

In Concert
Chapter One

Long before he leaves home this morning, Charlie Schlueter can feel the knot in his stomach begin to tighten. It happens every time he has to go to work. He gets up early, usually by six o'clock, and fixes breakfast, including the first of many cups of black coffee he will drink today. After nervously puttering by himself in the kitchen, putting away the dishes from the dishwasher, he glances at the *Boston Globe* the newsboy left on the porch of his simple, comfortable house in Newtonville, Massachusetts. Today is September 30, 1986, the first day of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's new season, so there are no reviews about him in the newspaper. That's a relief.

In a few hours, at 10:30 A.M., Charlie must be onstage in Symphony Hall to begin the rehearsal of Gustav Mahler's Second Symphony, the *Resurrection*. Charlie is the principal trumpet in the orchestra, a job that means more than the honor of being titular head of his section. He not only plays the most difficult trumpet solos – and any solo on the trumpet is difficult – but he also sets a tonal standard for the entire brass section, a standard that influences the way the whole orchestra sounds.

Handling the pressure of his highly vulnerable position is a constant test of his nerves, and though Charlie tries, as he puts it, "to

stay a day ahead of the struggle," the nature of his profession makes tension inevitable whenever he must rehearse or perform. He says goodbye to his wife, Martha. Their two grown daughters are away at school, and Martha, an accomplished violinist, has started to spend more of her time painting in an upstairs studio at home. Charlie puts his trumpet in the passenger seat of the Toyota Corolla and backs out of the driveway onto Otis Street for the twenty-minute drive to the hall.

"Playing the trumpet is hard because it's so easy," Charlie often says. He likes aphorisms. "What I do makes no product, it's all process" is another of his favorites. He also likes analogies, which usually take the form of anecdotes that he weaves into conversation.

The pitch rising in his natural tenor voice, he recalls an incident a few seasons ago, when guest conductor Bernard Haitink led the BSO in Mahler's Seventh Symphony. At a rehearsal, the faint plaintiveness of the first chords didn't sound the way Haitink wanted them to. So Haitink stopped the orchestra and told a story about Mahler's writing this piece. Haitink said that when Mahler created the beginning of the symphony he'd been rowing a boat on the lake where he was spending the summer. Think of the sound of the oars, Haitink told the players. As soon as he heard this story, Charlie said, his sense of the music's character changed.

But this morning he is not preoccupied with the subjective qualities of Mahler's music. Guiding his car through the busy suburban traffic of Newton, Charlie tries not to think about everything that could go wrong when he gets to the hall. His part in the Mahler Second is extremely demanding, calling for endurance as well as skill, with several exposed spots of solo playing. For him, rehearsing with music director Seiji Ozawa is in many ways more unsettling than presenting a concert. No instrument stands out more in the orchestra than his, and Charlie has repeatedly gotten himself into terrible trouble for standing out too much. Yet he yearns to do just the opposite, to draw attention not to himself but to the music. In Charlie's view, he and his music director simply disagree on how. It is as though with each phrase he must prove himself. Mahler Two, as Charlie and most of his colleagues call it, will be an ordeal.

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But Charlie's anxiety is mixed with anticipation. Mahler is his favorite composer. His writing for the trumpet, says Charlie, "is lyrical and refined, not just, 'Here I am a trumpet player.'"

Mahler is also unpredictable, a quality Charlie admires. He hates to do the same thing twice, and even in the most routine, pedestrian score he will look for a fresh nuance. Mahler, however, is never routine. "Just when you think he's going to be lyrical, there's a quirk. Mahler's always pushing and pulling. That's the nice thing about him, the constant shifting about. The music's schizophrenic. Each one of his symphonies is like a whole lifetime."

Charlie's life began in 1939 far from Boston in the coal-mining town of Du Quoin, Illinois. It is a community where success consists of keeping a roof over one's family and putting enough food on the table for them to survive. Music, the kind of music Charlie plays for a living, could strike most Du Quoin men and women as an anomaly in a world where the basic virtues are hard work and sacrifice. To this day, there are Schlueter relatives who don't understand what Charlie does. If he had followed in his father's footsteps, Charlie would have entered the coal mines after finishing high school. But when Charlie was ten years old, his father introduced him to another miner, Charles Archibald, who was also a Du Quoin music teacher and an amateur trumpet player. Though Charlie had picked out an accordion in the Sears catalog, Archibald persuaded him to start with the cornet instead. Archibald's lessons were expensive for the Schlueters—seventy-five cents—but Charlie's father supported his son's interest in music, even if he did not completely understand it. Perhaps the lessons would help Charlie escape a life in the mines of Du Quoin. Charlie quickly discovered that practicing the trumpet was a way out, not of Du Quoin, but of doing household chores and, as he got older, homework. But when Charlie was thirteen years old, his father became very sick and had to quit his job. And the Schlueters could no longer afford to pay for Charlie's trumpet lessons.

That year at school, a drawing contest was sponsored by the Egyptian Music Company (southern Illinois is known as Little Egypt, because two of the towns on the bordering Mississippi River are called

Thebes and Cairo). Don Lemasters, a trumpet player and professor at nearby Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, was a partner in the Du Quoin branch of the music company, and first prize in the drawing contest was ten lessons with Lemasters on whatever instrument the winner selected.

Charlie entered the contest. Luckily, the boy's musical ability was matched by artistic talent. Charlie's winning drawing of a Christmas scene meant he could continue studying the trumpet for at least ten weeks.

Lemasters knew Charlie's family was poor, and he knew Charlie's father was sick. And before Charlie's ten lessons were over, Lemasters also knew that his young pupil was not just another boy who wanted to play the trumpet in his school's marching band. This young trumpeter was special.

Most of Don Lemasters's students showed up for their lessons armed with excuses about why they hadn't been able to practice during the past week. But Charlie practiced all the time. And he always learned what Lemasters had taught him at the last lesson.

"I can't pay for any more lessons," Charlie had to tell Lemasters after his ten weeks were up.

"I know," Lemasters said. "You don't have to. You can study with me for free."

Charlie played his first solo, *Adeste Fideles*, in fifth grade. When he was twelve, 14,000 people heard him at the Du Quoin Fair.

By the time Charlie was halfway through high school, Lemasters realized he'd taught his star pupil all he could and telephoned his friend Ed Brauer, who played trumpet in the St. Louis Symphony. He offered to pay Brauer for Charlie's lessons, if Brauer could fit him in. Brauer told Lemasters to keep his money and he found a space for Charlie in his busy schedule—Saturday mornings at 7:30.

For two years, Charlie got up each Saturday at 4 A.M. so he could make the drive to St. Louis for his lesson. His father had bought him a new trumpet, for which Mr. Schlueter had had to sign a promissory note. Charlie played in two bands, Du Quoin High's Indianairs and his own Charlie Schlueter and His Orchestra. While most of his friends planned to put away their trumpets and trombones, flutes and clari-

nets after high school, Charlie was determined to enter the musical world beyond Du Quoin. His next step was as easy as it was audacious.

Though he had no idea how he would pay for it, Charlie applied to the Juilliard School in New York City, probably the most prestigious music conservatory in the United States. Juilliard in the 1950s was headed by the American composer William Schuman. Some of the finest instrumentalists in the world taught there, and its string quartet, which took the name of the school, was renowned. For a high school senior from Du Quoin, Illinois, Juilliard represented not only an escape from the coal mines but also the expression of a wish to experience something new and largely unknown. And it was an early demonstration of what would become a lifelong trait, the capacity to grow.

Charlie was accepted in the class of 1961. He had a small scholarship, and earned the rest of his tuition by playing in a salsa band at a Puerto Rican nightclub in upper Manhattan. He also sang in a church choir, for which he received five dollars a week; that covered a quarter of his weekly expenses. At Juilliard, Charlie often practiced six or seven hours a day. "It kept my mind off being lonely and depressed, and having to do other work," he says.

At Juilliard, Charlie studied with William Vacchiano, beginning a relationship that he would remember affectionately as "four years of agony. I never knew what was going to happen." By virtue of his position as the New York Philharmonic's principal trumpet player as well as his teaching association with Juilliard, Vacchiano was considered the most illustrious classical trumpeter in the country. Only the best trumpet students at Juilliard studied with him, and they were required to audition before he accepted them.

Charlie had met someone who was more than his match. No matter how well he played, Vacchiano always saw room for improvement. At Charlie's first lesson, the celebrated teacher asked Charlie to turn to page 59 of Arban's *Complete Conservatory Method for Trumpet*. Since childhood, Charlie had been playing from this comprehensive 350-page manual of exercises and études by a nineteenth-century French virtuoso, Joseph Jean Baptiste Laurent Arban. The page Vacchiano requested began with one of the first things he had ever learned, a C-

major scale. Somewhat befuddled by the easiness of the assignment, Charlie nevertheless did as he had been told. Had he really come all the way from Du Quoin to play this?

But Vacchiano interrupted Charlie repeatedly to correct his attack, phrasing, and breathing. Written in 2/4 time—two beats to a measure, with a quarter note getting one beat—the first exercise Vacchiano requested requires staccato tonguing. Each note must be given a clean, sharp attack, the trumpeter showing no strain as the scale ascends. The spaces between the notes that make them staccato must be even. Further sequences in the exercise present different combinations of loud and soft, and add increasingly difficult intervals between some of the notes. Intervals are tricky on the trumpet because they are often played without a change in the fingering. To get an interval right, the player must trust his ear and control the tension in his lips.

Uncountable other Arban exercises filled Charlie's lesson and practice hours, and he still uses the volume today with his own students. Mastering the trumpet's technique under Vacchiano taught Charlie something he doesn't like to remind his students: Playing the trumpet is hard because it is *hard*.

What Charlie learned or relearned from Vacchiano was to have a connection to everything he played in his professional career. There is a direct link between the staccato notes in that first Arban exercise and numerous places in the Second Symphony of Gustav Mahler. And Vacchiano was always dispensing tips. "Never keep the tuning slide in the same place," he'd remind Charlie. "No good musician accents an upbeat," he'd say. Or "A staccato eighth note followed by a sixteenth note is short." Like a father giving advice to his son, Vacchiano was getting Charlie ready to handle the musical challenges ("Carry two mutes, one for high notes and one for low") and personal challenges ahead ("Talk back to the conductor"). And, he told him, "when you're onstage and the lights go out and you're going to be broadcast, always look for security." Vacchiano meant a player shouldn't take unnecessary chances, advice that headstrong Charlie would not always follow. Three things made a good trumpet player, according to Vacchiano. "First of all, you have to be a good bugler." Then, he continued, "you have to read." You must, in other words, know your instrument's lit-

erature and understand what different composers require of you in their scores. This, of course, is only possible if you possess a trumpet player's third quality. "You have to know what you're doing." Vacciano liked to let that phrase dangle. He didn't want its simplicity to mask its significance.

By 1961, Charlie was a good bugler, becoming better. Completely, irrevocably, he was also on his own. His father had died when Charlie was eighteen, leaving Charlie free to make the final break from Du Quoin, but with the responsibility to go home whenever he could to see that his mother was provided for. And Charlie had met his future wife, who was studying the violin in New York and who lived in the same apartment building as he did. One night Martha heard Charlie's trumpet through her open window. A diminutive but feisty woman who acts on her thoughts, Martha wondered who was playing so beautifully and found out by ringing the doorbell of Charlie's apartment. They were an unlikely match, Charlie, from a strict Lutheran family, and Martha, a New York Jew, but they fell in love and got married the year of his graduation. Instead of taking a honeymoon, they traveled on a cross-country tour for five months as players in the American Ballet Theatre's orchestra.

Returning to his midwestern roots, Charlie in the next decade established himself as one of the country's top orchestral trumpeters. He held jobs as principal or co-principal in Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Cleveland, before taking the position of principal trumpet in Minneapolis in 1972. Then, in 1981, exactly twenty years after leaving New York, he and Martha returned east to Boston. It was a move that would shake the foundations of Charlie's career.

Winning the audition for the BSO job had been almost too easy. If he'd been a baseball pitcher, it would have been like throwing a no-hitter in his first game with a new team.

Under normal audition procedures, the BSO advertises an opening and invites candidates to send taped examples of their playing from a prescribed list of pieces. An audition committee screens these tapes and winnows the applicants. Those who survive this cut are asked to come to Boston to play for the committee behind a screen placed in

the middle of the stage, hiding their identities. And the finalists from this group then play before Seiji Ozawa and the committee without the screen. For a principal position, the final candidates sometimes play with the orchestra as well. Then the audition committee makes a recommendation to Seiji on whom to select for the job. It is Seiji's decision whether to accept that recommendation.

The orchestra had actually tried to persuade Charlie to audition when Armando Ghitalla announced he was retiring after the 1978–79 season. Personnel manager Bill Moyer wanted Charlie to apply for the position being vacated by Ghitalla. Moyer, who had begun his BSO career as a trombonist in the orchestra, knew of Charlie by reputation. But when he called Charlie in Minneapolis, Charlie said he was happy where he was. Furthermore, Charlie said, he wasn't going to come to Boston and play what he called a "naked audition." At this stage in his career, he wasn't going to play unaccompanied behind a screen. Terribly unnerving, it also seemed humiliating. Having recently turned forty, Charlie thought he was too old to be treated that way.

Two years later, the job was again open. Twice more, Moyer called Charlie. The first time, with his typical bravado, Charlie suggested to Moyer that he listen to the Minneapolis orchestra on the radio. When Moyer called again, over one hundred people had been rejected in the preliminary rounds of the new audition, and Moyer said the audition committee would permit Charlie to play just with the full orchestra in the finals. Feeling he had nothing to lose, and perhaps realizing that he was trying Moyer's patience, Charlie said okay. He'd gotten his way. All the finalists had been told in advance what works to prepare. They included the opening of the Mahler Fifth, the post horn solo from the Mahler Third, and Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, all extremely difficult and calling for different styles. Their diversity illustrated a fact of orchestral life. But a member of the orchestra must be able to exploit his or her playing skill according to the demands of complexly varied music.

Because the audition repertoire was so mixed, Charlie brought several trumpets with him to the audition in Symphony Hall in February 1981. Walking on the stage with all his trumpets, Charlie looked like a tennis player before a big match. Certain kinds of music simply

sound better on one kind of trumpet rather than another. And some music can be played only on a given type of trumpet. The extremely high notes in much of baroque music, for example, necessitate the use of a smaller, more compact trumpet, pitched several tones higher than the usual.

Playing with great confidence, Charlie quickly sensed that this orchestra was qualitatively better than the one he was used to. Though this was only an audition, the BSO players seemed to take the occasion seriously. They were more attuned to nuances in Charlie's playing, making small but important adjustments in their response to what he did. This kind of ensemble coordination, usually associated with chamber music, is possible only among the finest orchestral musicians. Charlie was very impressed.

So was the orchestra. Charlie's was the kind of performance that made being an orchestral player more exciting to a musician than anything else. The sound of his Mahler was rich and dark, the kind of trumpet sound Mahler must have had in mind when he wrote his symphonies. Charlie played *with* the orchestra, with the kind of give-and-take that defines the difference between a good trumpeter and a good orchestral trumpeter. He was being the kind of star who put the team first.

When he was finished after almost half an hour, the players did something that was almost unheard of in an audition. They applauded.

Then Charlie remained onstage to play for the audition committee alone. "How about a *Leonore*?" he asked.

For his only opera, *Fidelio*, Beethoven had composed four overtures. The first he discarded and the fourth he used for the work's 1814 revision. The middle two, taking their names from the opera's main character, Leonore, eventually became part of the orchestra repertoire. Both feature fanfares for trumpet, and one of them was on Charlie's audition list of prescribed pieces.

The committee agreed that Charlie could play the fanfare from the prescribed *Leonore*. After he did, though, no one on the committee said anything. Charlie thought perhaps he hadn't played it loudly enough. So, with the committee's permission, he repeated the overture, more loudly. Silence again greeted his last notes.

Long afterward, still mystified by the audition committee's response to his *Leonore*, Charlie asked one of the committee members about it.

Had he played the *Leonore* loudly enough? Charlie wondered.

The answer was immediate and emphatic.

"Holy shit!" Charlie, it seemed, had played it louder than they'd ever heard it, so loud he'd almost blown the audition.

Nevertheless, the committee recommended him and, to the surprise of no one present at his orchestra audition, Seiji Ozawa chose Charlie as his new principal trumpet player. His hope when he hired Charlie was that Charlie's sound would improve the character of the brass section.

Despite the comfort and security of his Minneapolis job, Charlie accepted. He knew the Boston position was more prestigious than almost any other in the world. Everything the BSO did—its regular season, the chamber group its principals played in while the rest of the orchestra played Pops, its summer Tanglewood season, its tours, its regular radio broadcasts, and its recordings—everything was bigger and better than Minneapolis. Charlie would also earn more money, though he'd spend more, too. But in Boston he'd be able to teach, not just a few private pupils but many students at the New England Conservatory of Music, a block away from Symphony Hall. That would bring in additional income and it would further his reputation. He might become a modern Vacchiano.

Arriving in Boston now, a few minutes before 9 A.M. on the last Tuesday in September, forty-seven-year-old Charlie pulls his Corolla into a garage near Symphony Hall and walks past the Stop and Shop and Amalfi's Café to the stage door. His trumpet is in a leather case over his shoulder.

A little too round in the waist, which he blames on too much gin and bourbon, Charlie has a moustache and bearded face. His dark hair, beginning to gray, is thin over his forehead but comes down over the tops of his ears. He wears glasses onstage and off, and his eyes are penetrating and inquisitive. Except when he is upset he smiles a lot, and people trust that smile, find it welcoming and friendly.

"Hey, Bill," he greets the security guard Bill McRae, then descends to the basement, quickly scans the bulletin board, checks for his mail, and stops for yet another coffee at the urn. With his free hand, he reaches for the package of Winstons that he carries in his shirt pocket. Charlie smokes cigarettes only at work, changing to a pipe at home as a concession to Martha. No one needs to tell him that cigarettes hurt him, but they seem an occupational hazard, providing a constant in a professional life filled with uncertainty. Only one of the BSO's four trumpet players doesn't smoke. And only one, Andre Côme, is older than Charlie.

Yet Charlie worries compulsively about his health. He suffers frequently from colds and seems to clear his throat and blow his nose habitually. He rides an exerciser daily in his study, and he takes a variety of vitamins, of which he keeps an ample supply in his Symphony Hall locker. He believes especially in the beneficial effects of vitamin C and vitamin B complex. He also experiments with a multitude of mental techniques to quiet his nerves. One of the simplest is avoiding unnecessary pressures, such as being rushed.

There are players in the orchestra who regularly arrive for a rehearsal or concert with barely enough time to open their instrument cases. For Charlie and the other early arrivals, finding a private place in the cramped, old building is important. Taking his coffee cup with him, Charlie walks through a hallway to a spot in the basement that is directly underneath the center of the auditorium. Near him are a few soundproof practice rooms. Charlie calls them isolation booths and uses one for some of his teaching, but he dislikes playing in it. He can't hear himself, and despite the windows in the doors the rooms are so small that almost anyone would feel claustrophobic. Charlie claims a spot in the open basement, where he can pace as he plays and where he can glimpse other people, including members of the house crew in their repair shops.

Here, far from the brightly lit changing rooms that soon will begin to fill with his colleagues, Charlie at last takes his trumpet from its case. It is an expensive custom model, made for him in Chicago by a young man named David Monette. He fusses for a moment with its three valves. Then he holds it under his shoulder, while he puckers

his lips and blows a few notes on the unattached gold-plated mouthpiece, producing funny-sounding kazoolike buzzes. He inserts the smaller end of the mouthpiece into the trumpet's unpolished leadpipe and sends a shot of hot air through four feet of tapered brass tubing. He fiddles with an apparently absentminded, automatic fingering. Finally, he is ready to warm up, except that he doesn't like to use the term. "Checking the templates" is how he describes this procedure, as though it were shrouded in a certain mystery, with Charlie wondering what will be there each day.

He begins with a series of slurred, or legato, thirds, the bottom note of each third part of an ascending scale. He plays ten such thirds consecutively: an octave's worth plus two more. This makes the last note of the last third a perfect fifth above the tonic, or note on which he began. So, for example, when he starts on C, his last third bridges the interval of E to G. From the concluding G he slurs a whole step down to F, then on down to D, B, G, and D—an arpeggio of thirds—before arriving back where he started with a final whole-step slur to C.

Such a sequence takes him less than ten seconds to play, but its difficulty does not lie in its speed. What makes this hard, though he plays it without the slightest perceptible strain, is the combination of strength and control it requires. Like much trumpet playing of this caliber, it is analogous to walking a high wire. In addition to courage, you need well-developed muscles that you apply with a light touch.

As soon as Charlie completes the figure, he breathes deeply and begins again, in a new key, usually a half step above, from C, therefore, he goes to C sharp, and so on. Charlie keeps going upward until he reaches a key whose top note, in this exercise, defines his comfortable range (D two octaves and a whole step above middle C, though he can play several notes higher). Charlie performs this exercise from a combination of memory and habit, and he improvises others that form no set pattern.

He follows with a little Mahler, playing as though he believed Mahler had composed this music just for him. Stretching the fingers of his left hand, he keeps the trumpet grasped in it, arches his eyebrows as he stretches his facial skin, and flexes the fingers of his right hand, which remain placed over the three valve keys. Attached to one of the

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valves is a pencil stub with which he marks his sheet music, but he uses no music now.

Splah! The sound he makes reminds him of something he's been trying to forget, the ever present possibility of failure.

He refers to his mistake self-deprecatingly as "my signature." He tries again. This time the sound is gold, something warm and dark a listener could get lost in. The sound comes from somewhere very deep inside and it fills the basement cavern while Charlie plays, waiting for the announcement over the hall's public address system that will summon the orchestra to the rehearsal.

Charlie has played Mahler Two many times before. He knows his part. But he knows, too, that the score is filled with trumpet writing that will make it necessary for him to draw on everything he has ever learned about the trumpet. And it will require something else, too. "What is best in music is not to be found in the notes," Mahler was fond of saying. For Charlie, playing this supremely nostalgic and ultimately triumphant symphony, the music is an echo of his own past, a reflection of his life.

Appearing outwardly calm, Charlie retraces his steps through the basement hallway, exchanging pleasantries with whomever he encounters. But he keeps on walking. His gimmicky digital watch tells him it's almost 10:30.

Charlie stops for a glass of water, which he carries with him to his seat at the center of the rear of the stage and places on the music stand before him. As he sits down, he can smell varnish and paint, during the orchestra's September vacation, the house crew has been painting the backstage area, and a new coat of lacquer has been applied to the stage floor. Surrounded on that stage by his fellow players, more than one hundred men and women, friends and enemies alike, Charlie feels completely, utterly alone.

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