

## Sol Schoenbach - The Last Conversations?

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**L**ate in their married lives, **Sol Schoenbach** and his wife, Bertha, moved to a nice retirement community called The Quadrangle in Haverford, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. When Bertha died in May, 1998, Sol was naturally feeling lonely and depressed. A mutual friend of ours, Joe Koplin, communicated this to me, whereupon I resolved to write him and extend an invitation for lunch. I had worked for him briefly at Philadelphia's Settlement Music School in 1972 and had enjoyed chatting with him about his Philadelphia Orchestra days and the history of Western music, particularly wind music, about which he was very knowledgeable.

I wrote the letter and back came the grateful, positive response, with a request to call him about a time and place. We eventually settled on Friday, October 9, 1998, in the dining room at The Quadrangle. What transpired that day was a long, fruitful conversation about a number of things related to his career. It was so memorable that I wrote down everything we had talked about when I arrived home. I sent a copy of my narrative to my good friend of long standing **Christopher Weait**, who enjoyed it so much he suggested sending it to the IDRS for possible publication in its journal; so here it is and I hope you like it.

**Sol Schoenbach** was born on New York City's East Side near the Bowery, but later moved to the Bronx. Neither of his parents were overly musical, although his father, a native Austrian, liked to sing informally.

Schoenbach started playing bassoon at the age of eleven. His older brother was playing in a youth orchestra in Harlem and the ensemble needed a bassoonist. Eventually he began studying with the Russian emigré, **Simon Kovar**, and progressed so well that he was offered a scholarship at the Institute of Musical Art, which later became the Juilliard School. Schoenbach initially refused the scholarship because the school wouldn't let Kovar continue to teach him, but eventually it relented and both Schoenbach and Kovar entered its environs.

Kovar was originally a violinist studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. When World War I started, Alexander Glazunov, the director of the conservatory, feared that the string players would wind up as cannon fodder when they were drafted, so he told them to learn a wind instrument as fast as possible so they could join an Army band rather than go to the front lines. When Kovar showed up for bassoon lessons and

the German professor of bassoon at the conservatory balked at providing them, Glazunov told the professor in no uncertain terms that if he didn't, he (Glazunov) would have him interned as an enemy alien!

In addition to studying at the Institute of Musical Art, Schoenbach found time to major in political economics at New York University. He was also very interested in comparative linguistics. Furthermore, he was a studio musician for CBS from 1932, when he was seventeen, until 1937, when he won the audition for principal bassoon of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

The focus of our discussion then shifted to his military service during World War II. Schoenbach spent 1944 and 1945 in the Army as an enlisted man, first in the infantry after basic training at Fort Blanding, Florida, and later in an Army band at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn. At Fort Hamilton, he was very busy playing for ceremonies, participating in concerts in towns like Astoria on Long Island and making "V" recordings. Thus, he was in shape to resume playing professionally after the war ended.

Schoenbach was discharged from the Army on February 12, 1946. The day before, he had recorded Igor Stravinsky's *Pastorale* for violin and woodwind quartet for Columbia with Joseph Szigeti, violin; **Mitchell Miller**, oboe; Robert McGinnis, clarinet; and **Bert Gassman**, English horn, and the composer conducting (Columbia 72495-D, a single twelve-inch, 78 rpm record). Schoenbach remembered how they had to play it time after time, presumably to satisfy the producer's desire for a "good take."

Like many other returning musicians, he had a hard time getting his old job back. He had a three-year contract but the Philadelphia Orchestra wanted to cut that down to one year and expressed doubt that he was at his pre-war level of playing. Knowing that the GI Bill guaranteed a veteran his former job, he cited all the playing he had done at Fort Hamilton and fought to be reinstated as principal bassoon. Eventually, management acceded to his demands and **George Goslee**, who had been brought in to play the 1945-1946 season, left the orchestra. Schoenbach implied in the course of our conversation that Goslee had departed willingly, but I decided to call Goslee in Cleveland to get the other side of the story. He was very gracious on the phone and said that there was no animosity on his part, that he understood the job was Schoenbach's when he returned and that he voluntarily went to Cleveland and became principal bas-

soon of that city's orchestra in the fall of 1946 under its new conductor, George Szell.

Although Schoenbach returned to his former position in September, 1946, when the new orchestral season started, there were other problems with returning veterans. Clarinetist Bernard Portnoy was a postwar 'casualty' who didn't get his old job back and there was a ruckus over who would be the principal horn, serviceman Mason Jones or the wartime replacement James Chambers. Interestingly, both men later became the personnel manager of their respective orchestras, Jones with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Chambers with the New York Philharmonic.

In the course of our conversation, several names came up and I will mention his comments on two of them. **Vincent Pezzi** was a very nice man and an excellent bassoonist. He had been hired to play in the Detroit Symphony by its conductor, Ossip Gabrilovich, before becoming an instructor at the Eastman School. **Mitch Miller** went to New York to be a freelance oboist after graduating from Eastman. His sound was so hard he sounded like an alto sax, and his colleagues worked hard to get him to soften it.

After lunch, we went into the sitting room for the final phase of our chat and touched on several items. He preferred 'harmonie' music to woodwind quintets and added that the original scoring of the Reicha quintets was, for a long time, available only through Czech Artia. He had a very high opinion of Czech wind players and had heard several excellent Russian ones while adjudicating competitions in Germany. One young man from Siberia, a particularly good player, had steel teeth. "Imagine what he did to a reed!" Schoenbach cracked.

That sums up our first luncheon date. I had enjoyed it so much I wanted to do it again and so did he. We met a month or two later at The Quadrangle on another Friday afternoon and at his suggestion went to a local pizzeria. This time the conversation was much less productive in terms of historical information but a few juicy tidbits emerged. Again I wasn't writing anything down, and I didn't tell him I had jotted down the highlights of our first get-together.

The highlight of our confab concerned Fredric R. Mann. For those of you who don't know who he was, let me give a capsule summary of his life. Descended from Russian Jews, Mann had had high hopes of becoming a concert pianist in his youth but a hand injury dashed his dreams. He turned his attention to business and made a fortune in the cardboard box business; but he never lost his love of music. In the summer of 1948, he bailed out the financially prostrate Robin Hood Dell summer concert series of the Philadelphia Orchestra and, with city help, instituted a plan which kept the series solvent for

several decades up to his death and somewhat beyond it. When the Philadelphia Orchestra moved from its summer home on the east bank of the Schuylkill River to a beautiful new facility on the west bank, it was appropriately named the Mann Music Center. Mann also funded a concert hall in Israel which bears his name.

Mann's administrative leadership of the Robin Hood Dell programs had its genesis at the same time that the Democratic party wrested control of the municipal government after decades of Republican rule. (The Democrats have held onto their power for fifty years.) Mann was a heavy contributor to the local Democratic party and, I believe, the national party, too, as he was named Ambassador to Barbados during one Democratic presidential administration; so the political and financial arrangements between Mann and the city government seemed to be and probably were a marriage made in heaven.

This much I knew before Schoenbach and I began to split our large pizza. What he added was that Mann was an enthusiastic patron of up-and-coming pianists such as William Kapell and Berl Senofsky and also a real music 'groupie' who enjoyed a close friendship with stars like Jascha Heifetz, Artur Schnabel and Gregor Piatigorsky. At one point Mann tried to get the contract for the cardboard that RCA Victor's 78 rpm album covers were made of. Victor responded, saying it was happy with its present contractor. Mann passed this news on to the Heifetz-Rubinstein-Piatigorsky trio. The three of them went to Victor management and told them that if they didn't do business with Mann, they would jump to Columbia. Mann got the contract.

We finished the pizza and I drove him home. On the way, we talked about the Puerto Rican bassoonist **Angel Del Busto**, whom we had known, Schoenbach in New York in the thirties and I in Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, in the late sixties. As I pulled into the driveway at The Quadrangle, he told me about a dance band recording he had made with Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa and others circa 1935: "Dodging a Divorce" by Reginald Foresythe, an English composer. He promised to send a tape of it and sure enough, it arrived in the mail about a week later.

I never saw him again. He died at The Quadrangle on February, 25, 1999. A long obituary appeared the next day in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The obit amplified some of the points we had discussed and several more. A few items were a slight variance with what he had told me. What struck me was that I may very well have been the last person to chat with him extensively about his life and times.