

## THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS: THE UNSEEN MAN IN HOLLYWOOD

a memoir  
Judith Aller

Striding onto the Warner Brothers set sixty-five years ago, Victor Aller was sure he could pull it off. “You only get one chance,” he reminded himself. The piano tuner, Howard Jackson, put his tools away and sat down nearby, his eyes – and those of director Robert Florey and the rest of his crew – on Aller. Aller moved center-stage to the piano. Standing over the keyboard, head down, left hand extended, he shot a run, rapid-fire—a sound test. Removing his glasses, he put on an earphone, nodded at the crew and crawled beneath the piano. He pumped the pedal, checking for noise that could spoil the take.

Special effect man William McGann cloaked Aller in black velvet so only his extended hand could be seen. Then: “Vic, are you ready?”

Contorting his body and arm—left hand on the keyboard, right hand on the pedal—Aller answered: “Yeah, sure.” He waited a beat for the sound of the click-track: one, two, three as the camera rolled. His hand and wrist moved together with the piano keys, floating seamlessly with the music of the Bach Chaconne—his hand a *thing of grotesque beauty*—his well-placed fingers spidering along in alternate time.

The scene above occurred during the shooting of *The Beast With Five Fingers*, a 1946 Warner Brothers horror film in which Victor Aller had the starring role. Though he was unseen, buried in a cloak of a sort, as the disembodied hand of the title, he played with remarkable ease underneath the piano. The scene of his “severed” hand playing the Bach Chaconne was a virtuoso stunt that was never done before or since. (There

was a similar movie by Oliver Stone called *The Hand* in 1981, but Stone had the advantage of digital technology to animate his murderous beast, which belonged not to a musician but a cartoonist.)

Someone watching *The Beast With Five Fingers* today will surely wonder how it was done, in the pre-digital era and accomplished with serious purpose by an artist hidden from sight on camera, beneath a grand piano. That artist, Victor Aller, was my father, and the how and why of his performance are questions people ask me these days. The answers are part of who Victor Aller was.

After a long and distinguished career as a concert musician and teacher, Victor Aller, at age thirty-six, signed on at Warner Brothers, spending years working the background, heard but unseen. This was to be his first and only appearance in a WB movie, though only his hand would show—as the disembodied “beast,” not only playing Bach in the nightmare fantasies of the deranged protagonist, Peter Lorre, but strangling him in the end.

My father was my musical guide. I was raised by the music that came from his pianos. There were two of them, side by side in our living room, which functioned as his studio. And that’s where I spent the better part of my childhood—sitting on the couch, or lying on the floor underneath the piano listening and playing with the pedals (when he let me) or practicing the violin with my father at the piano behind me. I found myself there one day watching as he showed me how he’d played the Bach Chaconne sequence from “The Beast” on his knees – working the pedal with his right hand while reaching his left hand over the keyboard.

“It was a good trick,” he said, pointing out that his hand was “all over the place” in the movie, even around Peter Lorre’s neck. Though the scene was supposed to be horrifying, I’ve heard it produces a laugh or two from people who catch it on cable TV.

As a pianist, my father's powers were startling to me even as a child, listening through the night while he practiced (notably for his Capitol recordings in the fifties). I would fall asleep as passages of Franck's Piano Quintet thundered a room away or wake up hours later to quiet passages of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* rippling through the house. What was evident then, and more striking to me now, is that his music had a "larger than life" dimension to it. His playing was peculiarly masculine – not just in strength and character, but in purpose and philosophy.

Life was a test to him and you could see it on his brow. Even before he struck a note, his eyes deepened to a daring and penetrating watch over his hands. His body never moved nor did he pose his hands or grimace in supposed ecstasy. There were no antics in his manner; it was always just as it should be, to be taken seriously. And with that, his playing cast a spell.

Matching music with film was easy for my father and he did it instinctively. Evidently, Warner Brothers trusted him with the job, and he was asked to participate in the editing and dubbing process. As orchestra manager, he was often present on the set, putting together in his mind which composer best suited the style of the film. He gave his opinion to studio music director Leo Forbstein, who then forwarded his recommendation to the producer. If the rights to the music had to be obtained, for whatever the film was, Forbstein backed his requests to the New York office.

It was also Victor Aller's responsibility to work with the director and screenwriter in the presentation of musical scenes, with dialogue as well as staging. But that didn't preclude the importance he saw in the natural order of things, which was to respect and retain both the musical and emotional intention of the composer. His method, as in all art transcription, was to return to the original work (which in "The Beast" episode was the Bach Chaconne for solo violin) and proceed from there.

Throughout my childhood and musical studies with my

father, his personal history and life in music were revealed through the stories and anecdotes he told me; they were part of my studies, just as his father had taught him. He seemed forever looking back to his teachers and mentors, and to the time in his life when “the sheer joy of music” was all around him.

But because of his work behind the scenes those many years, coupled with his extraordinary ability as a virtuoso, his life took on an element of mystery. I began to think about the mystery even more when I left the United States for Finland to pursue my career there. Returning to the city shortly after his death (1977), I learned more about his role at Warner Brothers from musicians I worked with in the recording and motion picture studios – and from others whom I met quite by accident. Stories varied, but all of them focused on his giving them work at a time not too distant from those Depression years. It wasn't employment alone they received, but also his personal and business advice that helped them through hard times following the strike of 1958, and the disappearance of the American Federation of Musicians Pension Fund, which affected musician-workers like my father.

Victor Aller came from a distinguished family of Russian musicians who immigrated to the United States through the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There had been musicians on both sides, dating back to before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when, as the Altschulers, they had moved from Germany to Russia. Victor's father, Gregory, was a cellist and a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory; his mother, Fannie, went to Poland to complete her studies at the Warsaw Conservatory. Born in 1905 in New York City, my father was clearly destined for a life in music. Piano was to be his instrument and his mother his first teacher.

Through his father, my father gained musical insight of a standard that placed him among his older contemporaries. He later studied with Josef Lhevinne at the Juilliard School and

became the protégé of Alexander Siloti, one of the great piano virtuosos of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the illegitimate son of Liszt. When Victor Aller played his recital debut in New York, Siloti attended and declared he had heard “the greatest interpreter of Brahms in the world.” At about this time Ernst von Dohnanyi heard Victor Aller and urged him to pursue his career in Europe.

My father was curious about the world around him, and influenced by the times he lived in: The Great War, even Houdini. When he was seven, he saw Houdini perform and recalled his magic to me as if stilled by the memory of it. “Houdini’s *look* came from within,” he said. A sense of Houdini stayed with him from that day onward.

Along those lines, Victor Aller linked the Houdini show with another early scene from his childhood. He became interested in music and special effects, in connection with the music of Alexander Scriabin – the Russian composer working subtly with abstraction, not unlike paintings of Vasili Kandinsky. It was 1915, and Scriabin had died at age forty-three. Aller was dazzled by a rare performance of his music given by the Russian Symphony Orchestra and led by his uncle Modest Altschuler, a cellist and conductor who founded the orchestra as a means of giving employment to Russian émigré musicians and providing a showcase for great new Russian music. He introduced the music of Scriabin, a classmate in Moscow, to New York audiences. He also arranged the American debut of Sergei Rachmaninoff.

In the bottom year of the Depression (1932), Victor Aller made his debut at one of the Stadium Concerts in New York as soloist with the New York Symphony Orchestra, playing the Tchaikovsky Concerto. Critics hailed his performance. His three recitals the following winter brought him instant recognition as a virtuoso and “master of expression.” He told me: “My particular studies were over—I was married and embarking on a concert career and things didn’t look

good economically at that time.” At Juilliard, where he was an associate instructor, he was promised a position—“But I’d have to wait until someone passed on—and I couldn’t wait that long.” So he borrowed money and left with his family for Los Angeles, where he’d been told by family members that the film industry offered great opportunities for musicians.

Although at first he experienced disappointment because the cultural life of the city was so limited that he had little chance to perform in concert, he gradually created opportunities for himself. He was given the chance to play solo piano and chamber works on a weekly radio program. These continued for a number of years, enhancing his reputation. Since Los Angeles had no established conservatory, Victor and his father taught privately in the city. Among my father’s students were Eleanor Pepper, a gifted pianist who became the youngest ever to solo with Otto Klemperer and the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1938), as well as the two children of Jascha Heifetz and Florence Vidor.

The uncanny sense of Victor Aller was established in Hollywood through a fifteen-minute playing spot for Studebaker over KFI radio. The live program, which aired nationwide, received letters from all over the country. “I was very fortunate,” he said. “It brought me some monetary benefits that were quite a lot at that time.” He opened the program with a love song by Schumann – a melody that drew people to the music not only for its beauty but for the feeling he put in every note. Many of his fans included Hollywood studio bosses, who were stirred by the intimacy of his playing that came from the depth of his sound, influenced by an epoch that had come to a close.

As his concert activities increased in the Thirties and Forties (he also performed as soloist with orchestras throughout the Southwest), Aller formed the Hollywood Music Alliance with other musicians and composers. It was modeled upon the *Societe Nationale de Musique* of Paris and gave first



performances of modern music by American composers, as well as American debuts of compositions by Darius Milhaud, Paul Hindemith, and Dmitri Shostakovich. What began so well ended, however, in the early forties, when the Hollywood Music Alliance was put on the U.S. Attorney General's list of suspect organizations and many of its members were blacklisted.

Gradually, through the thirties and early forties, the cultural climate of Los Angeles improved with the arrival of many refugee writers, film workers, and musicians from Europe. By the war years, Hollywood had become a musical mecca. Music rooted in the traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to be heard on Hollywood sound stages. The early musical promise of sound motion pictures was fulfilled at last at the end of the decade. In due course, that too would change forever.

By this time, Hollywood studios had begun to identify Victor Aller with the authenticity of his work. His knowledge of classical music and recording were notable components of interest to Warner Brothers—whose serious moviemaking music is evidenced early with *The Jazz Singer*—and the music director Leo Forbstein, who sought to expand the quality of music and sound recording at the studio.

He recalled for me the urgent telephone call from Forbstein in 1941 when the studio was making *Rhapsody in Blue*, a highly fictionalized life of George Gershwin.

ALLER

What's the problem?

FORBSTEIN

I have a man who is supposed to play the piano... It's the life of George Gershwin... Would you be willing to teach him?

ALLER

So—he doesn't know anything at all... Well, if I can't do it, nobody can...

"If I can't do it nobody can"... And that was his motto.

*Rhapsody in Blue* was the first of many movies in which

Victor Aller worked with actors to help them handle and “play” their instruments convincingly in films—among them, not only Robert Alda in *Rhapsody in Blue* but Cornel Wilde as Chopin in *A Song to Remember*, and Dirk Bogarde as Liszt in *Song Without End*.

For “Rhapsody,” Alda came to Aller’s house over a three-month period for lessons before filming began: “He gave a lot of control to his part in being able to simulate whatever he had to play in the movie... He actually played some parts of it and he did a very fine job,” said Aller. (Alda did an even better, and more memorable, job as Sky Masterson in the original Broadway production of *Guys and Dolls* a decade later.)

Before signing with Warner Brothers, Aller told Forbstein he’d have to wait – he’d just signed a contract with Columbia Pictures for *A Song To Remember*. Aller’s work on the picture took six months. During filming, Paul Muni caught qualities of him in his role as Josef Elsner – Frederic Chopin’s teacher. The picture made fifteen million dollars—a lot of money in those days.

In 1941, Aller transferred his activities back to Warner Brothers. As Forbstein’s associate, he was hired to oversee every aspect of music production, with the handling of a music budget of over one million dollars a year—and to develop whatever ideas he had in the classical field so they could be used for commercial purposes in the recording end of the motion picture. And he did so at the studio for seventeen years. There, Franz Waxman, Erich Korngold, and Max Steiner (yes, on *Casablanca*) created some of their most legendary musical scores with his help and supervision.

Unseen, but not unheard, Victor Aller played in dozens of Warner films. But because of his novel and physically challenging on-screen assignment in the “title role” in *The Beast With Five Fingers*—though considered a punch-line at the time of its release and more a comedy than a horror show in the years since—it was probably the most noteworthy and



the one he liked to talk about to friends and family.

Before filming began, Forbstein phoned him about a “big problem” with *The Beast With Five Fingers*. Someone had chosen the Ravel Concerto for left hand as the signature piece for the music. To get the rights, it would cost the studio \$25,000. Aller offered a solution: “Why don’t you let me take care of it?”

My father knew his way around ghost stories; he was curious about the unseen and unexplainable—and he also had a keen instinct for imagery in music. He knew the Bach Chaconne—instead of the Ravel Concerto—would fit the picture.

Aller arranged and recorded the Chaconne for the left-hand alone (the disc is in my library). “The interesting part about *The Beast With Five Fingers* is that the composer, Max Steiner, used the theme of the Bach Chaconne throughout the whole picture...People were very grateful at the studio but from there on in I really got myself into a problem...I never dreamt I would have to be photographed all the way through the picture ... actually play the piano on camera ... and drag myself all over the place.

“But the problem was simple...There was no way to film my hand in the usual playing position... So I tried it from underneath the piano.”

Craft was everything to him and his luck prevailed. His arms were long enough; the pads and upper-joints of his fingers were shaped uniquely, curved to the keyboard; and he was able to contort his body from his knees. “The special-effects guys came up with the trick-of-the-black-velvet,” he said. And hidden from sight he could still play.

His starring role as *The Beast With Five Fingers* was as the left hand of a pianist, Francis Ingram (Victor Francen), confined to a wheelchair from a stroke, his right side paralyzed. In reduced capacity, he plays but one piece, the Bach Chaconne,

arranged for him by a penniless composer (Alda) on an Italian pilgrimage. Hovering impatiently for the pianist's death is his secretary Hilary (Lorre), hoping to inherit Ingram's library for his research in the black arts. To prove mental competence, Ingram summons his lawyer and friends for dinner to witness his final will. When he falls to his death, his estate becomes a battleground, compelling Lorre to take desperate measures. Lorre severs the pianist's hand, sending it on a disembodied killing spree that demonstrates Ingram's hold on his music in the afterlife.

The look of the film is parlayed through lighting devised by French director Robert Florey, who captures a cadaverous glow on the faces of the cast, and upon the severed hand itself, which seems to gleam translucently.

But here's the "interesting" part: what makes the hand seem alive yet dead is the music itself and how it resists reality through the poetic reality of an occult tune. The music actually "explains" the drama—and the scenes enacted with the hand somehow "explain" the music. The Bach Chaconne is heard throughout the film with Aller playing amid Steiner's cascading music portrait as the severed hand runs wild in the Gothic villa, finally choking Peter Lorre at the end of the film.

Recalling his performance as the murderous hand, my father said he may have temporarily lost the expert fingering technique that made him such a piano virtuoso. In the strangling scene, Lorre complained to him, "Vic, Vic, you're squeezing too tight!" Lorre may have been joking, but considering how he rolled his eyes, grimaced, and badly overacted in the picture, he probably deserved a good throttling.

It was a story I had heard before but I don't mind hearing a good story again – or twenty times again. As a teenager, I'd seen the "Beast" on late night TV. But it was my father's re-enacting those scenes for me that kept me coming back for more over the years.

The "Beast" is a big part of the puzzle of who Victor

Aller was behind the scenes. It's the one picture in which his ability is played out visibly on film. But for viewers of those WB movies, the details of Aller's film work are sealed in the pictures he supervised.

I'd heard about the composers and actors my father worked with. And that part of his story turned out to be another puzzle of what happened in that great Hollywood epoch of musical scores with resident composers Steiner and Korngold. They brought glory to the studio in a way that no other composers did at other studios.

Aller was a hidden guide for Steiner and Korngold and others. (And later Franz Waxman, who also relied on Aller's contacts with musicians like Jascha Heifetz, as did Korngold.) "There was a lot of respect on both sides, they were very fine people," Aller said. But that was not all.

My father's office was on the WB lot facing north. It looked like a room in Raymond Chandler territory, big and shadowy, with a darkly varnished desk. You couldn't make out the color of the couch. It was pushed against the wall alongside a large rack of music, books, records, and a turntable. That's where the composers sat talking things over with my father. I was there once or twice taking it in. And though this may sound a bit odd, his office was a room with musical secrets.

My father worked on all the Steiner films I've seen over the years. *The Woman in White* was another he liked to talk about. I hadn't seen it since I was a teenager, and found that the picture was unavailable to the public. So I arranged to see it at UCLA.

The score is based on two themes of William Byrd that Aller chose for Steiner, fashioned like a tone poem of Sibelius or Debussy written in black-and-white "sound images" that seem to describe the story. Steiner, as much as Waxman did, loved the challenges Aller gave him. *The Woman in White* is Steiner's greatest score. All that feeling of whiteness in the wind using harp and harpsichord gave a sense of isolation that

thrilled me. As I watched Sydney Greenstreet, I remembered him through my father's eyes: "Sydney was a great kidder. We bumped into each other walking in the lot before filming. He was looking oddly at me, sizing me up. Then he started to laugh. I said: 'What's so funny?' Greenstreet always exaggerated his tone. This time, he said *very* slowly, 'I'm stealing your stare for Fosco.'"

There was something spooky about sitting there alone watching a film that no one else could view. And that stirred up more memories of how much of my father's work was unknown to the world outside.

What about *Humoresque*? inquired a novelist friend of mine, who called it a "musical noir." I liked what he said about "its darkness, almost total: the party scenes, the concert halls, the cocktail lounge, the dawn shots on the beach. And Wagner timed to the waves." In a very personal way, *Humoresque* fit pieces of Victor Aller's life into the dark side of the classical music scene presented in the story.

The music theme of the movie is a classical tune wrapped in a story with an atmosphere of Gershwin as a backdrop. The composer and conductor for the film was Franz Waxman, Victor Aller's friend and colleague. *Humoresque* is the story of a violinist, John Garfield, a grocer's son, who falls in love with a married woman, Joan Crawford, who becomes his sponsor and lover. Garfield is a musical star from the first close-up of his face in the darkness looking back to where it all began when he was a boy. And again in his eyes to where it ends in the waves as Joan Crawford goes for the Big Swim to Waxman's transcription of Wagner's *Liebestod*.

Of all the actors he worked with, my father said that Garfield was the most intense. He was also the most sensitive to the musical values that my father taught him. As Aller recalled: "Garfield showed up at my office. I was on my way out so we walked around the lot and talked. We swapped stories about boxing, growing up in New York and Coney Island.

“Garfield was very direct with me. He said he wanted to ask me some questions about myself. What was it really like in the concert world? He made it clear he wanted the dirt, not the glory. Was it possible to make a living at it? Music politics. Sponsors. Critics. Jealousy. He looked me straight in the eye taking it all in. After I told him what it was like, I knew the lesson was over. ‘It’s worse than being an actor,’ he said.”

Aller also worked in designing special effects for Garfield who actually held the violin convincingly in certain “violining” scenes supported with trick photography. But in no other musical movie have I ever seen such a wonderful face as John Garfield had. And – if there is such a thing as perfection in picture scoring, it’s timed in the waves of that great Hollywood musical epoch that my father helped usher in.

Fast forward: as to the “expressionistic” stroke that Victor Aller used in movie scoring, *Deception* is a film that summons themes of violence and lust in the classical music world. Two months after *Humoresque*, Aller put together the score with the music of Korngold (this was to be his last film score), as well as Beethoven, Schubert, Bach, and others.

Claude Rains stars as the arrogant and jealous composer Hollenius who is writing a cello concerto that Paul Henreid, under dire circumstances, will finally perform in New York, in spite of music politics and revenge. The music comes across by what is being dramatized in the story.

As bells chime, Bette Davis glides into her role right out of the mist. She mounts the stairs of a concert hall in New York where she finds her lost lover, Henreid, playing on stage. Henreid is the European artist with contempt for the “power complex” of the music establishment. With a line like this he rages to Davis, “Didn’t we abolish dictators in politics to find them cropping up in music!” Davis conveys the unspoken past of the two lovers with the expression in her face as the music plays. And Henreid simulates his cello performance in keeping with the style of the music. The “interview” sequence

after the concert sets the tone of who Hollenius (Rains) is to the story.

Hollenius is consumed with power and position as a wealthy composer. He delivers his dialogue to a point in which he says to Davis with disgust, “Compose a piece yourself, *my dear*, and see how it sounds to you after listening to Beethoven!”

Victor Aller coached both Rains and Davis. Aller’s father performed as the tutor for Henreid in a five-week cello course. What’s somewhat surprising and reassuring is that the three stars seem “poetically” devoted to their screwy roles, and the music manages to sublimate their vanity and crimes. A noble deception.

The Warner Brothers epoch ended in 1958. After Forbstein’s death in 1948, Aller remained at the studio. During the 1958 musicians strike, he was an “intermediate” for all parties involved. The outcome turned sour for Aller. He was asked to take a pay cut and left the studio. Echoing his memory of his years at Warner Brothers, he recalled: “I lost this friend of mine ... Leo Forbstein ... probably the greatest friend I had in my life.”

Through that time, Aller was involved in the work that left the most lasting record of his musical ability. As a recording artist for the Capitol label with the Hollywood String Quartet (whose members included his sister Eleanor, and his brother-in-law, Felix Slatkin), Aller left performances of the Brahms Piano Quintet, the complete Brahms Piano Quartets, the Schumann Piano Quintet, the Franck Piano Quintet and the Shostakovich Piano Quintet. These are among their finest recordings and are still well-remembered by critics, musicians and serious listeners. His solo recordings with orchestra are but three: the Dohnanyi *Variations on a Nursery Tune*, the Shostakovich *Concerto for Piano with Trumpet and String Ensemble*, Hindemith’s *The Four Temperaments*, and the arrangement for two pianos (with Harry Sukman) of the Saint-Saens *Carnival of the Animals*, done with the Concert Arts



Orchestra conducted by Felix Slatkin. At this time my father did limited touring.

The rigorous demands of his work at Warner Brothers shortened his active career. He had his first heart attack in his early fifties, and was forced to cut back his musical activities drastically. Except for individual productions, for which his work was especially needed, such as *My Geisha* (Japan), *Song Without End* (Vienna), *The Birds*, and *Taras Bulba*, he returned to teaching. Although he lived nearly two decades longer, he was unable to make the contributions to music he might have done had he been completely healthy.

The same novelist friend of mine asked after he learned what I was writing about my father: “Did he sell out to Hollywood like so many others had? Might he have had a more glorious career as a concert pianist if he hadn’t gone to work at WB?”

“He didn’t sell out. His health didn’t make it any easier to get back to what he loved,” I answered.

But those questions again got me to thinking how much he wanted to play concerts. In his last years, life would probably have been easier for him if he had. His last stage appearance was in my debut recital. Even with angina his playing was like iron in a velvet glove. About a decade before his death he received a recording offer from RCA. But he knew what the stress would do to his heart. Also he had no stomach for music politics.

He was asked to do a recording of the *Warsaw Concerto*, which was first written for the movie *Dangerous Moonlight*. He refused because he didn’t like the music. That annoyed people and they resented him for not doing it. There were family jealousies and betrayal that broke his spirit for a time. He remained loyal to family nonetheless. Dirk Bogarde, who became his friend when my father coached him for the Liszt picture, remembered him “as a most powerful influence in my life... who taught me, more than anyone else, what

determination and dedication could do.”

He was the nicest and most decent musician I’ve ever known. He went back to the work he was known and respected for in the film world and did it very successfully, as he had done his recordings. Hitchcock consulted him. Dick Powell used his talents, others too. Aller put together orchestras for recordings with Heifetz, arranging sessions and films for Waxman. He even put an opera together in Japan following his first heart attack.

During his last years, Brut Productions came around for his advice on *Five Easy Pieces*. They offered him a lot of money to teach Jack Nicholson the piano. He wrote to me in Finland that he had turned the offer down because of his health. But he gave enthusiasm to the project, as well as advice about the music and recommended his pupil Jimmy Fields for the job.

I hope I haven’t given the impression that he was some plaster saint, which he never was. As I said, he made people angry sometimes, with his honesty about music. He didn’t care about approval or the establishment. That’s one of the reasons he could keep himself in the background so well. But touring wouldn’t have been a problem for him earlier if he’d had the support to do it. Either way, he deserves more credit than I could give him here.

As a freelance music supervisor, my father worked with Waxman on *Taras Bulba*, a so-so movie with one of the great scores of all time. My father took me along to Goldwyn Studios for the recording. I can still hear the music from those dates on the Goldwyn stage, which has since burned to the ground.

The stage was the grandest in town. And from where I sat the studio shook with the sound of horses pounding down the Pampas where filming took place. I’ve never heard an orchestra play quite like that since. I wasn’t the only one struck by the feeling of the occasion. Musicians not just from

Warners but from every studio in town came to make history that day. My father rounded them up and brought them to the steppes of Hollywood to play music for Gogol, Aller, and Waxman, as it was meant to be played and for the sheer joy of it. I remember thinking that the place felt like a sanctuary, dust and smudge and all.

Waxman looked worried as usual. Aller reassured him. There was joyful back-slapping that day, almost as much as in the drinking scenes of *Taras Bulba*. At moments the studio resembled a camp for Cossacks going to battle, shifting their sabers, beating the drums, loading their rifles.

I suspect the excitement was too much for my father. Perhaps too much of a reminder of Warners and his friend Forbstein who had given him a job that allowed him the freedom to work with his talent in a way that put bread on the table for a lot of people beside himself. I knew he had given a lot for his family's sake. He had his first heart attack shortly after the *Taras Bulba* sessions.

He had four subsequent heart attacks (and other illnesses of a serious nature) but continued to work and even managed trips with my mother to Europe, Russia, and Finland, where he visited me several times. I was on a trip to Los Angeles from Finland once when he gave a lesson to one of his students. My father had come out of the hospital a few days before and lay in bed as the student played. Over and over he explained how the opening note of the Liszt Sonata should go. "It comes from nowhere, mysteriously," he said. The student almost got it—but not quite. I could tell that my father wanted to get up to play it right.

I remembered years before, my father driving to a violin lesson. The radio was on and he was testing me on the music. Suddenly crossing a freeway overpass he blacked out yet kept driving. I had my lesson that day while he rested, then he drove home and went to bed. Afterward he told me he had no idea how he had driven while blacked out.

Well, as my father used to say, “You only get one chance!” It took me a long while before I could explain the details of my father’s work at Warner Brothers. But here I sit in Los Angeles writing about it now. Why? How can I do that?

This is a city with no past, only an overwhelming present. It seemed to me the time to put together the puzzle of my father’s past, by setting it down here and now. That’s part of it, but there’s more: when you write about things that are closest to you and most secret, you learn things about yourself—and in this case, about others close to you. Don’t let anyone tell you different.

The last time my father played for me was in Finland in 1975. He was pleased to find an upright piano waiting for him. Not lacking in warmth, but always with a serious tone in his voice, he asked me to stand behind him while he played. “I want you to watch my hands,” he said. He had often taught me in such a way.

He began to play a set of exercises he’d devised for his own daily practice. He was very particular as to the mode of holding and placing his fingers that followed the style of the band of Russian pianists he followed. As he played I remembered stories about them. My father attended the funeral of Rachmaninoff. Afterward he drove his car slowly behind the hearse that carried the great pianist’s body to the train station for the long journey to Valhalla New York where he was buried.

I suppose what I am trying to get at here is that I knew from my father that those musicians had come from a time that would never be repeated. And my father tried and succeeded, I believe, in keeping the feeling of that time alive with dignity and more. Therefore I took in that last lesson as carefully as I could.

As I stood behind him—listening and watching—the whole effect of his method played out as if in slow-motion, taking me back to the years in which I heard him play through

the night.

Foremost among the memories stirred by the nocturnal music were those that came from having seen – and heard – *The Beast With Five Fingers*. I could never close the book of who the Beast really was. It inspired a half-awake vision of the hand crawling up the wall beside my bed. Summoned by my cries, my father came into my room and with paternal sweetness looked under my bed to reassure me there was no hand hiding there. Then he stayed by my side as he wiggled his fingers in the air until I laughed.

That night he put a radio in my room over my bed tuned to the classical station KFAC. I lay there for a long time listening alone. Whatever was playing was pretty good. But it didn't have the feeling of my father's playing in it. That spell he cast in everything he played. And the spell keeps coming back to me, just like the hand, again and again and again. ♦