

CINCINNATI SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

EUGENE GOOSSENS, Conductor

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CINCINNATI

OFFICE OF THE CONDUCTOR

May 17, 1940

Col. O. N. Solbert
Eastman Kodak Company
Rochester, N.Y.

Dear Colonel Solbert:

I hope the enclosed will contribute something towards the proposed book on Mr. Eastman. I'm afraid that I didn't see as much of him as did his business colleagues, but I had the opportunity of knowing him from a very human standpoint; and if there were any tender and sentimental sides to his character, I certainly was in a position to encounter them. I quite often did, as a matter of fact, for when music was played he lost the austerity and reserve which characterized him in his daily business life and contacts.

Greetings from

Yours sincerely,

Eugene Goossens

EG:KM

Goossens, Eugene

Goossens

My contacts with George Eastman during the years I was conductor of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, namely 1923 to 1931, were close ones; and though these contacts had to do mainly with matters musical, there existed nevertheless a bond of deep affection between us. The first proof of this affection was the splendid gesture he made after the first four concerts I conducted in 1923, when he tendered my wife and myself a banquet to which was invited all of Rochester society -- a banquet which I cannot recall being equalled anywhere for lavish hospitality and sumptuous display. The decorations even featured miniature fountains which sprang from the center of the table....

He was tremendously proud of having given to the people of Rochester a major orchestra, and at our many breakfasts together he would confide in me the deep concern he had regarding the musical public's reaction to it. These breakfasts were almost rituals. They began at 7:30 promptly, and Harold Gleason will confirm the fact that he was never known to be late at any of them and frowned at any of us guests who arrived even a fraction of a minute late. The entire conversation at breakfast was carried on against a background of soft organ music. On cold mornings he would wear a skull cap at breakfast. He left the conversational openings to his guests, and woe betide those who concentrated on trivialities, to which he simply refused to even respond. These breakfasts were actually events at which one gave an account of one's stewardship for the past week, or weeks, depending on how long since the last one had taken place. He was immensely proud of his floral decorations, and went to great pains to describe exactly the nature and derivation of the particular flower which formed the keynote of the great bank of flowers concealing the organ.

Though fond of organ music, George Eastman's great passion in life, outside of the orchestral concerts, was the string quartet; and he was never happier than when listening to his own string quartet discoursing the works of the great masters. His technical knowledge of music was nil, but he had an extraordinary flare for the subtleties of chamber music and would very often surprise me with some comment concerning a piece which might have emanated from a real musician.

In all my eight years' contact with George Eastman, I never knew him to crack a joke. He was susceptible to a certain amount of flattery, (especially if it came from a good-looking woman.) But, although I am quite prepared to believe he had a quiet sense of humour all his own, he rarely gave evidence of it, at least not in my presence. His gratitude was immediately apparent, however, whenever he was the recipient of a gift, or the object of an affectionate gesture. He was always interested in ships, and the last year I was in Rochester I presented him with three miniature models of the "Majestic", the "Berengeria", and the "Olympic". These models he kept on the mantel shelf of his library, and was almost as proud of them as he was of the trophies of the hunt which decorated that library. The only subject regarding which I ever heard him become really talkative was the subject of his African trips, and here he would go into great detail and relate much concerning his experiences with Martin and Osa Johnson in the African Veldt.

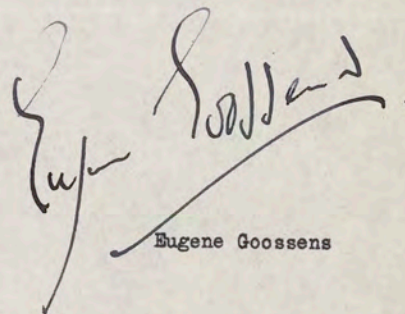
To return to music. He rarely asked technical questions about the orchestra, and relied on the men he had appointed to positions of authority in the carrying-out of his musical plans to do their job adequately without any advice or words from him. I'm convinced, however, that he knew much more of what was going on

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behind the scenes than one suspected, though he invariably gave the impression of an almost bland confidence in one's capacity to run his musical machine adequately, just as he relied on the directors and heads of his business organizations to represent his interests and protect them with the utmost efficiency. He had no liking for old men in positions of authority so far as his artistic ventures were concerned. His choice of me to head his orchestra was almost a blind one, and it was only on hearsay that he engaged me. My reputation as a young and promising musician who had achieved much for his age in Europe was the thing which caused him unhesitatingly to summon me by cable from Europe. As in the case of Howard Hanson, once he realized he had made a wise choice, he never questioned any decisions we made.

One of the most convivial evenings I ever spent at his house was on the occasion of Mary Garden's visit to Rochester to sing in "Carmen" at one of our student performances at the Kilbourne Hall. His admiration for her was very obvious, and her approach to him was so refreshingly unconventional that he reacted instantaneously to it. Rarely did I see him in more jovial spirits nor so young in years as at that supper. We all drank champagne, but, characteristically enough, after the first two glasses of it had been consumed, the supply automatically ceased, and the rest of the supper was carried on to the accompaniment of iced water.

My relations with George Eastman were invariably cordial, and, as I have already said, a bond of real affection existed between us right up to the time of my departure from Rochester. His reaction to my departure was characteristic. He merely said; "We're sorry to lose you". But he uttered no word of reproach, or even extreme regret. He was, in many ways, a much misunderstood man. Obviously, the one person who counted most to him in his life was his mother, and the only tenderness I ever heard him express in words was on that one subject. People are apt to criticize him for his seeming austerity and reserve. They forget his tremendous benefactions, and his realization of the fact that without a real enjoyment of the arts and, above all, music, no community -- however flourishing -- can be said to be truly complete. In this respect he will go down in history as one of America's greatest benefactors.



Eugene Goossens

Goossens, Eugene