

Because of his bouts with alcoholism, little has been written of conductor Walter Hendl — a sad case of cultural amnesia that Donald McQuaid hopes to rectify in *Walter Hendl: The Early Years*

By **DAN MOREY**
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In the pantheon of 20th-century conductors, certain legendary figures stand out, and nearly all of them are European. Toscanini, Furtwangler, Karajan — names even the casual listener will recognize.

But where are their American counterparts? Who has the New World produced to rival the great Continentals? There is Leonard Bernstein, certainly, but who else?

For those of us fortunate enough to have attended the Erie Philharmonic between 1976 and 1990, another name readily presents itself: that of Walter Hendl, the brilliant American-born maestro who helmed the orchestra during those halcyon years.

Before coming to Erie, Hendl directed the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, taught at Juilliard and conducted some of the world's finest symphonies, premiering works by Stravinsky and making definitive recordings with the likes of Jascha Heifetz and Van Cliburn.

Yet, due to a catastrophic bout with alcoholism, his reputation has diminished severely over the past 25 years. As a result, very little has been written of Walter Hendl, a sad case of cultural amnesia that Donald McQuaid hopes to rectify with his new biography, *Walter Hendl: The Early Years*.

In this first installment of a longer work, charmingly and appropriately presented in the form of a theatrical program, we follow Hendl from his birth to German immigrant parents in 1917 to the death of his father in 1941.

It's the first leg of an extraordinary climb, one that Mercyhurst's composer-in-residence, Albert Glinsky, in his introduction, compares to the archetypal American success story.

"Hendl belongs to the best homegrown traditions of our country," Glinsky writes. "His struggle, against the overwhelming personal and financial

lot into which he was born, and his ascent into the highest echelons of artistic achievement, is a true Horatio Alger story of American music."

HENDL'S PATH THROUGH LIFE begins in a working-class suburb of New York and moves steadily onward and upward, through the wealthy corridors of Sarah Lawrence College (he accompanies the girls' choir on piano) and the bohemian wonderland of Greenwich Village, to the prestigious Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he studies with Leonard Bernstein under Josef Hofmann and Fritz Reiner.

International acclaim is soon to follow, but his transition from rags to riches (artistic and otherwise) is hardly a smooth one. Hendl's eventual fall from grace is never completely out of mind, as McQuaid takes pains to sow the seeds of his psychological unraveling in the early chapters.

His mother, Ella Hendl, is a terror who inflicts "domination and outright destruction ... on

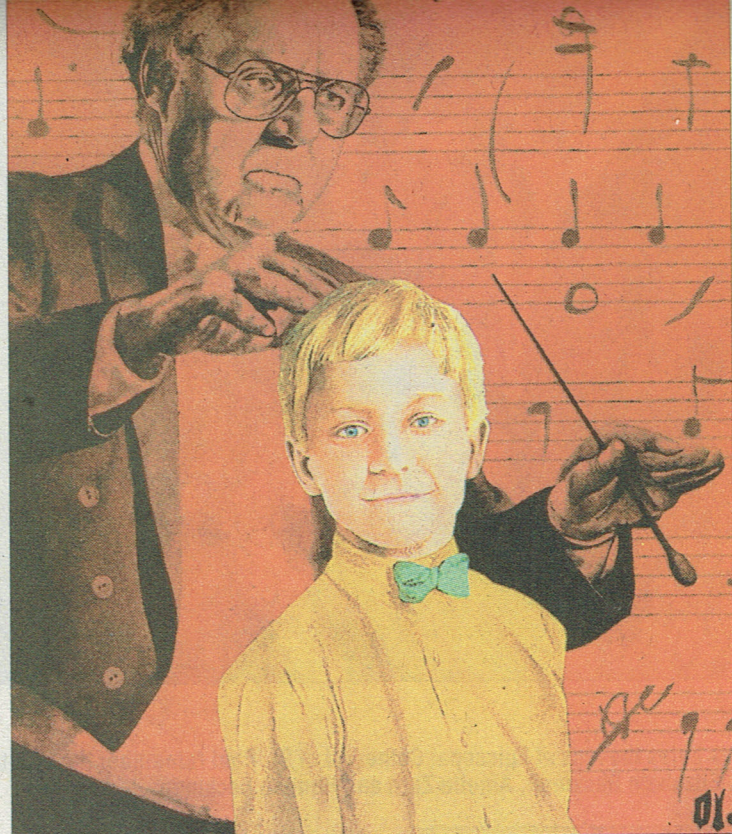


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN OLESS FROM THE COVER OF *WALTER HENDL: THE EARLY YEARS*

both her husband and her son." And his instructor Reiner is even worse. Hendl is forced on one occasion to get down on his hands and knees and beg permission to remain in the master's class.

There seems to be no end to Reiner's notorious brutality. Hendl recalls a classmate who "was a nervous type and really

had no business trying to be a conductor. Reiner would single him out and humiliate him in the worst

ways. It made me cringe inside. Finally, the boy committed suicide."

UNDER THIS SORT OF PRESSURE, most of us would've cracked well before midlife. But Hendl survived it all. And as if to prove it, the book comes with its own CD soundtrack. On it we hear Walter Hendl conducting the Festival String Orchestra at the 2002 Erie Summer Festival of the Arts.

Here, in the music, the true essence of the man is revealed. We hear his precision wit in Mozart's 29th symphony, his whimsicality in the pluck of Strauss Jr.'s "Pizzicato Polka" and the colorful rusticity he absorbed from his father's love of simple folk music in Gustav Holst's "Saint Paul's Suite."

The intermezzo movement of this final suite is virtually bipolar, with its pensive romantic depths and sudden soaring peaks, and seems to perfectly encapsulate Walter Hendl's life.

There have been valleys, to be sure, but the summits remain, and these high accomplishments more than merit his recognition as one of the great, groundbreaking American conductors.

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The young conductor: Hendl survived it all.



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Library staff takes the mystery out of selecting

Recommended authors include Nancy Bartholomew, Nevada Barr, Susan Albert and Diane Mott Davidson

