

Introduction

March 12, 1979. The musicians of the Boston Symphony gather at an international departure gate at Logan Airport, surrounded not only by the usual gaggle of BSO staff and administrators, but also by family members, the symphony's deep-pocketed benefactors, corporate sponsors, and a buzzing swarm of local, national, and international media. Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts is here, lending his largesse to the occasion. In front of the cameras, Teddy bids us an impassioned bon voyage, expressing his pride in Boston's own orchestra, and—though he mispronounces the name of our esteemed music director, Maestro Seiji Ozawa—exhorts us to greatness in inimitable Kennedy style. This is not an ordinary concert tour. This is history-making cultural diplomacy. The Boston Symphony is going to China!

The unfathomable, churning land of Mao, of Chou En Lai, of the Gang of Four, had only recently proclaimed an end to its tumultuous Cultural Revolution, for the moment sheathing its sword against anything that smacked of Western taint. Relations with the U.S. have theoretically “normalized.” That China is still mopping up from its invasion of Vietnam has been put on our political backburner, perhaps because it was seen as an indirect strike against the Soviet Union for its support of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia.

But what will normalization mean? How will the BSO be received in this unpredictable political environment? Will we be cheered or booed off the stage? Will there be demonstrations against our decadent Western culture? Will we be confined to our hotel rooms, or followed by security personnel everywhere we go? Can we even take photos? There is a palpable exhilaration tinged with anxiety at the departure gate that chilly, late winter day.

Fast forward to 2014. I am a musical Rip Van Winkle. As one of the few musicians on that first tour to China in 1979 returning thirty-five years later, I have a unique opportunity to chronicle the striking transformations taking place not only in China's arts and society, but in the symphonic world as well.

What are the nuts and bolts of a concert tour? How do you finance its staggering costs? And why bother? What are the improbable logistics of getting a hundred musicians onto the stage on time, every time?

I recently conducted a rehearsal of seventeen musicians of the string section of the Stockbridge Sinfonia, which annually presents a grand total of one program. These amateur musicians, comprising high school students to retirees, work assiduously on their own time, purely for the love of music. The program I drilled them on ranged from Beethoven's Eighth Symphony to American Salute.

At intermission (which, unlike those of professional orchestras, is of indeterminate length) I chatted with concertmaster Christine Singer, about the recently completed Boston Symphony Asia tour. I recounted a few run-of-the-mill travel tidbits I assumed was common knowledge, but Christine, who in real life is a with-it, team-building consultant for companies and non-profits, was floored.

"The only time we see the musicians is when they're onstage!" she said. "I've never had any idea of how you get there. You should write a book!"

In *Symphonies & Scorpions* you'll glimpse both the glamor and the drudgery of an international concert tour. You'll sit next to me on the hallowed stage of Symphony Hall in Boston and in

concert halls in China and Japan for four weeks of rehearsals and concerts, meeting my congenial and occasionally cantankerous colleagues, listening to the Maestro's words of debated wisdom. You'll fly with me nonstop from Boston to Tokyo, dine on succulent Peking duck, squirm through Beijing alleys crowded with scorpion vendors, and be spiritually restored in a Tokyo park floating in tranquility.

But nothing can be taken for granted on a tour, and sometimes disasters do happen. Our 2014 tour was no exception. It was almost cancelled before it even began, and on the final leg our instruments were held up by Japanese Customs officials, challenging even the American ambassador's diplomatic skills to resolve.

So pack your bags and get a good night's sleep, because we're hitting the road for classic adventure on and off the stage.