

# ONE

He discovered a great ambition to excel. . . . He was uncommonly inquisitive; and his memory was so tenacious, that he never forgot anything that he either heard or read. . . . In short, he is a memorable instance of what has often been observed, that the boy is the man in miniature.

*Boswell, Life of Johnson*

Bernard Herrmann was a premature baby, born in the seventh month of his mother's pregnancy on June 29, 1911.<sup>1</sup> His early arrival—foreshadowing the tempo of the life to follow—may have resulted in his being born, like many premature infants, without a fully developed nerve-protection system. Or perhaps his sensitized aggression was the legacy of a cultural history marked by persistence. Both of his parents, Abraham and Ida Herrmann, were part of the massive immigration of East European Jews to New York, triggered in the early 1880s by the oppression of their czarist homeland.

In Europe, the Jews were a nation without recognition. Their collectivism threatened by Russia's anti-Semitic Alexander III, the East European Jews began to move westward in search of freedom and a reaffirmation of cultural ties. Their reception in New York was at first one of open hostility, as predictions of "Russian radicalism" and growing crime filled the newspapers and street talk.<sup>2</sup> Gradually more subtle forms of suspicion took hold as an increasing number of skilled workers and intellectuals followed the first wave of settlers. Some, like Abraham Dardick (soon to become Abraham Herrmann), came not from the slums of Russia's Pale of Settlement but from successful professional districts threatened by Russia's political instability.<sup>3</sup> New York promised community, wealth, even intellectualism, values important to the optometrist from Proskourv.

Abraham was one of six Dardick children. Four others—Sonya, Nathan, Lazar, and Hinda—also left for America in the late nineteenth

century. Abraham's parents left Russia as well, settling in Palestine at the time of the First World War; they died about fifteen years later.

Abraham Dardick's early years, according to the tales of his children, were the stuff of Melville and Israel Zangwill fiction. After an education in Russia, Dardick left for America around 1880. There he changed his name from Dardick to Herrmann, probably because of the growing success of German Jews in America\*—although his son Bernard would have enormous contempt for the "airy" Germans. (This did not prohibit Bernard's admiration, sometimes idolatry, of German composers.)

Abraham sailed to Hawaii to become an assistant overseer of a sugar or pineapple plantation a few years before the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy that led to American possession of the islands. After years in Hawaii, Herrmann traveled to Seattle, where he became a whaler aboard the brigantine *Alexander*. During a trip to the Bering Straits the *Alexander* was reportedly shipwrecked, but the crew were saved and made their way to the Ratt Island and Atu.

Herrmann returned to America around 1895, studying optometry through a correspondence course in Chicago. He received his degree in 1896 and moved to Cleveland, opening an optometrist's shop in the Cleveland Arcade. A few years later his wanderlust took him to Watertown, New York, and finally to New York City. There he married another Russian immigrant and fathered two children. The marriage was short-lived, apparently owing to Abraham's temper. The first Mrs. Herrmann returned to Russia with both children. Abraham followed them in an unsuccessful attempt to gain custody of the children.<sup>4</sup> One child died in Russia; the other, Willy, later returned to New York.

By the opening decade of the new century, New York Jews were enjoying their first taste of prosperity. They were becoming bankers and restaurant owners; they inhabited modern downtown apartments, many with that unique symbol of status, the elevator. It was to this upper middle class that Abraham Herrmann belonged, proud of his Russian heritage while cultivating an erudition in Western art, literature, and music. A non-musician but frequent concertgoer, Herrmann (according to his sons) always purchased two theater seats, even when alone—one for himself, one for his coat and hat.

Abraham Herrmann, with his aristocratic, Edwardian lifestyle, found an opposite in Ida Gorenstein, another Russian immigrant of less well-to-

\*Two explanations of Abraham's name change were passed down to the Herrmanns. The first concerned an amatory alliance Abraham sought to escape; the second, a Herrmann family in Pittsburgh with whom Abraham stayed, and which asked Abraham to take their name. Abraham's son Louis believed the first story.

do ancestry. Ironically, the Gorenstein family was from the same Russian city as Abraham, Proskourv;<sup>5</sup> but unlike Abraham, Ida's parents were extremely religious. One of five children, Ida had come to New York with her family at the age of nine, losing most of her native language in the transition. She was uneducated and poor, with only the most basic working skills.

She was also, in 1909, attractive and eligible. Now in her late teens, Ida worked in a New York shop as a gloves salesgirl, supporting her family and introducing her to a leisured, successful class of businessmen. Among the frequent clients was the middle-aged Herrmann, who already had a history of mistresses in the New York area. Soon the gentleman with a diamond stickpin and gold-knobbed walking stick had taken a fancy to the simple young salesgirl, and the first wave of scarves and trinkets was followed by a proposal of marriage to Ida's parents.<sup>6</sup>

His offer was conditional: his fiancée could not be a salesgirl. Since her wages were essential to her family, Abraham agreed to pay her parents to keep her home until he decided it was time for marriage. Ida Herrmann later described herself as "the lady of the district," free from the drudgery of garment labor and protected by a gentleman.<sup>7</sup> Frequently calling for tea and providing tours of the city in his horse and carriage, Abraham insisted on an extended engagement before finally deciding in 1909 it was time—again—to marry. (According to their son Louis, the couple eloped and married in New Jersey.)<sup>8</sup> Ida was nineteen, Abraham in his late forties (even his children never knew his age), as culturally intellectual as Ida was unsophisticated. Recalled a later Herrmann friend, Joan Greenwood: \* "Benny always said his mother was a peasant and his father a gentleman."<sup>9</sup>

Ida and Abraham had at least one thing in common: high blood pressure, which their children would inherit. The Herrmann home was rarely calm; Abraham deliberately initiated fights with Ida as an excuse to escape to the Lower East Side and the Café Royal, where Jewish intellectuals could play cards and talk politics.<sup>10</sup> According to Louis, Abraham once brought home a bust of Athena, "goddess of peace," to bring calm to the household.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it was a joke on Abraham's part. Athena was goddess of war.

The Herrmanns' first home was a spacious brownstone at Second Avenue and 18th Street on New York's East Side, furnished with heavy European furniture and filled with oil paintings, bronze busts, and bookcases. It was a household of clashing extremes; an illiterate mother, insecure about money (despite Abraham's full-time employment), and a well-read

\*Not the actress.

father who rarely saved his earnings; an Orthodox Jewish mother in perpetual argument with a father who would not tolerate religious discussion. Outside their community hostility toward Jews remained, in a city whose police commissioner declared that half its criminals were Jewish.<sup>12</sup>

New York was not the only site of flux. The second decade of the twentieth century was a period of international change, socially, technologically, and artistically. By 1911 Russia was on the brink of revolution; in three years the world would be at war. New movements stirred by the industrial revolution swept through business; Einstein and Planck were re-writing classical physics; and in Vienna, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung offered shocking reappraisals of man's psychological needs and denials.

1911 was also a hallmark year for European concert music. On January 26 the first performance of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* took place in Dresden, followed on April 3 by the premiere of Sibelius's Fourth Symphony in Helsingfors, on May 24 by the first performance of Elgar's Second Symphony in London, on June 13 by the premiere of Stravinsky's ballet *Petrouchka* in Paris, and on November 10 by the premiere of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* in Munich. Music was at a crossroad as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Scriabin, and other modernists challenged the traditionalism of Elgar, Strauss, and Mahler, as well as the more progressive school of impressionism led by Debussy and Ravel. As Charles Ives, a full-time insurance salesman and part-time composer, sat in his Connecticut study writing music not to be heard for decades, the music world mourned the death of Gustav Mahler at age fifty, his collapse apparently abetted by New York's artistic politics. It was a fact not lost in later years on 1911's most distinguished addition to composition, born that June 29 in New York's Lying In Hospital.

Benny Herrmann—as he was almost immediately known—was the first of Abraham and Ida's three children. To his mother he was a breathing doll, a plaything to pamper and spoil with attention. His prematurity was a source of great maternal worry; Ida even wrapped the precious child in cotton.<sup>13</sup> Pulling and curling his dark hair and rubbing his tiny feet, she filled the hot afternoon hours with her most precious toy. Another, more handsome son was born on April 14, 1913—Louis, the practical, athletic child; and on October 15, 1914, a daughter, Rose, who grew up with a marked resemblance to Benny. A fourth child died stillborn.<sup>14</sup>

There was no question which of the three children was the favorite. For the next sixty-four years Ida Herrmann treated her son Bernard with the constant, excessive nurturing a mother awards a newborn child. Despite

the endless arguments, their relationship was totally supportive. As Freud observed, "A man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror, that confidence of success that often induces real success."<sup>15</sup> Whether or not Ida was the catalyst, confidence was part of Bernard Herrmann's psychology even before adolescence.

The major trauma of Benny's early years was a battle with St. Vitus's Dance at age five, which he barely survived.<sup>16</sup> This aside, Bernard Herrmann's childhood memories would be a romantic (and no doubt romanticized) collage of carriage rides through New York; of Abraham listening to their extensive gramophone collection as Ida cooked; of young Willy Herrmann appearing at their door and introducing himself as Abraham's son (and receiving a meal from Ida before leaving).<sup>17</sup> Herrmann also remembered literature—especially that evoking the bustling, foggy London of Dickens and Conan Doyle. And he remembered music.

Benny's early passion for the arts was actively encouraged—perhaps initiated—by his extraordinary father, who championed art, literature, and music with a zeal that amazed both friends and family. Recalled Louis Herrmann:

My father was always insistent that we be aware of the adventures that lie before us and that art could fulfill our lives to a larger degree than life itself. We were taken to operas and museums at a very early age—perhaps too early, but who can say? We did not grow up in a permissive attitude. We understood that discipline and obedience were part of the ritual of growing up. We were given the freedom of speaking our minds within the framework of obedience.

My father was basically an agnostic. He gave us no religious training at all. My mother came from a pious but not a particularly learned family. She was very much dismayed by his antagonism to her tradition and her training, but as she had neither the strength nor the ability to cope with my father's dynamism, we grew up basically cultural illiterates as far as religion was concerned. . . . We were not bar mitzvahed, nor did we belong to any organized temple.

My father [so believed] in the necessity to draw from the arts . . . that by the time we were five or six we were already involved in musical activities. Bernard was given the violin, I was given a cello, and my sister, who was probably no more than four, already knew there was a piano in the house. . . . Practice became the rule of the day; an hour or two a day on our instruments was the minimum required. I personally became an avid clock watcher and always heaved a sigh of relief when practice was over. This was not true of Bernard. He took violin lessons to the age of twelve

or thirteen, and while he may not have been the world's worst violinist he certainly could have ranked in the lowest strata. He needed a larger field to work with and shifted to the piano. By the time he was about eleven he had already composed an opera, and I was amazed that my brother, only two years older than I, could not only read at such an avid rate but could write music almost as quickly.

Bernard indicated at an early age that he was beyond the capacities of his early teachers. I recall the first teacher we ever had; he charged perhaps fifty cents a lesson, or less. By age ten my brother had already established a very strong recognition in the neighborhood. In those days almost all the barbers were Italians, and while they may have been caricaturized as opera-loving and excitable, they were exceptionally knowledgeable; to them, music was another way of life. When my brother entered the barber shop he was hailed as "the young Toscanini." He and the barbers would have animated conversations about Verdi versus Wagner, with the barbers rattling off in a crescendo of voices the operas by Verdi and the Italian school and my brother counterpointing that any one Wagner was worth five "oompa-pahs."

Since we were born at the beginning of the twentieth century, our schoolteachers were all products of the nineteenth century; most were born around 1870, 1880. The result is that we were nineteenth-century people. And if you're a nineteenth-century person, where does your root of art take hold but with nineteenth-century people? This was the root of Bernard's Anglophilia—his love of English poets, English music. We were privileged perhaps in having neither radio nor television; an incentive to read was fulfilling one's imagination. My father bought entire sets of authors; we read Dumas, Zangwill, Tolstoy, de Maupassant, Twain, Balzac, Molière, Ibsen, Dickens. Books were lined from floor to ceiling, and they were read.

In his early grades Bernard was a very good student, because he had a voracious appetite for reading and a remarkable ability to write. His papers were always marked with comments such as "My, what imagination." In my brother's early days at junior high school [the East Side's Public Schools 40 and 50], in the seventh or eighth grade, my father received several communications from the principal, Mr. Franklin, commending my brother and my father on the remarkable ability of Bernard but ruefully indicating that perhaps the mathematics class under Mrs. Lux was not the place to write music. Mrs. Lux was a woman who understood that she had a remarkable student who should be nurtured.<sup>18</sup>

Hampering Benny's school years was his social awkwardness with other children. His scholarly demeanor typed him early as a bespectacled, uncoordinated bookworm. Their taunting abuse left deep scars, shaping Herr-

mann's artistic empathy with the outcast and strange that would serve him well in later dramatic scores. One group of young toughs particularly enjoyed threatening young Herrmann. Typically, Benny fought back, hiring with his own pocket money an even tougher schoolboy to serve as his protector. One day, when the gang began their usual attack, Benny's bodyguard and his friends seized the tormentors and warned them never to touch Herrmann again. They obeyed.<sup>19</sup>

If Herrmann's memory is to be trusted, some early teachers were almost as brutal. In a 1948 letter to his first wife, Herrmann bitterly recalled an early music lesson, giving a striking glimpse into his perception of his school days:

N.Y. School of Music was the place where when I showed the first songs I ever wrote—they were laughed at and torn up by the bastard that ran the place, Dr. Hearn. There they made fun of my interest in music. And brought in other children—to show me what real talent was. There they showed me what real pupils in harmony did—and there the sour German teacher of the violin hit me with the violin bow—because I would not play the piece of garbage he gave me to learn—it was called “When Knight-hood Was in Flower” by Gustave Lange. I ask[ed] to be allowed to play the selections from the “Freuchutz” [Weber's *Der Freischütz*]. How he laughed at me and hit me with his violin bow—but I would not play that lousy piece—and wanted only the Weber piece. He then slapped me hard—and I took my violin and broke [it] square over his head—and ran [out] of the building never to return again. . . .

The songs I showed—and felt so proud of—were settings of Heine—I shall never forget or forgive the laughter and the derision that they were received in. I suppose my hatred of the place—is still there—waiting to be revenged.<sup>20</sup>

Benny's main refuge from harassment was the New York Public Library on 23d Street, a universe of literature that he explored inexhaustibly, complementing the literary scholarship his father expected with an amazing retention of historical detail and quotations. (Even during the summer, when the Herrmanns stayed at a rented bungalow in Rockaway, Long Island, Benny—whose skin and temperament were ill suited to the beach—retreated to the local library. Louis, already a handsome ladies' man, often served as a beach lifeguard.)<sup>21</sup>

Instinctively Herrmann was drawn to authors whose vision was essentially tragic, highly individual, and contemptuous of contemporary mores. For him, “D. H. Lawrence was a man who followed his own personal vision. . . . The last really first-rate writer the world has had. Before him

was Hardy, one of the last great titans of English literature. . . . O'Neill was the last distinguished first-class dramatist. . . . You don't have to agree with him, but [his work] was something he felt deeply and wanted to talk about."<sup>22</sup> Herrmann also loved the writings of the iconoclastic artist James McNeill Whistler—especially his collection of essays *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*.

Benny also studied the moderns. His lifelong fascination with psychology (particularly deviant behavior) took root in Freud. It was Freud who associated anxiety with fear of loss of love, a pivotal theme in Herrmann's best music.<sup>23</sup>

Herrmann's creative disposition was drawn to the brooding poetry of the English Romantics and the socialistic lessons of Dostoyevski, Dickens, and Hardy. One of Herrmann's favorite novels was Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, a deeply pessimistic study of late-nineteenth-century English society. "I always remember the opening of that book," Herrmann said in 1954, "about little Jude being a young boy: after a rain he goes out onto a road full of puddles, and outside these puddles are worms struggling to get back into the water. Jude hops from rock to rock not to step on them. Hardy says a person of that sensitivity is going to have a very hard and wretched life."<sup>24</sup> That passage, as Herrmann must have realized, was as much a reflection on its admirer as on young Jude. Observed Louis Herrmann, "The poignancy of life was made evident to him very early. He felt the hurts and anguish of life very strongly. You could not value friendships too highly because sometimes they were used for other purposes. As a result he had a tendency to view people slightly from a distance, very cautiously. . . . He was very demanding of other people being able to fill his sense of perfection."<sup>25</sup>

Herrmann also absorbed himself in biographies of artists and composers, learning musical works through the precious 78 rpm recordings Abraham collected and the New York Philharmonic concerts at Carnegie Hall on 57th Street. In 1924, at age thirteen, Benny's literary excavations led him to the *Treatise on Orchestration* by Hector Berlioz, whose work Herrmann knew through the Weingartner recording of the *Symphonie Fantastique*. The *Treatise* became Benny's secret Koran—the book, he later claimed, that convinced him to become a composer.<sup>26</sup> (A CBS press release of the mid-thirties cites a Philharmonic performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony as the key factor in Herrmann's career choice. Herrmann's version seems more likely.)<sup>27</sup> Herrmann could not have found a better introduction to the world of orchestration and programmatic music, the areas in which he would excel. Berlioz was, in many ways, his

nineteenth-century counterpart—explosive, intuitive, musically and personally adventurous. His work and ideology would be major influences on Herrmann for the rest of his life.

Benny's formal training as a composer reportedly came at the persuasion of a young, nonmusical teacher at P.S. 40, probably the Mrs. Lux recalled by Louis Herrmann. The teacher (whom Herrmann would remember in schoolboy amazement as the first Indian he had ever seen) was so struck by the intensity of Benny's passion for music that she wrote Abraham a letter, urging him to encourage his son's gift. When asked by his father what career he wished to pursue, young Herrmann replied emphatically: "A composer." "You'd better become a good one," Abraham replied.<sup>28</sup>

The next week found Benny, his supportive teacher, and his proud father in a Russian tea room discussing Benny's future. As the teacher stressed the importance of Herrmann's musical education, Father assured her—with a pat on the knee—that he would continue his support of the boy.<sup>29</sup>

While at P.S. 40, both Benny and Louis performed in the school orchestra (as violinist and cellist, respectively) under the leadership of its music teacher, Mrs. Fischer. It was Fischer who invited Benny to give a school lecture on Beethoven—Herrmann's first public speech.<sup>30</sup> Despite the unattractive timbre of his nasal, often high-pitched voice, Herrmann was throughout his life an articulate and compelling speaker. Judging from the pride he took in later speaking engagements in London, New York, and Los Angeles—as well as his frequent monopolization of social occasions—it was an exercise he greatly enjoyed.

In Herrmann's sixteen years the world had changed drastically. Europe had been reorganized, a development that would have great repercussions on the arts, and electronic media had assumed a preeminent place in American society. Radio was about to become a vibrant commercial enterprise. Recording technology was rapidly improving, especially in the record studios of Europe; and motion pictures had been transformed from ten-minute "flickers" to feature-length talking cinema.

In the fall of 1927, Herrmann began his studies at DeWitt Clinton High School, first located at 59th Street and Tenth Avenue on New York's West Side, then after 1928 in the countryside of Mosholu Parkway in the Bronx. DeWitt was in many respects an exceptional high school: it boasted a sixty-piece student orchestra and offered regular productions of operas and plays. (Among Herrmann's DeWitt contemporaries was a

young swimming champion, Burton "Burt" Lancaster, whose film directorial debut, *The Kentuckian*, Herrmann would score twenty-five years later.)<sup>31</sup> Again Herrmann found a sympathetic mentor: music department head Harry A. Jennison. To his students, "Pop" Jennison was "a god," Louis recalled: "In the manner of the old schoolteacher we read about now but rarely see, he directed people into paths that served them well for the rest of their lives."<sup>32</sup>

DeWitt's solemn motto—"Men may come and go, but I go on forever"—was especially apt for Benny: his lackadaisical attitude toward school, despite his zest for knowledge, suggested that he might never graduate. Grades in such subjects as history, English, and fine arts—areas in which he would excel throughout his life—were usually C's, occasionally B's. In chemistry, hygiene, drawing, and math, his grades were usually D's. In January 1928, during Herrmann's second year at DeWitt, the principal noted Benny's work as "poor"; by June it had fallen to "unsatisfactory."<sup>33</sup>

Yet Herrmann was not entirely alone. Among the bullies and conformists in his German class Benny found a similarly irreverent youth who shared his passion for music. In 1927 Jerome Moross was fourteen years old, but like Herrmann he had ambitions to be a composer:

I always sat in the back of the class so the teacher wouldn't disturb me while I composed. One day I looked up and saw a boy sitting across the aisle twirling his hair and studying the Mahler Fifth Symphony in a miniature score. He looked at me and said, "D'ya know Mahler?" I said, "Mahler stinks."

He got quite angry, grabbed what I was writing, tossed it back, and said, "Dishwater Tchaikovsky." We started to argue, because I felt he hadn't even looked at it. Suddenly the teacher was calling both of us up and said, "Get out!" She threw us out into the hall. I said to Benny, "There, you got us thrown out of class. We don't even know what the homework is." Benny said, "Forget it. Wanna go to a rehearsal of the Philharmonic?" I asked him how we could. He said, "I know where there's a broken door." I said sure.

From DeWitt we walked the few blocks to Carnegie Hall. We went in the entrance to the studios on the side, climbed up to the dress circle, walked down a hall, and there was the broken door; somehow Benny knew about it. We got on our hands and knees and crawled in. I knew if they saw us they'd throw us out. We peeked over the balustrade, and there was Mengelberg conducting. We watched Mengelberg conduct for the next hour and a half, and Benny and I became friends.<sup>34</sup>

Among the conductors Herrmann and Moross watched from the secret post was the flamboyant Leopold Stokowski, whose conductorship of the Philadelphia Orchestra was Benny's ideal of a musical marriage. There were also Koussevitsky, Furtwängler, and Arturo Toscanini, whose violent rows Herrmann admired more than his music-making—and which he later emulated. On one occasion recalled by Herrmann, the two concert infiltrators were discovered by an angry manager who ordered them to get out. "But I have the score!" Herrmann pleaded. The decision was ultimately the visiting conductor's. Herrmann and Moross were allowed to stay.<sup>35</sup>

The boys also made music on their own. "Benny discovered I was a very good sight reader on the piano, so we began to dig up four-hand music. We played an endless amount of it, and an endless amount of piano/violin music. With Louis on the cello we formed a trio, and even got ourselves a few jobs. That went on for the next few years. Every night we'd take the subway and go to concerts. My life and Benny's were very intimately connected."<sup>36</sup>

Young Herrmann was not just listening to music; he was writing it. From his earliest pencil scribbles, Herrmann's subjects were programmatic and highly theatrical. Among his first pieces was a setting of Paul Verlaine's poem "The Bells," written, Herrmann later claimed, in 1924 (the earliest existing score is dated 1927).<sup>37</sup> It was probably his first musical success, winning a money prize (usually reported as \$100)<sup>38</sup> in a De-Witt song competition. (Another Herrmann Opus 1, no. 1 exists—appropriately, a turbulent overture to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* entitled "Tempest and Storm—Furies Shrieking!")<sup>39</sup> Other settings followed, most for piano but some ambitiously orchestral—even the first sketches for an opera, *Herod*. Many pieces were written in the fast bursts of creativity on which Herrmann would pride himself. His later setting of Verlaine's "The Dancing Faun," for example, is dated "April 27 '29, Finished from 9 to 12 A.M."<sup>40</sup>

Coinciding with Herrmann's earliest compositions was the start of his most intense boyhood friendship, with a twelve-year-old would-be writer named Abraham Polonsky. Polonsky—later a successful screenwriter and director—had moved with his family from upstate New York to 11th Street near the Herrmanns. "One afternoon I was skating home from school," Polonsky recalled,

when a young man stopped me on the street. He had been waiting for me, watching for me. He asked, "Did you just move in?" I said yes. He

said, "My name is Bernard Herrmann. Your name is Polonsky?" I said yes. "Do you like music?" I said, "Of course I like music." "I love it," he replied. "Let's be friends." No one had ever approached me like that in my life, and no one has since. We were never out of each other's houses after that. This went on until we were about seventeen; he was my closest friend and I was his.

We were both very serious about ourselves. I was going to be a poet or a novelist, or both, and for inspiration we would go up on the roof of my house and recite the poems I had written, and he would make up a tune to go with them—not a pop-type song, but a Brahms-type song. I even wrote music under his influence, although I knew nothing about music. He was so overwhelming—he made music so overwhelming—that he made you want to be a composer.

He also gave me good advice about my writing. Knowing my bent towards abstraction he always said, "You must be concrete! Don't write about ideas, write about things!" I knew literature, but Ben knew literature also; he was the most widely read person I've ever met in my life. The only thing he couldn't read was intellectual stuff; he couldn't stand philosophy, math, physics. But he read biographies, autobiographies, and many a writer I'd never heard of. He was a searcher among books as well as music.

He also taught me composers. I first heard Ives with him. I first heard Berg and *Wozzeck* with him. I went to the Met with him—I don't know how he got the tickets, but he did. We went to concerts of the League of Composers. And Benny knew everybody—famous people, almost-famous people, people who wanted to be famous. He could find his way into the most sacred places; he'd say, "C'mon, we're going to so-and-so's house"—and while we were there we would meet seventeen famous people. But Benny was a musical climber, not a social climber.

Benny's father was not an Edwardian gentleman; that's Benny romanticizing, his admiration and devotion. Abraham was a déclassé Yiddish Russian intellectual. He was certainly educated and had read a lot. Benny and I would make monocles at Abraham's optometry shop, then wear them in class at DeWitt and get thrown out. But we loved working those machines.

As for religion, Benny's father was a semi-demi-socialist who didn't believe in shit about God. Ida Herrmann was a real Jewish mother who loved her children. As far as Benny was concerned God was dog spelled backwards.

By a strange coincidence, when Benny's family moved to 12th and Second Avenue some years later, into a fairly large apartment building with an elevator, my future wife lived in the same building. When I told her Benny was my friend she said, "That's the crazy family. They all play

musical instruments they can't play—they do it for the father, I think, and as they're playing their dog barks." Abraham would sit with a glass of port wine eating Roquefort cheese—Benny and I would eat most of it—and he would make the kids play, Benny at the violin, Rose at the piano, and Louis at the cello. Well, Rose couldn't play; Louis had no musical sense whatsoever [here Polonsky must be mistaken; as a result of his playing Louis was awarded a music scholarship at age seventeen]; and I can't tell you how lousy Benny was on the violin. It was all not to be believed.

Benny's first girlfriend was my sister Charlotte. I don't know why that didn't go anywhere—perhaps because he was a composer, or because his peculiarities annoyed her. But the gifts he would spoil on her! Always things he couldn't afford. Benny was a collector from the very beginning, and years later, after his first trip to England, he gave me a Hogarth.

After my name appeared on the blacklist in the late 1940s I didn't see Benny; he had just visited me at my house days before that. About twenty-five years later he told a producer he didn't know me. Obviously something had happened, but the Benny Herrmann I knew as a young man was generous, kind, crazy, warm, friendly, and my best friend for many years.<sup>41</sup>

Benny's first composition teacher was probably Gustav Heine, with whom he began studies around 1927. Heine's musicianship was solid but unadventurous. It was the mysterious, exciting collection of library scores and Philharmonic concerts that introduced Herrmann to two of his greatest influences: Ravel and Debussy, the latter of whom Herrmann once called the greatest twentieth-century composer.

Sharing importance with the impressionists were two composers of disparate cultural backgrounds, one an obscure American, Charles Ives, the other England's most revered composer, Edward Elgar. From adolescence to adulthood many of Herrmann's colleagues were perplexed by his passion for the conservative Elgar and his championing of Elgar works unknown in America. It was acceptable to admire Elgar's *Enigma* Variations or the popular overtures—but the symphonic study *Falstaff*?

Yet for Herrmann, the performance of any Elgar was a spiritual experience, an evocation of the vanished Edwardian culture he adored. "To have lived with and studied Elgar's music has been more than a great musical experience," he wrote in 1957. "It has been an enriching of one's whole life, for it brings in its train not only melodies and harmonies that remain permanently in one's memory, but also a great tranquility and solace, and at the same time the joy and excitement of being on a mountain peak. For Elgar's music is, in the end, an affirmation of the miracle of life

and never a negation of it. This accomplishment certainly places him with the very greatest of the masters of music."<sup>42</sup>

At the library Herrmann also found the music of a younger English contemporary, Ralph Vaughan Williams.

As a boy I first heard the "London Symphony"—and at that, only the first two movements—at a concert given by Walter Damrosch. Up to that time I had only been to London through the magic of Dickens' prose and the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. But through the evocative power of this music I was there again. At that time the only full score to be had was in the New York Music Library. I spent days absorbing the contents and reading over and over again the program as delineated by Albert Coates. And all I could do was to wait, with the greatest of impatience and longing, for someone to play the Symphony. This happened about two years later. The second impression, and this time of the full work, only deepened my excitement and fervor for this great poetic work, which not only held me with its individual music-making, but also because of its literary and descriptive powers. I resolved then that whenever I was to have a chance, if I ever did, I would conduct this Symphony.<sup>43</sup>

Another British contemporary had great influence on young Herrmann's development as a musician and iconoclast. The career of Sir Thomas Beecham, England's preeminent conductor, combined iconographic window-breaking and thrilling performances of new music—the former characterized by Beecham's diatribes on "glorified Italian bandmasters" like Toscanini<sup>44</sup> and German "humbugs" like Mengelberg;<sup>45</sup> the latter by premieres of Strauss's *Salome* and the little-heard music of Englishman Frederick Delius (whom Herrmann adored). To biographer Charles Reid, the stately, swaggering Beecham was "Hector Berlioz reincarnated and transplanted."<sup>46</sup> To Herrmann he was an ideological hero.

The first public performance of a Herrmann concert work took place at DeWitt: a concert overture for band (in which Herrmann also reportedly played) based on old school songs. Considering the paucity of his source material, it was not an inspiring endeavor, and after one performance at assembly it was not repeated.<sup>47</sup>

Yet in his studies with Heine, Herrmann had acquired the basics of composition, with which his active imagination was eager to experiment. Genuine inspiration would come not from a high school songbook but from the mavericks Herrmann adored and Heine disparaged—none more than a fiercely obscure American composer whose *114 Songs* Benny discovered one day during his routine exploration of the New York Library.