

Michael Tanner

15 April 1935 – 3 April 2024

A PERSONAL MEMOIR BY JONATHON BROWN

version of 12.vii.2024



This image is taken from "Likenesses" by Judith Aronson, published in 2010 by the Lintott Press in association with Carcanet Press, Manchester: ISBN 978 1 85754 9942.

The illustration of Odoreida's piano is by Lt.-Col. Frank Wilson and appears on p.56 of "Supermanship" by Stephen Potter, published in 1959 by Rupert Hart-Davis.

Both images have been lifted with heartfelt if proleptic thanks.

Still perhaps a work in progress, a concise version of this piece has appeared in the autumn 2024 issue of OPERA NOW.

The on-line version is at villaparasol.com/mkt

When he died, in early April this year [2024], Michael Tanner was very nearly 90 years old; for many readers he had been the opera critic of The Spectator for quarter of a century, and for others their Moral Sciences mentor at Cambridge over nearly forty years. Saddened to learn the news, I found I wished to put down some thoughts, which follow.

At the end of my first year reading philosophy at Cambridge, in 1975, my director of studies, assessing my interests and inabilities, told me, "I think you're one for Michael Tanner next year." I had never heard of Dr Tanner. Yet this verdict, itself also much chattered among my contemporaries, came with a sort of eyelid flicker suggesting a plot. Be it poisoned, glitteresome or leaky, I had been handed something akin to a chalice, if not a grail.

In the autumn I took up this vessel. Entering his rooms for the first time, sidling down past its overflowing contents, past an orange-shaded lamp, to a zone of compressed habitation in front of the gas fire-place, to meet the man in the red jumper and leather trousers, of eagerly poised, oft-tilting head, I felt completely at home. Fortunate enough to have a Study in my parents' home, I too knew a more or less square room, with a fire-place, a piano, shelves and tables piled or laden with innumerable books and LP recordings, and narrow access down the side of it all; with one difference - in mine you could see the floor. Tanner and I seemed to pick up from an earlier conversation that had never in fact happened, of course, and my 2 o'clock supervision ended around eight in the evening.

That was to be below the average duration thereafter and it was not unusual only to manage back to my room at 2 or 3 in the night, sometimes by climbing in over the bike sheds at the back of Pembroke. Occasionally we took an evening meal together, possibly in the so-called Grad-Pad, but I remember rather few of those; the more usual pattern was that I would bring a pineapple and a bottle of whisky. He, of course, no longer could drink, but, like Colonel Sternwood, he was happy to watch me and would share the pineapple. We also shared a passion for spade-worthy dark coffee made in a Bialetti machine over a gas ring by the fire, and served in large cups in the form of chamber-pots, fashionable at the time, decorated perhaps with Victorian advertisements for corsets. The room was an *inner sanctum* in so many ways, a live shrine, so to speak, of a passion for the flowering of our civilisation - "a twentieth-century version of Hume's library" he once called it - represented by those musty, almost holy whiffs of the paper of books and the cardboard of record sleeves, competing with pagan whiffs of that macadamesque coffee and what I am sure was inexpensive but generously applied *eau de Cologne*.

What on earth did we talk about? For we did talk and talk; it was not always 'philosophical' – my essay was a springboard and while it was always clear he had read it carefully, it was never annotated – but could be peppered with gossip. His ability to offer a concise 'put-down' was very sharp, either of a contemporary in the faculty or from a wider field. Once, holding a copy of the latest volume by Lacan he frowned: "Just shows you how fast the French have to run to stand still." Not quite gossip but of the ilk in tone. Of a distinguished Germanist I had also studied with, "He's so vain he wears his hair to look like a *toupé*." Michael had a very subtle and ironic understanding of vanity, based finely on a certain glimpse of self-observation. In my day he fancied he resembled James Dean, of whom he had a very large photograph on the door leading to his bedroom. I made the mistake of seeming unconvinced.

Though he showed great understanding towards me when I went through a standard-issue crisis, we seldom spoke on personal matters. On the rare occasions when he spoke of his alcoholism, then defeated by drastic but long-lasting treatment that had even been the subject of a profile in *The Sunday Times*, I think, I recall that his abiding memories of it were the problems of dealing with all the empties, in a suitcase in the woods, and of dealing with the tendency to inanity on the part of his fellows at High Table as they downed drink at dinner. He gave two-hour lectures and brought a thermos in his briefcase – strong coffee, but a legacy of the erstwhile need for surreptitious drink.

Amidst the talk it is my recollection that it was quite rare for us to share a recording together as if at a concert or recital, and that if we did it was of something of the highest vibrancy to our spirits – a recent performance of *Die Winterreise* that Hans Hotter had given in Tokyo, an unofficial tape of the Busch Quartet in Op.130 come to mind. The underworld of such tapes was the work of a global network of enthusiasts; recording companies did not approve, though it was known that Callas, for instance, did encourage these 'live' tapes to flourish, even of her under-estimated rival Leyla Gencer, much to our benefit now that copyright worries have subsided and allowed such material to be released officially. One collector, possibly in Norway, had an exhaustive collection of Flagstad pre-war; another, in America, had the tapes from after the war; Michael put them together and managed thus to have the whole career. The BBC had a very sloppy policy of wiping tapes and subsequent official issues of gems such as Goodall's *Mastersingers* and Horenstein's *Das Lied von der Erde* came about solely after an amnesty with Tanneresque enthusiasts who had taken the first live transmission.

In reverse, the *Ring* cycle that he used for his weekly evening classes on the tetralogy, to which I was not invited, came from tapes that had been smuggled out of Broadcasting House for a night, to be copied. Or was that the Toscanini Brahms cycle from the Royal Festival Hall? (Both have now been issued, some three decades after, by Testament.) At my first supervision I was so pompously proud to have been taken on as his pupil, 'this year's protégé' as people had it behind my back, that I assumed the slowly turning tape deck was there to record our conversation. No, it was Cherkassky's lunchtime recital from Manchester after all.

This ancient cluttered chapel contained very large photographs of D.H. Lawrence and Schoenberg, as well as James Dean, standing like statues of saints amidst the rubble of learning and listening. This collection was both deep and wide. That's to say, he had a wide range of love of music, but also had a passion for how different performances of that music enhanced its richness. Wide or deep, his love could bubble into sheer glee – I recall the day the stall on the Market had put the Bob Dylan *Budokan 1978* LPs on sale, or when Murray Hill issued the Furtwängler *Milan Ring*, news that quickened his step to a trotting gait, wearing his collectors' spurs. Be it of Dylan or Furtwängler, record collectors all have their sundry 'versions' fetishes, but in few if any cases does one feel that so much is at stake as when Tanner would pull out an LP, not even necessarily some extreme rarity none of us could hope to find, and promote its glory. He bought LPs of artists he did not care for – such as Fischer-Dieskau, Karajan, Sutherland – on the basis of "knowing the enemy". Of his heroes however – in that congruency they would be Hans Hotter, Furtwängler and Callas – he could unfailingly dig out the clinching snippet to leave you in no doubt. And on top of all that, knowing it would alarm people, he would explain that the tapes "are the hub of my collection."

We made many record-buying excursions, across Cambridge or in London, and, in my second year of study with him, when I had a car, out to Norwich or even Lowestoft. My haul might come to nearly 100 LPs, usually less than half his 'bag'. You must remember that there was no internet, nor easy advertising by the little specialist shops who in any case seldom had anything as technologically sophisticated as a list of their stock. So, each excursion was an adventure. We would set off for Ives' in Norwich, for instance, not knowing if the haul would be few or by the dozens. Like any true collector, Michael did not need a list of his own collection, and could spot a variant at a glance; and he would share my excitement when at last, after years, I happened upon an LP he had long

wished for me. For some reason, Cherkassky's Beethoven Op.111 comes to mind, not quite a rarity, let's say an oddity: "Oh yes," he chewed to me from another stack, "just wait till you get to the *istesso tempo*." He shared my excitement when I graduated to a ten-and-a-half-inch reel-to-reel deck, and made me tapes of my favourite least available glories.

That generosity was most evident in the way in which Tanner allowed undergraduates to borrow LPs from his collection, if they turned up during a fifteen minute window before dinner in Hall. During my extended supervisions I was often a witness to how succinctly Tanner would guide their exploration of the repertoire or fashion their taste in performance, sometimes with a withering opinion that was more directed at the overwhelming conventionality of classical music reviewing, than at the poor beginner's bewilderment. On another level he told me once how he had started to play the 1939 Mengelberg performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* to Raymond Leppard, a doyen of 'authenticity' in performance – who told him he would leave the room if Michael persisted he listen on. "Not a 'musician' in our sense," he uttered to me from behind the lamp shade.

THE PIANO-PLAYING OF ODOREIDA



His no-nonsense robust and focussed intellect – after all, I was there to study philosophy, at least some of the time – was balanced by a complete sensitivity to the absurd. He remains more or less the only peer with whom I have had proper conversations about Stephen Potter's gamesmanship books, he relishing that Odoreida's cluttered piano in *Supermanship*, a suitably Nietzschean title by the way, so resembled his own, 'in constant use'. This sense of the absurd (a word he relished to utter, the second syllable coming with a torque that suggested the fashioning of a dowel) was of course laden with serious intent, belonging to his ingrained disdain of what we usually call 'authority'; an ironic disdain given the rank he achieved as an authority not least on Wagner and Nietzsche, not to mention in the college hierarchy. It was clear from his (very

infrequent) recollection of National Service, in RAF Intelligence, in Germany, that he had no higher an opinion of military authority, or any other officialdom, than Spike Milligan. Not that 'disdain' was always strong enough: his masticatory declamation gave words such as 'loathe' the resonance of a strangled neck as he despaired of people's possible sheer wrong-headedness or sad tendency to unthinking stupidity.

Indeed, his manner of declamation was part of the point. Perhaps it is intrinsic to most lecturers that their style resembles in some way the lesson they seek to impart. Of course. But again with Tanner one sensed that more was at stake. And I am tempted to think that this was achieved by a sort of back-handed insouciance – as if he counter-balanced the vital importance of these skills, tastes, passions, values and all, with a recognition that most people don't care, perhaps cannot care, and, well, that's their loss. He was an evangelist by example, not by speech. I have no recollection of ever anything being 'rammed down my throat'. On the contrary, I have an indelible memory of him, as so often, in that red jumper and craning his head round the lamp-shade gazing, imploringly, lost for words – yes – at the *Kyrie* of the 1935 Toscanini *Missa Solemnis* or Hotter delivering the *Karfreitagszauber*. He knew well the seventh proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, that there are things of which one cannot speak. But must all the same.

At this moment we might address the subject of Tanner's relationship with Wittgenstein and indeed with philosophy in general. Some might start and ask, "There was one??" The answer can be simple or complex, the one not excluding the other. The simple answer is that he taught what the gritty philosophers regarded as a soft subject, aesthetics, rather than hewing the coal faces of logic or ontology, where you have to wear goggles at the face. And his speciality, in those days quite innovative in itself, was to look at the so-called 'continental' tradition, the German romantics in particular, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche especially. The superficially assumed disconnect with most of these writers to the mainstream flowing from Berkeley, Locke and Hume, gave his course the character of a backwater. Yet this is where Wittgenstein strikes a dischord; on the one hand, Wittgenstein had become the pivotal figure in hard philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon field, yet was a figure whose roots in the German tradition such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were underestimated, and whose almost poetic power was at utter odds with that other, Anglo-Saxon tradition.

In a fine television documentary on Wittgenstein by Christopher Sykes,

later to become David Hockney's sympathetic biographer, first aired in 1989 and available in a VHS home tape version on YouTube at [youtube.com/watch?v=8BoKjQfMihs&t=2582s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BoKjQfMihs&t=2582s) features Tanner, in his study, cushioned among books, elaborating Wittgenstein's philosophical progress with language and meaning. It seems aptly characteristic – a word which he pronounced as *kahra'tistick* – that he is seated facing sideways to the camera, leaning round to the viewer, his fine, open fingers explicating clarity or flicking a cigarette. His exposé is perfectly judged for a television audience, and we witness his signature clarity and judiciously unexpected phrasing. We also come up against counsel given by Wittgenstein himself, to the young Norman Malcolm, when Malcolm was offered a philosophy teaching post in America: basically *don't* – you will be asked to cheat yourself, and others. Malcolm disobeyed, as did Tanner. But as a teacher of philosophy, Tanner took Wittgenstein's warning completely to heart.

Let me explain myself better. In various obituaries I noted that Tanner was referred to as a music or opera critic – true – and as a philosopher – untrue. As widely read in philosophy as it would be possible to be while 'having a life', as we'd say, he was superbly able to lay these thoughts and thinkers before you, as well as offering ideas towards your ability to appreciate or criticise them. Many of his writings on Wagner, for instance, or Nietzsche, reveal his superb ability to be completely fair-handed – while despatching a text or writer to a deserved, dusty oblivion of nonsense. Hence he admired my very first essay, on Richard Wollheim's *Art and its Objects*, as a splendid 'hatchet-job', then a phrase much in vogue in some philosophical quarters. His variations on *reductio ad absurdum* were Beethovenian in effect. But he did not philosophise. There is no doctrine or seminal insight or crucial tool of his that has lingered either as a seed or a plague upon the field of philosophical endeavour. Nor had he any pretensions to having contributed in that way. I do not know, but I cannot believe he had ever expected to be offered a Chair in philosophy at Cambridge, he knew too well the then emerging requirement for productivity in print that that entailed. And in that sense he adhered nobly to Wittgenstein's fear that what would be expected was just such churning, as illuminating and insightful as a cement mixer, and did no such thing.

Instead, nobody interested by the creations and insights of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Wagner can afford to overlook Tanner's cogent and vivid accounts, including sundry introductions to translations. His guide to reading *Nietzsche* that prefaced the CUP translation of *Daybreak*, in its

first edition, is one of the finest elaborations we have; in later editions it was of course replaced by something less quirky and of little merit. Both in his lectures and in his writings, however, he achieved a very delicate balance between exegesis and – well, something like enticement. He encourages you to think for yourself, though that hackneyed phrase does not do enough, for it underplays the way in which Tanner expected you to engage with the texts at stake. He had doubts about how effective it was to the world's enlightenment that people study such matters, but he had no doubt about the importance of such matters. How the inner self is to engage with the outer – perhaps even indeed *whether* – had, for Michael, a self-evident answer, and his life's mission was to make it a shade evident to others.

I do recall one idea of his however that has never left me: we called it The Tanner Triangle. Its principle was that you assign each point of a triangle to a given artist, his work, and the audience. The length of the lines between each point represented the 'closeness' between these



aspects. Thus for instance with a cerebral composer such as Schoenberg the two lines between audience and the rest would be rather long, but the line between artist and work very tight and short. As the basis for a pretentious after-dinner parlour game this has some potential, doodling the triangles for Proust or Dittersdorf, but its value is hidden by that superficiality: for it reinforces the idea of the importance of the audience in the whole process – our very own importance in the whole business of communication – reminding us that this variable gives life to it all. That this ultimately reflects the later Wittgenstein's thoughts on language as social tool is something to be elaborated elsewhere; that this vital spring in the life of artistic expression was central to Tanner's passion for the arts, on the other hand, is something that I am seeking here to celebrate.

Back in the day, in my guise as an arts critic, I was sometimes asked to give a talk on the rôle of the critic, especially the critic of performance. Some thought this a beastly task, others vacuous. My gist was always simple: the job is to create an audience, so that those who were there might relive their experience maybe with richer or wider or just different enthusiasm, ears & eyes, and those who hadn't attended just kick themselves. Nobody had trained me to hold so lofty or daft an ideal, it just seemed to be right and to form some sort of buttress against the pointlessness of being rude. It was only later that I

realised that my mentor in this regard had been Michael Tanner and that he had never said or suggested any such thing.

Of all my teachers, from Kindergarten to degree, Tanner is the one of whom I'm stuck to recall something he actually taught me. Yet he was perhaps my greatest teacher. And that's just it. He opened doors, and cajoled. His criticism appealed, like Cromwell, "in the bowels of Christ", to the possibility of the sublime, towards the fullest realisation of the expression of art, towards an understanding that might, just might redeem our frail misunderstandings and lazy complacencies – all, as he once put it in a short radio talk, for a "temporary warding off of ultimate defeat". Few have his urgency of intelligence that matches and indeed dovetails with what we suppose to be the usual urgency of sensuality. His fascination was with that process and his teaching by example. Yet to the idea of being in some way an aesthete he told me once, curling round with conscious irony from behind that lamp, "I can't stand that poofy attitude to art." For art was in no way an accessory, but a necessity. In this way of life he differed profoundly from most of his fellow critics.

Such manly pessimism, as well as the Sisyphus-like heroism needed to survive it, had its voice for Tanner in the world of German romanticism, the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and indeed of Wagner, whose *thinking* Tanner took as seriously as the music. (I might observe here that though he is most of all taken as a prime Wagnerian, he once told me, "I can never quite escape the feeling that the greatest opera of all is *Fidelio*" – which I took to be a confession of a closet optimist after all.) Despite later volumes, I still regard his extended essay in the 1980 *Faber Wagner Companion* as the finest introduction to the composer, because of his conscientious exposition of the intellectual procession of the dramas. It is a very long contribution which Tanner had had to fight to have included without cuts. But it is very strong, at once rich in research and knowledge, and warm in personal commitment. Indeed, his exposition of *Die Meistersinger*, debunking the supposed antisemitism of the character of Beckmesser, caused Leonard Bernstein to summon him to the Savoy, whereupon the great man told Tanner that he had now renounced his refusal to conduct the opera but that nonetheless it was now too late for him to take it on. I believe their discussion also included Bernstein's more complicated conversion to *Parsifal*, which he also had never chosen to conduct. Tanner's telling of the encounter was memorable for his disdain of the monogrammed knitwear.

Tanner's various writings on Nietzsche – including sundry introductions

to translations – press home the point that there is no 'philosophy' to be found, no Dummies'-Guide crib, rather a way of thinking, which was at heart what made Tanner himself tick in that fetching, wise and frequently witty plurality of single-mindedness with which he welcomed all human expression that expanded his life and, if we make the effort and pay attention, ours. Too bloody bad for you if you don't.
