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BY HOWARD BOATWRIGHT

This talk was presented on May 22, 1983 at a dinner given by the Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music in celebration of Mr. Krasner's eightieth birthday.

The events of Louis Krasner's career are already history and have been recited many times in this community where he spent about thirty years, teaching, playing, and using his wisdom about music and the world of music to bring the level of concert life here to the high point we now enjoy. Perhaps you will forgive me if I don't attempt to repeat all the details of Krasner's legendary (and still ongoing) career, but talk about him in a way no one else could—that is, how, as a person fifteen years his junior, I have felt his orbit of influence intersect my own life.

I was first aware of Louis Krasner when his Columbia recording of the Berg concerto appeared on 78 rpm records around 1941. I was then twenty-three. I bought the records immediately and played them to extinction on the old, crank-type, parlor Victrola that we had in my home. It would be difficult to convey to you now how astonishing it was to hear such music and such playing. Having worked so hard myself to play an in-tune arpeggio in octaves, I was amazed that here was a man who could play one in major sevenths! The beauty of the final variations on *Es ist genug* was strange at that time, yet overwhelming in its effect. Although the musical idiom, known rightly or wrongly as "atonality", had existed for twenty or thirty years by then, there had been no such major work for the violin at the time Krasner commissioned Berg to write his concerto. But Krasner, trained in the tradition of all the great violinists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had to enter a totally new world, both musically and violinistically. It took a remarkable combination of *foresight* and *courage* to do it. I think that there I have struck the key words which

Louis Krasner in Crouse College on his return to Syracuse University in October 1984 (Photo: Steve Sartori).

characterize everything Louis Krasner does, whether it concerns music or any of the many challenges one has to cope with in life.

Foresight of the kind possessed by Louis Krasner is one of those inexplicable gifts from God—like musical talent, unusual ability in mathematics, or the profound philosophical insights imparted to the biblical prophets. Courage is most often associated with the soldier or the athlete. But by no means do all conflicts occur on the battlefield or playing field. Only the naive are unaware that artistic life is itself a battleground and that the concert stage is as much a challenge to the performer as the playing field is to the athlete. Krasner has been a courageous soldier in the struggle for the acceptance of twentieth-century music. He has never lacked the courage to fight for the living composer, a fact that has made him dear to all the participants in that grand campaign. Among the many persons in this country who revered Krasner for his contributions are Gunther Schuller, Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Ernst Bacon, and Ernst Krenek.

Among thinking violinists in the world, Krasner has long held a special place. Not all fiddlers were like Ruggiero Ricci, who, upon being introduced to Louis after a concert in Buffalo, said: "Oh, you're the guy who played that goddamned concerto." I can bear witness to the deep respect of Yehudi Menuhin, who had a meeting with Louis on one of his visits to Syracuse to see the manuscript and discuss the Berg concerto, which he had just performed with Pierre Boulez; or the respect of Joseph Silverstein, who asked to consult Louis before he played the Schoenberg concerto with the Boston Symphony. In recognition of the courageous feats he performed on the concert stage, Krasner is held in high regard by many others among the world's best violinists, even though not all of them (but an increasing number every year) have dared to commit their careers to performances of the Berg or Schoenberg concertos. It has been only within the last ten or fifteen years that several recordings of the Berg have appeared and that this work (although not yet the Schoenberg) has become accepted not too unwillingly by planners of symphony programs. So it is only now, nearly fifty years later, that the violinist's world and the musical world in general are arriving at the same point that Krasner had arrived at when he was in his mid-thirties! In that respect he was a true pioneer. Whether it is staking out new land, new ideas,

or new art, such people have to have those two characteristics which Louis has in such strong measure, foresight and courage.

To return to my personal recollections, I first saw Louis Krasner and had a significant talk with him in 1944. I was teaching at the University of Texas in Austin when the Minneapolis Orchestra under Dimitri Mitropoulos gave a concert there. Krasner was the concertmaster. A friend of mine in the German department of the University had given me the score of a violin and piano sonata written in the twelve-tone technique by one of the good American students of Krenek, Russell Harris, then on the faculty at Hamline College in Minnesota. Thinking that Krasner might have known the composer or the piece and wanting to speak to the famous violinist whose playing I already knew so well, I approached him as he left the stage at the end of the concert. After I had described the piece—which he had not seen—he said something which surprised me. I had expected automatic interest from the proponent of Berg and Schoenberg because it was a twelve-tone work. But Krasner said: "It doesn't matter whether it is twelve-tone or not; the point is whether or not it is a good piece."

For me, this was an eye-opening remark. It showed me that the attitude of the Viennese School (at least, of Schoenberg and Berg) was not a faddish kind of modernism that placed all importance on its technical devices but one that stood first for basic musical values, for which their twelve-tone technique was only a new means of construction. I have seen this view confirmed many times since; but it was Louis who first gave me that insight, and at a time when he didn't know my name or that our paths would ever cross again.

The above incident reveals other notable traits of Louis: his interest in, his belief in, and his accessibility to young musicians. I have witnessed examples of these over and over again in his teaching at Syracuse University. In this segment of his professional life, he is as active as ever through his association with his alma mater, the New England Conservatory, and the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. I have spoken of the regard in which Krasner is held by composers and violinists. I don't dare try to count the numbers of the devoted students who have come under his influence or guess how many more there will be. The catholicity of Krasner's taste, as revealed in my earliest encounter with him, was one of the assets he brought to his musical directorship of the Syracuse Friends of Cham-

ber Music. Though he always insisted on quality, he by no means turned the organization into a special-plea platform for twelve-tone music, or any other kind. The result has been that the SFCM has given a hearing to many diverse trends in contemporary music and has provided a remarkable education to its members, as well as satisfied them with fine performances of traditional masterpieces.

The SFCM is only one of Louis Krasner's many legacies. As he reaches his eightieth year, he sets an example for all of us about how to live. With his gift of foresight, he has never lived only for the moment, but for the future as well, and with deep respect for that which has passed. Therefore, the importance of any one point in his life—an eightieth birthday, for example—means only as much as a sign passed on the highway indicating the distance to the next city. One sees it go by, but it is no stopping point. And so it is on this happy occasion: Louis sees it go by, but he is still on the move. All we need to say to him now is, "Glückliche Reise".