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Sam The Messiah Man
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Frosty and still, and early, this 5 A.M. on the morning of December 15, 1985. Walking about the living-room in his bedclothes Sam Goldberg, violinist, vacantly examined the miraculous snow-flake ballet descending from the high heavens to its earthly melt. Staring through the tall French windows of his stately house in Boston's fashionable Concord suburb he watched the streetlights flicker and go out. There was still plenty of time before he would have to go down to the garage and start warming up the car.

The drive to Logan Airport to catch the plane to Denver would begin at 7. He was scheduled to arrive therefore before noon, Rocky Mountain Time, to preside over a performance of Handel's Messiah with the Colorado Symphony.

"Breakfast is ready, Sam".

"Just a minute, Sharon." Sam returned to the bathroom and washed up at the sink. The heavy demand for his talents would keep him in the West for the next eight days. Then he was due back in the Boston area for the Christmas day concert with the Boston Philharmonic in Symphony Hall. With a bit of luck he and Sharon should be able to spend the evening with their 3 children, Abe, Simon and Rebecca, all grown to maturity with their own

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families and concerns. He'd already reserved a table for the family at a good kosher restaurant in Brookline.

A brief respite! After Christmas, Sam wasn't expected home again until January 11th. The interim would see him trekking through snowstorms to engagements across the country, and a few abroad.

Sam dried his face with a towel, threw on a bathrobe and slippers and shuffled into the dining-room. On his way into the dining-room he paused to adjust the Hanukah decorations on the mantelpiece over the fireplace; once more he compared his watch with the time on a small pendulum clock.

As he lowered himself into a chair at the dinner table, Sam emitted a fervent sigh of contentment. The aroma of coffee and clatter of dishware signaled Sharon's imminent arrival. While he waited Sam relived (as he was so fond of doing), the honors heaped upon him at the time of his graduation, in June of 1946, at the top of his class at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He chuckled at the high hopes that teachers, family and fellow students alike had placed in him, and simpered as he contemplated, once more, the cleverness with which he had *disappointed* them all!!

All the faces of the teachers beloved of his youth rose up again before his mind's eye: kind, dumpy and wise Professor Baumgartner, chairman of Violin; the brilliant, exquisitely groomed Professor Spinelli: Composition; Professor Lutoslawski, always in a hurry, never on time: Piano. Each and every one of THEM had assumed that HE, Sam Goldberg, would work like a

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HORSE at the plough and STARVE for ART ! But HE , *Sam Goldberg the violinist* , had forever laid to rest their old-fogey European Conservatory nonsense: *HE had done the UNFORGIVABLE, and THRIVED!*

Sam planned to retire in 3 years, bringing to an end a very successful, in fact extraordinary, though far from brilliant, career. Age had not mistreated him. He was in good health for a man in his 60's, slightly overweight, his glasses a trifle stronger , his hearing unimpaired. The tonsure of silver hair stretching behind his ears and around the back of his head only added further distinction to his bearing as a respected senior musician.

Sharon, sad and unsmiling, came in from the kitchen dragging a tray holding cereal, coffee and eggs. As Sam reminded himself, he lived like a celebrity- "like Jascha Heifetz!" - he cried, talking out loud to himself - "like Jascha Heifetz!" - from doing the bare minimum of work.

" I probably earn more money , I bet you", he gloated , " in *real* dollars, than Baumgartner, Spinelli and Lutoslawski ever did - all put together !...And in America!" he cackled, so loudly that even Sharon, who had lost most of her hearing over the decade, could hear him, " MONEY'S where it's AT ! MONEY'S WHAT COUNTS! "

"Eat up, Sam", Sharon chided, "... you have to leave soon. " He continued his reflections in silence :
"*What's my secret of success?* " It was not the first time he'd asked himself this essentially rhetorical question: "*CLEVERNESS !*
And, well ... *A TOTAL LACK OF AMBITION*Then ... *A HARD-*

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*NOSED PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE!A capacity for realism !
Beyond any other musician you're ever going to meet ! Sam " , he
congratulated himself, "You've got that primitive grasp on the
verities of life that puts you in the company of the likes of
Rockefellers, Vanderbilts , Gettys!.... " And he smirked.*

Sharon watched him with concern. He didn't realize that he was getting old, but to her the symptoms were obvious. She was worried that he might not make it through Christmas. When he returned in January she was determined to pressure him into retiring. They *had* enough money; it was only force of habit that kept him at an occupation that was no longer required of him. Or was he being driven by something else ? No one understands what motivates an artist. She certainly didn't understand Sam, and she'd been married to him for 32 years.

In May of 1946 , for his senior honors recital at the Curtis Institute, Sam had played the Paganini Concerto in E^b , the Wieniawski Concerto in D minor and the Bartok Unaccompanied Violin Sonata. These are among the most fiendishly difficult pieces in the violin repertoire . He was never to play them again. He hadn't gone far in his conservatory education before Sam realized that the listening public has rejected most of the classical music written since the 20's.

Popular music was an alternative, though it held no appeal for him. Why , he argued, should he devote his artistic life to playing music he didn't like? By his third year at the Institute he'd come to recognize that concert audiences have little use for most of

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the traditional classical repertoire as well. How often did one see concert hall posters advertising *Schumann's* Violin Concerto? *Salieri's* operas? *Hummel's* piano concertos? The *Mendelssohn* String Quartets? *Any* symphony of Dvorcak's except the New World ?

It was patently obvious that the audiences at classical music events, by and large, only want to hear a small number of established masterpieces *played over and over again in exactly the same way* .

The reality was enough to discourage any security-conscious young artist, and , for a short time, Sam considered dropping out of Curtis and enrolling in medical school. Then his imagination went to work, and in due course he discovered a silver lining within the dark cloud of professional music.

Any qualified musician, by mastering a few shrewdly chosen well-worn standards, often called war-horses, could forever afterwards chuck out the sentimental garbage about snubbing the Philistines, shocking the *bourgeoisie* , suffering in garrets and working for nothing, and live out his allotted span of days surrounded by all the trappings of comfort and wealth. The promotional work involved would be more in the nature of a hobby: cultivating the agents, institutions and grateful audiences that would reward him handsomely for the dependable and undeviating rendition of the tried-and-trusted.

By graduation day he had narrowed down the list of pieces he intended to play *for the rest of his life* , to a single indestructible paradigm: *the first violin part of the orchestral*

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accompaniment to Handel's Messiah , a score technically accessible to any talented elementary school student after a few years of study of the famous Suzuki violin method .

It should be noted of course, that for accomplished musicians there *are* no easy pieces in the classical repertoire. Mozart's violin concertos are a good example: though they lack all the gymnastic tricks present in the Paganini concertos, they aren't any easier to perform in public. Performers of Mozart's music are totally exposed on every note. Mozart deliberately avoids using any of the gimmicks that make the facile appear complicated. There are no displays of brilliant effects that can be used to disguise faulty intonation or poor musicianship. What is true of Mozart is also true of Handel. Even so simple a score as the first violin part of Handel's *Messiah* will resound, when played by a musician at Sam's level, as far above the productions of your generic orchestra violinist, as the ravishing bouquet of vintage Chateau-Laffite Rothschild wine will soar above the sour aftertaste of Gallo red.

Sam therefore devoted 4 years, from 1947 to 1950, to the attainment of absolute mastery of the *Messiah* score. Every note was committed to memory, bowings and fingerings revised dozens of times, (and in fact such experimentation with minor technical details continued all through his career) . He obtained and studied all the available recordings. He read the musicologists, analyzing the *Messiah* score theoretically, historically and artistically. Ultimately he knew every note of every part of the

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Messiah, orchestra, chorus, and vocal soloists more thoroughly than all but the best conductors.

While acquiring this proficiency Sam supported himself by freelancing. Several orchestras wanted to make him their permanent concertmaster. He turned them all down; he *knew* what he wanted. Within a few short years he'd convinced everyone in the music business that his presence on the stage as Messiah concertmaster galvanized orchestras and audiences in a way that no-one had ever imagined possible. Mind you, this was a young man, still in his twenties. Once he started playing, everything came together; the effect was dazzling. Musicians, bored to tears through having participated in Messiah performances a hundred times over, suddenly discovered that there was new life to be found in it. To watch Sam at the helm was to be witness to a revelation. What orchestral sound gained incredible homogeneity, sophistication and style was truly incredible. Conductors were known to comment that Sam's presence on stage made them superfluous: he knew the score so much better than they did!

By the early 1950's, Sam could -and did- call the shots. He never played anything but this one piece, even for pleasure, even in his own home; never accepted a position lower than concertmaster; never gave autographs; or solo recitals; or lessons. He banked his first million in 1963, just before the Kennedy assassination. Financial insecurity would henceforth be a thing of the past, while wise investments protected his old age. By his own lights his crowning achievement had been the creation of a brand new profession within music: roving Messiah concertmaster!

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The basic routine he would be following for the rest of his career had been adopted by the early 50's . In the two months between January to March, (and the 6 months between May to November) , Sam's fingers did not so much as graze the strings of either of his two prized Old Italian Masters violins: an Amati and a Guarnerius . Three weeks' steady training sufficed for the cruel workloads of Christmas and Easter.

Between Thanksgiving and Twelfth Night and again from the end of March to the beginning of May, Sam slogged over 150 gigs! By the mid-70's his fees were already averaging \$3000 per concert, by which time his yearly income before taxes was never less than \$500,000. And rising with inflation!

Sam concurred with the opinion of all who knew him, that he had no ambition: he had no more desire to be superrich than he did to be a great violinist. His goal in life , oft proclaimed with fatuous uncton to friend, family and associate as "Sam's practical philosophy", was to do as little work as possible, yet live like royalty. It just happened to be the case, that this intention had , over 4 decades, translated itself into three months of back-breaking labor followed by nine months of delicious hibernation.

Sam was enormously proud of himself, and there is no doubt that he ought to be given credit for shrewdness: if there is one musical masterpiece that the world will continue to demand to after a billion replays, it is Handel's Messiah. Handel's Messiah will outlast McDonald's hamburgers. Sam's nest-egg was indestructible as long as Christianity remained a force in our

world; nor was he about to lose any sleep, worrying about the possibility of its sudden disappearance.

Obviously, after 40 years in the profession of course, Sam hardly needed to hustle. Within the music world everyone knew him as "Sam, the Messiah Man". Many legends circulated about him. One of them centers on a New York booking agency where, every year shortly before 11 AM on the third Monday in September, the entire staff gathers around the telephone. As they wait they place bets on the exact minute when Sam's call will come over the line. Sam always calls between 11 and 11:15. In the first ten years, so the story goes, he always introduced himself with "Hello. This is Sam. What's the Messiah been up to?" Then he dropped the "This is Sam" part. Finally, somebody picks up the receiver and bark, "Messiahs for Hire, Incorporated!"

Trade humor.



Christmas Day, 1985. The Messiah concert of the Boston Symphony Orchestra was scheduled for the 3:00 matinee. A steady snowfall had begun early in the afternoon, the wind was high, the day bitterly cold . At 2:45 , true to form, Sam Goldberg's Lincoln Continental pulled up in front of the stage entrance on the north side of Symphony Hall. He stepped swiftly out the front door, retrieved his instrument case from the back , then handed the keys to the doorman to park the car in a lot on the other side of Massachusetts Avenue.

The past 24 hours had strained even Sam's resources to the utmost. The ordeal had begun the day before with a flight from

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Denver to St. Louis to perform at a gigantic midnight mass concluding an Evangelical Congress at the St. Louis Convention Center. There had been no sleep that night: immediately afterwards he'd flown to New York, arriving at La Guardia Airport in time to preside over a 9 AM Messiah concert at Columbia University's Union Theological Seminary.

His brother, a rabbi on the faculty, had been in the audience. Although the rest of the audience had stood up during the Hallelujah Chorus, he'd remained seated. This breach of protocol may have reflected religious scruples, or, more likely, may have been intended as a criticism of Sam's way of life. He couldn't wait to find out: a chartered limousine took him to Newark Airport, where he boarded the 45-minute Continental Airlines shuttle to Boston. From Logan Airport Sam had raced his car through heavy traffic to get to Symphony Hall on time.

Nor did his commitments end with this matinee performance: at 1 A.M. that night another plane would be taking him back to Chicago. And, from there, onwards to Detroit and Ann Arbor, Michigan, and St. Paul, Minnesota.....and .. and ...

A vortex of snow whirled like a tower in his wake as Sam hurried through the stage entrance of Symphony Hall. A doorman cleared the way; Sam returned no greetings. During the holiday season one could not have uncovered so much as a mustard seed of benevolence in his calculating heart: *these were the most lucrative days of the year* . From the long travail beginning with the midnight mass the night before, and ending

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with a guest appearance with Pinchas Zuckerman's chamber orchestra in St. Paul, Sam raked in \$50,000!

It may be appropriate here to recall the list of principles that make up what Sam referred to as his "practical philosophy" :

No Ambition
Good Contacts
Precision Scheduling
Excellence
A Hard-Nosed Philosophy of Life

Sam hung his hat, coat and scarf in the cloakroom, then dashed into the Men's Room for some quick grooming. Within 15 minutes of his arrival he was in the wings, pacing the musician's lounge. The priceless Guarnerius violin was withdrawn from its case, the strings tuned, the bow tightened and rosined. Warming up with scales or passage-work hardly seemed necessary: had he not already played the score *twice over* in less than 16 hours? Nor did he need to review the slight variants in the editions employed in St. Louis , New York and Boston: Sam knew them all.

A droll recording, broadcast throughout Philharmonic Hall, of the serenade from *Don Giovanni* played on chimes, recalled the audience to its seats. The amplified din subsided as the musicians began walking onto the stage in small groups. As the lights dimmed Sam entered from the left, followed by Seiji Ozawa,

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now in his 14th year as permanent conductor of the Boston Symphony.

With the consummate stage presence of a veteran of 4 decades of public service Sam returned the applause from an eager audience by a deep bow at the waist. He placed a thin handkerchief on his left shoulder. His ear picked up the ambiguous "concert A" from the oboe. Following minute adjustments on his strings, he transmitted the ground pitch to the rest of the orchestra. Fans waved to him from the darkened auditorium. Turning to face them, he winked.

Comfortably installed in the concertmaster's chair, his gaze casually roamed over the ranges of sentimental pseudo-Greek *bas-reliefs* at the base of the ceiling. He recalled how Isadora Duncan had behaved at the time of her disastrous appearance there in 1922. As she ripped open her blouse to expose her bare breasts, she'd pointed to these same decorations and cried to an astonished audience: "*You worship plaster Gods!*"

To himself he thought, "I wonder how much *she* left in her bank account?" and he smirked.

Orchestra musicians treasure their ancient jokes - like the one about the viola player who dreams that he is sitting in an orchestra, playing the Brahms Requiem. Waking up he finds himself sitting an orchestra, playing the Brahms Requiem.

Yet 40 years of conditioning had placed Sam far beyond the protagonist of this dour anecdote, far beyond either dreaming or sleeping, or even hypnosis. Sam's spiritual state was closer to that of the workers on automobile assembly lines, who have learned

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how to block out their minds while on the job. One might describe Sam as someone who, to a consummate degree, had fashioned himself into the perfect artifact of modern capitalism : a technician ridiculously over-trained for the production of a single absurdly specialized task.

One can therefore appreciate his distress when, beginning with the fugue that enters midway through the Overture , Sam acknowledged the encroachment of a relentless , irritating yet strangely fascinating train of thought. Despite his many years of conditioning, this time his mind now refused to shut down on command. With an obstinate energy that caught him off balance, he found himself picking up and pursuing a meditation that had begun the night before in St. Louis while waiting out an endless peroration on Divine Intervention and the Virgin Birth. By the time of the entry of the first tenor recitative , *Comfort Ye My People* , a host of nagging reflections had swollen to the proportions of an obsession. Still, no noticeable effects were apparent in his playing. Blindfolded, drugged, even comatose, Sam could still churn out a Messiah without faltering or blemish. And this is what Sam was thinking:

Now, you take this man, Jesus. I consider him just a man, mind you. Remember: just a man. I'm a Jew, (they don't let you forget it) You're never going to get me to believe the Christians' "Son of God" cockamamie ... Between you, me and the metronome , believing in God is already a crock, if you know what I mean. I've never met anyone who ever made a dime crying Hallelujah and crawling before an old man with a beard , begging for forgiveness

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.... So! I'm a lousy Jew, too, all right? So why should I worry about his so-called Son, I ask you?But you know, his birth was a good thing for me Hey! I've made a fat income from it all my life... and for musicians in general It's funny when you think about it that way, but Christmas carols are a kind of soup kitchen for jazz musicians on the skids.... even a street musician can earn a living over Christmas and his death gave us Easter, too, a real blessing, a mitzvah ... as a matter of fact, the goyim (forgive me, no offense intended) consider his death more important than his birth, otherwise there wouldn't be any religion... and, say, when you really come down to it.., he went on, with a disturbing momentum,

....The way this man, Jesus, died, couldn't have been an accident He was just a man, remember; just a man a man, not God ... how does it go? " for the Holy Scriptures say that He rose up in the flesh and appeared to his disciples after 3 days.....and they believed in Him.....and again on the road to Emmaus...and only doubting Thomas refused to believe...until he touched the wounds" (what utter rubbish).....and then the Church fathers went out into the desert, and fasted...and the martyrs were persecuted by Rome... which eventually acknowledges Christianity as its state religion...and it takes root in the two Empires, East and West Then comes the Dark Ages and the Faith conquers Europe.... and spread all over the world

Startled, Sam shook his head as if waking from a dream : what's this all about? Yet, almost without being aware of it, he soon fell back into the same train of thought :. comes the 18th

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century. George , the English monarch imported from Germany, brings Handel along with him who conquered the musical world and King George the First commissions the Messiah or maybe it was George the Second I don't think it was George the Third, that's the American Revolution...I don't know, I' m not a musicologist! I' m not even a violinist when you come down to it, or rather I' m a funny kind of violinist..... so that millions of Christians around the world would flock to performances of the Messiah at Christmas and Easter, year after year for centuries, so that I, Sam Goldberg , could draw a guaranteed income for forty years , without having to learn a single God-damned new piece of music ! ..or pretend that I really enjoy living like an artist, that is to say like a dog , or be forced against my will to be creative, or show initiative, or invent some kind of ambition in this miserable! Cut-throat! Ruthless! Vicious! Capitalist! Rat race!! "

Sam's violin obligato, composed by himself 30 years earlier to accompany the alto aria "*He Was Despised And Rejected, A Man of Sorrows And Acquainted With Grief* " , was always the high point of his concerts. There existed a dedicated following who attended them solely to be transported by the sound of his lyric violin sobbing above this aria. As he began to draw the soft strains that raised the illusion of an amber glow over the trembling strings, Sam could scarcely restrain himself from crying out:

" What all of this means is that Christ died for me - for me alone ! Christ had to die so that Sam Goldberg could live!!"

Like the sun emerging from the edge of a vanishing storm-cloud, Sam's stiff grimace crinkled across his face. Smug satisfaction rippled from ear to ear. He admired the cleverness he'd shown in reaching this conclusion. It was time once again to hew the line: his special relationship to Christ could be debated in his 9 months of leisure. Calling upon almost half a century of habit, Sam once again totally emptied out his mind.

Yet: with an upsurge of mounting horror Sam found himself, *for the first time in all his days as a Messiah concertmaster* , thinking about the *meaning* of the words written in the libretto!

"..... He was despised and rejected, a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief...."

Responding to a strange agony moving through the depths of his interior oppression, Sam moaned softly to himself:

"...I, too, am acquainted with grief!...Didn't Julie, my daughter, die in a car accident when she was only 15? ...And when my mother died while I was on tour, I couldn't miss even a single day to be at her bedside. ...It didn't matter that I loved her as much as any son can love a mother ... she had to die alone !...And the doctors say there's trouble with my heart...They'll soak me for all the money I ever made , then throw my body into an unmarked grave.....like Mozart!... And property values are dropping in Concord too many ethnics, like Sharon and me. We'll have to move - in our 70's !And Sharon, I know she doesn't love me, I've known it for many years...."

Sam wept copiously. Engrossed in their work, none of the musicians seated at the adjacent stands paid him any attention,

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"..Despised...Rejected.. Rejected of Men! That describes me exactly, just as it did that man , Jesus...' He gave his face to the smiters!' And Oh, don't I know what that means! I know how they all hate me! Me , Sam Goldberg, the Messiah Man !! because I graduated at the top of my class, and got rich through mastering a single score and playing it for the rest of my career! Oh they hate me all right! "

Like a moth returning to the scorching flame , his mind feasted obsessively on its torment :

"...I am Sam Goldberg, the Messiah Man, despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief! Behold and see, if there be any sorrow, like unto my sorrow !! ..."

By a powerful effort of will Sam managed to pull himself together. Someone observing him at that moment would have recognized that he was in the grips of a major emotional crisis. But why should anyone have suspected that something was amiss ? The audience couldn't see him very well. The players were too busy. His violin playing was, if possible, above even his normal standard of flawless perfection.

Yet somewhere in the middle of the chorus that begins , "*The Lord Gave The Word* " , there came that irrevocable moment when the deep truth he'd sought through these two long hours of misery exploded into consciousness, when Sam's suffering psyche was rent by the force of a grandiose revelation: It happened at the end of a long interior discourse that went something like this :

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".....Jesus was a Man of Sorrows... I, too, am a Man of Sorrows...Jesus has been called 'The Messiah' I am called 'The Messiah Man'...and Jesus died for Sam Goldberg alone , so that Sam Goldberg could live!

*What can this mean? What can this possibly mean ?
.....Jesus was born... (Behold, a Virgin shall conceive !)Jesus preached to the multitudes; those who had ears to hear, heard ; all others understood not ...He healed the lame and blind, raised the dead....He suffered and died on the Cross , the Prince of Peace... Then the disciples proclaimed the teachings of their beloved Rabbi. ...The Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans ... 70 AD ...The Jews dispersed, my ancestors among them... Constantine is converted to Christianity , AD.... 336.....The long line of Popes... Charlemagne, feudalism, the Middle Ages European classical music develops, very slowly ,under the patronage of the Roman church..... Luther, Calvin... Henry the Eighth and the Church of England.... Along comes Elizabeth! and the golden age of English music and letters.... With Cromwell sets in the demise of music in England...But the Restoration chases out the Puritans and brings music back into the churches.... ... William of Orange comes over from Holland, James the Second is booted out ... 1688 .*

Then Parliament offers the English crown to George Ludwig, Elector of Hanover ...1702...He instructs Handel to join him in 1712..... who composes the Messiah in ... 1741 ! Which is performed for the first time in Dublin, Ireland, on April ... 13 1742!!"

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Bewildered, Sam paused " *Where am I ? ...* " but only for a brief moment , before going on :

"...Mozart arranges the score for large orchestraa Messiah cult evolves around Christmas and Easter, together with evergreen trees, wreathes, bunnies, turkeys, reindeer, Santa Claus... To the sole end that Sam Goldberg, also a Jew, could know fullness of life !! "

There was not a minute to be lost. As the Hallelujah Chorus burst over Symphony Hall , Sam sprang to his feet and cried:

" I am Jesus Christ! I, Sam Goldberg, am God's own Son ! God so loved the world that he sent me , Sam Goldberg, his only begotten Son, so that ye might have eternal life!! "

On its feet, bellowing out the Hallelujah Chorus at the top of its lungs, the audience saw little of this . But Sam's wild antics were being played out in full view of the entire Boston Symphony . Seiji Ozawa indicated to the startled musicians that they should continue to go on playing as if nothing were the matter. In his 35 years as a conductor he'd dealt with every kind of crisis . He paused just long enough to bend down to the principal cellist and instruct him to rush offstage, alert the security guards and telephone for an ambulance. The curtains would come down at the end of the Hallelujah Chorus. For the moment there was nothing to be done : Sam had to be allowed to rave at liberty.

Ozawa reflected that his Buddhist father would have provided the apt proverb. *" They all crack up in this racket" ,*

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Ozawa murmured, bitterly, under his breath: "Each in his own way, sooner or later, they all go down. "

