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Notes on being “professional”

by Roger Horn

“I went back to being an amateur, in the sense of somebody who loves what she is doing. If a professional loses the love of work, routine sets in, and that’s the death of work and life.” —Ada Bethune

Roger Horn and friend



I have no idea who Ada may have been, but that is how I have felt about music-performance for many a year. At one time I was playing the tuba in the Mecca Temple Band, which met in a church basement in Greenwich Village. One night I found myself with a very well known player (last name was Black, I think) who was counted a considerable success. He had played the whole run of South Pacific and had lots of other work. During a break he said to me, “I don’t know who you are, Horn, but you’re a good tuba player. For God’s sake don’t make your living this way, it’s awful.” Bill Bell, the tuba player with the NY Philharmonic at the time, had told me the same thing and it wasn’t that either of them feared competition from me—I wasn’t THAT good. I believed them and other professional musicians I had known and decided I would be a lifelong amateur musician and earn my living at something else, so that I wouldn’t get jaded from having to play the same

things again and again.

Then, recently, I was driving along listening to Jussi singing, mostly Swedish numbers, and it struck me that he had never become “professional” in that sense. When he sang what is translated as “I long for you” at that last concert he sang it with even more of the ringing conviction he showed all his life as a singer, which is to say, all his life. He simply had everything: the love of music of the amateur, the naturally beautiful voice improved with study and practice, and the confidence of a master. And to all that he added that conviction. The combination is just stunning, making him not just a little unique, but simply unique; one of a kind probably never to be equalled. ■