

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1993

A probate lawyer turns impresario, resurrecting music so sweet to his client's ears.



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Ask Julius Burger to describe what his lawyer did for him, and he responds as best a 95-year-old man, the victim of two strokes, can. His eyes water, and as he reaches for an elusive encomium he pounds his cane on the floor in frustration. Finally, the mot juste wends its way through the damaged neurological maze.

"Everything!" he exclaims. "Everything!"

Through tax tips and testamentary tricks, probate lawyers spend their days helping people die in peace. But Ronald Pohl, a probate lawyer at Rothfeld & Pohl in Manhattan, did more for Mr. Burger than tidy up his estate. He gave him new life by giving him back his music.

When the two first met in April 1990, Mr. Burger, once an assistant conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, was a new widower, grieving and depressed. He was planning for his own death and told Mr. Pohl his posthumous wishes: to turn what he had managed to save — earnings from his days as a conductor in Europe and America along with German war reparations — into scholarships for young Israeli musicians whose careers, he hoped, would never know a Holocaust. Mr. Burger, a Jew, had been an assistant conductor at the Berlin Staatsoper before World War II when he was stripped of his job by the Nazis and forced to flee.

As Mr. Burger shared his memories, he also disclosed a dream. Tucked away in the closets and desk drawers of his apartment in Elmhurst, Queens, he told Mr. Pohl, were sheafs of his own, almost entirely unperformed musical compositions, sonatas, symphonic fragments and songs, most of them also refugees from his incinerated Europe. Among them was a cello concerto; after the war he had dedicated its second movement to his mother, whom the Germans shot on her way to Auschwitz. How nice it would be, he said, to hear it performed before he died.

Exit Mr. Pohl, lawyer; enter Mr. Pohl, impresario. Persuading musicians to perform something new, he quickly learned, was an arduous task, far more complicated than devising trusts or writing codicils but ever so much more rewarding.

Mr. Pohl's first task was to determine whether Mr. Burger's music was any good. He turned to Maya Beiser, an Israeli cellist, who went to Mr. Burger's home and, with Mr. Burger accompanying her on the piano, performed the piece. Suddenly, music that had been imprisoned on paper for decades filled the room. Mr. Burger wept. Mr. Pohl resolved to have the concerto performed by a

full orchestra, and quickly, because in 1990 Mr. Burger had suffered two nearly fatal strokes.

Words, names, arias — Mr. Burger remembers them all, but he can no longer summon them on demand. Nowadays the German of his youth is more accessible than his English. Only when he has a musical score before him can he communicate as he once did; on Monday it was with a Mozart sonata, K. 533, which he performed on his upright Steinway.

In March 1991, Mr. Pohl persuaded the Orchestra of St. Luke's to perform the cello concerto, along with four other compositions, at a concert to be held that June. Mr. Pohl booked Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, found a conductor, prepared the programs, had the music copied, hired a publicist and arranged for a digital recording.

The concert got rave reviews, and it was repeated in Israel and New York. Tomorrow night the New York Virtuoso Singers will play his "Miserere," a composition for chorus and organ, at St. Peter's Church on Lexington Avenue at 54th Street in Manhattan.

"My goal has been to have Julius hear all of his music before he dies, and by enough people so that it could last on its own merits," Mr. Pohl said. "We're close to accomplishing that."

Besides being lawyer and impresario, Mr. Pohl has played grandson, too. He and his wife, Diane, have invited Mr. Burger to a family seder as well as to outings at the New York Botanical Garden. When Mr. Burger dined with his niece at the Palm Court, Mr. Pohl secretly arranged to have a violinist serenade them with a Burger arrangement of a Dvorak melody. Mr. Pohl secured a new housekeeper and physical therapist for Mr. Burger, and helped him buy new glasses, new dentures, a new hearing aid and a new suit. He has done much of the work free because, like most of those who spend any time with Mr. Burger, he has come to love him.

With Mr. Pohl's help, Mr. Burger also bought a new stereo. Now he can play recordings of his music, including his cello concerto. As the mournful, Hebraic sounds of its second movement filled his apartment recently, Mr. Burger listened silently, rocking, and then began crying anew. For all his infirmities, he still managed to make clear just what the tears were for: the vanished world of his youth and family.

"It disappeared," he said. "All of a sudden, nothing." And then he moved his hand clockwise, as if turning on a faucet. "The gas —"