

'El Exigente' Looks Back - and Ahead

Written by Dan Kellams

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"What strikes me — and I'd call it the tragic view — is how the passage of time sweeps away those who don't adjust to new attitudes and mores."

Harvey Sollberger did not play sports at Marion High School. He played music — and went on to international renown as a flutist, conductor, composer and teacher of contemporary classical music.

Sollberger remembers well the legendary high school athletic heroes of his childhood in the 1950s ("as if they were spun out of the Illiad," he wrote), the importance of sports to the high school and town, and "the puritanical and ascetic philosophy" of Coach Les Hipple, who drove his teams to victory while molding his players' characters through strict discipline.

"Those teams set us apart from and above other towns," Sollberger wrote in an e-mail. "I bought into it completely and held my breath with the rest of the town during close or crucial games."

Sollberger studied music at Marion High School under a teacher named Paul Wright, who, like Hipple, taught "the gospel of hard unrelenting work and full commitment. Teamwork, depending on each other and not letting one's comrades down was part of that ethic."

Wright, like Hipple, "clearly established the connection between fundamentals, hard work and dedication on the one hand, and success on the other," Sollberger wrote.

The music teacher produced excellent results. "Paul Wright took the bands he created and led them to musical heights (in state competitions) equivalent to those that Hipple achieved in athletics."

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Then Wright met a fate similar to Hipple’s. He was criticized and demoted within the school system during the 1960s for adhering too strictly to the old ways — the ways that had worked so well for so long.

Parents, boosters, school officials “wanted teachers to attend more to students’ self-esteem rather than constantly reminding them that the price of success was a high degree of self-abnegation and deferral of immediate gratification,” Sollberger wrote.

“I see Hipple and Paul Wright as exemplary men whose hard-edged and jagged truths could no longer fit a world that was being reconfigured as they aged.”

As a high school student, Sollberger absorbed the teachings of Hipple and Wright, and went on to apply them in setting unyielding standards for the musicians and students he led.

“To the New York musicians who played under me, I was El Exigente (the demanding one) and it was an epithet I prized.”

But Sollberger also experienced how Hipple’s stern discipline could slip into cruelty. When Sollberger was in eighth grade, his father, who viewed football as “nothing but violence and head-banging,” forbade Harvey from going out for the sport. The boy was not eager to do so, but he was a sports fan and would have gone out simply because so many other boys did.

Harvey did not escape Hipple, however — few boys did. Unless they had a medical excuse, boys who didn’t go out for a sport had to take physical education, which was run by the fearsome coach.

Now, Harvey and other non-football-playing classmates — “the few, the bedraggled, the disconsolate” — stood before Hipple in a phys-ed class.

The coach “launched into a lecture informing us that we were throwing away a priceless

opportunity, that what awaited us in life was failure, shame and disappointment. Everything he communicated through his words, tone and attitude said we were losers. I felt demeaned and humiliated.”

This harsh judgment was coming from “the most important man in town, the man everyone looked up to, the man through whom the world saw Marion as number one.”

Sollberger never forgot the shock and surprise he felt that day, and still resents what Hipple said.

(A partial defense of Hipple may be in order. Hipple truly believed that sports would benefit any boy. He did not engage in long diatribes, but he could deliver a few sentences with memorable power. He may have been directing his statements at particular boys he thought held promise as players or, more likely, at those whose lifestyle gave evidence of needing correction. The scolding may have bounced off them, but the sensitive Sollberger absorbed it.)

Today, Sollberger sometimes wonders if he, too, in his conducting and teaching, might have erred on the side of being too rigid. “I’ve learned that — especially with today’s youth — a little empathy and support go a long way. Forty years of teaching and still trying to figure it out.”

Sollberger recently retired from the University of California, San Diego and moved to Strawberry Point, Iowa, where he continues to compose new works. His work, “Perhaps Gilead,” inspired by two Iowa novels by Marilynne Robinson, had its premiere performance by the Red Cedar Chamber Group recently.

Once a young lion in music, Sollberger, now 73, reflected on growing old as an artist.

“What strikes me — and I’d call it the tragic view — is how the passage of time sweeps away those who don’t adjust to new attitudes and mores.

“I see this wiping away of the old by the new in my field today. Values that my colleagues and I pioneered and established are now seen as old-fashioned by the bright young people who are today re-inventing the wheel.

“In the arts, at least, young people need to react against their elders, push off (sometimes violently) from them to establish and make room for themselves. I did it, and am these days on the other end of it.”

Unwilling to retire and content himself with being remembered as an “elder statesman” or “modern master,” Sollberger works on, “composing music that is ripe and full of the experience of all that I’ve lived, seen and felt.”

Note - Harvey Sollberger graduated from Marion High School in 1956, obtained a degree from the University of Iowa and went on to receive an M.A. from Columbia University in New York. He has taught at Columbia, Indiana University and the University of California, San Diego. He has composed more than 60 works for flute, chorus, orchestra and chamber combinations. From 1997 to 2005 he was music director of the La Jolla (Calif.) Symphony. His work as a performer and composer has been represented on more than 100 commercial recordings.

(Dan Kellams is the author of “A Coach’s Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians,” which has been issued in a second edition by its publisher.)