RANDALL THOMPSON (1899-1984)

Alleluia, for unaccompanied mixed chorus

When the first class of students gathered for the opening session of the Berkshire Music Center in 1940, Serge Koussevitzky inspired them with high-minded words on the importance of the arts to humanity, particularly in times of danger and difficulty (no one present could forget that war had been raging in Europe for nearly a year). Koussevitzky wanted to have an object lesson in the form of a new composition in which everyone present could take part. To that end, he commissioned Randall Thompson to compose a choral work that would serve as the finale to the opening exercises the first summer. Through some hitch at the printers, the music almost failed to arrive; when it showed up in Lenox, less than an hour before the ceremony was to begin, there was barely time for a sight-reading. But Thompson’s Alleluia made such a powerful effect that it went on to become the most-often-sung work of American choral music. It has become traditionally the first music performed by the Fellows of the Music Center—whether singers, instrumentalists, conductors, or composers—at Tanglewood’s Opening Exercises every year.

—STEVEN LEDBETTER

Farewell, Thanks, and All Best

With the end of the BSO’s 2001-02 season, BSO principal timpanist Everett Firth retires after fifty years of service to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He is at Tanglewood for this July weekend celebrating Seiji Ozawa’s tenure as music director.

Mr. Firth was appointed to the orchestra by Charles Munch; his time with the BSO has encompassed the music directorships of Erich Leinsdorf, William Steinberg, and Seiji Ozawa.

Born in Winchester, Massachusetts, Everett Firth was raised in Sanford, Maine. His father, a trumpet player, encouraged him to study arranging. As a result he learned to play several instruments, including drums, which he played in a dance band. Mr. Firth is a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, where his teacher was Roman Szulc, his predecessor as timpanist of the Boston Symphony.

His teachers also included Saul Goodman, who was timpanist of the New York Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini. An alumnus of the Tanglewood Music Center, Mr. Firth joined the BSO as a percussionist in 1952, at twenty-one. In 1956 he was appointed the orchestra’s principal timpanist, becoming one of the youngest players ever to be named a BSO principal. He has been a featured soloist with the orchestra in concertos of Kraft, Denisov, Martin, and Colgrass. Listed in “Who’s Who in America,” Mr. Firth has taught at the New England Conservatory and the Tanglewood Music Center. He is CEO of Vic Firth Incorporated and Vic Firth Manufacturing, the largest manufacturer of drum sticks and mallets in the world, with distribution to more than 150 countries worldwide.

It is no exaggeration to say that Vic Firth’s sound has become inseparable from that of the orchestra itself. His contribution to the Boston Symphony Orchestra has been immeasurable, as is our gratitude for his half-century of devotion to the BSO.

A Message From Vic Firth

Fifty years with this great orchestra has allowed me to develop not only a philosophy of sound, but a philosophy of life. This has made my time at Symphony Hall exciting and rewarding from the very first day. On one of my first concerts we performed the Brahms Second Symphony. I was thrilled by what went on around me. Fifty years later we played that same music on tour, and the drama was every bit as exciting.

I have spent all of my musical life and most of my adult life on the stages of Symphony Hall and Tanglewood. The drama, the excitement, and the beauty of the music have remained overwhelming. I could not have asked for better colleagues. I depart with the same enthusiasm as when I joined.

Playing for the BSO’s audiences has been like performing for friends. I will never forget the warmth emanating from the audience over the course of these many years.

For more than half of my time with the orchestra, Seiji Ozawa has been music director. Working with Seiji-san has been a timpanist’s delight. His extraordinary baton technique has made even the most difficult music seem readily accessible. His personal warmth and generous musicianship will never be forgotten. I salute his dedication and devotion to his craft of making music.

My life with the Boston Symphony Orchestra has been a wonderful adventure in music that will always be part of me.