“Misty water-colored memories” is a famous lyric. Many of us have memories of concerts, early on, that were important to us. Same with books, movies—people, even. What if we heard them again? What if we read them, saw them, met them again? That might be dangerous, right? What if our memories turned out to be—wrong? Even embarrassing?

Some years ago, I wrote a piece that included a theme: Be careful not to romanticize the past (especially at the expense of the present). I believe I had listened to some concert—a live concert, recorded—of the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Otto Klemperer. I think I said the concert was lousy, or at least subpar. This despite the fact that Klemperer was a great and storied conductor.

I received a letter from J. D. McClatchy—Sandy McClatchy, the poet, librettist, and critic—who became a friend, I’m glad to say. As it happened, he had attended that very concert, as a teenager. He remembered it as great.

Was it really that same concert? The orchestra, in all likelihood, had played that same program, under Klemperer, several times. And no two nights are alike—not in the music business, not in the performance business. I’m not sure we ever figured it out. But the subject of memory is a big one.

On YouTube a few years ago, I noticed that excerpts from a recital by Alicia de Larrocha were available: a recital played on October 18, 1976, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I was at that recital. I was twelve. The recital, for reasons I could get into, was greatly important to me. I was deeply impressed by it. And now I had a chance to hear it again, after a fashion.

Uh-oh.

I was not disappointed, much to my relief. (To hear de Larrocha play Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in G minor, which she never recorded commercially, go here.)

Last month, I wrote a piece from the Salzburg Festival, in which I discussed another pianist, Grigory Sokolov.
Sokolov’s program in Salzburg consisted of Chopin on the first half and Rachmaninoff on the second. I was nervous. Would Sokolov be “on”? That was the question. No one can be on every night; that is asking too much. When I was a youth, I heard two Horowitz recitals, a couple of years apart—1978 and 1980. I was nervous before each one. The first was bad, or mediocre; the second was fantastic.

You’ll never believe this—but that second Horowitz recital, in its entirety, is available on YouTube: here. That afternoon, he played Beethoven’s Sonata in A major, Op. 101; the Schubert Impromptu in G-flat major; a slew of Scriabin etudes; and a second half of Chopin, ending with the Scherzo in B minor.

I have a friend who heard this same program, in 1980, elsewhere—in another city than Ann Arbor, I mean. He says it was lousy. I bet it was. To return to a theme: musicians, like athletes, are variable, and older musicians are especially so—Horowitz was seventy-six and seventy-seven in 1980—and Horowitz was quite variable. Mercurial. In Ann Arbor, on 11/9/80, he was “on” as all get-out. Or so I remembered.

Was it true? Yes, for sure. The tape bears out my memory in general. It also bears out some specific memories—of particular passages or phrases. I will not give you a review, piece by piece. You may listen to the recital, if you like. But Horowitz was by turns poetic, thunderous, beguiling, electric—you know, Horowitz. The recording is poor, merely a pirate: probably, some guy had a tape recorder under his coat. And sound—sound in all its mystery, glory, and wonder—is very important in Horowitz’s playing. Still, this recording, this treasure, gives you an idea.

Sometimes the past is a welcome guest.

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His podcast with The New Criterion, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.