

## TRULY CHARMING

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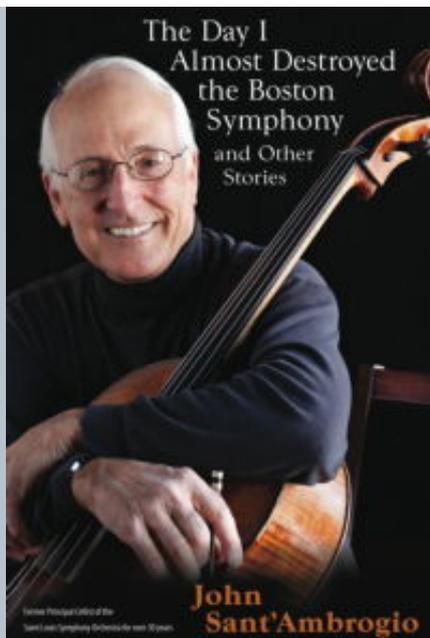
*John Sant'Ambrogio's  
'The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony  
and Other Stories'  
read by KELLY FERJUTZ*

The very best reminiscences come from people who have not only lived an interesting life, but have no hesitation in telling you all about it. If you're reading such a book of fond recollections, you can easily imagine sitting with the story-teller, as he or she recalls the incidents, and happily relays them as they happened. It's even better if the events sometimes back-fire on the person, casting them more in ignominy than glory.

I suspect the title of this book might be a bit more drastic than the actual happening, but it reflects well on the author that he is willing to assume all the responsibility for the said event which leads off this delightful book.

Cellist John Sant'Ambrogio is the 'middle' of a musical sandwich family. His parents were musicians, and his daughters have held prestigious positions in several American orchestras. His first 'job' was with the Boston Symphony, and he stayed there for nearly ten years, before moving on. In St Louis, he held the principal cellist chair for thirty seven years. Following his 'retirement' from the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, he's been performing chamber music with local ensembles in or near his retirement home in Colorado, and recently returned to orchestral playing with another smaller regional group. Well, once a musician, always a musician.

Fortunately for us orchestra groupies, Mr Sant'Ambrogio is also a great talker who happens to be an excellent writer. Many of the incidents relayed in this, his first book, put the reader squarely in the musical hotseat he held for all those years, telling tales of soloists, other orchestral players and the ever-present archenemy -- the conductor. For the most part, the conductors with whom he worked really don't fall into that latter category, however, or at least not too often. Indeed, this memoir presents nearly all conductors as human beings!



The sixty-eight short chapters (365 pages) read easily, with never a boring moment. In addition to the humorous moments, there are lessons to be learned, by both adults and children. The author was not a musical prodigy, originally fighting the very concept of being a musician. But then, in spite of himself, he fell in love with the cello, and from that point forward, his life had direction.

This book would be a valuable resource for a music student wondering if orchestral life would be a suitable occupation. It's full of inside stories -- auditions (then and now, varying vastly from each other); the differences between being a section player and a principal, especially regarding pay and responsibilities for each -- and having been both, Mr Sant'Ambrogio knows whereof he speaks; orchestra tours (domestic and international), plus visiting composers and conductors -- not to mention guest soloists are but some of the topics covered here. Others are mis-adventures with baton and/or bow, and little things that can go wrong -- and will -- but not always with an unfortunate ending.

His musical life really began to perk when his mother, who was also a pianist and teacher, founded the Red Fox Music Camp in Massachusetts, primarily for her students. Of course, her teen-aged son was also an active participant, and kept it going for some thirty years. Of course, camps of most any kind are replete with adventures, and Red Fox was no exception. From there, the young cellist went to the Army which sent him (after basic military training) off to Europe to serve his time as a member of an orchestra!

He tells in a matter-of-fact way about his bout with depression, and how it was cured, plus other illnesses to which musicians are sometimes uniquely prone. And, if you like reading about world-famous musicians, you'll find Yo Yo Ma, Pablo Casals, Leonard Slatkin and Itzhak Perlman -- to name just a few who grace these pages with their wit and their music.

This is truly a charming look at a world which really no longer exists in the same format as it did fifty years ago, but then nothing else is as it was then, either. You'll laugh, you'll get more than one lump in your throat, and you'll enjoy every word of this beguiling collection of stories, all wrapped up in the person of one John Sant'Ambrogio, cellist and story-teller extraordinaire.

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*The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony  
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John Sant'Ambrogio

*Nebbadoon Press*, California, USA, 2010  
ISBN 13: 978-1-891331-15-2  
365 pages, trade paperback

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