



The very sensitive Mr Previn

A room full of people makes him panic, start sweating and exit swiftly. Previn hates parties but, baton in hand, he knows how to give a performance. Caroline Phillips takes notes from the well-known conductor

I don't want André. He always makes me think my fly is open.' Thus spoke Hollywood producer Joe Pasternak when asked whether he wanted André Previn to score his next musical extravaganza.

Three decades later, a meeting with Previn induces the feeling that your flies are open, your trousers stained and your shirt on the wrong way round. Ava Gardner once sat next to the 17-year-old Previn playing the piano at a party. She enquired whether he would like to take her home later. 'You mean you

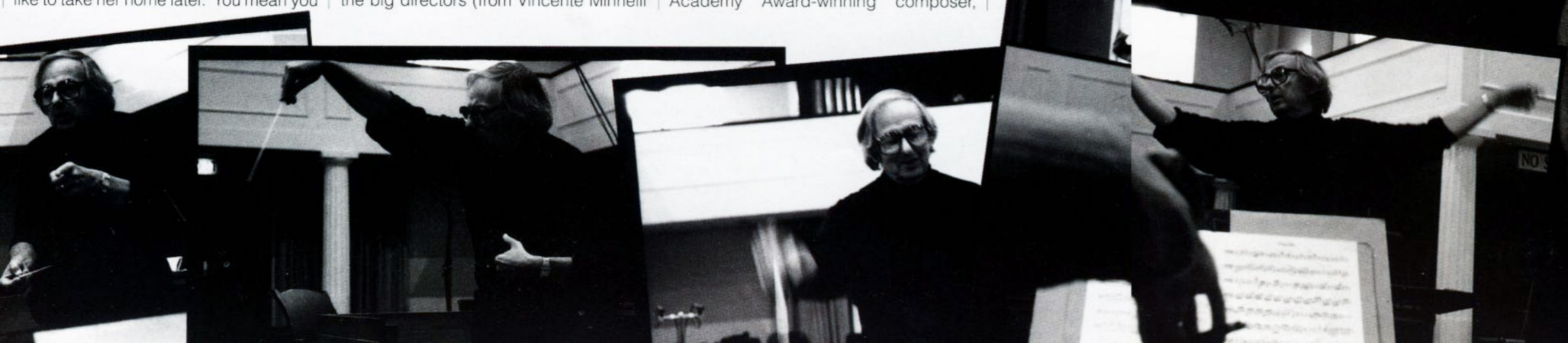
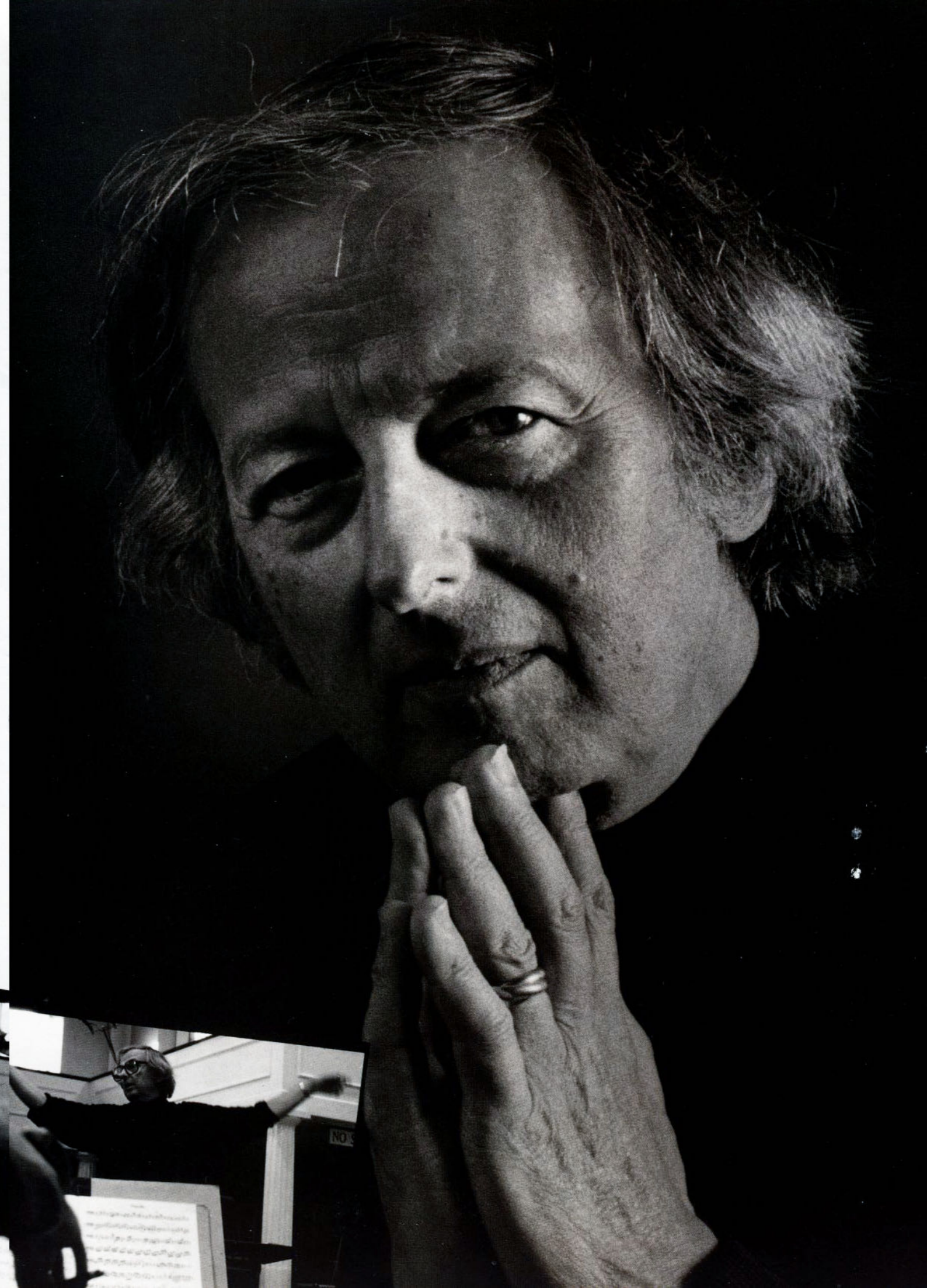
don't have a ride home?' he replied, naively. Two years later, and with greater confidence, he saw her at another party and blithely asked whether she would like a lift home. She gave him a look of pure sweetness and then replied: 'Go **** yourself, kid.'

These stories are related in *No Minor Chords* (Doubleday, edited by Jackie Onassis), André Previn's recollections of Hollywood from 1948-1964, the last years of its Golden Age when he was mostly contracted to MGM.

Often hilarious and anecdotal, *No Minor Chords* includes the great studio moguls (from Louis B Mayer to Sam Goldwyn), the big directors (from Vincente Minnelli to Busby Berkeley) and the stars. There's the time Errol Flynn, less than sober, delivered a present to Previn's door—a Chinese girl. And the period that Julie Andrews was running around town with a bumper sticker that read 'Mary Poppins is a junkie'.

But there are *No Major Revelations*. Today the 63-year-old maestro is sitting in The Savoy being tetchy. His table is piled with symphony scores. 'It never occurred to me to write an autobiography, nor would I. The whole "I was born . . ." It's nobody's business.' He doesn't want to talk in such personal terms, he says brusquely. 'I value my privacy.'

Academy Award-winning composer,



arranger and conductor, German-born Previn was seduced by Hollywood at the age of 18 and became a professional orchestrator, arranger and conductor at 19. He has fashioned the scores of classics such as *Gigi* right through to *Jesus Christ Superstar*; made himself one of America's finest jazz pianists; discarded a highly successful and lucrative career in Hollywood to become a classical conductor; been Principal Conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (a position he holds until June); and been nominated for 14 Oscars, the first of which, for *Three Little Words*, he heard about when he was digging a latrine trench while doing national service.

'I know I'm a workaholic because my wife keeps telling me. I guess if I knew why I was, I'd stop—but gamblers don't know either. I work way too much. In fact, until six years ago, I had not had an organised holiday in my adult life, ever.' For two weeks a year they go away now, and he's not allowed to take his scores with him. His best friend in London is playwright Tom Stoppard. Previn's wife, Heather, recently remarked that she was condemned to 'a social life of Tom's plays and André's concerts'.

'Since she made that remark, things have changed,' says the man who mentions collecting contemporary art, fencing and American folk art as his leisure interests in *International Who's Who*.

Previn is dressed all in black, wearing owlish spectacles that steam up and magnify his eyes. He's short, with low-hooded eyes with bags beneath them, and has what's left of a longish grey Beatles-style haircut and a hangdog look. John Mortimer once described him as having the expression of an extremely intelligent dormouse.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' he says, disparagingly, feigning total disbelief in clipped, nasal transatlantic tone. 'Come back tomorrow and I'll be wearing all green. Who cares? If you're looking for an effect I'm trying to make either with black clothes

or my haircut, you're on the wrong street.' By his own admission, he is a 'lousy interviewee'. Certainly he is monumentally difficult—often unfriendly, rude, and by turns a little patronising and daunting. Talking to him is a constant battle. But he can also be very funny, with a great range of one-liners and a dry New York humour. He is also precise, very clever, and apparently composed.

In her book *Previn* (now out of print), Helen Ruttencutter described the world-renowned conductor as antisocial, hating parties and hurting his friends with his sudden coldness. Previn coughs defensively. 'I don't remember if she thought that [cough], but if she thought so, she thought so. Oh yes, I hate parties. I love being with a small group of friends. But that habit of after a performance going into a room filled with a large number of people, none of whom you know—for me it's not just an antisocial reaction, but one of almost panic. I really loathe it. I start sweating and I want to go home.'

Ask him to describe his temperament and 'that is getting dangerously close to a certain type of film magazine question. It's so aggressively stupid. I mean what's my temperament like? I don't know.' And his personality traits? 'Short.' That describes him physically. 'Yeah, short—it doesn't make any difference. I don't describe myself to anybody, not even myself.'

His press suggests he's confrontational. In 1989 he resigned from his job as Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra after clashes with its Managing Director, Ernest Fleischmann; then he officially resigned from the Royal Philharmonic in 1991. 'Does it really say that? How wonderful! I didn't know I had ever clashed with anybody.' Is he independent and strong-willed? 'Sounds terrific. You sure it's about me? You got the right notes?'

Is there anything Germanic in his character, I ask wearily. He has continued to be dismissive and I have continued to try

because I don't want him to end our conversation. 'I suppose orderliness. I like things neat, and I am a compulsive putter-away of things left around, but not enough to wear a monocle, no.'

Previn has a rather complicated gang of progeny, including twins and some adopted children, begat of four different marriages. 'I would have thought that was the easiest thing to check,' he says, in condescending tone. 'I have four sons and then I have four daughters. Oh, who cares by which marriages?' he fairly spits the words out. 'I'm not going to go through that game with the number of wives. We're coming up to our 10th wedding anniversary, so why refer to Heather as wife number so-and-so? I feel whose child is whose doesn't make much difference.'

He writes about the times he was at MGM when the prettiest girls floated down the street to him. His first marriage was to jazz singer Betty Bennett, followed by songwriter Dory Previn, actress Mia Farrow and then Heather.

He once shared a London flat with Frank Sinatra's former wife Mia Farrow that belonged to the then top model Jean Shrimpton. They courted publicity, advertising fake-fur coats and adopting a Vietnamese child. But Heather, taller than he, sensible and with an Elizabethan sense of humour, wearing glasses and at home in jeans, doesn't represent the glamour to which he was attracted in his youth.

'I have nothing against any of the ladies I was with. We were just wrong for one another and what you learn from that, my God,' big pause, 'I don't know. I think you'd learn things whether you stayed single or married 12 times. People always think if you've been married multiple times that you're a great expert on marriage—whereas what you're really an expert on is divorce.' He speaks with sardonic tone. 'Sure I still see them. Everybody is still friends.'

His family is of paramount importance. 'It



is the most important thing I do.' More so than work? 'Yeah . . . Hell, I can't really separate the two. I mean, it's nonsense to say I could do without work, but it's insane to suggest I could do without my family.'

One senses his love of fatherhood. 'I always toured with my family [his youngest child, Lukas, and Heather]. I cling to the misguided opinion that for a very young child to go to different countries with his parents is as educational as finger painting. But the headmasters don't seem to think so,' he says with a touch of irony. He now goes away without Lukas. 'I miss him dreadfully,' he says, with real feeling. Is he Previn's favourite child? 'What? No . . . If I have a favourite, it would certainly never be known to you.' Andreas Ludwig Priwin was born in Berlin in 1929 (when the family went to the States they changed the name). He was a child prodigy, a phenomenal pianist. One day his father was summoned to his school and told by the professor that he couldn't keep such an obviously talented Jew in his academy. By 1938, the Nazis were smashing shop windows, beating up old people and marching past the Previns' home. The family uprooted and fled Berlin at two hours' notice, leaving everything behind to flee first to France and then America.

Ask him to talk about his childhood influences and formative experiences, and he coughs defensively again and sounds uninterested—before talking about how great a role music played in his home.

But what effect did fleeing the Nazis have on him? 'I don't know what it was like. You'd have to resurrect me when I was eight years old and see what happens.' Resurrect away! 'I think that's not for a

magazine actually. It would take too long and I don't want to talk about it anyway.' But later he says, 'Sure, I can just see it. You're going to portray me as all in black, lonely, selfish, hard as nails, spirited away by the gypsies when a child . . . come on!' He laughs.

Before fleeing Hitler, Previn's father had been a highly successful and wealthy barrister in Berlin. He then had to scrape a living as a refugee piano teacher in a country where he had difficulties with the language; a life of alarming lack of funds, despair and disappointment. 'Listen, I was callous and I was a kid, a real child. I thought it was a great thwacking adventure.'

His father was 'an imposing presence . . . He was not home all that much so he was a bit scary. I didn't have with him what, for instance, my son has with me. Go into his room to see if he was awake? Forget it.' In his book *André Previn* (Century), the first authorised biography of Previn, Michael Freedland writes that the maestro described his father thus. Previn now says that he dislikes this book greatly. And he then tells me his father was a 'man of extremely quiet courage'. So what was his relationship like with his parents? 'Fine, thank you.'

For years Previn has been publicly voicing his disenchantment with all things British. Now he is returning as Conductor Laureate of the London Symphony Orchestra in October after an 11-year absence. 'I don't like the laziness of the shopkeepers here, the fact that you can't get your car repaired within three weeks and I'm disenchanted with the educational system. When I first came I thought a boy's education in England was the best in the world, but it isn't any more. My boys learnt more in one year in

America than they did in five here. And I don't like the fact that nothing works. We lived in a beautiful house here—and nothing worked.' His permanent home will still be in upstate New York, but he will spend several months of the year here.

It is rumoured that he commands around \$20,000 a concert as a guest conductor. And the salary for the Los Angeles Philharmonic job from which he resigned was thought to be \$500,000. 'My manager recently said to me, "As far as your fee is concerned . . ." and I said, "Oh, I don't care. I don't really want to know about that."' He suddenly said, "Have you bothered to find out what your current fees are?" and I said, "No." I swear to you that's true, I have no idea what I earn.' Cough, cough.

How does he feel when he stands in front of a huge audience? 'The audience?' He sounds astounded, 'I'm aware of the audience, but my first responsibility is towards the composer.' Even if he's dead? 'Most particularly then. I have no illusions, delusions or definite thoughts about any kind of afterlife, but if I ever run into Brahms, I wouldn't like him to say "I've been waiting for you" and hit me round the ear.'

And who would he most like to bump into in that great orchestra in the sky? 'Mozart, from number one to 100. No, I don't want to talk. I just want to meet him.' Does he think Mozart might have something to say to him? 'No, I tell you what,' he says, suddenly weighty and mighty serious. 'That music means too much to me to play games with.'

Previn can't bear sitting still. The second the interview finishes he jumps up and starts pacing round the room. I expect he'll be more congenial to Mozart. □

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