

The B List

A distinguished quartet weighs in on "second-rate composers" who wrote some first-class music

BY MARK TIARKS

IN the November 21 edition of *Pasatiempo*, we heard from three New Mexico musical luminaries about the "marble bust syndrome," the tendency to worship at the feet of a small number of "first-rate" composers while simultaneously assuming that those in the next rank down are barely worth bothering with.

This week, two artistic directors, a conductor-composer, and a pianist share their thoughts on the same topic.

"There are so many problems with the 'marble-bust syndrome' I could vent ad nauseam," says **violinist Colin Jacobsen, artistic director of Santa Fe Pro Musica**. "But let's just start with this premise: It puts our very living tradition in a musty-museum frame of mind and stifles creativity in today's composers."

The syndrome also makes concert programming difficult due to its "Top 40" mentality, he feels, with the same works being played over and over, which deprives audiences and performers alike of a wider and deeper experience. (In the realm of full disclosure, Jacobsen acknowledges that he loves many highly popular pieces, such as Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, which is on a Pro Musica Christmas Eve concert.)

"But let's talk about cellist-composer Luigi Boccherini," Jacobsen continues. "He wrote a 'Top 40' classical hit that represents perceived snooty-classical music in any number of American movies. It's the minuet from one of his quintets, a piece that I played as a four-year-old Suzuki violin student. It's one of those miraculous things that works no matter what tempo you play it in, because it has such strong bones!"

Boccherini, who lived from 1743 to 1805, wrote more than 120 string quintets, many for the royal court of Spain, to be played on its matching set of Stradivarius instruments. "I really got turned on to his music and these quintets by Vera Beths, my

Pasatiempo's two-part "B List" series was inspired by the Richard Strauss quote, "I may not be a first-rate composer, but I am a first-class, second-rate composer!" We asked notable musicians in the local music scene to address the "marble bust syndrome" and offer their opinions about lesser-known composers whose contributions are worthwhile. Read Part 1 in the November 21 edition.



former teacher in Holland, and her husband Aner Bylsma, the pioneering period cellist," Jacobsen says.

He recalls their descriptions of Boccherini's incredible sense of fantasy and imagination, as well as his being "an early minimalist" often more interested in musical texture than narrative content. "The interweaving of his homogenous string writing creates an almost hypnotic effect," Jacobsen continues, "predating the mesmerizing patterns of Philip Glass by hundreds of years.

"Boccherini had virtuosic string writing, humor, pathos, all the good stuff! Check out Vera and Aner's recording of his tragic F Minor quintet and his *Stabat Mater* for strings and soprano and tell me that this 'lesser' composer isn't worth another listen."

LISTEN UP:

To hear the string quintet, go to sfnm.co/boccherini; for an excerpt from the *Stabat Mater*, go to sfnm.co/stabatmater.

"Writing music is not a contest, but there will always be debates about which classical composers were the best," says **pianist, composer, and conductor Joe Illick**. "This begs the question, best at what? Writing fugues or conveying emotions? Dazzling virtuoso showpieces or charming salon music?"

There's an important subjective aspect to debates about greatness as well. "All music attempts to reach some combination of the ear, the heart, the mind, the spirit, and the senses," he says. "How much it succeeds in each area is dependent not just on the piece but also on the listener."

Illick also cites an interesting phenomenon in the classical music world around the subject of perceived renown.

"Even great composers can be involved in cases of mistaken identity. The popular wedding song 'Bist du bei mir,' long attributed to J.S. Bach, was actually written by Gottfried Stölzel," he says, "and his famous Minuet in G turns out to be by Christian Petzold. These forgotten composers were clearly

capable of writing music that was either mistaken for first-class or really is first-class."

Just as popular music has its "one-hit wonders" — such as Johnny Nash with "I Can See Clearly Now" and Doris Troy with "Just One Look" — classical music has its counterparts.

"Some composers spent their lifetimes writing hundreds of pieces but are remembered for just one standout composition," Illick says.

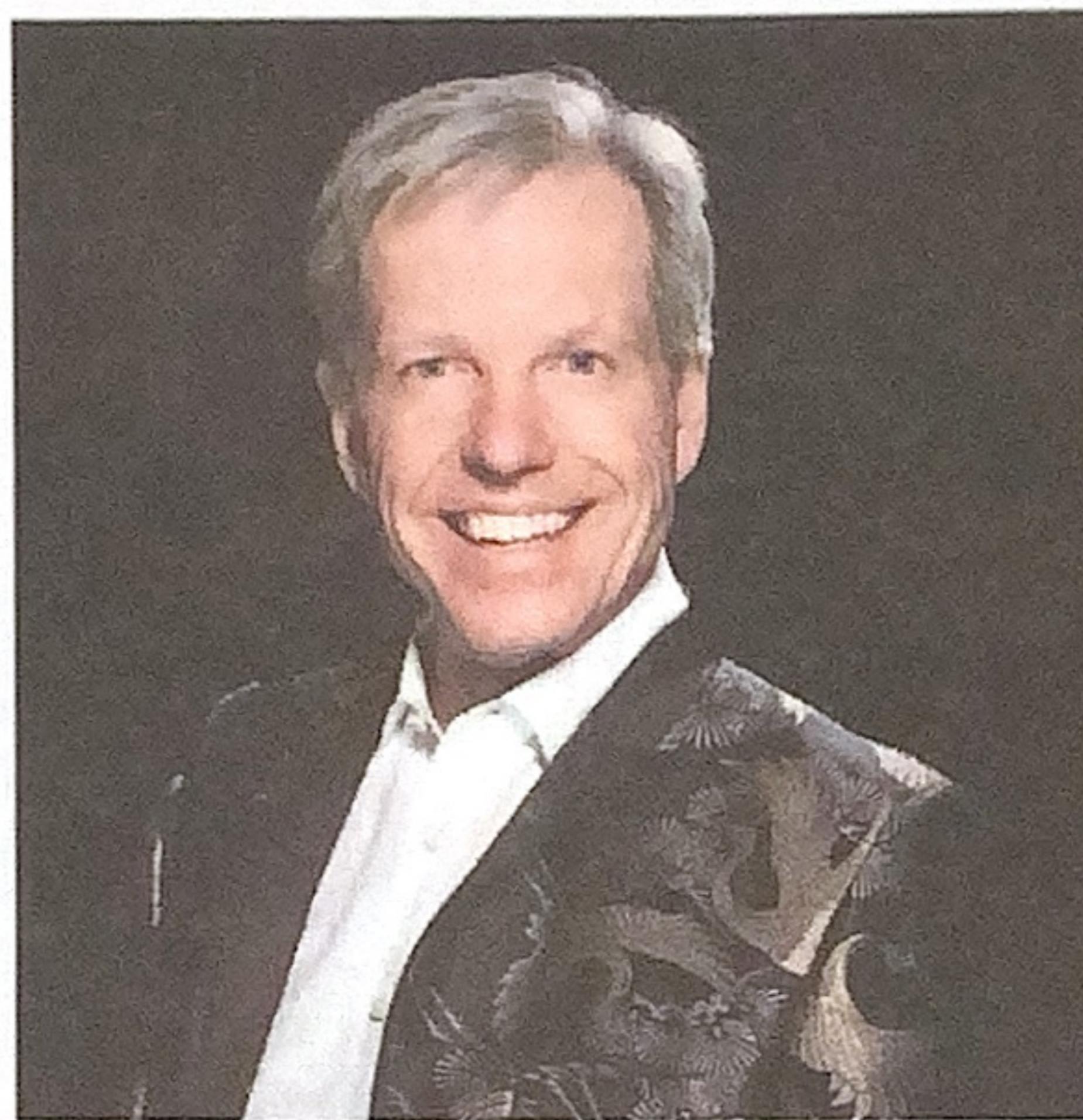
His list of "composers who don't make the cut of all-time musical heroes, but could clearly still write a first-class piece," includes Pietro Mascagni (especially the Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*), Johann Pachelbel (Canon in D Major), Heitor Villa-Lobos (*Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*), Gustave Charpentier (the aria "Depuis le Jour" from *Louise*), and Tomaso Albinoni (Adagio in G Minor).

See below for video links to each of these works. Illick notes of the last piece, "Albinoni composed a few lines of this, and the rest was written more than 200 years later by his biographer Giazotto, so this is a first-class collaboration between two composers who never met in person."

Illick also widens the discussion to consider music on the most macro possible level.

"Sometimes you will read that [some famous piece] is one of the most significant achievements of civilization," he says. "It may be, but really, it's not any single piece, however wonderful, but the whole enormous body of human music that is such an incredible, extraordinary achievement."

The fact that we've been making music, dance, art, and theater for thousands of years and are continuing to do so, "is the most hopeful and positive sign that we are wired not just to survive, compete, and multiply, but also to create beauty and to search for meaning."



LISTEN UP:

For the Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, go to sfnm.co/intermezzo; for "Depuis le Jour" from *Louise*, go to sfnm.co/louise; for the Canon in D Major go to sfnm.co/canon; for the Adagio in G Minor, go to sfnm.co/adagio; and for *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*, go to sfnm.co/villa-lobos.

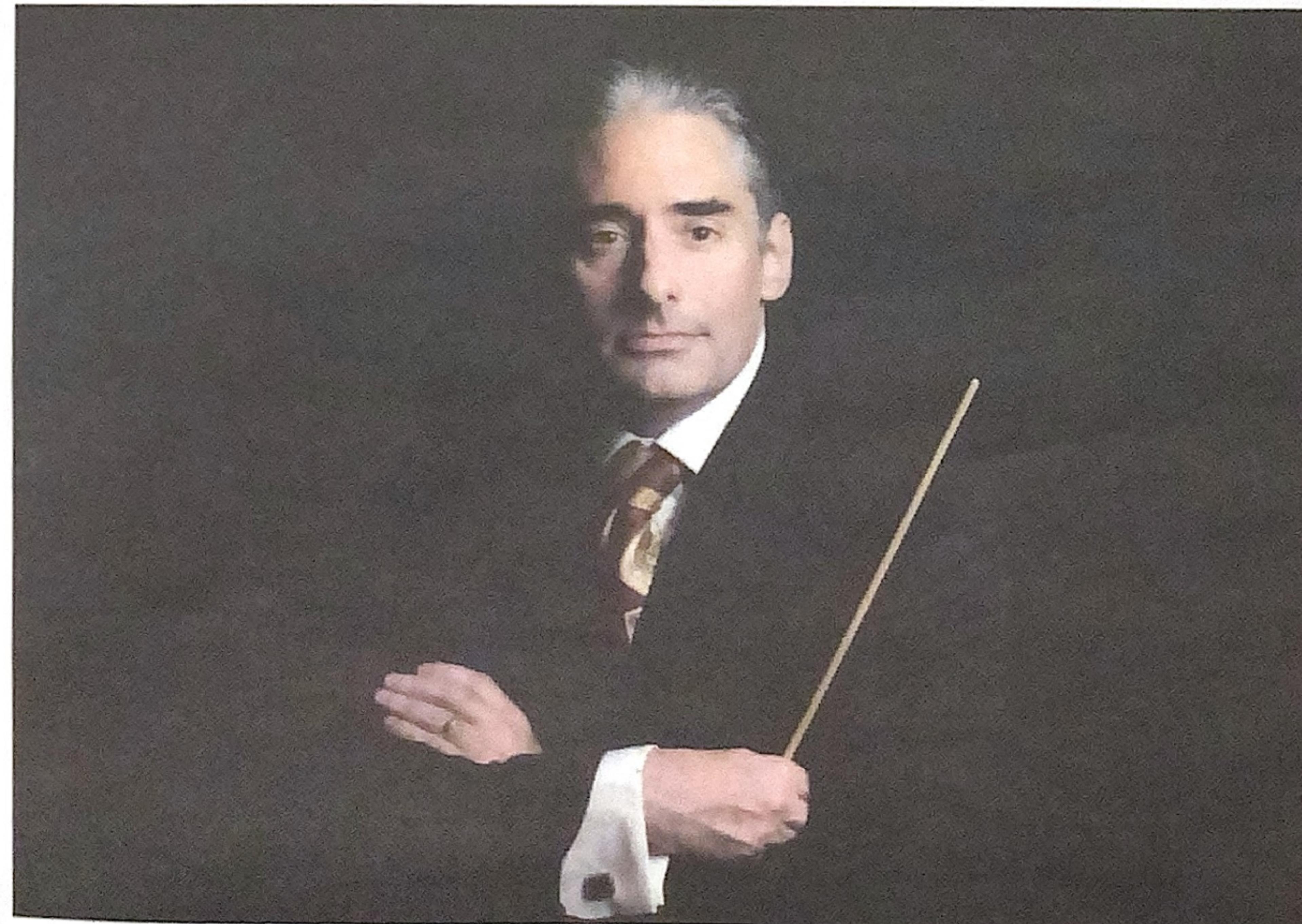
One of our state's most skilled excavators isn't a paleontologist. He's musical sleuth **Anthony Barrese**, **artistic director of Opera Southwest**, who has unearthed more than 25 rare but worthy operas over the last two decades.

He's especially enthusiastic about three 19th-century Italian composers, Lauro Rossi, Luigi Ricci, and Pietro Rimondi.

"Rossi was born at the beginning of Rossini's career and saw all of Verdi's operas but the final two," Barrese says. "He wrote more than 30 operas for some of the most famous singers of the day, and they were performed in the most important opera houses."

Two works by Rossi are of particular interest to Barrese, his *Dottor Bobolo*, which premiered in

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Top: "Writing music is not a contest, but there will always be debates about which classical composers were the best," says pianist, composer, and conductor Joe Illick.

Left: Anthony Barrese, artistic director of Opera Southwest, is especially enthusiastic about three 19th-century Italian composers: Lauro Rossi (above), Luigi Ricci, and Pietro Rimondi.

Opposite page: Violinist Colin Jacobsen (top), artistic director of Santa Fe Pro Musica, contends that the marble bust syndrome "puts our very living tradition in a musty-museum frame of mind and stifles creativity in today's composers." He suggests giving composer-cellist Luigi Boccherini (bottom) a listen.

1845 at the Teatro Nuovo in Naples, and his final opera, *Macbeth*, which was staged in 1877 at the King's Theatre, London.

"The former contains, to my knowledge, the first instance of music in 5/4 time in an Italian opera," he says. "It occurs during a first-act trio where, in typical Italian comic opera fashion, three characters sing in asides of their confusion. The fact that the 5/4 rhythm feels like it is constantly falling over itself adds to the general unsteady atmosphere of the music."

Barrese calls Rossi's *Macbeth* "one of the most fascinating musical dramas of the late 19th century," with features that include a text "in a quasi-made-up version of Italian in which syllables are brutally truncated, to approximate what Scottish would sound like," as well as an attempt at Scottish Gaelic and characters who sing in French, since Scotland was dominated by France at times in its history.

"Sadly, the opera was never given as *Macbeth*," Barrese says. "It was sent to England where it was transplanted to Norway! The title was changed to *Bjorn*, and all the characters were renamed as well."

Rimondi seems to have been born about two centuries too early.

"Even though he wrote around 50 operas that we know of, his greatest contribution to music came in his large-form experimental music," Barrese says. "His *Oratorio Triplo* from 1848 is a gigantic work consisting of three oratorios — *Giuseppe*, *Giacobbe*, and *Putifar* — that can be performed separately or all at the same time. Musical experiments of this type before the 20th century are unthinkable."

Ricci dominated Italian comedy after Donizetti, sometimes co-composing works with his younger brother Federico.

Barrese is particularly interested in Luigi's *The Devil Condemned to Take a Wife*, an 1827 comedy he describes as "a classic battle of the sexes that takes place largely in hell. The libretto includes such fantastical stage directions as, 'At Pluto's sign a hideous dragon appears with open wings,' and 'The Furies force [Pulcinella] to ride the dragon.'"

Luigi Ricci's personal life could be an opera subject on its own. He lived quite openly for several years in a ménage à trois with the twin sopranos Francesca and Ludmilla Stoltz. Luigi eventually married Ludmilla, although without abandoning Francesca, and fathered children with both women.

"Leaving aside the brilliance of Richard Strauss' rejoinder to an evaluation I emphatically disagree with, this idea of first-rate and second-rate raises so many questions I hardly know where to begin," **pianist Jacquelyn Helin** says.

Until recently, the established musical canon was often presented as already decided.

"Every piano student learns about the three 'B's' — Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms — as if great

LISTEN UP:

Rossi was one of 13 composers to contribute music to a Requiem Mass in honor of Rossini. To hear his "Agnus Dei," go to sfnm.co/rossi. For Barrese's electronic realization of the Sinfonia from Rimondi's *Oratorio Triplo*, go to sfnm.co/rimondi. For an excerpt from the Ricci brothers' opera *Crispino and the Fairy*, go to sfnm.co/ricci.

composition were a process from former times," she points out.

"Certainly, all the great works had already been written, hadn't they? But who decides what is great? The musicologists and critics? The presenting organizations? The performers? The audiences?"

Helin believes that to condemn composers as second-rate because their output is smaller or more esoteric robs us of the pleasures to be found in an enormous amount of music. "Composers like Olivier Messiaen, Maurice Duruflé, Tōru Takemitsu, and Astor Piazzolla have written extraordinary music," she says, "and I have spent hours listening to or playing all of them."

Helin is a great admirer of Aaron Copland, whose body of work wasn't large, having played his music since graduate school in concerts around the world and known him while she lived in New York.

"Even though he grew up in Brooklyn, he managed to capture a particular sound that many people find American," she says. "I never fail to respond to his music, whether I'm playing the Piano Sonata, the Piano Variations, or a chamber piece like the Sextet for Clarinet, Piano, and String Quartet. His musical

voice is utterly unique and unmistakable, adding to the richness of our collective musical experience."

Helin cites a literary example to demonstrate the power unfamiliar music can have. The character Charles Swann in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* keeps returning to a little musical phrase from a contemporary violin sonata.

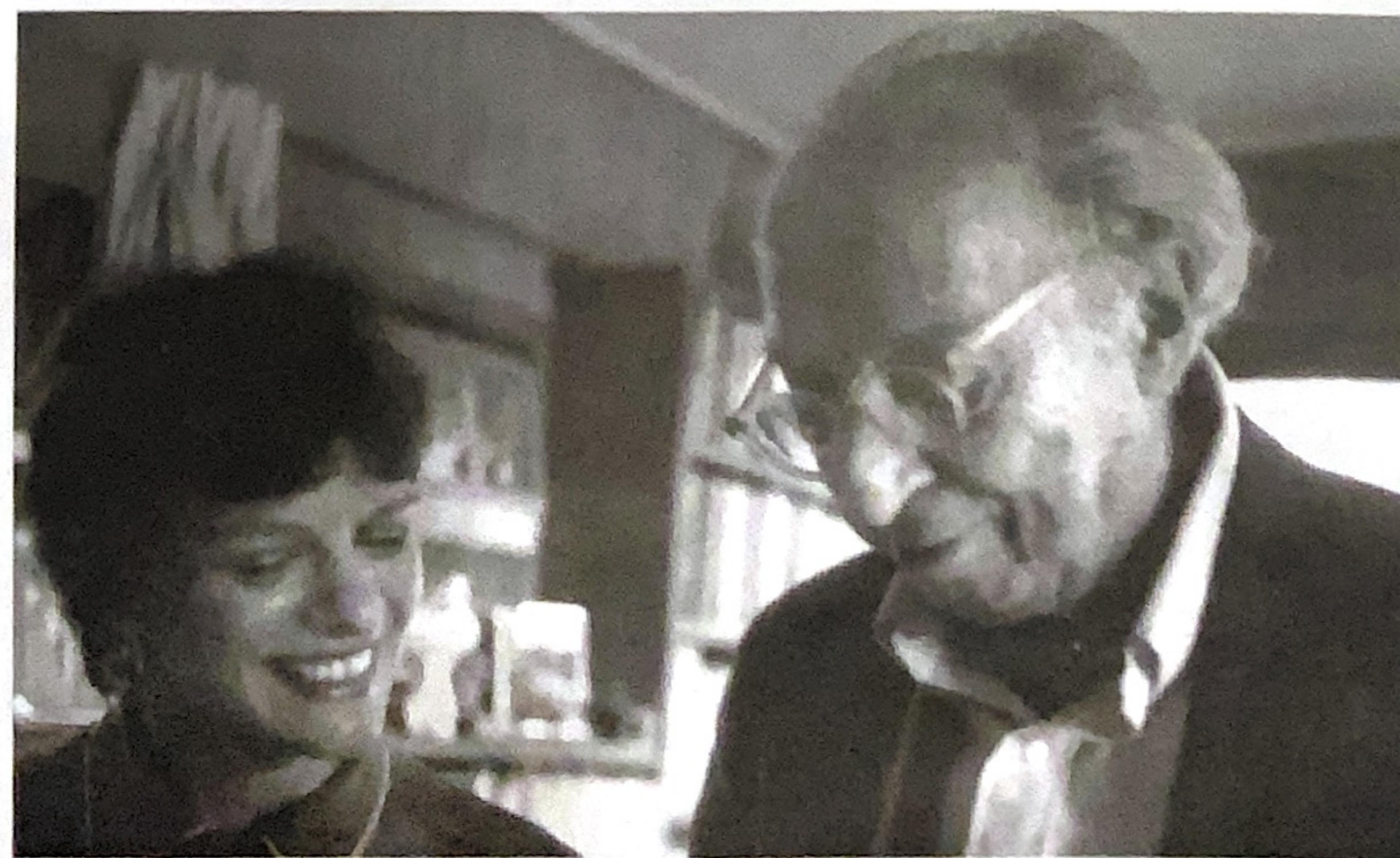
"He finds the greatest pleasure both in its sound and in its mysterious effect on him," she says, "while totally unable to explain that ineffable power. Like him, each of us is totally free to explore and to find the music that speaks personally to us. Once you give up on the tyranny of 'genius' as a measure of what music you wish to hear, there is virtually no limit to what you might discover and love."

Helin relates a specific, recent example that introduced her to a piece she'd never heard but now adores. One of her piano students brought in the "Notturno" by Ottorino Respighi, famous for such large-scale works as *The Pines of Rome*; she has now performed it several times. "Audiences adore it, and I find it exquisitely communicative," she says. "There is nothing quite like stumbling on a new work unexpectedly and falling in love with it."

And for those who disparage Richard Strauss today, she has a simple solution — listen to the end of *Der Rosenkavalier* to hear "some of the most perfect and brilliant 20 minutes of music possible on the operatic stage." ◀

LISTEN UP:

To hear Respighi's "Notturno," go to sfnm.co/notturno. For the *Rosenkavalier* finale, go to sfnm.co/rosenkavalier.



■ Pianist Jacquelyn Helin (left) believes that to condemn composers as second-rate because their output is smaller or esoteric robs us of an enormous amount of well-written music. She knew and is fond of Aaron Copland (right), whose body of work was not large.