

# BEYOND THE HANDSOMENESS



Entrance to the Bosco Sacro di Monteluco (Sacred Wood of Monteluco) where part of Thomas Schippers's ashes were strewn. *Courtesy of the Comune di Spoleto. Photograph by Nicoletta Di Cicco Pucci.*

# BEYOND THE HANDSOMENESS

A BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS SCHIPPERS

NANCY SPADA



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*Beyond the Handsomeness:  
A Biography of Thomas Schippers*

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*Remembering with infinite affection*

*My brother Bill*

*My parents*

*Pietro*

*George*

*Margot*

*Henry and Doris*

*Tony*

*“Music, once admitted to the soul, becomes a sort of spirit,  
and never dies.”*

—Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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# Foreword



An infrequently considered benefit of growing older is one may discover he or she has gained status as a “last-man-standing” resource of information learned about or from someone of greater significance than oneself and, therefore, a repository of experience or knowledge of value simply through association. This ironic consequence came into focus for me when Nancy Spada contacted me to ask if I would be such a resource and willing to talk to her about Thomas Schippers, whose biography she was writing. I was pleased to be contacted, and more importantly, that she was writing his biography. Apparently, in addition to, or perhaps because of, the voluminous material she had already mined, she began to *know* Schippers well. She intuitively felt there must also be those uncharacteristic, unguarded, and/or other interesting moments in which the man reverentially referred to as “Maestro” might more appropriately be called out as “Tommy.” Nancy was correct.

She was also correct that I was present on a few such occasions, most of which I think belong only to him and to those with whom he shared them and, therefore, understood the context of such moments. Nancy understood and agreed with this sensitivity. I was also impressed she chose to reexamine her goal and intentions, and she reconfirmed to her satisfaction she was truly motivated by her respect for, and admiration of, Schippers. In fact, when she began her consideration of such a book, I’m not certain she was aware that by its conclusion she would also be memorializing her conviction that he was an extraordinary conductor about whom international conversation was quickly growing just as he was confronted with what would become his year-long battle with cancer in which he ultimately could not prevail.

Schippers and I knew one another and worked together during the last six years of his brief life. I quickly learned that which many others knew: Thomas Schippers was an extraordinary musician. I also quickly learned he was a complex man, and of this far fewer people were aware. Spada's commitment was to write a scholarly account of his life to clearly set forth and preserve that which he accomplished in such his foreshortened life. I suggest she has exceeded that goal, as the depth of her research could not avoid important references to personal circumstances and obstacles that influenced his life and his music. Spada's sincere commitment to a scholarly and respectful account of his life and musicianship were convictions I shared. Therefore, I was happy to contribute what insights I could that may not be considered wholly scholarly but do offer important insights into moments he was willing or needed to share, and the candor of which identifies their importance to Spada's book.

The author met Schippers when she was asked to deliver a score of the newly published symphonies by Muzio Clementi to him in Spoleto, Italy. In the years that followed and as Spada's admiration for Schippers grew, she interviewed many people who were, or considered themselves to be, close to and knowledgeable about Schippers. Some of the information she gleaned from her interviews and from published accounts and reviews do not coincide precisely, but one must keep in mind Schippers has been gone for more than forty years. I'm sure Spada was aware that the recollections of many who knew and worked with Schippers were memories recalled from decades earlier, which, to varying degrees, may have enhanced a few reminiscences. Nonetheless, Spada also recognized the validity and value of including that which added nuance and understanding to Schippers's values, conflicts, and the complexities of his short life from each unique perspective.

In reading this book, one is taken by the reality of the brevity of his life and the speed with which he rose from his position as his hometown church organist to that of a highly respected vocal and choral accompanist and coach, to increasing numbers of engagements as a guest conductor of significant opera productions, and then to one of the pre-eminent opera conductors of major opera houses in the U.S. and Europe. He was soon recognized and admired worldwide for his extraordinary, intuitive, and personal interpretations of such performances. His music universe would soon and unexpectedly grow to embrace a far greater

breadth of repertoire and opportunities, which benefited from years of exploring conducting techniques that achieved the uniquely personal and collaborative performances resulting from the artistic commitment and gratification shared by those in the pit and the podium.

The whole of Spada's survey of thorough interviews and retrospectives from different perspectives and different periods of Schippers's career allows the reader to see and understand the degree to which his acceptance of growing artistic leadership responsibilities increased the complexities and responsibilities of his personal and professional life. I'm not certain he had initially anticipated the degree to which this would impact his artistic flexibility. But he quickly came to understand the larger universe of colleagues he had to consider in the musical plans for which he had accepted responsibility. He soon realized his focus could no longer be on his performances alone but must now also reconcile the implications of his new responsibilities to the major music institutions of which he was artistic leader. This new authority and responsibility had very real implications and consequences for these organizations and the hundreds of people inextricably reliant on them and for the potential complexities and inevitable conflicts these new responsibilities would bring to bear on his musical decisions and life. Previously, his artistic decisions were driven by the music he heard in his head and how he could replicate it in performance. His considerations now had to expand to include the implications of his decisions on the artists and artistic institutions for which he assumed far greater leadership responsibility, as well as for the cities they served and by which they were supported. These new realities may have made it more difficult for Schippers to create close relationships that were both personal and professional. He now had to see himself and the artists he conducted as musical collaborators but also to understand he was "the boss"—roles that could, on occasion, conflict.

Fortunately, this was also about the time Schippers accepted the music directorship of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra (CSO). This appointment was a bold move by the leadership of the CSO as Schippers had never conducted the CSO, nor had he previously been the music director of any orchestra, let alone a major American orchestra. Only one previous CSO music director had also been appointed to this post having not conducted it or any other orchestra in the U.S. prior to his CSO engagement: Leopold Stokowski. In fact, Stokowski became a

member of the American Federation of Musicians when he arrived in Cincinnati. His application for membership still resides in Local No. 1 of the AFM, located in Cincinnati, the city in which the AFM was founded. In addition, both men began their careers as organists, which may likely have contributed to the innately similar vocal approach to music-making they shared. Also, both were young, and both were considered quite handsome. However, Schippers's appointment may have been more unusual because he was not only young but also was an American. In the mid-twentieth century, these characteristics were not among the priorities of orchestra search committees. It seems candidates who were both older and European were of greater interest.

And one could not begin to understand Thomas Schippers without also recognizing his deep commitment to his wife, Nonie. He was acutely aware and sensitive that the decisions he made and opportunities he was offered were equally important and consequential to her. Spada sensitively addresses Nonie's interests, influence, and impact on Schippers's decisions because her happiness was an essential priority. Over the years and on only a few occasions did Tommy and I enter into private or personal conversations in which he asked my thoughts about opportunities and options available to Nonie and to him and how those choices might impact both of their lives.

In Cincinnati, Tommy and Nonie made their home in a beautiful antebellum-style house, about which Spada writes in this book. Tommy and Nonie loved the fact that their home sat on a large and secluded lot with many mature trees and manicured hedges, but at the same time was a short ten-minute commute to the CSO's home in the Cincinnati Music Hall. It was the Maestro's practice to arrive at the Hall no more than about ten minutes before his concerts were to begin. He clearly enjoyed the proximity of his home to his podium and artistic "team." Some even speculated he must have left his home earlier and, if necessary, parked somewhere close to the Hall to be certain he would arrive just moments before his concerts were scheduled to begin. He was never late. I believe he also did not want to arrive so early that musicians, soloists, or staff might ask to see him or discuss the concert just prior to its performance. I believe this entire process prior to the concert of driving his car to the Hall (as he always did), exiting his car, and briskly walking to his office to complete his regular pre-performance routines, and then going directly to his podium, standing before his orchestra,



and imperceptibly greeting them, were all part of his concert ritual, which was an intractable part of the performance experience he loved.

When Nonie died in 1973, the CSO was committed to a domestic tour that included a performance in Carnegie Hall. These annual performances in Carnegie were very important to orchestras such as the CSO. However, there was not a moment of question or deliberation about Schippers conducting any of the tour performances. He was emotionally completely overwrought, and no one in his CSO family felt he could or should conduct any of the tour concerts, nor did they want him to try. The CSO musicians shared a warm relationship with Nonie, and they joined him in mourning her loss.

The proximity of Nonie's death following Schippers's CSO appointment was cruelly ironic. He trusted Nonie to guide and advise him through the many new realities he faced in his life off the podium, which now included completely redecorating their new home, a car or two, and caring for two large dogs, as well as the personnel duties of the CSO music directorship. They understood they were undertaking a significant expansion of their lives to include responsibilities, participation, and visibility in and to an entire city, which would feel *ownership* of its new and revered residents and which would want a sense of personal and civic relationships with their new "neighbors." Tommy and Nonie understood that their lives in Cincinnati would include new relationships and expectations, many of which were unlike those with which they had lived most of their lives.

However, it was clear they were very much looking forward to the prospect. Nonie's natural warmth and engaging personality made for a fast and comfortable transition. She was, therefore, able to provide guidance and expertise in these areas that initially may have been less comfortable for Tommy, but he had complete confidence in Nonie's sensitivity and intuition. He also relied upon and appreciated her subtle assistance to bring a sense of reality and balance to his new and more complex life. These new roles were embraced by them both. However, Tommy's reliance and trust in Nonie in this still new sense of *community* and his place in it compounded his overwhelming sense of loss when she died in 1973, only a few years after arriving in Cincinnati. Tommy believed strongly in his musical knowledge and intuition, and he collaborated very well and was very happy with everyone associated with the CSO and, in particular, with its musicians. But the changes he and

Nonie had so recently embraced and his reliance on Nonie to help him become comfortable and successful in developing new relationships, considering the expectations of his new “hometown” celebrity and his rise to new and prestigious opportunities, added to the profundity of his grief and loss, which would be an inevitable and sad burden for some time. Tommy would need time to confront and accept the reality of Nonie’s death just as both had looked forward to their new life in Cincinnati, where their professional and personal lives could grow more and more reliant upon one another. His sense of loss and vulnerability was greater and deeper than he could have anticipated even after they learned of her illness.

After a prolonged absence, Schippers returned to Cincinnati with a renewed anticipation of collaboration with “his” orchestra for many seasons. Although by this time Tommy regularly conducted many of the best orchestras and opera companies in the world, he had not accepted nor sought the music directorship of any other orchestra. I think he found he loved living and working in Cincinnati, a city that in many ways was similar to his own *hometown*. And, I believe, he genuinely looked forward to returning to work with his orchestra’s musicians and to the opportunity to share his commitment to them and to the possibilities he foresaw for their future.

The CSO was a major and excellent orchestra built on the shoulders of many of the best music directors of the time. Immediately preceding Schippers as music director was Max Rudolf, who graciously welcomed him to the podium he was about to inherit. Rudolf built a strong ensemble of first-class musicians, most of whom became committed to Cincinnati, the CSO, and its music director. They understood Rudolf had led them to a new level of excellence and ensemble, and they were eager to take advantage of the opportunities for which Maestro Rudolf and they had prepared and Schippers’s appointment promised.

Schippers quickly showed his style and expectations were no less challenging or aspirational than Rudolf’s, but their shared goal of performance excellence would be approached differently. Nonetheless, I think it fair to say the consensus among the CSO musicians was Schippers could not have accomplished that which he and the CSO did had Rudolf not prepared them so well for whomever became their artistic leader. It was not long after Tommy took the podium that any questions or doubts about what he was doing changed to “How can we make that

sound for him?” Over the years, many CSO musicians confided they felt many of their best performances were under Schippers’s baton.

Schippers was aware his approach to music making and conducting was neither “textbook” nor typical, but he believed strongly in his artistic instincts and goals and felt he could best achieve them through his unique and personal gestures from the podium. Many of those gestures were physical indications of where and how he wanted the musicians to articulate and to breathe—including string and percussion musicians who did not produce their sound by blowing into their instruments. Still, the entire orchestra must include the sense of breathing and phrasing together in order to achieve the sounds and lines of a musical “collaboration” Schippers sought from the entire orchestra. The tragedy of his own untimely death, just three years following Nonie’s, was compounded by the growing recognition among the leading musicians at that time—including composers, soloists, orchestral musicians, patrons, and even a few orchestra managers—who were beginning to recognize and embrace his musical accomplishments and artistic vision. They were also enthusiastic about how he went about sharing the music in his head—by achieving with his musicians their now-shared artistic vision.

Schippers was not always an easy conductor with whom to rehearse or perform. He had developed his personal conducting technique and gestures—small, efficient, and effective—that went far beyond beginning and ending the music together. They allowed Schippers, guest soloists, and the orchestra musicians to deliver a meaningful and personal experience to which every performer made an important and personal contribution. They soon realized and appreciated they were being invited to experiment and help create a jointly articulated podium language through which they could share an artistic vision or concept—an experience created together. Jointly, they could raise their level of performance, as well as its very nature, to an immersive experience that could be beautiful, dramatic, or incredibly intimate—whatever Schippers was seeking while remaining respectful to the composer and to which every performer could personally contribute. Schippers’s unique podium gestures may also have evolved because he had no formal conducting training or mentor to mimic. I doubt he could have tolerated one. Of course, he attended many performances, many of which he enjoyed and appreciated; many he did not. Fortunately, he remained discreet with his opinions. He was in every case focused on the music

coming from the stage or pit and comparing it to the music he heard in his head or from his podium. He valued opportunities to reinforce or to refine that which he wanted to hear. He was happy with Cincinnati, where he comfortably resided in his beautiful home, and he was very happy with *his* orchestra.

Schippers's musical goals and approach to achieving them were closely related to vocal production. Unlike string and percussion musicians, singers and vocal ensembles are obviously very aware they must breathe at some point, and the time and manner they do so has a great deal to do with the sound they produce and the musicality of their performances. It was always gratifying to see the satisfaction and appreciation of accomplished singers, as well as those just beginning their careers, when they sensed Schippers's awareness and sensitivity to their needs in order to perform at their very best. He also emphasized the importance of breathing in all sections of the orchestra, including in those in which their sound was not produced by breathing ("blowing") into their instruments—in other words, string and percussion sections. To produce the phrasing and ensemble he wanted from his orchestra, all its music must musically *breathe*. He also understood their breathing must reflect the musical phrasing he sought. Some breaths might be quick gasps and others long gentle breaths, some taken just before the next beat and some just after it. And he sought these musical nuances in the melodic lines, phrasing, and ensemble that could only be achieved with the artistic commitment and trust of the orchestra's musicians. They quickly learned, understood, and appreciated the musical enhancements these subtleties created. And just as importantly, they recognized and appreciated his confidence in their artistry and, therefore, their ability to achieve this level of musical commitment. They shared his pride in their collective success.

Within just a few years, the CSO and Schippers became a familial, trusting ensemble that only time, mutual respect, and commitment to the highest musical standards could create and sustain. Contributing to this bond were also some very human and humorous exchanges. An early relationship-building opportunity had to do with the CSO Fantastiques—the CSO musicians' softball team, which played local teams in several of the small, nearby cities in which the orchestra performed casual outdoor family concerts in the summer. For whatever reason, there came a time the Fantastiques decided they needed to

practice before their next game. This was such a noteworthy event that a member of the orchestra staff organized a picnic at her home for all members of the CSO—musicians and staff—which featured the Fantastiques’ practice. Tommy was aware of the Fantastiques and asked if he could come to the picnic and join in the softball practice because he liked to play baseball. I encouraged him to come and told him I was sure the Fantastiques would enjoy his participation. And Tommy did come. And he did play. And the musicians did enjoy it. It was clear he had played baseball, but apparently some time ago. And it was also obvious the musicians very much enjoyed his participation—not because he played poorly or well, but just because he came, he played, and he clearly enjoyed being part of the *CSO team*.

There were evenings, often after tour concerts, when Tommy felt the need for a different competitive game that he enjoyed playing for relaxation and in which he felt quite accomplished. That game was bridge—the card game. However, following a concert, it was not always possible to gather the required three additional players who knew how to play bridge. Or, if they did play, they may have been hesitant to join in a competitive game with the music director—seemingly a “no-win” situation. However, a recruited novice’s level of expertise, if they had any at all, was of no concern to Tommy. If necessary, he would ask someone nearby if they played bridge. If the answer was no, Tommy would assure them this would not be a problem. He would teach them as they played. “Sit down. Don’t worry. You’ll be the *dummy*,” were typical of his words of encouragement.

There was also a memorable occasion on a regional tour that began as a “prank”—a small, harmless joke perpetrated by one CSO brass player on another. However, the “payback” earned by the prankster quickly grew in scale and proved to be an appropriate and insightful coda to the tour. Typically, the tour presenter or the CSO itself would see to it that a light meal or snack was available to the conductor following the concert because eating a substantial meal shortly before a performance might precipitate uncomfortable consequences during the performance. For reasons I don’t recall, preparations for this courtesy had not been made. Fortunately, Schippers was not particularly unhappy with the oversight as this was the final concert of this short tour, he was tired, and he was pleased with the tour performances. Nonetheless, one of the CSO musicians to whom I will refer as Musician #1 (“M#1”),

who had a long history of creating harmless and humorous moments among his colleagues, took it upon himself to remedy the post-concert food oversight.

Such a duty was of course in no way his responsibility and, given his “prankish” history, he likely would have been relieved of his good intentions by someone appropriate to the task had any such person been aware of M#1’s plan. But the spontaneously conceived prank remained M#1’s secret. M#1’s remedy for our hungry Maestro was to purchase a box of fried chicken from a chain of such establishments, which was the only source of food at that hour. M#1 then approached another musician, to whom I’ll refer to as Musician #2 (“M#2”) for this exposé, who was a fine musician and a very kind soul. M#1 told M#2 of the food oversight, but that he had found a source of a carry-out meal and purchased one for our Schippers. However, he explained he had an engagement elsewhere and was already late. So, M#2 (he of the “very kind soul”) agreed to deliver the meal to the Maestro’s room since M#1 could not. M#2 went to the Maestro’s room as directed and knocked on the door. However, when Schippers opened the door, it was immediately clear to M#2 that Schippers knew nothing about an order of fried chicken, nor did he have any interest in it. M#2 was mortified. Schippers was also aware of M#2’s gentle personality and immediately understood M#2 was the victim of a prank. He responded not with anger or annoyance, but with the smile of a man who immediately conjured a payback scheme appropriate to the circumstances. Although M#2 remained embarrassed and nervous about the situation, he agreed to Schippers’s plan. The following evening’s concert concluded with a large orchestral piece featuring the CSO’s brass section. The audience responded enthusiastically, and during his second or third return to the stage to acknowledge the applause of the audience, Maestro Schippers graciously turned to the orchestra and gestured to the brass section to stand for a “solo bow.” Such a gesture is not unusual following an exciting performance of such a piece at the conclusion of a concert, so there was no hesitation by the brass section to “rise to the occasion,” including M#1. However, in an atypical move, the musicians of the brass section quickly returned to their seats before completely rising—except M#1. He was not aware of the special newly installed choreography for that evening’s solo bow for the brass section. He therefore found himself the only musician standing to the applause of the audience and to the laughter of his seated colleagues.

He was joined standing only by Schippers, who continued gesturing with his extended hand toward the subject of the protracted standing ovation, M#1, while another musician contributing to the event handed M#1 what appeared to be a rubber chicken. Maestro Schippers's broad smile made clear he was very happy with both the new finale he had choreographed to memorialize the previous night's catered meal, and with the red face of the embarrassed and still standing M#1. The CSO musicians were very pleased with their Maestro's personally conjured "gotcha" moment so appropriately and humorously delivered to one so deserving on behalf of many previous "victims." It may have been the only occasion on which Maestro Schippers morphed into "Tommy" onstage, before an audience and still in tails.

Tragically, in 1976, Tommy also became very ill. He fought with the same courage and tenacity he had not long ago employed to bring his orchestra into their extraordinary partnership. He had succeeded magnificently in sharing his musical vision with his musician collaborators. Sadly, this was not possible with his health, and so, sadly, his music stopped. But with Spada's commitment and sensitivity to the friendships, events, and occasions of his life, we now have a far better understanding of that which made Schippers, his collaborations, and his music extraordinary and unique.

In the end, Thomas Schippers was also a man of character, courage, and generosity; as we later learned, he had named the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra the residual beneficiary of his estate.

Steven Monder  
Cincinnati  
March 2022





## Preface



If Muzio Clementi had not composed his later symphonies and had not been so reticent about publishing them—in fact, he never did, even though he had his own publishing house in London—I doubt I would have had any sort of personal encounter with Thomas Schippers at all. Always interested in musicological research, Schippers was quite curious about these Clementi symphonies, as they had never before been available in a version this close to the original. It seems that these later works were not published in Clementi's lifetime because he kept revising them. He carried the scores with him on many of his trips and had them with him when he died. There were, certainly, other editions published in the past, but this one was closer to what the composer had written.

My first encounter with Schippers came about when he conducted Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) television's "Hallmark Hall of Fame" broadcast on Christmas Eve in 1951. How I found out about Menotti's opera is only an indistinct memory. Being a first-generation musician, it was definitely not through my family. I was told by my mother that I ranted, cajoled, and otherwise tried to put my point across until I was permitted to watch it, dealing a small blow to the rest of my family, who would rather have watched *anything* else than be subjected to such a program. That was my first awareness of Thomas Schippers and, of course, of Gian Carlo Menotti, who presented his opera, which had been commissioned by NBC, to the national audience. It was not meant to be the last of my encounters with either of them. Time passed, and with the exception of the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera

House at Lincoln Center in 1966 when Schippers conducted Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, I had had very little contact with him.

Then, several years later, I again met him. On an overwhelmingly warm day in July 1973, I was asked to take the scores of the four later symphonies by Muzio Clementi, which would soon be published, to Schippers in Spoleto where the Festival of Two Worlds was taking place. Dutifully, I took to the Italian *autostrada* from Rome to Spoleto. I had been given Schippers's address, which was Piazza Campello, but never having been to Spoleto before, I had no idea what I was looking for. It was a Sunday morning, and when I arrived in the town center, there was no one to be seen. Worse yet, when I finally found the vast, ancient Palazzo Campello, there seemed to be no inhabitants. Entering the building through a very large doorway and commencing my climb of the enormous and somewhat daunting stairway, I stopped at one of the apartments, where I found a door ajar. I dared to enter. No one was there. This was repeated on the next floors with no one apparently having locked the door to their apartment. Finally, at the very top, I knocked at the only door left and was greeted by a none-too-friendly woman wearing an apron. Later on, I found out she was Schippers's housekeeper and cook. I inquired as to where I could find Maestro Schippers, and she responded, "Out there," waving me nonchalantly toward a veranda. At least I had arrived.

I found Tommy studying a score with his feet propped up on the coffee table. He was a handsome man, but I did not really take much notice at the time, as there was something indefinable about him, for me at least, that had nothing to do with his looks and was far more captivating. It was said that he was quite charming, but I was not particularly aware of that either. Instead, I immediately *felt* his overwhelming passion for music as if it were welling up from inside him, which I found extraordinary. It seemed as though he was never far away from this state of mind. It was as if he couldn't stop it. He possessed a rare quality of belonging to the world of intuition, and it served him exceedingly well when he conducted.

In any case, I gave him the Clementi scores and began to take my leave. But instead, we sat down together and began speaking of personal matters, although we had never met before. He had been through a terribly distressing time with the death of his wife the previous January, and of her father shortly afterward. On a lighter note, I recall, we discussed the ongoing problems we still had, at our age, with our authoritarian mothers! In the space of an hour, it truly seemed as though we had

known each other for some time. Tommy invited me to stay for lunch and in the meantime, as it was still quite early, he sent me to a charming chamber music recital at the Teatro Caio Melisso. After lunch, I was accompanied to the theater for the performance of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and placed in his own box to see the opera. I have seen many operas in many places with very capable conductors of whom I have only a vague recollection, but I still remember the moment he raised his baton and began conducting. I was spellbound! He was so engaged with the cast and orchestra that he seemed oblivious to the audience. In fact, he *was* oblivious to the audience. When Tommy conducted, he was in another world, and he knew it. He later declared that he disliked the audience. He was there to make music. In an interview with Patricia Marx, published in the New York Public Radio Archive Collections (NYPR) of January 17, 1962, Tommy recounted that:

I don't feel that I'm in those lovely stories that the old time conductors love to tell and I don't feel that I'm playing on a beautiful Stradivarius (comparing it to an orchestra) kind of thing. It becomes a very human thing, I think, music making. That is conducting. I can't hide what my eyes say, or my left ear or my hands or my whole body do, or if the moment comes for me to speak. I don't know what I do. I've never seen an audience. I feel them but as many times as I've tried, I walk into the pit and I'm gone. Lost. Gone. The whole thing, in a strange way, is created before you ever get to the performance, even before you get to the first rehearsal, so you can't command without having planned very well. The music must be both technically and emotionally so instilled already, so much a part of you that you're ready to give it off to the people that you're working with.

After the performance, I went backstage to thank Tommy for his hospitality and for the astounding musical experience. His courtesy was not yet exhausted (following an exhausting performance!) as he had troubled himself to find someone who, as it was quite late and I was going to drive back to Rome alone, would come with me. A few days later, invited by Tommy, I returned to Spoleto with my husband to attend a concert, to have dinner together and then, most importantly, to consider the Clementi symphonies. He conducted the United States première of the Fourth Symphony, opening the 1975 season of the CSO


with it, the same year the orchestra marked its eightieth anniversary, and was enthusiastic about eventually recording all four of them. Sadly, this was not to be as he passed away before it could be accomplished.

Having discussed with other musicians over the years—not only those who performed with Schippers, but also with music historians—the lack of biographical material available regarding him, who was, after all, one of the most significant American conductors from the early 1950s until his death, I decided to attempt a more in-depth narration of his life. There is very little detailed information available about him, and consequently much of the content of this book is based on that provided by his family members, friends, associates and, quite significantly, in my opinion, those who performed with him. I was present in the audience many times when he conducted, including the last performance of his life, but I was also privileged to have had a personal friendship with him. Throughout this book I have sometimes referred to him as Tommy, as he was called by almost everyone during his lifetime. Even now, after his death, he has remained so for many when speaking of him.

The idea of writing Thomas Schippers's biography came about several years ago when our mutual friend, Margot Melniker, was visiting with me. Margot was Schippers's executive administrator, organizer, secretary, friend, and problem solver for several years in New York. As Nick Webster, general manager of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra from the spring of 1971, told me in an interview in July 2006, "Margot was the Gatekeeper *par excellence*. She was able to, in so far as Tommy let her, help Tommy's life. Very often artists like that don't let people do that, to their own harm."

I met Margot in the early 1970s and we developed an immediate friendship, often visiting each other. We spoke frequently about Tommy after his death, but during this visit, for who knows what reason, we awakened to the fact that there was no available biography of Schippers and perhaps it would be about time for someone to write one. My immediate suggestion, since she knew him so well, was that she should write it, but she had neither the time nor the inclination to do so. After some discussion, I'm afraid the designated one turned out to be me, but the path has been a lengthy, arduous, and complex one, albeit very fascinating. It is my most heartfelt hope that I have, in some way, been able to make at least a small contribution to the memory of this immensely gifted musician.

# Acknowledgments



The person to whom I feel I should be most indebted is my mother. Without her meticulous and unwavering support of my musical and pianistic aspirations, I doubt I would have ever been able to write this book and, in all probability, would never even have met Thomas Schippers. She accompanied me, her four-year-old daughter, to my first piano lesson and then to weekly lessons remaining with me for *every single lesson* for the next several years. My father, on the other hand, sustained me by providing for the lessons, and my brother, together with my father, endured my relentless practicing.

My deepest gratitude goes to my husband, Pietro, for his patience and indulgence in sharing his extensive musical knowledge with me over the years. The research he did, with a very minor amount of assistance from me, eventually produced a definitive edition of the four symphonies by Muzio Clementi, which, in turn, led to meeting Thomas Schippers.

Very special thanks to our son Marcantonio, who provided the initial encouragement without which I probably would not have even begun writing this book.

Among those whom I interviewed, the celebrated soprano Martina Arroyo was instrumental in encouraging me to write Schippers's biography, stating, "I think that the world could give much more credit to Thomas Schippers, not only as an American conductor, but as a great international conductor. He should have his place when you talk about the great ones of the 1970s."

After having decided to attempt writing Schippers's biography, I considered contacting his brother, Henry. But time passed and I kept procrastinating about phoning him. One day, in April 2006, I decided

that I should just get on with it. I am very pleased that I did. By some odd, fortuitous coincidence, Henry and his wife, Doris, were going to be in Livorno, Italy, when their cruise ship docked there in May. It was the perfect opportunity to meet with them as Livorno is only about fifty miles from my home. I went to pick them up at the pier and we spent a lovely day together speaking about Tommy. Henry gave me much insight into their childhood as he was the elder of the two. His second wife, Doris, who had never met Tommy but had always been interested in classical music, told me that she felt cheated that she had never been able to meet him, as he died before she and Henry were married. Henry and Doris were both quite enthusiastic about the biography and they procured some very interesting family photographs, together with other information, and sent them to me. I am especially grateful to both.

It is absolutely impossible to quantify the amount of assistance given to me in this venture by Steven Monder, the former President and CEO of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. He has been enormously helpful, offering suggestions and providing material resulting from his thirty-nine-year tenure there. Above all, he was exceedingly significant in this endeavor, accepting to write the *Foreword*.

I am also grateful to the American composer and author, Ned Rorem, not only for conceding to an interview, but also for offering some appropriate suggestions about writing.

The well-known set and costume designer, Tony Award and Oscar winner Tony Walton, who worked with Schippers on the Spoleto version of Verdi's *Otello* in 1965, recounted some extraordinary stories that I would never have known about from any other person. I am extremely grateful to him for his invaluable help and for permitting me to include some of his fascinating scenes from *Otello* in this book.

To Jane Marsh, I am indebted for illustrating Schippers's approach to the human voice from the conductor's point of view, which is fundamental in understanding the rapport between singer and conductor, and for recounting interesting episodes of performing with him.

The well-known conductor Peter Stafford Wilson provided me with some very fascinating points about conducting and some details on how Schippers taught lessons on this subject. He was particularly helpful.

Schippers's assistant conductor, Carmon DeLeone, who later assumed the position of resident conductor, was extremely gracious in making available some quite interesting material about his time with Schippers in Cincinnati.

A great deal of help, support, and information was given to me over the years by Margot Melniker, my very close friend and executive assistant to Schippers in New York. She knew him well and shared with me many, many details which would have otherwise been omitted. I cannot thank her enough.

I am particularly grateful to Ralph P. Locke, professor emeritus of Musicology at Eastman School of Music, for the invaluable help he has provided for this book.

Over the years, several people have helped me in this enterprise, and I hope that I have included them all here and that I will be pardoned if I have omitted anyone.

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In addition, I would like to thank my very dear friend Gabriella Giorgi-Alberti for being available to listen and for offering much-appreciated suggestions and comments.

Lastly, the person to whom I owe inestimable gratitude for her encouragement, love, and support in this endeavor is my granddaughter Yasna.

Nancy Pasawicz Spada  
Pieve a Nievole, Italy  
December 16, 2022





# Introduction



It would have been difficult for Thomas Schippers not to have perceived the extent of his handsomeness even if an article by Jane Howard in *Life* magazine of December 6, 1963, had not so blatantly said so. Although he could seem occasionally prone to a surge of vanity, he certainly did not base his career on such a fleeting quality, even though the magazine had labeled him “Matinee Idol Maestro.”

Mary Campbell of the *Marysville Journal Tribune* of December 13, 1974, wrote that he was once considered the “handsomest conductor in the West,” from whence came the idea for the title of this book. As Schippers said in an interview, “I got tired of hearing this thing all the time.” “This thing” was the description of Schippers as handsome, a collection of glamor, talent, and promise with glamor mentioned first. Even an unfavorable review was not the same for him as for other conductors; one critic wrote, “Mr. Schippers took honors for his left and right profiles.”

There were very few people whom I interviewed who knew and worked with Schippers who did not comment on his looks, men and women alike. Of course, he was simultaneously praised by them as the enormously gifted musician he was and for his capacity to turn out great performances. But this label remained in the background for nearly everyone. In my conversation with the soprano Martina Arroyo, she pointed out that:

Of course everybody talks about the fact that he was so very handsome but behind that handsome was a great person. I don't think people always appreciated that there was

more going on than just those good looks. He knew what he wanted; he knew how he wanted it; he conducted well; his conducting was clear. Even if you were a person impressed with his looks at the beginning, and I suppose many people were, after all, when you see someone for the first time when he's conducting, you have to see him first. I was impressed with his musicality—with his conducting. Even if you weren't a bit impressed at first, you couldn't deny that he backed it up with far more interesting and far more valuable qualities. He was serious about his music. He didn't make fun or imply this was something he could do easily. He worked hard.

On December 7, 1958, Schippers appeared as a mystery guest on a popular American television program of the time, *What's My Line?* For those who are not familiar with the show, it was composed of a panel of celebrities who would try to guess what the guest's occupation was. Schippers appeared, signed in as "Mr. X," and proceeded to answer the questions presented to him. The first panelist, the journalist Dorothy Kilgallen, began by saying it would seem "a waste of attractiveness if you weren't doing anything to entertain or amuse." Another panelist, Arleen Francis, told him he was "much better looking than your pictures but I can't remember the name" and "I may go to pieces." Even though she had seen his picture in the newspaper, she still did not know what his profession was. Neither did any of the other panelists. They were simply captivated by his handsomeness.

The famed contralto Lili Chookasian, who sang under him on several occasions, had this to say: "He was so considerate it was incredible. Most conductors are not like that. The thing is that he was extremely good looking, and any woman would have dropped her eye teeth for him."

Schippers's former secretary Barbara Morgan-Herbert wrote to me, "Even though he could look somewhat like Dracula on a Monday morning right before rehearsal (and sometimes after) he was the handsomest man I had ever seen in person."

In the *Life* magazine article by Jane Howard, he was described as: "The brilliant young conductor, Thomas Schippers, is tall, with the face and body of a Greek god at a time when Greek gods are hard to find."

Thomas Schippers was quite likely aware that his *savoir faire*, elegance, and attitude of courteous detachment had created a personality

that was already legendary in his time. Admired by many for his classic handsomeness, he provoked nearly unanimous adulation for his musicianship and for the apparent ease with which he conducted scores of the utmost complexity, frequently by memory. Members of the audience were often taken aback by his physical aspect, which was clearly impossible to hide when entering the orchestra pit, before being intrigued and, in the end, enchanted by his profound and passionate musical interpretations. Handsomeness was not Thomas Schippers's primary concern in life. Certainly, he was well-aware of his looks, but he stated in the above-mentioned article by Jane Howard, "I've had movie offers, but I've turned them down. My world is the world of music." Music was his life, which he demonstrated from a very young age. He wanted, above all else, to be a great conductor and said, "I don't think audiences have any idea how difficult it is to try to be, shall we say, a great conductor." In addition to his good looks, Schippers was also an elegant and understated dresser and was included in the "International Best Dressed List" of 1971. According to Frederick M. Winship in the January 10, 1972, issue of the *Kalamazoo Gazette*:

Princess Salima, English-born wife of Aga Khan IV, and Mrs. Ronald Reagan, wife of the governor of California, headed the 1971 "International Best Dressed List" which reflected a return to elegance after several years of confusing fashion experimentation. On an additional list for men, was Kalamazoo born and raised Thomas Schippers, now conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony. Together with Schippers, the list included Gianni Bulgari the Roman jeweler, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Lord Snowdon, and Robert Redford, among others.

At times, it is difficult for musicians to separate themselves from the music. In fact, Thomas Schippers did not. In that case, what ensues is anyone's guess, but he was able to propel his way, with what was essentially pure talent, toward a mesmerizing career. His talent was vast and he used it to the best of his ability, becoming not only a very proficient pianist and organist but, more importantly for him, a brilliant conductor. He made a large contribution to American cultural life by championing various significant American composers such as Samuel Barber,

Ned Rorem, Frank Proto, and Aaron Copland, among others, and presenting their works with a most perceptive interpretation. He had a particular gift for opera from a very young age, even rousing enthusiasm from the Italian critics, a rarity at that time, when he conducted his first *Macbeth* in 1958 at the Spoleto Festival. He went on to conduct the opera and symphonic repertoire and to earn his place among the most distinguished American conductors.

# Abbreviations



NYP	New York Philharmonic
CSO	Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra
NYPR	New York Public Radio
Met	Metropolitan Opera
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
WOSU	W-Ohio-State-University
RAI	<i>Radiotelevisione italiana</i> (Italian Television)



# Precocious in Portage

## 1

**B**rilliant, charming, intelligent, and athletic, Thomas Schippers strode across the stage of the twentieth-century musical world in a blaze of absolute charisma. Ronald Wilford, the legendary head of Columbia Artists Management in New York, once stated that Schippers was perhaps, “Too good looking for his own good.”<sup>1</sup> He was also vastly talented, possessed a memory of prodigious proportions, and had a penchant for precision, qualities that could have enabled him to arrive at the top in a multitude of other professions.<sup>2</sup> But he chose music—or perhaps destiny chose it for him—and his destiny was to embark on his musical career in Portage, Michigan, at the very young age of four. And Portage in the 1930s was not, perhaps, the most inspiring area of the world in which to do so.

It began with Agnes. She was in trouble. It was somewhere around the beginning of May 1922, and in her day “in trouble” had a particular connotation. A strict Portage Reformed Church member, she had met there the attractive Peter Schippers. They began seeing each other, and that was where the trouble began. Agnes Nanninga was eighteen and Peter Schippers nineteen when they met. Both were devotedly observant of their religion though not excessively so, it would seem, when taking into consideration their “problem.” From their point of view, the only solution to their dilemma was marriage. This presented a nearly insurmountable predicament as the pastor of their church, Reverend Berend T Vander Woude, did not look favorably on the situation and

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Wilford, interview by author, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s conversation with Henry Schippers, May 2006.

would not perform the ceremony.<sup>3</sup> The wedding, officiated by Reverend William Van Vliet, finally took place on Agnes's nineteenth birthday, July 14, 1922, when she was nearly three months pregnant.<sup>4</sup> All four of Thomas Schippers's grandparents had emigrated from the Netherlands, and consequently his parents, Peter Schippers and Agnes Nanninga, were both born in the United States.

Dutch immigration to Kalamazoo had started in earnest in 1847 through the efforts of the wealthy businessman Paulus den Bleyker, although such immigration had begun to be encouraged around 1846. Born on December 23, 1804, in Ouddorp, a province of southern Holland, Paulus den Bleyker was the youngest of seven children of a blacksmith. Both his father and his mother had died by 1814, leaving him an orphan. A few years later, he entered the Dutch army and, soon after, began the business of reclaiming land from the sea, which he then used to plant potatoes. It proved to be a very profitable business, but he eventually became concerned about the Dutch religious oppression and the devastating effect it could have on his livelihood.<sup>5</sup>

Den Bleyker first read about America in the letters of a certain Reverend Van der Meulen, who was the pastor of a church in the Dutch colony of Zeeland, Michigan. There were already other colonies in the area, as the Dutch seemed to be overwhelmingly attracted to Michigan. He decided to sell his land in Holland and, on August 14, 1850, left for America with a group of over twenty-five prospective settlers, most of whom were fleeing religious persecution or poverty. They arrived in New York in September and from there had planned to travel as far as Wisconsin or Illinois. It was not to be. By the time they reached Kalamazoo on October 1, 1850, they numbered only eighteen as some had decided to settle elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Kalamazoo was merely meant to be an overnight stop on their westward journey, but after a short time there, some of the group became seriously ill with cholera, as there was an outbreak in the city; thus, the affected parties were forced to go into

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<sup>3</sup> M. Drew, First Reformed Church of Portage, Michigan, email, September 29, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Bethany Reformed Church records, Kalamazoo, Michigan, email, July 5, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Paulus den Bleyker, (1804–1872) Heritage Hall, Hekman Library, Calvin University, collection.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Airo-Farulla, "Paulus den Bleyker," History Seminar of Kalamazoo College, January 1958.



quarantine outside of the city. When the cholera epidemic finally ceased after causing the death of four of his party, den Bleyker bought a property and moved back to Kalamazoo. He found that Michigan was more economically advanced and was already linked by rail to New York City, whereas in Wisconsin, for example, the inhabitants had to depend on the Great Lakes for transporting goods; thus, shipping stopped every winter.<sup>7</sup>

By 1853, nearly 12 percent of Kalamazoo's population was Dutch.<sup>8</sup> A well-known businessman in West Michigan, den Bleyker had, by now, become quite wealthy, but his most memorable contribution for the Dutch was the help he provided in establishing the Reformed Church. This was of the utmost importance to the newcomers who had fled religious discrimination, and it would also become significant to Agnes and Peter Schippers one day.

Up until World War I, the Dutch language was used for the Reformed Church services. Catechism was also taught in the native language.<sup>9</sup> From the time of their birth to the end of their lives, this faith, for Agnes and Peter, was of much importance. Peter Schippers was born on October 13, 1902, and was duly baptized in the Portage Reformed Church, though no date is recorded. Peter made his Confession of Faith on June 12, 1939. Agnes was born on July 14, 1903, and was baptized in the same church, but there remains no official record. She also made her Confession of Faith.<sup>10</sup> The Confession of Faith, or Belgic Confession, is a doctrinal document to which the Reformed Churches in Holland and Belgium and the Reformed Dutch Church in America adhere.<sup>11</sup> Unlike his elder brother Henry, Peter and Agnes's third child, Thomas, had little inclination toward any form of religion and frequented church for the musical instruction that was often provided there, as will be seen.

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<sup>7</sup>Robert P Swierenga, "The Western Michigan Dutch," Holland Genealogical Society, December 11, 2004, Holland, Michigan.

<sup>8</sup>This estimate is by Jacob Quintus, editor of the *Sheboygan Nieuwsbode*, who visited Kalamazoo in 1853. Cited in Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America* (Ann Arbor, 1955; Grand Rapids, 1989), 279.

<sup>9</sup>Swierenga.

<sup>10</sup>Bethany Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

<sup>11</sup>New Schaff-Herzog *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 32.

Peter and Agnes set up housekeeping in a rented home in Portage, Michigan. Considered to be a suburb, Portage lies approximately seven miles south of Kalamazoo. Their first child was a daughter, born on February 1, 1923. They christened her Cornelia Grace. In the 1920s, diphtheria was, unfortunately, still a disease that inspired dread in most, and although the first vaccine had been licensed in 1921, it was not widely administered until the 1930s. Public Health Service reports indicate 1926 as the year having the lowest incidence of diphtheria cases in the United States. However, in 1927, a noticeable spike occurred in the number of cases and deaths reported.<sup>12</sup> Sadly, Peter and Agnes's little Cornelia Grace was stricken with it in 1927 and died on June 26.<sup>13</sup> There is a small stone marking her grave in the Portage Central Cemetery with the inscription: "Cornelia G. Schippers 1922–1927 Our Darling." In the meantime, Agnes had become pregnant again and the child was born just a few months after Cornelia's death. Christened Henry Peter, he was born on September 21, 1927. Thomas and Gracetta followed, all but compelling the Schippers household to move, with each birth, to larger rented homes to accommodate their expanding family.<sup>14</sup>

It was Sunday, March 9, 1930, when the authoritarian Agnes went into labor in the Schippers's modest home. At that time the family lived in what was then known as the "Flatiron" district of Portage, across from the old cemetery. The name was coined due to the shape of the neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> Agnes, of robust Dutch stock on both sides of her family, was tall and commanding and known by most relatives to be formidably difficult to get along with.<sup>16</sup> Peter and Agnes's third child, Thomas, was born that day. Neither of them could possibly have had any inkling that he would someday become one of the most celebrated conductors of the mid-twentieth century. It would never have entered their minds. They were not a musically inclined family.<sup>17</sup>

Peter and Agnes were both hard workers. At the time of their marriage, Peter had found work selling tires and, according to his son Henry,

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<sup>12</sup>"Diphtheria in the United States," Jason Waterman, *Public Health Reports* (1896–1970) Vol. 42, No. 40 (Oct. 7, 1927), 2443–2446.

<sup>13</sup>Henry Schippers.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Author's conversation with Thomas Schippers, July 1973.

<sup>17</sup>Henry Schippers.



**Figure 1.** Left to right: grandfather Thomas Schippers, father Peter, grandfather Henry Nanninga, Henry, and baby Thomas. *Author's collection. Courtesy of Doris and Henry Schippers.*

had the reputation of being the fastest tire-changer in the business. Agnes worked in a paper factory. Some years later, Peter founded the Schippers Service Appliance Company. Initially, it was a small store but escalated in 1959 into a \$70,000 (of that time) 18,000-square-foot renovated version at 401–411 West Michigan in Kalamazoo. Not only had Peter added an ultra-modern built-in kitchen department with two full-time kitchen designers on the staff, but he also added a 1,200-square-foot stereo and sound room—a real innovation for those times, for the first stereo phonograph records only appeared on the market in 1958.<sup>18</sup> Peter was an outstanding and resourceful businessman but music was decidedly not among his priorities, nor did anyone else in the family have any musical inclination, although Agnes's mother had once attempted to provide some encouragement by giving each of her children a piano as a wedding gift. She soon realized that no one was in the least interested

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

in learning to play them, at least until little Tommy arrived on the scene, and consequently had all the instruments brought back to her house.<sup>19</sup>

When Henry was six and Tommy was two, the family moved to Kalamazoo. They rented a home at 1848 Van Zee Street, directly across the street from Agnes's mother.<sup>20</sup> It was near an empty lot that Tommy had once set his sights on to go play ball or run with his big dog, Snookie.<sup>21</sup> But Agnes had other plans for him. Observing the child, she was amazed to notice that he was captivated by music. When he was only two, she often found him pretending to play piano on the armrest of the family sofa, as no instrument was available in their house at that time, completely absorbed in his imaginary music making. Tommy's elder brother Henry had, to his dismay, been prodded into taking piano lessons and often took his little brother with him. With the discovery of not one but three pianos just across the street, little Tommy's enthusiasm reached new heights because at his grandmother's house, he was permitted to do pretty much as he pleased, going from one piano to another to experiment.<sup>22</sup> He later recalled:

In a very little Indian village in America called Kalamazoo, my grandmother lived in a large house with three pianos. There (in Kalamazoo) almost anything could be found with the possible exception of Indians! Above all, for me, there were pianos. Even before I could pronounce two words together correctly, I was already "pounding" on the black and white of those magical keyboards. This is to explain where and how I began. When I am asked why, I'm not at all sure I have an answer. I believe that the passion and spirit of a dedicated artist must be born within one.<sup>23</sup>

Henry recounts that Tommy would sit quietly listening to the lesson, and when it was finished, he would climb up on the piano bench

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Taken from a recording belonging to Henry Schippers.

and repeat what he had just heard—an impressive feat for a small child who had not as yet had any musical instruction whatsoever.

It was decided, principally through his grandmother's insistence, that Tommy begin formal piano lessons with Ilah Decker.<sup>24</sup> She considered him a child prodigy and rightly so. Tommy gave his first recital in Kalamazoo at the age of four. A few years later, he began studying with the lively nonagenarian Victoria McLaughlin, who had studied in Europe with Brahms at a time when few Americans had done so and thus could afford to be particularly discriminating in her choice of students. Tommy considered himself lucky to study with Victoria. She was born in 1849 and had frequented Brahms and Liszt. He fondly recounted, "She was ninety when she took me on. God knows what she was doing in Kalamazoo. She used to rap my knuckles with an ebony cane and once, when I had the nerve to say she played with a lot of pedal, she replied, 'My Dear, people wouldn't believe how much pedal Franz Liszt used.'"<sup>25</sup>

Under her tutelage, he progressed rapidly and in a short time became amazingly proficient. Later in his life, Tommy was to remember her with nostalgia: "No one was good enough to study with Victoria ... but then she took me on, and I lived in the nineteenth century with that marvelous library of hers."<sup>26</sup>

At six, he was able to give his first recital, which regrettably was quite criticized by his mother, who was present. She told him after his performance that he "could have done better." As Margot Melniker recounts:

One time he told me that when he was six years old, his mother had taken him to perform and when he got through she said: "Well, it could have been a lot better." And there was another time his mother "took him over the coals" in a letter or something. So I told him: "You know what's wrong with you?" and he looked at me and said "What's wrong with me?" "You didn't have a Jewish mother! She would have praised you and encouraged you." He just howled with laughter, but I meant it!<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Schippers.

<sup>25</sup> Betty Dietz Krebs, "Thomas Schippers Remembered," *High Fidelity Musical America*, April 1978.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Margot Melniker, interview by author, 2007.



**Figure 2.** The Schippers family. Top row left to right: Tommy, Henry, Gracetta. Front row: father Peter and mother Agnes. *Author's collection. Courtesy of Doris and Henry Schippers.*

He remembered this episode with his mother well into his adult years and occasionally spoke of it with regret.<sup>28</sup>

By the age of nine he was already proficient enough to perform before his first proper audience at an afternoon *musicale*. An article in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* of November 6, 1939, announced:

*Local Boy Pianist, 9, To Be Heard in Bangor*

Thomas Schippers, nine year old pianist, and son of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Schippers, 1848 Van Zee Street, will take part in a musicale to be presented Tuesday afternoon in Bangor at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Cross, by students of Miss Ilah Decker, Hartford. Students from Hartford high school will present several musical groups. Thomas, a former pupil

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 3.** Tommy practicing the organ in church. *Author's collection. Courtesy of Doris and Henry Schippers.*

of Miss Decker, will play three piano duets with her, and will give three solos.<sup>29</sup>

With his *début* performance behind him, he began studying the instrument that was to become and remain his true love: the organ. Tommy had joined one of the oldest choirs in Michigan, the Singing Lads Boys choir, and began taking organ lessons at the age of nine with Henry Overley, the organist and music director of St. Luke's Church in Kalamazoo and chairman of the Kalamazoo College music department. About Tommy, Overley observed that "He seemed to sense instinctively the musical essence of a score. His registrations were so revealing of the heart of the music that at times his discernment was almost uncanny.<sup>30</sup> He could sight read with a sureness that many players never acquire."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Kalamazoo Gazette*, November 6, 1939.

<sup>30</sup> Registration is the technique of choosing and combining the stops of a pipe organ in order to produce a particular sound.

<sup>31</sup> "Yesteryear," *Encore* magazine, September 1979.



**Figure 4.** Practicing the organ in 1943. *Author's collection. Courtesy of Doris and Henry Schippers.*

Tommy's chief pleasure, when other little boys were out playing baseball, was to practice the organ in the church until late at night and then fall asleep in the warm chancery.<sup>32</sup> The pedals of the organ are nearly impossible for a small boy to reach, but Tommy was already making good use of one of his fundamental personality traits: determination. He was adamant and stubborn in wanting to study it, and he got his way. As his brother Henry recalls, someone came up with the brilliant idea of constructing three or four-inch soles for his little shoes in order to enable him to reach the pedals without sliding off the bench.<sup>33</sup> By the early 1940s he had become the principal organ accompanist for the choir. In 1941, at the age of eleven, he was the assistant accompanist for a production of *The Bartered Bride* by Bedřich Smetana, amazing everyone with his remarkable ability.

On a Sunday afternoon in September 1945, two hundred people gathered in Kalamazoo's Stetson College Chapel for the organ recital

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Schippers.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*





**Figure 5.** Tommy in 1945 or 46. *Author's collection. Courtesy of Doris and Henry Schippers.*

of the fifteen-year-old Thomas Schippers. It was his last public performance there before leaving for the Curtis Institute of Music to study under a scholarship he had won the previous spring. He once said, “A rare talent can survive the years between ten and fifteen. Talent must fight nature. Obviously, if you’re gifted, your gift is apparent early, but if you don’t get guidance from your family, all of your talent can go down the drain. I was lucky to survive.”<sup>34</sup>

The April 1945 issue of the *Kalamazoo College Alumnus* magazine published a short article including information about Schippers:

Thomas Schippers appears in a farewell organ recital at Stetson Chapel. It included the program notes: “Thomas Schippers—more familiarly known to his friends as Tommy—is one of Kalamazoo’s best known young musicians. He leaves tomorrow to begin work at Curtis Institute under the scholarship he won last spring. He celebrated his fifteenth birthday last March.”

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<sup>34</sup> *Encore* magazine.



**Figure 6.** Summer of 1947. Author's collection. Courtesy of Doris and Henry Schippers.

These amazing achievements led the other kids to consider him to be too serious, but he was not at all concerned because he had already understood that his belief in music would be the key to any success in that profession. Fortunately, he did not need to search for a passion; he had one. "All my life people have considered me too serious. My high school classmates used to cold-shoulder me because I got excused for concert tours, until the day I threw my heart at them by playing *Rhapsody in Blue* at an assembly wearing blue jeans and red socks."<sup>35</sup>

While he was at Curtis, he played the organ in various Philadelphia churches to make some spending money and "used my entire free time running up to New York and all the money I made playing the organ, on movies, theaters, and dates, though I still wore braces on my teeth."<sup>36</sup>

Following his studies at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, he went on to the Juilliard School of Music and then to Harvard University, where he had gone primarily to learn composition with

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<sup>35</sup> *Kalamazoo Gazette*, December 6, 1963.

<sup>36</sup> *Encore Magazine*.