

The Concert by Basil Porter

At the tender age of fifteen, I had been immersed in the world of music, first by starting to learn the violin from age seven, and then learning the joys of playing in small groups and orchestra by an impressive lady, Ms Pack, who had devoted her life to introducing young children to the world of chamber music in Johannesburg. She had formed a small orchestra which I was chosen to join, and we would travel around the towns of the Highveld, giving concerts to people who had little exposure to such music. We would sleep over at the homes of the organizing committee, my first real exposure to cultured white Afrikaners. The new places, people and foods were a formative experience for a young Jewish boy who grew up in a double story home with swimming pool and tennis court in the sheltered Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg.

But a far more important experience awaited me, when we were informed at our weekly rehearsal, that we had received a request to perform in Soweto, the black city formed next to Johannesburg to ensure the policy of separate development for whites and blacks, otherwise known as Apartheid. The conductor of a church choir in Soweto had decided to teach his choir the magnificent oratorio "The Creation" of Joseph Haydn, and approached our teacher about the possibility of supplying the orchestra to accompany the choir. Our teacher and conductor suggested a small quartet of musicians, which included me as one of the violinists. I was not familiar with the Creation, though I had been exposed to Haydn's music when playing some of his piano trios for violin, cello and piano. I also knew Soweto only as the name of a place where black people lived, the lucky ones who worked in the area of Johannesburg, and were allowed to work, on condition that they did not live there. Up to this moment, Soweto had been a name, a place where lots of black people lived, a place where pictures of commuters to Johannesburg in the early morning hours would appear in the newspapers, as far away from my daily reality as America or Japan.

We duly set out one Sunday afternoon for a first rehearsal with the choir, entering Soweto after a half hour drive, as the paved roads and tidy homesteads disappeared, replaced by a vista of tin shacks, dust roads, with only an occasional car to be seen among the carts, horses and bicycles. I think whites required a permit to enter Soweto, and I have no idea if we had one. But I did not envy the official that would refuse Ms Pack entry to a place where she was committed to perform. On arrival, and after meeting the conductor, we set up music stands and music, and prepared to begin the rehearsal with the short overture, the orchestral piece played before the choir joins in. We played through the overture, then waited for the conductor

to comment. In a quiet voice, he asked "Could we play that again?". Our lead violinist turned to the conductor and politely asked if there was a problem. The conductor paused, and in a shaking voice whispered, "Oh no, it was just so beautiful." The rehearsal continued, and then plans were made for the concert where we would perform with the choir in the large church hall the following Sunday.

On the set day we drove into Soweto, following the directions we had received to reach the church hall and soon realized that we were not reaching our destination. There was no telephone to call the conductor or the priest, and after driving around the foreign roads, mainly dusty paths, for two hours, we turned around and returned to Ms Pack's home. Four hours after the scheduled beginning of the concert, the phone rang, and the priest was on the line. Ms Pack our teacher apologized and explained how we had had to return on our tracks after not finding the hall. "Miss Pack, I have hundreds of people who have waited since the morning to hear the concert. You cannot let us down." We realized there was no choice, and dutifully went back to the car and set out again. This time we managed to reach the hall without mishap. We climbed out of the car carrying our instruments and music stands, and entered the church hall. I still vividly remember the din of hundreds of adults and children, together with the smell of sweating bodies which had been confined in the hot hall for many hours waiting for us. As we entered there was a deafening explosion of applause and shouts of excitement, where I thought some cursing and boos would have been a more just response after the waiting we had caused.

We quickly organized ourselves and our conductor marched on the stage, raised his arms, and we began the overture. After only a few bars of the music, we sensed the young priest standing next to us, the conductor lowered his arms and we stopped playing. The priest apologized profusely, then turned to the audience, followed immediately by a deafening silence. "You shamed me!" he cried out with a shaking voice." I even taught you how to cough, and now you disturb this beautiful music with your talking." He apologized to us once more and stormed off the stage. The conductor raised his arms and we now managed to complete the overture in a hushed hall. But a new surprise awaited. The first part of the oratorio describes the first verses of genesis, with the untrained, but wonderful powerful voices singing the solo parts describing the events from the first words, "In the beginning, God created...". The music moved on, as the choir sang in soft unison, "And God said, let- there -be- light, and there was..... LIGHT!!" Some sixty years later, I can still remember the shock of hearing the choir behind me bursting into a loud fortissimo of the single word "Light". My bow almost fell from my hand, and I had trouble collecting my overwhelmed brain to continue playing. But soon the entry of the choir, the collection of voices with no formal musical training other than this choir, combining Haydn's

beautiful melodies and chords, with the innate musical abilities that all black people seemed to have, continued the experience. I felt that our conductor and my fellow musicians all sensed the same wonder that I felt. No religious experience could compare to hearing the creation of light, performed by a white string quartet in a place I had never visited, accompanied by a black choir, representing the misery of millions of black people, which due to the belief and perseverance of its conductor, was performing one of the classic works of early European classical music.

Seven years later I would return to Soweto as a young medical student, learning clinical skills at the giant Baragwanath hospital. Many new impressions would be formed, meeting the appalling results of apartheid head on as a young student, learning about the diseases studied in classes through the misery of a neglected population displaying the signs of these advanced diseases due to poor access to health services. But my main memory of Soweto would always be the amazing experience of performing the Creation in this setting years before, with the realization that great music can happen anywhere if people wish it.

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A Word About Me:

Retired pediatrician (Child Development specialist), living in Tel Aviv with my wife of 54 years, Noga. Three children, eight grandchildren. I am a passionate amateur musician, playing the violin and today mainly the viola in chamber music groups over the past forty years. Started doing some writing, mainly creative non-fiction, trying to be creative.



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