

Making a Conservative – A Personal Record of My Encounters With Sir Roger Scruton

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FEVER SINCE HAVING WATCHED HIS SPEECH entitled «The Tyranny of Pop Music» on YouTube, I felt a strong intellectual bond with Sir Roger Scruton. At the time a left-leaning liberal, I used to disapprove of many of his conservative views, yet, I was going to experience a gradual but complete turnaround, watching video recordings of his lectures, reading some of his 50 odd books, finally getting to know him personally, the erudite polymath he was, and still a humble, polite and humourous teacher.

Sir Roger was absorbed in music probably more than in any other field of culture. Yet, it turned out that we shared a mutual taste in classical music.

In this essay, I will describe our eye-to-eye chats on art, music, politics, and quite a lot of other topics. Sir Roger was a pessimist in many regards, but he never got tired of starting initiatives to save English culture, traditional institutions, or the beauty of English streets and landscapes. Only three years ago he came up with the idea of a Scrutopia summer school, which he started in Ireland first and then the following year moved to Cirencester, England.

Sir Roger hated to be disturbed in the morning. People who stayed at his farm at Sunday Hill had to promise not to talk to him until noon, so he could read and write without interference. Later in the day, it seemed to me that he sometimes forced himself to feign interest whenever spoken to out of mere courtesy. Yet, when he would utter a phrase like «hm, that's interesting» in response to some remark you made you knew that indeed you had managed to get the great thinker's attention. This happened to me on three occasions, and I hold the recollection of those instances dear just the way any good apostle would do.

I think, as I said before, that my first encounter with Sir Roger happened via the internet, where numerous recordings of his lectures, speeches, interviews, and radio programmes can be found. It was his short rant on «The Tyranny of Pop Music» that caught my attention. Through that little passionate speech, I

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thought to have found a soul mate, for I experience nothing as enervating in urban life than the consistent presence of background music that is not even music to me but a clatter of repetitious patterns of simple chords accompanied by a minimal set of lyric phrases over and over again.

Until then, I did not realize that I had a very conservative person in me. And Sir Roger would be the sparkling mind to bring it out — gradually. Besides music, Sir Roger has written a ton of books and articles on other art forms. Architecture and literature are most prominent among these. He was less interested in the performing arts. Acting and ballet dancing seemed to be of minor concern to him. In his view, theatre was basically poetic and meaningful words uttered on a stage, best being delivered in a fashion that wouldn't direct too much attention at the person performing except maybe for a well-trained speaking voice. At least, that is the impression I got. After all, he has also written two operas, and it is only natural to a conservative taste, that voice and musical rendition are of much higher consideration than the other aspects of staging. Art, whose main point was to draw attention to the artist was undoubtedly something to which he strongly opposed. After all, beauty ought to be what art is all about. So, when I talked to Sir Roger about the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum, a contemporary artist who manages to revive the tone and plasticity of the Rembrandt-school in his dark tableaux I remarked, «But isn't there a certain ugliness in his paintings?» he would answer: «Yes, but you have to start somewhere!» This statement made it clear to me that Sir Roger at 74, still saw himself at the beginning of something. Scrutopia was his way of getting England — or maybe Europe — out of the clutches of post-modernism while woke insanity prevails at universities, academies and campuses. Thus, Sir Roger's untimely demise only reinforced my commitment to honour his legacy.

Where I come from professionally — the world of corporate storytelling, corp comm, and media consulting — a particular brand of systemic thought dominates all discourse: radical constructivism as proposed by Ernst von Glasersfeld and Cybernetics-Guru Heinz von Förster. Their line of thinking — based on the teachings of one Jean Piaget — was the first thing that was challenged when I got into reading Sir Roger's books. Once the axiom that there are no axioms tumbles, you seriously have to start searching for the truth. As my whole world-view was shaken, I had to start afresh. This was when I decided to attend Scrutopia summer school and get my answers face-to-face from the master himself. To prepare myself for the encounter I began to translate Sir Roger's comprehensive book «Modern Philosophy — An Introduction and Survey», into German, a task (some 700-odd pages) which took me a year to complete, just in time before attending summer school in August 2018. I was

somewhat anxious to show it to him, but I also was determined to give some proof of my commitment to our subject.

Sir Roger was not keen on modern art forms. He considered photography a lesser art among the depicting art forms. Yet, Sir Roger did occasionally watch movies and expressed his view on the so-called 7th art in sparse commentaries in his books. So, for instance, he hails Ingmar Bergman's «Wild Strawberries» as a masterpiece of cinema, and he loathes the excessive violence in Tarantino-movies. During one of our chats, he expressed his appreciation for Billy Wilder's «Some Like It Hot», giving a rendition of the last line of that movie with some fiendish gusto: «Nobody's perfect.» I also asked Sir Roger whether he considered photography and film as short-lived, fleeting art forms that will soon lose their appeal and significance, and he was very affirmative about that. But still, here I was, stuck with that special field of interest of mine, ready to get all my ideas and theories challenged by a supreme mind. Like for instance when Sir Roger was lecturing on the aesthetics of architecture, I presented him with my theory about aesthetics in general, how it would always be about balancing between the unnatural perfection of the Platonic bodies and the natural beauty of organisms or the intricate flourishing shapes as formed through fractal mathematics. He dismissed that immediately while gently mocking me as a founder of a theory of everything. This comes to no surprise to anyone who has read his books on «Aesthetics and The Classical Vernacular». He does not believe that beauty can be captured within the framework of theory. Yet, I still beg to differ. From a storyteller's point of view, any narrative that aims at captivating an audience needs some inner tension — be it the classic case of Manichaeism or a simple polarity like the one Schopenhauer proposed for architecture, namely support on the one hand and load on the other. Accordingly, when I look at what baroque gardeners would do to shrubbery by shaping it into globes, squares, and puddings, I cannot help but interpret it as the gardener's will to move the raw aesthetics of nature towards the idealized simplicity of the Platonic bodies.

Also when I look at a Corinthian capital, where the functional form of the column is carved so as to form an overflowing floral motive exactly where support and load meet, I get the impression that we are meant to note that we are at the intersection between nature and human ingenuity. This thought is not so far fetched after all. Sir Roger at least hints at a distinction between the narrative of carved and moulded details in his book about «The Classical Vernacular». There is a difference in perception. Of course, a marble statue tells a different story than one made of plaster, not only in terms of their respective genealogy but also what they express. And as soon as we make this distinction, we create a framework of judgement, which enables us to go from one end of the polarity to the other. If

this counts for stone and plaster in architecture, I argue, it also applies to the polarity of aesthetics between, say, Mandelbrot set and Ikosaeder, between Gaudí and Gropius. Unfortunately, we had to move on, and I could never make my point. I am sure that Sir Roger would have brilliantly torn my arguments to shreds, probably with just one sentence. It was a few days later, when we would talk again about architecture that I presented Sir Roger with yet another theory of mine: «Traditional buildings are designed to invite good spirits to dwell amongst us, they also bear features intended to repel the evil ones. Modern high rises with their smooth glass facades intend to repel especially the good spirits. Modernists fear them like the devil. There is only one spirit allowed in there: the spirit of money,» said I. Sir Roger paused for a second, gave it a thought and then uttered: «Hm, that's interesting.» I was on my way to vindication.

The above mentioned little controversy was not going to be the only one. When it came to storytelling and movies, we had our differences. One such incident was during Sir Roger's lecture on irony. I would then address the idea of dramatic irony, which usually occurs when readers or viewers possess more information about the diegesis than the fictional characters. To my astonishment, Sir Roger couldn't place the word «diegesis». However, it is a common term amongst storytellers, which describes the fictional world as created by an author the way the characters that inhabit it would experience it. In order to explain I mentioned its use by Alfred Hitchcock, who — of course — to Sir Roger was not cinema's patron saint the way he is to Slavoj Žižek and the — *horribile dictu* — French intellectuals. So Sir Roger tried to make a point by vividly describing the famous shower scene in «Psycho». «First you see this lady getting undressed, entering the bathtub, the music is slowly going up, the door opens...» And then he asked me: «But isn't that cheap?» — Once again, there was no time to argue with respect to the other students whose time I was taking up with my self-aggrandizing questions. What I didn't have the time to point out was the fact that Sir Roger not only misrepresented the scene, he also judged it merely upon its content removed from any context. First, there is no music while the scene is building up its suspense, and second, the infamous value of that scene consists in its position within the story's timeline. In essence, what is so remarkable is that we are only one third into the movie, and yet Hitchcock kills off the single central character, leaving us no more figure to identify with. This was indeed a bold stroke by Hitchcock, which Sir Roger was not prepared to appreciate. I was hoping to address this issue some other time. Sir Roger's illness prevented that from happening.

There was almost no disagreement at all when it came to music. We had only minor differences, like, for instance, when it came to ranking English composers

of the 20th century. I regarded Sir William Walton much higher than he did. Likewise, I was not as ardent a Wagnerian as he was. In fact, for most of my life, Wagner's music had been spoiled for me due to my early readings of Hesse's «Steppenwolf» (Hesse loathed the heavy romantic music by Wagner, Brahms and Strauss). During my teenage years, I had discovered the music of Béla Bartók and spent all my pocket money on records and sheet music of his. Sir Roger had also had an early experience with Bartók's opera «Bluebeard's Castle». When he mentioned this to me, I not only pointed out how much Bartók's opera meant to me, too, I also told him that I know the whole opera by heart and to prove it I sang the beginning of the opera with its original Hungarian text. He seemed to be quite impressed. «All the right notes! Now you are redeemed from your theory of everything,» he quipped. Later, when I attended Sunday service at the Anglican church, where Sir Roger was playing the organ, he would come up to me and ask jokingly: «So, did you translate everything into Hungarian?»

During a gala luncheon with MP Julian Brazier I was lucky to be seated next to Sir Roger, and we spent the evening chatting about music. Of course, I would talk about Bartók and when I mentioned the Hungarian musicologist Bence Szabolcsi Sir Roger's eyes began to shine: «You are familiar with Szabolcsi?» he asked me and told me about that fine man's life which was burdened with hardship and lack of recognition for most of his life. Our talk about Hungarian scholars led to a brief change of topic, when I mentioned Béla Hamvas, another great polymath, whose life was marred by the communist bureaucracy (he was head librarian at the Budapest library when György Lukacs arranged for his removal). I asked him whether he had read Hamvas's book on wine, which he did, and we moved on to talk about another work of Hamvas's which partially deals with Robert Burton's opus magnum «The Anatomy of Melancholy». I offered to send him a copy: «Can you read German?» — And he said that he could and that he'd be obliged.»

During that luncheon, we also came to speak about the modern composer Olivier Messiaen. Sir Roger had written a poem dedicated to this French master:

Messiaen: Apparition de l'Église Éternelle

A cornucopious organ

Pontificates in vacuo

Chromatic exhalations

Dilate the great Gut Morgen.

Pulsating Priapus
 Punts a tidal swell
 Through the piers' fixed staves
 Penetrates a warm sea–feast:
 Ding–dong bell.

Organ of eternal church,
 Pontifex in gaudio
 Ribbioned architrave
 Striates the sea's wide audio.

Lay for us now
 And at the hour of our death–
 With your octave stockings, your fancy breath,
 Your swelling sperm–whale–crested wave–
 The ribbioned road our pricked intentions crave.

I asked Sir Roger what he thought about Messiaen's change of style around the year 1948 when he not only invented serial music but also passed this way of composing down to his pupils, most notably to Pierre Boulez (whose music Sir Roger despises). Sir Roger did not know what to say but made some remarks on Boulez's firebrand–years at the Centre Pompidou. According to Sir Roger, Boulez's musical technique has gone over the top, pretending to be profound while being nothing more than random noise. Somehow the conversation turned to the topic of the music of György Ligeti, which, I argued, has far more artistic value than that of Boulez. I also added that Ligeti once said that Schubert's slow movement from his string quintet was a miracle. «How can anyone come up with such delicate music,» I wondered, and Sir Roger agreed. (One year later — already very weak from his illness — Sir Roger was asked by a student what he considered his favourite piece of music to which he answered «The slow movement from Schubert's string quintet»). I went on to marvel about Schubert's music, on how to me its slight imperfections made it superior even to Beethoven's because they added to the overall Viennese style and a very peculiar idiom only found with Schubert, Strauß, and Alban Berg. That is also the reason why I cherish the compositions of Mussorgsky much more than the ones of Tchaikovsky. At this point, Mr Brazier protested by declaring Tchaikovsky to be one of his favourite composers. «Great music, undoubtedly,» I replied. «But not very Russian by comparison.» Sir Roger didn't say much, but it appeared that he

was on my side in this little quarrel, but tacitly. After all, Mr Brazier was the guest of honour that evening.

I need to point out here what a gentle person Sir Roger was. I cannot imagine him ever to lose his temper. He would always be very considerate and only punish you with irony or mockery if he was sure that you could take it. I recall him using his razor-sharp wits only against people who were in some way on a par with him. So I wear every little blow he dealt me like a badge of honour. Like when he mocked my theory of everything or at another instance when he was asked by a student what the word «Kitsch» is derived from he looked at me and said, «I don't know, but Ip probably does.» — I took the bait and answered, that I'm not sure myself but that it might be derived from Hungarian «kicsi» — meaning «small».

However gentle he might have been in general, he was especially softspoken when talking to women. Women were the true heroes of all his stories. His favourite book amongst his own writings were the «Xanthippic Dialogues». In that book, we listen to some arguments between Socrates and his wife Xanthippe, and it is clear from the start that Xanthippe knows how to outsmart her husband. Likewise, his opera «Violet» deals with a woman — real-life harpsichordist Violet Gordon-Woodhouse — who was well ahead of her time, both in terms of her self-reliance and her refusal to live by conventional standards. She was married to three husbands at the same time, to one of them legally and the others in effect.

It is no surprise to me that his views were far less radical when he spoke to women than when he talked to people like me. I remember an instance when I had a discussion with summer-school lecturer Alicja Gescinska about Roger's views on capital punishment. She had a hard time believing that he was in favour of it. The same day she asked him about it, and he seemed to have been rather roundabout concerning this issue. When I talked to him one year earlier face to face, his views were comparatively strict. I recorded this conversation with Sir Roger's permission:

Me: What is your take on capital punishment?

Roger: Interesting. Um, I'm in favour of it. Never seen the slightest argument against it. All the arguments against it in my view are sophisms. You may not agree, but I think the correct punishment for a crime is the punishment that the crime deserves. And there are crimes that clearly deserve death and therefore that is the correct punishment. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't be merciful and compassionate in applying this penalty.

Me: You have to rule out mistakes here...

Roger: Yeah, but with DNA and all that stuff mistakes are as impossible now as ... they are less likely than they have ever been. Of course, when you made a mistake, you can't rectify it. When you made a mistake in putting someone in prison for 30 years you can't rectify it either.

Me: Schopenhauer says that being in prison for life is worse than dying. But it's not such a deterrent. Government should'nt educate us but rather deter us.

Roger: I agree with this deterrence theory, but I don't think it's the true theory of punishment. I think the true punishment is what the criminal deserves. It's the proper retribution.

Me: He has a right to punishment. I think Hegel says that.

Roger: Yes, Hegel says that. Hegel is right about most things actually — in this area. And you only have to think of the victim. You've lost your child. It's been murdered and abused by some horrible paedophile... You are the person. If someone is to grant you mercy, it's you who does it, not the state. The state must exercise the appropriate authority and inflict the punishment. And that is the only thing that could be a consolation anyway to the person who suffered. All other arguments seem to be complete sophistical nonsense. They inhabit the heads of people who don't themselves feel threatened. Ordinary working-class people — if there are any left — they are the ones who are most threatened. Whereas people who live in comfortable parts of London y' know they don't have to worry about being murdered ever. So — that's my view anyway. I'm sure you share it, don't you?

At this point, I had to confess to Sir Roger that I had been a left-leaning «artist» for most of my life and that only recently my conversion had taken place. Until that time, it did not occur to me that the value of human life is diminished by lowering the level of severity of punishments for murder and manslaughter. While the perpetrators are being under increasing protection by liberal

legislation, it is not considered a legal offence to take the life of the most innocent of all humans — the unborn children. By the time I had this conversation with Sir Roger on the campus of the Royal Agricultural University at Cirencester in 2018, my transition was already perfect. Sir Roger was startled to learn that this ultra-conservative student of his was, in fact, a neophyte to the world of conservatism.

Sir Roger raised an eyebrow: «Hmm, that's interesting.»

One year later I came to attend a concert at Sir Roger's farm, where some of his own compositions — amongst them his Lorca-songs — were to be performed. There he was sitting at the front porch with a glass of wine in his hand. He was already very ill and looked weak and fragile. He glanced at me with his bright eyes and said: «Ip, you make me sound like a serious philosopher.» He was referring to my translation of his book, a copy of which I had given him a few days earlier. I don't recall my answer to his remark, but I probably tried to sound witty.

One week after that I should meet Sir Roger for the last time. It was September 2019. His wife Sophie had prepared a meal for some Scrutopia alumni, and we gathered around a table in the Scrutons' tree garden. Sir Roger wore a straw hat with a wide brim so that his hair loss wouldn't show. After all, Sir Roger's unruly white hair used to be one of his most recognizable visual features.

«The sad thing about chemo is that wine starts to taste like the bad thing doctors tell you it is,» said Sir Roger.

«I hope it hasn't affected your taste for music, though,» I joked. And Sir Roger told me that he recently has been enjoying listening to the Proms on the radio. He told me about a programme featuring female composers, Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann amongst them, and he praised their music.

«It's nice music, but it doesn't go anywhere,» I replied. Sir Roger nodded. «Yes, it doesn't go anywhere. But there is that one quartet...»

For some reason, the subject turned towards the Polish composer Mieczysław Weinberg. «Actually he's Russian,» Sir Roger corrected me. «He has also been featured on the radio programme.» Then we talked about Weinberg's sad fate under Stalin and his enormous output, nevertheless. I said that there are 17 symphonies — which is wrong. In fact, Weinberg has written 22 symphonies, but Sir Roger didn't bother to correct me.

After that, we changed the subject to politics, especially Angela Merkel's policies. «Germany may never recover from the holocaust,» remarked Sir Roger. «But why on earth are the Scandinavian countries even worse in that respect than Germany,» I asked, and Sir Roger shrugged his shoulders. «Maybe it's

contagious.» I was not satisfied with that answer, and I have been thinking about it ever since. I came to the conclusion that the Scandinavian countries have a hard time dealing with the fact that their populace has been held hostage by Hitler when he proclaimed that the Nordic race was the superior one that should dominate the earth. So now they do their best to be superior at being inferior. Would Sir Roger approve of that theory, or would he mock me again for having a theory of everything? God only knows. Rest in peace, Sir Roger!



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