David Hartman and Jodee Nimerichter

Dinner at Coquette

by David Hartman

Weekday afternoon rush hour. I-40 Durham to Raleigh is a parking lot. Going to be late. Hate being late, especially to dinner. Cell rings – can't answer – yeah am on the way. Would someone please explain the inner and outer beltline? Never mind. After over an hour, finally, there's the Six Forks Road exit, then left into North Hills. Bingo. Made it!

It was a chilly, breezy dusk in early December. Christmas lights twinkled around the mall. "The First Noel" filled our ears and warmed us from speakers unseen. A teen girl with a red Santa Claus hat and scarf flowing bounced into J.C. Penney. Christmas shopping season is in full swing.

There's the restaurant, Coquette – French. Cute name. Four fabulous artists are about to meet and have dinner. This is the beginning of a North Carolina Symphony ritual that happens nearly two dozen times each year as guest artists and conductors descend on Raleigh, seemingly from nowhere, but, in truth, arrive from points north, south, east and west around the globe to join the orchestra for several rehearsals, then, usually, three performances at Meymandi Concert Hall and nearby communities. Then on Sunday the visitors, fresh from thrilling us with their extraordinary music, will disappear into the skies as magically as they arrived in early week.

But, this is just the start, the meeting of four people who have all arrived within the last few hours from many time zones away. They have never met each other. Well, that's not exactly true. We can assume that two of them have met because they're married – to each other. That would be Pascal and Ami Rogé. They play the piano, sometimes the same one at the same time, at other times two pianos. He's French and for more than three decades has played the major music halls of the world. Ami was born in Japan and grew up in the United States. When you think, "French piano music," you think, "the Rogés," who have concertized together for many years, but were married just last spring, twice (more on that later). This week the Rogés will play Poulenc as the orchestra performs an evening of all French music. The Rogés arrived from recent appearances in Hong Kong, Rotterdam and England.

Across the table from the Rogés will be the brilliant and charismatic Music Director of the North Carolina Symphony, Welshman Grant Llewellyn. The high frequent flyer-mileage conductor just blew in from appearances in Los Angeles and Moscow with one night at home in Wales thrown in. And next to him is Jodee Nimerichter, Co-Director of the American Dance Festival, the six week international modern dance festival that begins its 73rd season at Duke this summer. Jodee and Grant are meeting each other and the Rogés for the first time.

Safe to say, given their recent travels, that all four are jet lagged. The clock on the wall says 7pm, but there's no telling where their body clocks are ticking, probably somewhere between droopy drowsy and confusion. As we headed to the table, Grant whispered to please forgive him if he nodded off with the appetizer. Actually, the energy that would develop around the table would make sure that could not happen, and it didn't. Good job, Grant. You stayed awake!

Something to start, a glass of wine and menus, in French. The very American waiter was charming and of good humor, but the poor guy was blind-sided by the fact that three of his four guests were French speakers. As the waiter methodically explained the menu, Pascal, especially, was pleased to not only pronounce the words in his beautiful French, but detail the culinary history of many of the dishes. Given the expectation of conversations about music, the tutorial on French cooking was an added treat with the waiter the most delighted.

Coquette's reputation is good and the food did not disappoint. The French dishes were, in the gushed words of my former colleague of many years back, the late Julia Child, "Yum!" (Julia taught me how to make many dishes, including omelettes, crepes and Rhode Island clam chowder. I'm grateful that, at the same time, she assured me in her familiar bubbling way of talking, that "cheffing" and cooking were not my calling. This, of course, came as no surprise to me. It's amazing, by the way, how much Julia sounds like Meryl Streep. But, I digress.)

With hungers satisfied and palates assuaged, the focus turned to music. So often, when people meet for the first time, there is the warm-up, the get acquainted period as we size each other up – who's quiet or talky – who's naughty or nice, or both. Sometimes it all clicks or can fall flat. Well, this evening instantly became a romp of the smart, talented, urbane, unpretentious, wonderfully sensitive (where do I stop!) and fun! These four world-class artists, each so accomplished in his/her own field, playing at the top of their games, shared the thoughtful insights of people who are experienced, world-travelled and warmly confident in their own skins without being smug. As they sat face-to-face and elbow-to-elbow, energy enveloped the table like a swirling cloud. Each comment and observation kicked into the scrum of ideas kept the dialogue perking, at times, rockin'.

These four people are among a small minority who had the guts to follow their dreams and their passions, what they loved doing, making those passions into careers, despite knowing there were no guarantees and the roads would be long, disciplined, and at times, perhaps, painful. And this evening, at a nice dinner in North Carolina, their love of what they do and gratitude for their professional positions were on prominent display along with giant respect for each other. They were not like kids yelling, "Wow! I actually AM a pro ball player! How good does it get!" But, not far off.

A difficult challenge for performers (actors, dancers, musicians, conductors) is to explain, articulate for the rest of us what it is they actually do when performing and how they do it? (Many years back, I asked Jimmy Cagney that question about his acting. His answer was concise and clear. "'Muh boy, I walk in, plant my feet, look the other guy in the eye and tell the truth.") Many, if not most, artists would not be so facile at explaining their craft and art, but Pascal took on the challenge.

Pascal: "I'm not very good at talking." With a wry smile and a twinkle in her eye Ami leaned in and gently intoned, "Yes, you are!" Pascal continued, "I find it difficult to put into words the emotions I feel when I play. Sometimes people want information, hear me talk about the music or what I am doing, but I never talk before my concerts. I want people to just close their eyes, listen and go with the experience. Many people tell me later that

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it was an experience they'd never had before, that they were taken somewhere else."

Grant: "Sometimes, when there are certain characteristics of a piece that are not self evident, then a conductor or soloist might verbalize something from the stage. It can break down barriers, make the orchestra more accessible, but music is created, designed and conceived to speak for itself. Composers don't write music to be explained ahead of time."

Jodee: "The struggle for us in modern dance, a non-verbal art form, is trying to put into words what the experience will be for the audience. When I see a dance performance, I don't want a program. I just want to experience the show and leave with a 'feeling.' The question I ask myself is, 'how can I get dance to resonate for others?' Like all of you, I am extremely passionate about what I do. I could go to the theater 365 nights a year. But what is it about dance that resonates for me? What is it about me that makes me feel this way about dance? I can't explain it."

Again, very difficult to explain. But, back to artists explaining what they do and how.

Pascal: "I think conducting is the most elusive of all the arts. I don't understand how it works. I know you, Grant, must know the score, but how do you inspire people? How do you influence the music with a gesture for which there is no word? I am absolutely fascinated and glad that I never wanted to be a conductor, so I can talk about it without feeling frustrated."

Grant: "I'm not sure I understand it either. You do have to have a self-belief, even nerve and arrogance, to get up in front of eighty to one hundred highly qualified musicians and tell them what to do. And not letting that go to your head is a big challenge. Fortunately, I have four kids and a wife who smack me down to earth. 'Take out the garbage, Grant!'"

These days fewer and fewer people are attending classical concerts than in the past. Two new studies reflect that, over the last twenty-five years, attendance is down 29% at classical music, opera, jazz, theater, even sports and other outdoor events. How concerned are our dinner mates?

Jodee points out that, for some reason, the ADF attendance over six weeks in Durham last summer actually rose last year, but she acknowledged that major ballet companies are trimming seasons and struggling. The modern dance companies, including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Mark Morris Dance Group, Pilobolus Dance Theater and others are doing better, perhaps because they are better known and more cutting edge. Grant suggests that these modern companies cut across classical misconceptions, and that they're cool and sexy.

While Grant doesn't dispute the statistics, he says that his experiences of recent years don't reflect that reported 29% decline in attendance, neither at the North Carolina Symphony nor around the world.

Grant: "Last week I conducted in Moscow and the place was packed. I could hardly get tickets for my mother and aunt. And in Britain audiences are not significantly down."

Pascal: "When I started my career I was in my twenties and my audiences were fifty to seventy years old. The same is, generally, true today. It's partly generational, partly economic, perhaps, as people of this age can afford classical music. What saddens me is how difficult it is to attract young people to classical music in the Western world, unlike in Russia, China and Japan. In Japan half the audience is young people."

So, how to attract young people to classical music? Grant's conversation wattage spikes when he talks about trying to get kids inside the classical music tent and what a live exposure to the orchestra can mean to them.

Grant: "I started this morning conducting a youth concert for some 1,500 fourth graders. At schools across the state, we perform forty to fifty concerts each year to 40,000 to 60,000 fourth graders, more than any other orchestra in America. When I actually started the Prelude to *Swan Lake* this morning the sheer sonic experience, the impact of that live orchestra on the kids in the lovely acoustic of Meymandi – these kids have never had a visceral thrill like it – there is nothing to touch it in the world of music. And even though I was jet-lagged I was thrilled and energized as well. This is the foundation, the first thing we can and must do – get kids in front of live music. Kids can download until the cows come home and plug their ears into iPods, but they will never get this experience with these electronic gadgets. No way. Many hundreds of kids left that hall this morning stunned, excited and bewildered by the incredible physical, tangible, live sound, and they will take that with them. There's a chance that somewhere down the road some of them might say, 'Hey, why don't we go hear the symphony tonight? Remember that morning back in 2009?'"

Jodee: "At ADF we are also committed to getting children involved with dance. We do special shortened performances for them of pieces that will hold their interest and are doing more and more education programs. They use their own imaginations to actually choreograph their own dances. It's enlightening for them and a wonderful thing to watch unfold."

But, on to this week's program and Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos.

Grant: "This concerto is one of the most wonderful pieces of music ever written in terms of sheer entertainment. You have the pyrotechnics of two pianists playing together across the stage, the sheer fun and choreography of that. Poulenc's music is the most charming, the most sparkling, the most brilliant, and the loudest – and your heart melts! It is pure entertainment, circus music with quality. If we could expose the human race to this piece we could convert 90% of them to classical music!"

Pascal: "Most of what we play is French music, which is colorful, based on sounds, colors and humor. It's light music and never profound. It is purely about enjoyment. Poulenc makes you laugh, makes you happy. Debussy makes you dream, disappear to somewhere else. For us it's a privilege to bring that to audiences. I am so privileged to be a pianist."

Besides being incredible musicians, it is difficult to describe just how charming the Rogés are in person, as a couple. When they decided to marry, with her family in Japan and their many friends in the United States, the challenge was how to have a wedding that all might attend. No problem. Do it twice. The first, a traditional Japanese wedding in Shimonoseki, Japan, in March 2009. Then, for their American friends, at the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas, in a gondola! Fun, anyone?

The conversation could go on deep into the night, but tomorrow is a workday. Jodee and Grant agree to explore how the American Dance Festival and the Symphony might be able to join forces for a joint project one day, and Jodee will attend rehearsal this week to hear the Rogés and some French ballet music that's also on the program.

Grant mentions that Poulenc was incorrigible, an outrageous guy he wished could have joined us for dinner. Poulenc probably would have brought some sparkle to the evening, but there was no shortage of good conversation, good food and sparkle. Rehearsal tomorrow at 2pm. "Sleep wells" were shared all around. To the sleds, one and all, and to all a good night!

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David Hartman, Ami and Pascal Rogé