

# To Mr. Schaefer Con Amore

Louise Dauner

*"What did he teach me, in addition to how to play the violin? ...Patience, Perseverance, Preparation, Performance; and 'in-between'—like mortar between bricks—precision, punctuality, a respect for the work at hand, and a sense of responsibility to one's commitments."*

"PICK IT UP and put it in the waste-basket."

"It" was a single hair that had escaped from my bow during my violin lesson and that lay at my feet. I picked it up, crossed the room, and dropped the offending hair where it belonged.

That lesson in tidiness, like a stone cast into a pool, spread its ripples in many directions. I was never allowed to get by with a muddy passage or a faulty intonation or rhythm. Now, so many years later, I do not in the morning leave an unmade bed or clothes scattered about. After work at my desk, I organize it for the next session. I do not leave a stack of unwashed dishes. I straighten a tilted picture. Cliché chores. But they contribute to the smooth running of my works and days.

And the speaker? He was my first music-master, Ferdinand Schaefer. I met him when I was ten. A tall, slender man, blond and blue-eyed, with a Kaiser Wilhelm mustache and a Van Dyck beard, a courtly manner, and a burry German voice. We would work together for twelve years, and remain friends for forty.

I did not know for many years what a distinguished musical experience he had had before he left Germany in 1903 to come to America and Indianapolis. I had to piece that story together from casual bits dropped by his friends. But Mr. Schaefer was an authentic, vital link to

the great nineteenth-century Romantic composers—Brahms, Dvorak, Grieg, Richard Wagner, Tchaikovsky—who became his friends. He did mention once, modestly, that he had played the just-completed Brahms *Sonatas for Violin and Piano* with the composer himself at the keyboard.

He had studied with the noted Russian virtuoso-teacher Adolf Brodsky, at the Royal Conservatory in Leipzig. There he had won the two most prestigious violin competitions, the Mendelssohn and the Radius; and there later he had joined the faculty. He played viola with the then-famous Brodsky String Quartet. He was first violin in the Gewandhaus Orchestra, under its legendary conductors Carl Reinecke and Arthur Nikisch. He had also played under Brahms and Siegfried Wagner. In his early twenties he had been selected to direct the Gille Orchestra at the University of Upsala in Sweden, during which time he had taught the young Crown Prince Gustaf, who later became the King.

What did he teach me, in addition to how to play the violin? To answer that involves both his public and his private images; one reflects the other. I think of a little rubric: Patience, Perseverance, Preparation, Performance; and "in-between"—like mortar between bricks—precision, punctuality, a respect for the

work at hand, and a sense of responsibility to one's commitments. Of course, they blend together, like the *Dancer* and the *Dance*. But I think of them specifically, too.

For example, *Patience* and *Perseverance*. When Mr. Schaefer went to Europe in the summer, he often left some handwritten exercises which, ideally, I was to have mastered by his return in the Fall. So, I remember standing before a long mirror, my bow on the A-string of my violin, watching my right wrist perform a circular up-and-down movement intended to enable me to change strings smoothly. Since the top of a violin-bridge is slightly curved, the four strings are on subtly different levels. So I moved—A to E, A to D, D to G, and up and down. I do not know how many hundreds of times I practiced that wrist-movement until it became a habit and I could forget it. I did develop an effective bow-control—perhaps the most subtle and important aspect of violin technique. It is a capacity which I miss in many players today, who use their whole fore-arms, as though they had no bones in their wrists, in order to change strings—a slow, awkward, bumpy liability.

But *Patience* came hard. Often I had not at length mastered a certain passage or a complex problem. On the other hand, Mr. Schaefer's *patience* was elastic. But sometimes even that snapped. Then he would walk across the room, stand with his back to me silently looking out the window, while I stood silent, too, in mortification. Once, however, he burst out, "You never finish anything. You should take up the saxophone—the easiest and most foolish of all instruments."

It was all a part of *Preparation*; and that included physical fitness, too. In preparing for a special musical event, like a contest or an important performance, Mr. Schaefer directed me to walk at least one mile a day, sleep eight hours,

and no smoking. Nerves had to be steady. He himself was a stellar example of fitness. As a European, he was accustomed to walking, and altogether made some forty walking-tours in Europe and America. When he was eighty-one, he walked five hundred miles one summer in Maine, Vermont, and Massachusetts.

Preparing meant knowing a work deeply. Technical competence and memorization were assumed. But one also needed a conception of a work's intellectual and emotional implications.

Preparation also meant overlearning my numbers. Once he said, "If you deliver forty percent of what you know before an audience, that is about the best you can hope for." My graduation recital, on which we both worked for a year, included the Bach "Chaconne for Violin Alone." Of that he said, "You must know it so well that if I wake you at midnight and say, 'Begin here,' you can go on." It was wise advice, for the "Chaconne," which lasts about eighteen minutes, is a series of thirty-two variations on an initial eight-measure theme, which exhaust nearly every possibility of the violin. (It also nearly exhausts the performer, and perhaps also the audience.) To forget and lose your place may mean that you can never recover. I am pleased to remember that I did perform the "Chaconne" without mishap.

Such direction during my formative years must inevitably have contributed to the psychological and emotional shape of whatever I turned out to be—violinistically and otherwise. How far that influence extends I can partly judge by my reaction to the performance—or lack of it—of many of my students today. As a teacher of literature for nearly fifty years (like thousands of my musical colleagues I got side-tracked professionally by the Great Depression of the thirties)—I cannot accept or adjust to their tardiness, sloppiness, lack of courtesy toward their work, ignorance, lack of embarrassment

over what they don't know—the list goes on....But who would have taught them otherwise? That is an interesting question. This, I am told, is a different world. I am afraid I do not think that in these ways it is necessarily a better one. Recently, a student asked me, "On what do you base your grades?" I said, "Performance." She turned silently away, like the rich young man who, having received his answer from the Master, turned away, sorrowing. I am sure now that Mr. Schaefer's influence, with that of my parents, was basic in my experience.

Commitment? Two examples: one from Mr. Schaefer; one, my own. One year, an accident left him with, among other injuries, a broken leg. When after some weeks, he left the hospital, a non-professional orchestra that he was conducting was scheduled for a concert. Did he postpone it? No, indeed. He was helped onto the stage, his leg in a plaster-cast. Then, sitting on a high stool, the leg extended before him on another, he conducted the concert. Many years later, a local music critic mentioned that incident to me.

As for my own lesson in Commitment: I was to assist another musician in a recital. It was a typical hot summer day in Indiana, and the humidity had broken ten of my gut strings. I had programmed a particularly tricky number, full of double-stops. I knew that I could not play that number in tune on new unstretched strings. So I changed my piece to something less hazardous. I knew that Mr. Schaefer was teaching out of town that day, so I felt safe. The next day, however, when I entered the studio, he said, "Well, you didn't play it." I said, "No. How did you know?" He said, "Never mind. You have been doing well lately, and I was going to give you my fine Tourte bow. But now you don't get it." I didn't, either. Later he let me use his Stradivarius violin for many months; and his generosity included many unscheduled lessons, some of which lasted over two hours, for which

he would never accept any compensation.

Commitment. A sense of responsibility to the work itself. A dedication, both intellectual and emotional, to an ideal that approximated one's highest concept of The Artist. The task performed with love and devotion. Also, with a sense of Tradition. For instance, one does not play Tschaikovsky with the same style and emotional control that one accords to Mozart. But today we meet the curious fact of hundreds of "performers" who utter "songs," smack their basses, whack their guitars, casting noise, formlessness, and inanity on the air to the shrieked delight of millions. Tradition?

Of course, it is obvious by now that Schaefer was himself a consistent example of all he taught me. I am reminded of Chaucer's Poor Parson, who gave to his flock a "noble example": "that first he wroughte, and afterward he taught." Inevitably, Schaefer's character affected the community in which he worked for fifty years. During his first quarter of a century in Indianapolis, he had not confined his activities to his studio. He formed and trained the Schaefer String Quartet, himself playing viola, which presented programs on Sunday afternoons at the John Herron Art Institute, and on local radio stations. He gave Sunday afternoon lecture recitals on such subjects as Sonata Form, assisted by one or two advanced students. In the 1920s, he undertook a five-year European scholarship for a gifted cello student, whom he placed with the leading teachers in Leipzig and Paris, and eventually with Pablo Casals. But his major civic contribution, for which he is revered by Indianapolis today, came when, at the age of seventy, he undertook the most strenuous and difficult endeavor of his life. Now, paradoxically, he envisioned a major cultural asset for the community. He would form, train, conduct, and partially financially support for a time an Indianapolis Symphony

Orchestra.

I say paradoxically; for it was the beginning of the Great Depression. Thousands of musicians all over America were out of work, not only because of the Depression itself, but also because Hollywood was producing the new “talking” movies, which brought their sound-tracks with them, thus dispensing with live musicians in the theatres. Also, radio stations were linking up with chain programs originating in New York, and dispensing with most of their staff musicians. Indianapolis was no exception.

On the face of it, a symphony seemed an absurd idea. With a kind of directing genius, however, Schaefer turned the situation around. Years before, he had conducted the Bleunther Orchestra in Berlin, and had organized and directed the People’s Orchestra in Leipzig. In Indianapolis, he had conducted a short-lived Indianapolis Symphony organized in 1896, and he himself began an orchestra that lasted four years. By 1930, however, four attempts at a local symphony had failed. But Schaefer knew what to do. He wrote letters to potential players. He got permission from the local Musicians’ Union for its members to play with non-union players. He buttonholed people on the streets. In November 1930 he presented the city with an Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra of sixty members, whose first concert brought enthusiastic response from both the audience and local music critics, and promises of good things to come.

To be sure, the venture was no gold mine. But it was a new idea: We would have a *co-operative* orchestra, the first in the United States. “Co-operative” meant that any box-office receipts would be divided equally among the players. We began modestly: For four concerts that year, our “salary” was six dollars each, per concert, which also included two rehearsals a week, for six weeks. But in November 1930 *Time* magazine noted

the situation and the existence of the orchestra. And Schaefer shared with us a congratulatory letter from the distinguished conductor of the New York Philharmonic, Dr. Walter Damrosch. Slowly, the orchestra became integrated into the city’s awareness. The next year we gave six concerts, our shares increasing two dollars a concert. In 1931 the Indiana State Symphony Society was organized in support of the orchestra. And, as time went on, Schaefer instituted summer Pop Concerts at city parks, and concerts for high school and grade school pupils at various high schools. The students were brought in by buses (having already been coached in the numbers they would hear). I still remember the moving moments when a thousand young voices joined the orchestra in singing Sibelius’s “Finlandia.”

But I must mention another less tangible value of the orchestra. Today, one hears much about “identity crisis,” “frustration,” “loneliness.” Those psychic affects are not peculiar to the 1990s. They were endemic in the 1930s. Among the groups most affected by the Depression were the musicians—art being always the first to suffer in a bad economy. The young orchestra, with its hopeful schedule, its rehearsals and concerts, gave a new focus to many players who had been badly disoriented. For the loss of professional work brought also a sense of a lost identity. What, or who, is a musician who cannot perform? Further, the involvement in a group activity was good medicine for a feeling of being “out of it.” There is a unique therapy about making music with others—a quiet excitement, if I may coin an oxymoron. The sense of togetherness, plus our sense of a steady artistic improvement, were matched by a growing loyalty to Mr. Schaefer’s dream of one day having a fine city symphony. His courage, determination, and dedication rubbed off on his men and women, some of whom made round-trips of a

hundred miles to rehearsals.

I need not trace the growth of the Symphony. Now, after sixty-five years, it is one of the city's leading cultural assets, firmly financed, and with a respected position among the country's leading symphony orchestras.

Mr. Schaefer conducted the orchestra until he was seventy-seven, when he retired as Conductor Emeritus, directing two concerts a year, and turned the baton over to a younger man. For his last concert, at the age of eighty-four, he conducted a fine performance of the Brahms "Fourth Symphony." When I went to his studio to congratulate him, he said, "Well, it has taken me eighty-four years."

I cannot resist throwing that remark (so characteristic of the Artist who allows Time to mellow and deepen his understanding) against our present frenetic pursuit of Time—and time-saving technological devices: saving a few seconds here, a few minutes there, until I want to ask someone, sometime, "What are you going to do with all the time you save?"

Ten years after his founding of the symphony, Schaefer received a Citation from the Mayor of Indianapolis, in which he was noted as "Musician, Conductor, Civic Leader, Virtuoso, Educator, Friend of Man." Since it epitomizes much of what he was, I quote several excerpts from the Citation:

*He has been for his friends and neighbors  
an inspiring personification of Old  
World charm and New World vitality.*

*He has served and taught without regard  
for compensation or recognition.*

*He has been sole sponsor of the career of  
many a struggling young artist.*

*He founded the Indianapolis Symphony  
Orchestra and served as its conductor  
for the first seven years.*

*He numbers among his spiritual children  
all who have come in contact with his  
devotion to music.*

Another recognition came also in 1940, when he received the only honorary degree of Doctor of Music bestowed by Indiana University at its graduation exercises that year.

And here I must add one more "lesson." Even though I had switched professions, I continued to play, wherever I was—in trios, quartets, symphonic groups. One day at quartet rehearsal, Mr. Schaefer said, "If you can't hear the other fellow, you are playing too loud."

That lesson, with many others learned in my study of music, carried over into my teaching of literature. I learned to "listen to the other fellow," to the benefit of both the student and myself.

This testimony could go on and on. But I think, I hope, I have suggested, if not defined, the most important aspects of my indebtedness to my great teacher. Even though I never thanked him in so many words, I think he sensed my gratitude from the fact that I worked hard, seriously, and idealistically for many years. As in many intimate relationships—and certainly that of a teacher and a gifted student develops a special kind of intimacy—there were some rough periods; but we both persisted.

In contrast to today, when compliments and psychic pats are intended to bolster weak or ambiguous egos and identities, there was never any easy flattery. Rarely, I heard "Very good." And after my graduation recital, Mr. Schaefer said to my mother, "Tell Louise I am just beginning to be proud of her." But he did not say it to me.

It is appropriate that a bust of Mr. Schaefer graces the Music Room of the Indianapolis Public Library, and a fine oil portrait hangs in the foyer of the Circle Theatre, the symphony's home. And I like remembering that, two months before his death, more than four hundred local and state dignitaries honored him at an annual civic banquet. The Mayor proclaimed "Dr. Ferdinand Schaefer

Week—February 22-28.” He was given a scroll, and a number of the country’s leading conductors sent congratulatory telegrams. At the dinner, the Master of Ceremonies said, “He has woven a golden thread through the culture of Indiana.”

Ferdinand Schaefer died on April 18, 1953, at the age of ninety-two. That he died on the day before Easter has seemed to me somehow symbolic. I was not in the city at the time. Perhaps that is one reason why, to me, he still seems very much alive. Another reason, of course, is the

child of his heart, his mind, his spirit—the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, flourishing and gratifying. Finally and always: His influence upon me, which has its own kind of immortality, and which has long been basic in my reactions to experience.

So the two Images come together to form *The Image*, the composite of Schaefer’s various *personae*. I have a suspicion that even now, in his chosen role, he may be directing a rehearsal of heavenly harps for a celestial concert.