

THE BUDDHA'S FIRE SERMON

by

Ronald Stevenson

In the Spring of 1978 I was in New York. I wished to contact Leopold Godowsky Jr., the composer's son. I rang a New York number and was answered by his wife, Frances Godowsky, sister of George Gershwin. She said that they had had a fire in their apartment and that her husband would be home the following day and could see me then. I demurred at causing inconvenience in their predicament but she reiterated her invitation.

Next day, she received me with a smile and ushered me into an apartment still pervaded by the smell of smoke; the remaining furniture all covered in sheets. She invited me to sit, saying her husband would be with me soon. She excused herself and typed at a side table. From the tail of my eye I saw the Gershwin profile.

Leopold Godowsky Jr. entered and a sense of peace descended. A small man in a grey and sober green shirt buttoned at the collar and without tie. The small Godowskian hands were offered in large welcome. His head was the image of his father's. Buddhist.

He sat quietly and quiet was his conversation. He reminisced with filial love and ranged over a world of subjects - conversational phonoramas. He spoke of his father's early encouragement of his violin playing and of his work as co-discoverer of Kodak color photography.

Bolet was mentioned for his endeavours in the Godowsky cause. I conveyed Harry Winstanley's wish to found a Godowsky Society in the United Kingdom, an idea he welcomed, offering full support. Yes, manuscripts existed of unpublished Godowsky works. Only then did he refer to the fire in the apartment. He would'nt know until he consulted his catalogues whether any of those manuscripts had perished in the fire which had consumed his library next door; though some Godowsky manuscripts were certainly in his other house in Connecticut.

Just before I left, he showed me the charred remains of his library. At a loss, but trying to be helpful, I told him how the Maltings Concert Hall of Benjamin Britten had been destroyed by fire but rebuilt and improved within a year.

Back in Britain, I heard a performance of Rautavaara's "Fire Sermon" sonata. I read the Encyclopædia Britannica's entry on Buddha's Fire Sermon. It was the Buddha's Sermon on the Mount; its subject, a jungle fire on the opposite mountain. The Buddha warned the hearers against the fires of concupiscence, anger, ignorance, birth, death, decay and anxiety; and compared all human sensations to a burning flame that seems what it is not, producing pleasure and pain, vanishing and destroying. The world's miseries, fed by the fire of passion. Nirvana: the haven beyond passion; the subsumed fire.

And I reflected: Godowsky's music is like that: a quiet sermon in art from the opposite mountain to the jungle fire of anti-art in our age.
