

Antonietta Short Guide

Antonietta by John Hersey

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Characters

Antonio Stradivari, the greatest of the Cremona violin makers, falls in love again at fifty-five with an attractive widow. In his infatuation he creates a violin with a unique tone that gives expression to his new love, and names the instrument "Antonietta" in her honor. The violin is owned successively by virtuosi who play it for three composers, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Hector Berlioz, and Igor Stravinsky, inspiring them to write some of their finest music.

The violin also produces an erotic effect on those hearing it. It had helped Stradivari win the love of the widow Antonia Zambelli, and those who subsequently played it and their audiences as well find themselves responding to its tone by indulging in amorous longings. Even Spenser Ham, a businessman and the most recent owner of Antonietta, and his business associates are not immune to the spell of the violin. For a brief time their greed takes second place to another basic urge, eroticism.

Stradivari is depicted as a dictatorial craftsman of genius who browbeats his sons to get the results he wants in violin making. His courtship of the widow Antonia Zambelli is conducted in part by putting his passion into the violin he names for her. A widower himself whose first wife is described as "a holy terror," he longs for a new relationship. He wins his suit and his career blossomed and he went on to make better violins than Antonietta, but he always refused to sell her.

Hersey's characterization of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is quite similar to the one in Peter Shaffer's drama *Amadeus*, and the screenplay by the same author. This Mozart is more scatological than Shaffer's little vulgarian.

His father, Leopold, tries to curb his son's extravagance and to make him a more conventionally moral character.

This is the Paris phase of Mozart's career, and he meets there a virtuoso, Lahoussaye, the present owner of Antonietta. Mozart plays Antonietta himself and her tones "overwhelmed me, filled me with yearning." The violinist loans Antonietta to Mozart who accompanies his students on it. In Paris he writes his *Symphony No. 31 in D Major*, the *Paris Symphony*, and other compositions. He courts unsuccessfully the soprano Aloysia Weber by letter only to be rejected. In his last letter to her he insists: "I make love through music ..., " accusing her of being too insensitive to realize this.

Hector Berlioz in 1830 is the next great composer to come under the spell of Antonietta. The virtuoso Pierre Baillot plays her for him every day while he is working on what will finally become his *Symphonic Fantastique*. Berlioz is the quintessential romantic; dreamy, intensely in love with an English Shakespearian actress, Harriet Smithson, full of rapturous intensity.

He completes his masterpiece and wins Smithson, but the marriage is disastrous. She cannot possibly live up to his image of her.



Hersey characterizes Igor Stravinsky as a lecherous little gnome who professes great devotion to his wife who is gravely ill, but who tries to seduce every other woman within range. His friend and compatriot Pavel Andreivitch Fedorovsky, the current owner of Antonietta, plays the instrument while he composes his ballet *The Tale of a Soldier* (1918). He ruthlessly exploits everybody around him. A writer, C. F. Ramuz, provides the narrative for the ballet. The composer is infatuated with Fedorovsky's wife, Anna, who has no musical talent whatsoever, and not much intelligence either. He completes *The Tale of the Soldier*, and it is given a modest performance in Lausanne, but the Spanish influenza strikes Switzerland in 1919, and the work does not reach major concert halls until 1924.

"Act Five" is dominated by Spenser Ham, a billionaire trader who lives in the most expensive area of Martha's Vineyard. He lacks a full soul, as the two musicians, whom he has hired to perform at his wheeler-dealer parties, see in him. Tone deaf, he is totally insensitive to the music of Antonietta.

He bought the violin as an investment to promote his schemes. The most modern composers, Schoenberg, Hindemith, and Alban Berg are featured throughout this part of the novel.

Mathematical music is played for a man who deals in numbers, although Ham would not even try to understand this abstract dissonant material. June Speckman and Vera Flamm, the violinist and her accompanist, are forced to play as a background to Spenser's lottery in which guests will be buying tickets which may pay them as much as twenty-five thousand dollars. Meanwhile he is maneuvering to take over Consolidated Broadcasting, a television network.

Antonietta is the connecting link in these diverse stories and is a character of a sort. For the human characters Hersey concentrates on one or two dominant traits, so the charge that he has made caricatures of some of the world's leading composers is accurate.

But again, he is writing for fun. He makes no attempt to capture these highly complex characters in their entirety.

Social Concerns/Themes

Antonietta was written "for the fun of it," as Hersey says in his brief note at the beginning of the book. He begged forgiveness in advance from musicians and musicologists for his intrusion into their territory. However, most of the reviewers of the book were music critics, and they did not indulge him.

These readers found one of their unusual targets in the last section of the book. "Act Five" presents Spenser Ham, a tone deaf entrepreneur and insider trader who buys Antonietta at a Sotheby auction. Money, not music, is the chief passion of his life.

Some critics accused Hersey of preaching against the entrepreneurs of the era because making money was their only interest. Actually, Spenser Ham was very much like the other billionaires of the period who had created a new Gilded Age in American history. Ham used Antonietta to add elegance to his home as the nouveau riche of the 1870s and 1880s used artistic masterpieces. Ham collected modern art too with as little real appreciation of it as he had for music.

The contrast between the composition of beautiful music and the usually less than ideal characters of its creators is a constant theme. Some critics charge Hersey with reducing men of genius to the lowest common denominator, but the music itself was what really mattered, and music is the dominant theme of the book. Hersey was also trying to make his final novel a comedy. It is not surprising that over a long career of studying humans he might have decided that their comic traits were at least significant as their more serious ones.



Techniques

Antonieta consists of five acts, four intermezzi, and a finale. Five periods of time ranging from 1699, the time of Antonio Stradivari, to 1989, the section featuring Spenser Ham, are presented.

The times of Mozart, Berlioz, and Stravinsky, 1778, 1830, and 1918 make up a sequence which features some highlights of history. "Act Five" has Antonietta playing the abstract, mathematical music of Schoenberg, Hindemith, Berg, and Bartok. Hersey who had taken violin lessons while still a child in China, was a music lover all of his life.

He quotes from all the composers presented in his novel. To what extent he succeeds in reproducing the creative acts of these musical geniuses and their resultant compositions is debatable.

If several historical periods are covered, equally varied are the styles Hersey employs in presenting them.

"Act One" uses straight narration with occasional dialogue in dramatic form.

"Act Two" consists of letters between Mozart and his father, or Mozart and various women of his acquaintance, especially Aloysia Weber who finally asks him to stop writing to her. "Act Three" covers the years 1830-1832 and is a record of the violinist Pierre Baillot's association with Berlioz and Berlioz' infatuation with Harriet Smithson.

"Act Four" is Igor Stravinsky in 1918 as seen by C. F. Ramuz, Pavel Fedorovsky, and himself, three points of view with occasional dialogue. "Act Five," on the contemporary scene, is written as a television drama with music, titles and credits, dialogue, and with instructions to the actors and the cameramen.

The intermezzi are straight narrations.

Apparently Hersey feels that a television drama is the best means of capturing the essence — if he has one — of a man like Spenser Ham.

John Hersey was never afraid to experiment. In *Antonieta*, he gives humorous portraits of some of his favorite composers. Spenser Ham, supremely serious and confident in his entrepreneurial role, is also comic. He may be a commentary on what culture has become in the late twentieth century. Art of all kinds is a commodity that the wealthy can purchase and put on vulgar display.



Key Questions

Antonieta is quite unlike Hersey's other novels. In it he attempts to bring a lifetime of listening to music into the structure of a novel. While a child in China, he had taken violin lessons from a White Russian. He continued them for a time after the family moved back to the United States. Finally he gave them up because as he says, "I am a music lover." A book club will probably have members who are also music lovers. They might compare what they hear when they play or a great piece of music is played with what Hersey's composes say they play or compose.

Mozart in the letters in his section of the book describes what he experiences when playing *Antonieta* with his students. Is this how a composer of his stature hears the music he plays? Did Berlioz and Stravinsky experience music as Hersey says they did?

Hersey was writing for fun he tells us. He found pleasure in imagining what diverse creators of music felt while producing their art. How does the tone of the novel show that he was not totally serious?

1. Antonio Stradivari was a supreme craftsman. How successful is Hersey in explaining how he made what are possibly the greatest violins we know of? Why has Stradivari never been surpassed in his art?
2. Granted that it is intended as a joke, but Hersey makes his fictitious instrument a very powerful aphrodisiac. Can music have this effect?
3. We have as background for the sections of this novel a number of historical periods. In which of these does Hersey as an author seem most at home?
4. What do the composers whom Hersey makes characters in his book have in common? Why did he choose them rather than Bach, Beethoven, or a modern American like Elliot Carter?
5. What is the relationship between Leopold Mozart and his son? What use is Hersey making of their contrasting personalities?
6. What qualities mark Hector Berlioz as the quintessential romantic?
7. When Berlioz says "Music is memory ..., " do his methods of composition bear out the truth of his assertion?

Is this idea an oversimplification?
8. Hersey describes Igor Stravinsky as a gnome in appearance, a prima donna in temperament, and as an inveterate skirt chaser. Does he adequately explain why this man is also one of the greatest composers of our century? Could any explanation account for that fact?



9. Federovsky, watching Stravinsky at the piano, decides he has the diabolical in his personality. How does he reach this conclusion? Of course, the devil is part of the ballet that Stravinsky is composing, *The Soldier's Tale*. Is he constantly diabolical in nature, or is he merely becoming that for the sake of his art?

10. Are the alternate points of view, Fedorovsky's, Ramuz's, and those of Stravinsky himself effective in presenting the composer and his music?

11. Spenser Ham is Antonietta's least characteristic owner. What is the role of this tone deaf vulgarian?

12. As one critic puts it, a reader of *Antonietta* can absorb some high culture: "... you can say something about Hindemith, Webern, and Schoenberg without, thank God, without having had to listen to the music." (Glover, "Hersey Strings Us Along," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, August 11, 1991: 9).

Why is this music part of the background of "Act Five" which features Spenser Ham who does not hear any music accurately?

Literary Precedents

On one level Antonietta resembles Lloyd C. Douglas's *The Robe* (1942).

Christ's robe exerted an influence on all who wore or touched it; Antonietta inspires music and genius and erotic impulses whenever she is played. Robert Browning's "Pippa Passes" features a little servant girl on holiday whose joy and innocence influences everyone she meets. The use of a physical object which is seen as a fetish is almost as old in literature as it is in religion, a sword like Excalibur for example, or the Holy Grail also so much a part of Arthurian legend.

Novels concerning music and musicians are also fairly common. Aldous Huxley's experimental novel *Point Counter Point* (1928) derives its technique from music and gains its effects from stating themes, then counterpoints, then develops each separately, then restates both, repeating motifs and using abrupt transitions. Thomas Mann uses similar motifs in many of his works, and his *Doctor Faustus* (1947), considered by some to be his most difficult book, is the life of a composer, Adrian Leverkühn, who uses Schoenberg's twelve tone system which Mann discusses at length. Mann also describes the compositions of his fictional composer.



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