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## Unanswered Question

Joe Horowitz on music

an **artsJOURNAL** blog

Remembering Leopold Stokowski

July 28, 2025 by [Joe Horowitz](#)



*Last Friday's "Wall Street Journal" carried my [review](#) of a new memoir by Nancy Shear: "I Knew the Man Who Knew Brahms." Its central topic is Leopold Stokowski, whom Shear knew intimately for decades. I write in part:*

One of the most annoying claims ever uttered by a symphonic conductor came from the lips of Riccardo Muti in 2017. "The level of orchestras in the world has gone up everywhere," he said. Anyone familiar with old recordings – especially of live performances—know that's not true. During the interwar decades, at least five American orchestras regularly sustained a degree of hyper-commitment, evincing passion and love, today mainly to be found only in the ranks of the Berlin Philharmonic. What is more, each commanded a distinctive musical identity.

The most acclaimed American orchestra was Arturo Toscanini's New York Philharmonic, which set new standards for songful precision. The least acclaimed, because taken for granted, was the Metropolitan Opera orchestra superintended by Ettore Panizza and Artur Bodanzky: an Italian powderkeg. The Boston Symphony boasted an incomparable string choir that Serge Koussevitzky made "varm!" In Minneapolis, the raw energy and sinewy musculature of Dimitri Mitropoulos's orchestra was unnervingly unique. But the most mysterious, most controversial American orchestra was Philadelphia's, where Leopold Stokowski went his own way. A sonic sybarite who ignored or altered every composer's intentions, he evinced no known tradition or

lineage. And he was himself cloaked in secrecy. No one knew where and when he was born, or to whom. Though he sometimes claimed Polish parentage, his actual parents were British, with his father a cabinet-maker. Even his spoken accent – never British or American — was purposely untraceable.

Nancy Shear has long owed us a book about Stokowski. For decades, she was his librarian and assistant. Her relationship to him was itself elusive. He was an employer, a father figure, at times virtually a lover. Her new memoir unpacks both the eccentric methodology of the conductor and the odd loneliness and insecurities of the man. And it brandishes a trove of anecdotes. . . .

Of [Stokowski's Philadelphia successor Eugene] Ormandy she writes that "of all the conductors I worked with, [he was] the one I most disliked, both personally and musically." Because he regarded loyalty to his predecessor as disloyalty to himself, she had to hide from Ormandy her continued professional relationship with Stokowski. . . . In the 1960s, when Stokowski was finally permitted to guest conduct in Philadelphia, "he'd write memos on the official Philadelphia Orchestra stationery that bore Ormandy's name at the top, invariably turning the sheet upside down." Travelling by train, he would lower the window shade when passing through Philadelphia. In a rare outburst, he once commanded Shear to "sit down!" – and proceeded to inform her "why I left the Philadelphia Orchestra!" "His voice rising with outrage, he told me about being denied the authority to program substantial amounts of contemporary music and to take the orchestra on foreign tours. 'They dared to tell me what I could and could not do!'" This story matters, because replacing Stokowski with Ormandy – a move partly engineered by the musical powerbroker Arthur Judson – instantly diminished Philadelphia's significance as a cultural hub. . . .

*I write extensively about Stokowski in my books "Classical Music in America: A History" and "Artists in Exile."*

*To read a pertinent blog — "Stokowski and Ormandy: What Happened in Philadelphia? — click [here](#).*