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'Rolodex of Death' to the rescue for MSO

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Music and Dance

Andreas Haefliger was supposed to be the featured pianist for the Milwaukee Symphony's Brahms Festival. He was to have played the Piano Concerto No. 2 on March 26 and No. 1 on March 17.



Tom Strini

[E-MAIL](#)

But Haefliger fell ill on March 14 and went home to Vienna on the 16th. That left MSO officials feeling a little sick themselves. Where could they find someone to play these difficult works, especially the gnarly and not-so-frequently done Second, on such short notice?

"That's why I have the Rolodex of Death," said Evans Mirageas, his voice resonant with mock drama, even from London via cell phone. "I have not only the managers' office numbers, not only their home numbers, but the artists' home numbers."

That is why the MSO and several other orchestras and opera companies keep Mirageas on retainer as artistic adviser. As former artistic administrator of the Boston Symphony and former vice president of artists and repertoire for the classical projects of London Decca Records, Mirageas knows everybody who's somebody or on the way to being somebody.

The MSO turned to him for emergency back-up pianists. His first step was to consult with music director Andreas Delfs, to find out who would be acceptable to the maestro.

Advertisement "This was our Brahms Festival," Mirageas said. "It was important. We couldn't just put anyone up there - if we hadn't found someone really good, we would have changed the program. It had to be someone Andreas knew, and with whom he has sympathy in this particular repertoire."

Together, they decided to go for big-name pianists with a history with the MSO: Emanuel Ax, Yefim Bronfman, Andre Watts and Garrick Ohlsson, among others.

"They were all working," Mirageas said.

So, by the way, was Mirageas - elsewhere. In the middle of all this, he went to New York, to be master of ceremonies for a gala fund-raiser concert for the Brooklyn Philharmonic, another of his clients. He praised Carolyn Stoner, the MSO's artistic operations coordinator, for her deft phone work while he was

otherwise engaged.

Last-minute replacement is harder than it used to be, because entry visas are far harder to obtain under post-Sept. 11 restrictions. Mirageas said that his first round of calls yielded two big-name European pianists who were willing and able to come to Milwaukee to play Brahms, but lacked the coveted multiple-entry visa.

"It would have taken weeks and weeks and tons of money," Mirageas said.

So he dug deeper into his Rolodex and his cerebral cortex, where he stores bits of conversations, knowledge of working relationships and memories of performances.

"I remembered that Andreas came back from the Casals Festival talking about Arnaldo Cohen, and that stuck in my head," Mirageas said. "Once we knew that the household-name pianists were not available, I called his manager Wednesday (March 15) morning to put him on notice. I found that he had played the concerto and was available. He also teaches at Indiana University and was in Bloomington, so a visa was not an issue.

"Cohen wasn't on our original list, but I brought his name to Andreas, and bingo! The only problem was that Cohen hadn't played the concerto in four years. So he started practicing."

Mirageas couldn't reach Delfs until late in the afternoon, which left Cohen busily readying a concerto that he may or may not perform.

"I kept his manager standing by most of the day," Mirageas said. "I wanted to get back to him, to let him know whether Cohen should practice Brahms or go cook supper." Delfs eventually gave the final OK and Mirageas hammered out a deal minutes before he had to go on stage in Brooklyn.

Cohen flew into Milwaukee Thursday morning, rehearsed in the afternoon, and played the Friday matinee.

Concerto No. 1 solved.

Calling all pianists!

"Now, on Friday, we get the word that Haefliger is down for the count and won't be returning to play the Second Concerto on the 26th," Mirageas said. "Now it's the weekend, and managers are not in their offices. And not as many pianists play No. 2 as play No. 1."

Mirageas worked through his Rolodex and called 65 - 65! - pianists over the weekend. One was young Markus Groh, who seemed like a good match. Mirageas vaguely remembered that Groh and Delfs had worked together happily on some previous occasion.

"I'd been to this funny little festival that Markus runs, in an old Soviet airplane hangar east of Berlin," Mirageas said. "We kept in touch. His wife is Greek, and we speak Greek together. I had his cell phone number."

Mirageas reported this conversation, conducted between New York on his end and Berlin on Groh's: "Do you have the B-flat Brahms Concerto under your fingers?" "I do." "Do you have a multiple-entry visa?" "I do."

"Of all the serendipity . . ." Mirageas said.

Both Groh and Cohen played brilliantly with the MSO, and the Brahms Festival was saved, thanks to the Rolodex of Death.

And word is that Haefliger, an MSO favorite and a great friend of Delfs, has recovered nicely and will be back on the road soon.

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