Everyone who was alive at that time remembers where they were.

November 22, 1963. It is one of America’s great “Days of Infamy,” the day when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on a Friday afternoon at, approximately, 12:30pm CST.

But for all the stories everyone has and has heard, there are very few instances where the initial shock of the news was recorded, where the immediate reaction, has been forever preserved. That is one of the things that makes the WGBH radio broadcast of the Boston Symphony Orchestra on that day, November 22, 1963, so profound, so impactful and so visceral even today, 60 some years later.

Of course, as for every other American that day, November 22, 1963 had begun just like any other. Certainly, it was not going to be different for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. They had been performing over Boston’s WGBH radio station since 1951.

The November 22nd selections for the Symphony had already been decided, the programs printed and they had already been listed in the newspaper that morning. At Boston’s Symphony Hall that day, the great Erich Leinsdorf (only about a year into his stint with the Orchestra) would be conducting. The concert--the eighth of the season--would begin with Handel’s Concerto Grosso in B flat major and be followed by a new piece by a newer composer, William Sydeman; it was titled Study for Orchestra No. 2. Then, there was to be a Rimsky-Korsakov Suite.
The Suite was never heard.

Instead, after the Sydeman work concluded, there was a lengthy, unexpected pause. Finally, in a stunning break from normal concert protocol, conductor Leinsdorf turned and addressed the attending audience, and thanks to the concert being broadcast, his words also reached thousands of home listeners. His voice was surprisingly calm, even matter-of-fact. The hall’s technicians opened all the house microphones to capture his words. He said, in his clear but accented English: “Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a press report over the wires that the President of the United States has been the victim of an assassination.”

The gasps and soft cries--disbelieving, worried, confused--from the audience is audible, vivid and deeply poignant. For them--and for the thousands more listening via the airwaves--this was the first that they had heard about the President being shot. According to witnesses, many in attendance began to sob, many instinctively rose to their feet....

And though Leinsdorf’s brief statement did not reveal that the President had died (was it even known at that moment?), the selection the orchestra played next, in honor of President Kennedy, conveyed, or prefigured, the truth. The conductor finished his statement by saying, “We will play the Funeral March from Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony.” As its titles denotes, Beethoven’s Funeral March is only played in honor of the dead, and, in this case, it was played in honor of the fallen 35th President.

It was during that earlier pause in the program--empty broadcast air one supposes for radio listeners--that the program had been suddenly alerted. After learning of the shooting, the Orchestra’s librarian, William Shisler, on the orders of Leinsdorf, had rushed to the organization’s archives and gathered up the sheet music for Beethoven’s 3rd and ran back to the stage. As he quickly moved among the orchestra members distributing the scores, he briefly explained what had occurred in Dallas to all the suddenly shaken musicians and that this was the new piece that would now be performed.

Shisler would later recount, “I don’t remember whether I actually broke down in tears or not. I was busy doing what I needed to do. Get the music out and get off the stage so they can go ahead and do what had to be done.”

The Funeral March was played. Through the performance, the audience remained on their feet, heads bowed, for the full duration of the 15-minute work. Afterward, the audience and orchestra observed a moment of silence....

For BSO cellist Luis Leguia, this particular performance was an extraordinary beginning to a long career and his career with the Boston Orchestra. Leguia had only joined the BSO that year. He had studied with some of the greats in music including with Pablo Casals in Italy for a year and a half and with Leonard Rose at Julliard. He began his professional career in the Army Orchestra as well as having tenures with DC’s National Symphony and the Houston Symphony
and the Met Opera. He was 28 years old in 1963. He would play with the BSO until his retirement in 2007.

Leguia recalls about the start of the performance, “Not a word was said. I remember looking over at [fellow cellist] Bernard Parronchi, always such a funny man--a riot--and he was crying at the stand.”

Following the performance of the Funeral March, it was time for the program’s regular intermission. During the 20-minute break, both audience and orchestra members struggled to make sense of the news they had just been given. There was, of course, talk of canceling the rest of the concert. It is even said that the debate became heated, but the thought to cancel was, ultimately, dismissed.

The decision to go on was one that was both practical and prosaic. Many of those in the audience that day were well-to-do ladies and gentlemen of Boston, who had, per usual, been dropped off by their drivers for the performance. The drivers were to return once the program was over. Where was everyone to go in the meantime?

But, also, how were they and the musicians to continue?

Henry B. Cabot, President of the BSO trustees, was the one who made the decision to go on. He took to the stage and addressed the audience. He said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, these ladies and gentlemen of the orchestra who sit behind me, they came to me during the intermission and said that some of them felt that we should not continue with the concert. I told them that we should continue and I told them that the day my father died, I came to a symphony concert for consolation, and I believe you will receive it yourself.”

And so...

The concert resumed. The musicians took their place, the audience took their seats and the conductor returned to the podium.

The concert also returned to its originally-chosen works: all three movements of Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor that were scheduled were performed. This work would feature Turkish pianist Idil Biret making her US concert debut. Along with making her American debut, Biret was also turning 22 years old that day; earlier, before the performance, the orchestra had sung “Happy Birthday” to her.

In her memoirs, Biret related details of that, at first, confusing day. She was backstage and noticed the oddity of various happenings. “I didn’t understand what was going on,” she wrote:

A little while late, Anne, Erich Leinsdorf’s young secretary, came to keep me company. I liked her because she was young, smiling and friendly. But on that day even Anne was
not her usual self. She seemed about to cry, sad and didn’t know quite what to do. Only when my father came for me at the beginning of the intermission and told me that President Kennedy had been assassinated and that no one knew whether or not the concert would continue that I understood the reason for the unusual atmosphere.

Reviewed shortly after by the “Boston Globe,” Biret’s debut earned praise for her skillful, yet fiery performance while “The Christian Science Monitor” wrote of her playing of Rachmaninoff’s Concerto No. 3, “[H]er vehicle on this occasion carried forward the affirmative mood so magnificently set forth in the Beethoven... A great healing took place as Miss Biret lifted our hearts above the mists; clouds parted; great shafts of light poured through as she evoked the passion and ardor of Rachmaninoff’s sweeping themes.”

The day after the performance, Margo Miller (who was in the Hall that day) reported of the Symphony’s sudden change in its repertoire and the great necessity of it. She said, “The ‘Eroica’ marcia funebre is one of the great moments in music. The dread beat of the march cannot be disguised. Yet there is a middle section of the movement, a time of incredible energy and involvement, somehow, or so it seemed Friday, expressing eternal hope.”

Years later, archivist Shisler said, “I sincerely believe that music played its part in this tragedy for all of us. Afterwards of course everyone was glued to the television sets for days and days. But in that period of time when we were all there, listening to Beethoven in that concert hall, we all had to respond to this terrible tragedy ourselves. And the music sort of soothed us, reached out to each and every individual, and helped us to process what happened.”

_Cary O’Dell is a media historian with the Library of Congress. Previously, he was the archives director for the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago and an archivist for the Library of American Broadcasting at the University of Maryland._