveland Orchestra he is prized for his superlative rapport with the oft-elusive Music Director. For years, deleterious observations with regard to Mr. Preucil's darker side have been relegated to the back pages of social media along with the 'everyone knows that about him' rumor mill. Yes, Mr. Preucil's salary is reputedly the highest in the concertmaster business, and yes, a dynasty of family members have gained coveted places in his home orchestra.

His soft spot for female students, the stuff of much speculation for decades, was reported back in 2007. A local [Cleveland rag \(Cleveland Scene\) broke a story that detailed the darker side of the concertmaster's activities](#). The relevant portion focused on a specific incident in which Mr. Preucil's unwanted advances led to a deal and a cover up: in return for silence, the female violin student was transferred to another top musical institution, far from Cleveland's shores. The reputation of not only the star concertmaster but also the prestigious Cleveland Institute of Music and, of course Mr. Preucil's principal employer, the Cleveland Orchestra, was spared unwelcome media attention. No further media repercussions, no career consequences.



Just now en route to the music festival and the long-awaited chance to experience Mr. Preucil's artistry and leadership firsthand, the email message written by the Grand Teton Music Festival's CEO struck like lightning.

"Many of you saw the unfortunate article in [today's Washington Post concerning sexual harassment in classical music](#). In that article, there were allegations of sexual misconduct by William Preucil, concertmaster of the Cleveland Orchestra. Mr. Preucil was scheduled to be concertmaster for Festival Orchestra during Week 6. Earlier this evening, the Festival rescinded its invitation to Mr. Preucil."

Had the Washington Post discovered something new that smacked of criminal behavior?

Cringing in the aftershock of Harvey Weinstein's #metoo bevy of beautiful casualties, classical musicians held their collective breaths, wondering when the myriad of incidents of abuse on and offstage would capture media attention. For decades, such stories were more apt to escape any media attention whatsoever or fuel "Mozart in the Jungle" scriptwriters, than to reach courtroom scrutiny.

A quick mini-investigation I conducted in the form of questions posed to former Preucil students, coincidentally an equal number of male and female students, yielded a crop of comments of a thought-provoking nature. One former student, at present a member of a leading orchestra, observed, "not that again, I really don't have much to say about what may have gone on at the Institute in the three years that I studied there. He was an imaginative teacher, a great listener and the person who helped me get to the great place I am at now." Another former student, a 'female' concertmaster shared, "I studied with Bill Preucil, the amazing musician, and had nothing to do with Bill Preucil, the man."

Enter into the grey zone between the accused and the victim. Where lies truth? Where do we draw the line between unwanted attention and camaraderie, between the inappropriate and criminal? And will the floodgates post- #metoo ever close?

Music lessons are one-on-one, deeply personal, and to a substantial degree, physical in nature. Karen Tuttle, a force of nature amongst 20th century viola educators, insisted that her students pull up their shirts, uncovering the left shoulder, in order to place the instrument on 'bare skin,' exposing the body to unique contact and the vibrations of 'a piece of wood.' Memory lane takes me back to a master class with the legendary concertmaster-soloist Joseph Silverstein in sweltering Sarasota, Florida.. Hands-on demonstration was key to unlearn bad habits. The maestro pummeled and pushed, in an attempt to coax some modicum of relaxation, as sweat poured my face. In the context of the post-#metoo epoch, Tuttle and Silverstein would have been chastised, publicly named and shamed for their actions.

Accusations roam in rough terrain. We have landed in postmodern confusion, as we wait to see: How many of the mighty will fall, and how fast? Behind the accusations detailed in the Washington Post is the insinuation that Mr.

Preucil's sexual advances were tied to a threat: satisfy my needs or suffer in your career down the road. The career-loss threat as an implication is dastardly, and the smarmy situation bears resemblance to Weinstein's notorious casting couch. Does Mr. Preucil deserve total destruction?

No apologist for behavior that crosses into the legally no-fly zone and a vociferous opponent of inappropriate behavior at work or school, legal beagles (pun intended) plead for a dogged investigation of the bad, i.e. predatory actions/criminal behavior, coupled with true caution regarding actions that fall within an acceptable spectrum of behavior. Within days of the Washington Post revelations, Mr. Preucil has lost his position at the Cleveland Institute of Music and has been put on probation at the Cleveland Orchestra. Conductor Daniel Gatti, whose actions were brought to the fore in same article, just stepped down as Music Director of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra following allegations of inappropriate behavior. How the mighty have fallen and how swiftly!

Mr. Preucil, Mr. Gatti and others who have been placed in the classical #metoo limelight are celebrities whose status helps grab headlines. As the dust settles, will those who have suffered and the countless, voiceless benefit? Real change, 'change we can believe in,' moves slowly, is totally unspectacular and its legalistic detail will not reach headlines or even the back pages. The power of the #metoo narrative will dissipate unless the discourse widens to analyze the culture that has permitted pervasive abuse and that continues to turn a blind ear to skewed power relationships and protected hierarchies. Without respect and trust, the music profession -- and all professions for that matter -- will drift into a witch-hunting frenzy, where individuals lose careers but discriminatory behavior will persist.

A still small voice begs for caution before we enter into the stone-throwing arena. Until the parameters of appropriate behavior at workplaces and schools are subject to open discussion first, and rulemaking second, the temptation to sit back and applaud as 'another one bites the dust' makes us all culpable of smug hypocrisy.

Related stories:

- [Concertmaster William Preucil Is Suspended from Cleveland Orchestra; Resigns from CIM](#)
- [Violin News & Gossip, Op. 3, No. 14: Cleveland Scene Article about William Preucil \(2007\)](#)
- [Master Class with William Preucil](#)