

Faithful to His Theme

William Rickenbacker

"I have been faithful to my theme. '...With him music was more than art, it was a moral concern....[T]hat simple comment...has made me come to understand the uniqueness of music...the only form of art...in which it is impossible to express the concept of evil."

THEODORE C. PIERCE was born in Gardner, Massachusetts, in 1914, of a musical family. His father, a fine violinist, was supervisor of music for the Gardner and Acton public school system. His mother, Gertrude Clark, held the position of regular organist in the Gardner Episcopal Church, and, being also an excellent pianist, was often called upon as accompanist for the recently established MacDowell Colony. An uncle, Harry Pierce, was a fine cellist and well-known recitalist. And—a fact that surely merited in young Ted's mind equal billing with the musical biographies—the father loved fishing, and took the whole family off into the New England woods and fields as often as he could to visit the favored ponds and trout streams. The mother probably would have preferred her piano, but Ted had already fallen in love with fishing and he and his sister Eleanor trotted happily along.

The home was alive with music. The piano and violin and cello and the father's trio were the lingua franca. Ted's mother told me, years ago, of one evening in the home when she and her husband were practicing a violin and piano piece after the children had been put to bed, and she thought she heard an unusual sound out in the hallway. She arose from the piano bench and glanced around the corner to find Ted standing in the room,

his face radiant, his eyes flooded with tears. She asked him what was ailing him. "It's just so beautiful," was all he could say by way of explanation. She asked him the fatal question and he said Yes, he would like to play the piano. And so the program notes one evening in Jordan Hall, Boston, in 1948, mention that the composer of the new orchestral piece, "Divertissement," took his "first lessons from his mother, Mrs. Gertrude Pierce, in piano and organ."

The battle began immediately. His mother told him he had to practice. He rebelled. She had seen youthful rebellion in a thousand lads who had preferred to go fishing and she stood her ground. Ted had more to conquer than a mere childish will. He wanted to go fishing, yes, but unbeknownst to him, and anyone else there was genuine music inside him that needed to come out, and he could hear the difference between that subterranean melody and the military drumbeat of the hateful finger exercises. But before long he made the vital connection between fingers and spirit: until he mastered his fingers, his spirit would remain mute. He began to practice. He loved it. His mother would tell him to stop practicing and go out and play in the fresh air. Sometimes he would, taking off alone and tramping for miles through the woods and hills to find a new pond or stream that might be

harboring an ever more lovely bass or trout, which he would scale and clean neatly and perfectly with his strong hands. More often than not he would go up or down the street to find a kindly neighbor who would let him in to use the family piano for the afternoon. There he would continue his practice for hours; on coming home in the evening he would of course tell his mother he had had a fine time outside.

By the age of six or so, Ted's first lessons in theory began. Before he was ten he was writing competent short piano pieces. At the age of twelve he became a professional musician, of sorts. The family had a connection, I know not what, with a boys' camp at the far northern tip of New Hampshire, Camp Otter, on the first of the Connecticut Lakes, only a mile or so from Canada, way out in the northern woods, very wild and beautiful, and perhaps Ted's favorite place on earth. Ted spent his summers there for some years, apparently receiving room and board in return for his services as camp musician. There was probably the usual derelict upright "of a certain age" in the lounge of the main cabin, and Ted probably led the camp in Sunday hymn-sings, camp songs, and the lot; and would have shown off his repertory in Saturday night performances. He remained a regular at the camp throughout his life. In his late sixties—I get this from neighbors in my town who knew him well at the camp—he would frighten the visitors at the camp by taking off all alone, as he had when a boy, into the trackless forest primeval, in the morning, and staying out all day long, six, eight, ten hours at a stretch, until they all thought he had finally had "the big one," the stroke that seemed to be lying in wait for him. But he always came back at the end of the day, pink-cheeked, bright-eyed, delighted with his day.

At sixteen, while still a junior in the Gardner High School, Ted received his

first true professional appointment—as organist at the Federated Church in Ashburnham. By now he was studying with Heinrich Gebhard (Boston), who had been his mother's teacher years before. At Gebhard's studio Ted sometimes met a nervous young Harvard student, another pupil of Gebhard, named Leonard Bernstein. After two years with Gebhard, Ted was enrolled at Julliard, which awarded him the Certificate in Piano in 1934. While at Julliard, he also studied (1935) composition, and took a course in score reading with a young powerhouse who tackled all the big Romantic landmarks, a tiny girl named Rosalyn Tureck.

Along the way Ted studied organ with E. Power Biggs and voice with Jessie Flemming Vose. He was organist and choirmaster at Fitchburg, Massachusetts, 1938-43; musician-organist-choirmaster at Asheville School (North Carolina), 1943-45; associate professor in organ and theory at Converse College, Spartanburg (South Carolina), 1945-46. He took a year off to earn an M.A. from Boston University in 1947, exchanging for tuition his services as teacher of basic harmony. (I visited his home in Leominster more than once during those years, when I was at Harvard; one Monday, riding in with him to Boston on the early commuter train, I was amazed to see him pull a stack of music-notation booklets from his briefcase and calmly correct the students' open fifths and parallel octaves and so on in their string quartet exercises.) Ted kept acquiring those little pieces of paper that help a man get a job: from Lowell Teachers College a Bachelor of Science in Education (this, at the age of 27!), and from the American Guild of Organists the Certificate as Choir Master and election as Associate (this, at age 29!).

After 1947, and for the next 27 years, Ted was director of music at Cushing Academy (Ashburnham, Massachusetts; whose most famous graduate was the movie actress Bette Davis, a faithful

alumna). Later he taught for some years at the Hampshire Country School (Rindge, New Hampshire). At one time or another he was church organist in a dozen churches in the area.

Ted's independence of spirit was not, after all, youthful rebellion ridiculously prolonged into maturity. He was, above all, faithful to himself, whatever that might make him appear to be to others. If he knew dozens of the superstars in his profession, and if he steadfastly refused to play politics and butter them up to land himself a cushy spot, well, let that look like stupidity to the rest of the world, Ted didn't mind. He was here, and he made it clear that he thought so, to serve his art, and serve he did. On more than one occasion he said to me, usually during one of our long and discursive lunches, "I am very humble before my art."

The fishing continued, it was a passion. By the time Ted was 50 or so he had exhausted the possibilities of his native New England. I remember spending an afternoon with him on frozen ponds, walking from hut to hut, opening the door to each hut, finding the tough Yankee sitting there smoking a pipe. Ted would ask him, "Any luck?" Thereupon a long discussion would follow and a bottle of coffee laced with rum might or might not be produced. Onward to the next hut! We returned to his home frozen solid, or at least I was. His New England heart and muscles seemed impervious. An hour later we were driving to Gardner, where Ted presented a program of music at the annual meeting of the Alliance Française. As a compliment to his hostess he made it an evening of French music, including the exquisite but seldom heard *Prélude*, *Aria*, *Finale* of César Franck, and introduced each piece with a correct and graceful little musicological essay in French. And my fingers were still frozen. Responding to the audience's request, he played as encores several of his own

compositions.

So, having fished New England to his fill, Ted began spending his summers in his VW, driving out west, then west through Canada and the great mountains to Alaska, all the way to Barrow. On the Alcan Highway he simply curled up in his sleeping bag and spent his nights in the trackless woods. Then east to the Maritimes. He seemed to be working his way north. Something in the north pulled him, perhaps something awakened when their father had taken the family to see "Byrd of the South Pole" when Ted was about eight. They had all loved the film, and, as Ted's sister tells it, on their return home they were talking about the beauty of the musical score. Ted went immediately to the piano and played the entire score on the spot. Then he wrote out the music for his sister. The point is not that Ted was, like so many musical geniuses, gifted in that way as in all other ways; but that the subject of the film may have brought forth this response more powerfully than anyone suspected.

Then in his sixties Ted toured Europe, taking his VW with him, a little flivver now remodeled to allow him to bunk down in it overnight, good accommodations on musician's wages. Occasionally a gendarme would rap on his window and tell him to move on. Ted would always talk his way out of the difficulty. His sheer innocence was his armorplate; and no one could fail to feel and prize the simple purity of his spirit. His French and German, quite fluent, carried him through Europe with ease.

Perhaps his two or three years of study in New York City gave Ted a feeling of pity for the city kids, because, as he told me once, he never budgeted a summer trip for himself without making an equal dollar-amount contribution to the Fresh Air Fund. In essence he slept in his car so that a city kid might breathe clean air and see a healthy tree and walk a trail and find a pond or a stream and, God be

praised, even catch a fish.

Ted's generosity, a sweetness of temper that came as a total surprise to one who had known only his craggily forthright and honest and almost abrupt social manner, blossomed forth in many ways, but in none so pure and rare as his attitude towards his fellow musicians. In all the years I knew him, Ted never uttered a word of disdain or disapproval of a fellow composer or pianist. He understood and loved all music, loved it well enough to find what little speck of joy and genius might lie buried in a heap of rubbish. Whatever spoke directly to the heart, in no matter what century or country, was in and of itself good. The Romantic Tradition was valid. The Baroque was valid. The classical was valid. The French Impressionists—high among his favorites, and great contributors to this old Yankee's compositional style—were supremely valid. The modern Russians were valid. He adored Stravinsky and Prokofieff. But he drew the line when music ceased to speak to the heart. Mathematical tricks, aleatory theory, calculated silences, dissonance atop dissonance, absence of rhythm—all these were signs of a wrong turn, signs of confusion, and without engaging in overt criticism or accusation he simply averted his gaze and went on his way on the old, the Valid, path.

Music, the speech of the gods, was meant not to dismay us but to make us whole in spirit and in body. "Sometimes," Ted once said, "when I get up in the morning"—this was when he was pushing seventy and perhaps some little strokes had occurred in the night—"I don't know what to do and feel all confused, and so I go to the piano and play Bach for thirty minutes or an hour and then I am all set to rights again and my day goes fine. Bach is so *sane!*"

The simplicity and humility of Ted's whole being and of his thoughts about music came out one day when we were

talking about a certain point in his *Capriccio* for Two Pianos (which I had the thrill of performing with him in its premiere public performance). I was remarking on the pleasing effect made when a certain musical theme returned from time to time in wonderfully diverse settings and moods. "I have been faithful to my theme," said Ted. With him music was more than an art, it was a moral concern. I have thought about that simple comment a thousand times. It has made me come to understand the uniqueness of music: it is the only form of art, the only form of communication, in which it is impossible to express the concept of evil. It is the liturgical art, the art of the heavens, the only art, it is said, that is known in Heaven. Well might a man be humble before it.

That Ted succeeded in attaining every artist's dream—that of finding his own voice—is evident in the reviews, the precious few reviews—of the public performances of his major works. On his *Divertissements* (written at the age of 26) here is the *Christian Science Monitor*:

Mr. Pierce's *Divertissements* live up to their name: they are good entertainment. The Overture has energy. The Pastorale is practically a concerto for flute, 'cello, and violin. The Pavane has elegant parts for the clarinet and oboe. The Finale gives the suite a lively conclusion. Mr. Pierce has written in a romantic idiom. The rhythms and harmonies are luxurious, perhaps occasionally over-rich. But he has ideas, especially for solo instruments. Though the music may meander now and then, it never gets lost. The composer has kept in control of his material. He has written a pleasingly modest work without tricks or eccentricities.

And the *Boston Globe*:

The four movements are bright, engaging, well written, and admirably scored. His treatment of the instruments, singly and en masse, indicates not only excellent training but a native gift for orchestral expres-

sion. There are many solos, and they stand out effectively against their background. What is more, there is sustained motion without straining for brilliance.

In his sixties also, and into his seventies, Ted continued his sallies to the north. The cold unblemished perfection of the arctic landscapes attracted him, and always the wildlife, and the certain knowledge that there were fish in those black unfathomable waters. Newfoundland and Labrador held his attention for some summers, and then Baffin Island. By now he had begun to suffer a series of small "episodes" that might leave him disoriented for a few minutes or longer, and might affect his speech slurringly, but he remained in fine physical condition as always—lean, wiry, energetic. As he neared seventy his face was little changed from the decades of yore: eyes set wide and straight across, opened wide, looking straight at you with intense honesty; nose not small, but turned up in a semi-ski-jump, reminding me of an eager puppy sniffing something yummy in the wind; lips large and full and generous, the lower lip protruding almost pugnaciously; a huge jaw giving structure and character to the whole face, the jaw of a prize fighter. Said jaw was usually shut firmly. It contained the man's opinions.

By the time Ted was 77 he had to have oxygen to fly in unpressurized aircraft. No matter. He planned a trip to Baffin Island by jet and then by puddle-jumper across to Ellesmere Island, using his portable oxygen bottle on that segment of the journey. There, ten degrees from the North Pole, he had got about as far as Byrd had got on the other side of the earth. He went to sleep in some sort of lodge, exhausted, but a bunch of men sat up late talking loudly in the next room

and listening to the television. At two in the morning Ted got up in his night clothes, walked into the next room, said nary a word, turned the teevy off, and went back to bed. The men were nonplussed and silence reigned. They had seen the cut of his jib.

It turned out that there was a little wooden chapel there, run by nuns, mainly for Eskimos. It was Sunday the next day or so; there was a ruined upright piano in the chapel; someone mentioned that one of the visitors had been an organist or something. So it came to pass that Ted played the Sunday service that day, far above the Arctic Circle, in the landscape of his dreams. Surrounded by ice for thousands of miles in every direction, his New England spirit, craggy and rigorous and stern, made its music.

Next year "the big one" hit him, and hard. He lost almost all ability to speak. His family found a comfortable nursing home for him, but he insisted on going back to his cabin in the woods by the lake in Rindge. He would pack his suitcase and start down the hall. He was pushing 78, and yet it took three strong young men to hold him back.

There was a piano in the lounge of the nursing home but Ted ignored it for a long time. The other residents urged, begged him to play. He shook his head. Then one day without warning he sat down and played for something like an hour—gorgeously, with all the fire and robustness that had always marked his powerful playing. He was at the end as he had been at the beginning, faithful to his theme, humble before his art. His art, in gratitude, abided with him to the end.

No doubt he drifted away thinking of polar ice caps and, beneath them, millions of fish mutely waiting for him, like unsung melodies.