

WGBH broadcast of the Boston Symphony on the day of the John F. Kennedy Assassination, Boston Symphony Orchestra (1963)

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Essay by Margo Miller (guest post)*



Recollections of Boston Symphony Orchestra Concert When JFK Died

To introduce myself, I was interim music critic for “The Boston Globe” on 22 November 1963, and would write on a variety of subjects until July 1999, when I retired after 37 years at the paper.

I cannot now (8 April 2020) remember when I heard that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. In those days, the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Friday afternoon concert began the week’s subscription concerts, and so I would have arrived at Symphony Hall about 1:30 to review the program at 2. I must have already heard something, perhaps on the radio at home, before walking over to the concert.

The first person I saw in the Symphony Hall’s main corridor was an old family friend, Raymond S. Wilkins, chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court, the highest appellate court in Massachusetts. Judge Wilkins, a longtime BSO trustee, was also a subscriber to the Friday Afternoons, as they were called. He was coming out of the box office which in those days adjoined the telephone operator’s cubicle. (There may also have been a phone booth there.) At any rate, he had just made a phone call. I asked if the rumors were true. Yes, he said, adding, “Thank God, it was not a black man who did it.”

The concert went on essentially as I wrote in my review. If I remember, at the intermission, I did phone the “Globe” to see if they wanted a news story beyond the concert. The answer was no, News had plenty enough to cover as it was. That is why I omitted, or perhaps it was edited out, the most sensational sound of the concert. It was a woman wailing from the far balcony of Symphony Hall. I never expected to use the word “keening,” but that’s what I thought it sounded like.

And, yes, apart from the Funeral March from Beethoven's "Eroica," the program went on as announced. Your concert tape will tell whether the musicians already had the Beethoven in their folders, but my recollection is, the orchestra's librarians came on stage and handed out the parts for each stand of players. I've heard that orchestra librarians always have that music in a special folder.

That the BSO president, Henry B. Cabot, urged people to stay for the rest of the concert may be wrongly attributed to "cold roast Boston," but in fact he believed mightily in music. I suppose I must have looked at the faces in the orchestra. I knew many from my five years working summers at Tanglewood. I don't recall now anything but their absorption as professionals in the music. And it would have been rude to pry. Remember the times. They were more formal. Public displays of emotion and opinion--the marches, the sit-ins, the protests--were to come. That afternoon, what could we do? News travelled far less quickly in the 1960s. The Friday afternoon audience was largely female, a social event (in the community sense) as well as musical: women had their "Symphony Friend" whom they'd sat next to for years and sometimes only saw then, and sometimes knew only as Mrs. or Miss So-and-So.

I was born in 1936, and so Kennedy was the first president I could vote for. Growing up "madly for Adlai" Stevenson in the Eisenhower years meant I did not pay much attention to politics. There was the Red Scare, and how my family cheered Atty. Joseph Nye Welsh for trying to shame Senator Joseph McCarthy in the Army hearings.

I really did think the Kennedy Years would be different, but I remember vividly how scared I was during the Cuba crisis and the Bay of Pigs. I can't honestly say any of that was on my mind that Friday at Symphony. We knew so little about what had happened in Dallas except that a young president, a vital personality, was dead and we were in shock. I think it hit Boston particularly hard. He was our politician. He was our character, his Boston accent spoofed, the White House glamour treasured or distained, but part of the daily news.

In those days, I would write reviews at home, typing them, and marking up the copy for the printer. In most other cases, I would even write the headline. Then, I would phone the "Globe's" taxi service and be done with it. So that routine must have been followed because I know I was at home in a walk-up on Marlborough Street in Boston's Back Bay in time for the 6 o'clock news on WGBH, one of the earliest public radio stations. (I didn't have TV.) The news anchor was Louis Lyons, a former "Globe" reporter. His lead was "President Kennedy was murdered today in Dallas." I cannot imagine a more personal verb than "murdered." Or a more wise word: at that point, it was not known if Kennedy was assassinated in the usual sense, if a gang was involved, or who, if anyone, was behind the killer.

Months later, the Boston Symphony Orchestra would play for a memorial Mass in Boston's Catholic cathedral. The music was the Mozart Requiem, and it may have been a first in Boston that it was performed as a rite, with Cardinal Cushing the celebrant, and not purely a concert. The whole service, with Cushing's raspy, sorrowing voice, was recorded on LP; he had married the Kennedys and given the invocation at Kennedy's Inaugural.

Margo Miller is a former writer/reviewer for the “Boston Globe.” She is the author of “Château Higginson: Social Life in Boston’s Back Bay, 1870-1920” published in 2008. The Higginson of the title, Henry Lee Higginson, is best known for founding the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1881.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.