

Sol Schoenbach, 83, Orchestra Bassoonist

By Andy Wallace and Peter Dobrin
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Sol Schoenbach, 83, former principal bassoonist with the Philadelphia Orchestra and longtime director of Settlement Music School died yesterday at his home in Haverford.

Mr. Schoenbach was tall and imposing, an energetic and forceful man with a penchant for bright vests. He was described by an old friend as “a bit of an extrovert” and by a reporter as “a warm whirlwind of a man.”

And a whirlwind he was. Whether playing for the orchestra or directing the music school, he was doing several projects at once — and he was usually applauded for all of them.

Even after he retired, Mr. Schoenbach could be found conducting or playing for chamber groups, judging contests or corresponding with one of his many former students who occupy chairs in orchestras all over.

Mr. Schoenbach was there in the audience, front row and center, at a news conference last week at the Academy of Music ballroom as the orchestra announced its 1999-2000 season.

“You could be in any part of the world and stop a person on the street, and you’ll meet someone who knew Sol,” said Anthony P. Checchia, president of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society and a former Schoenbach student.

He claimed to have invented the name *Queen Village* for the neighborhood in which Settlement Music School is located.

During the 1960s, when the Settlement Music School neighborhood needed improving, Mr. Schoenbach formed a nonprofit corporation to buy deteriorated houses. Some were rehabbed and sold, some were razed for a parking lot.

Still, he thought, the neighborhood needed an identity. “I was thinking of something like Greenwich Village in New York and my school is located on Queen Street, so ...,” he recalled in 1978.

Mr. Schoenbach was born in the Bronx, the second of two brothers. The first, Emanuel,

played the violin and was destined for medicine. Sol played the piano and was destined for business.

Emanuel became a doctor, but Sol was ambushed by music and missed his business rendezvous.

He started playing the piano when he was 5 and stayed with it until he was 10 and was given a bassoon to play in the Hecksher Foundation’s Children’s Orchestra in Harlem.

“I thought it was exotic,” he said of the bassoon. “I brought it home and my father threw it out the window. He never gave me a cent for music from that day on ... I supported the bassoon myself by selling soda water to construction men building new homes in the Bronx.”

He graduated from Stuyvesant High School at 15 and went on to the Institute of Musical Art (later merged with the Juilliard School) on a full scholarship and, by age 17, was playing bassoon with the CBS Orchestra. At the same time, he continued his studies evenings at New York University, where he earned degrees in economics and linguistics — and a Phi Beta Kappa Key.

He auditioned for the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1937 before co-conductors Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy and won a job. At 22, he was one of the youngest musicians ever to win a first chair in the orchestra.

Two years later, he was recording the exposed opening bassoon solo in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* for Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*. Many years later, he recalled playing the piece 45 times until Stokowski was satisfied that it was just right.

Even while with the orchestra, Mr. Schoenbach couldn’t keep his hands out of other matters. He organized the orchestra’s pension fund and convinced Arturo Toscanini to play a benefit concert for it. He was instrumental in reviving the orchestra’s children’s concerts and in forming a credit union for orchestra members. In 1950, he helped organize the Philadelphia Woodwind Quintet.

Mr. Schoenbach was at his most productive during the 24 years he spent at Settlement, 1957 to 1981.

When he took it over, he recalled, it was near bankruptcy and its student population had declined to under 700 and was still falling. When he left 24 years later, enrollment was about 3,000. Today, it calls itself the largest community music school in the world, with about 7,000 students.

“When Sol arrived, Settlement Music School was a very small, relatively high-quality but somewhat exclusive place that catered to what it perceived as its constituents,” said Settlement Music School executive director Robert Capanna yesterday. “Sol walked in and said ... why not open the doors?”

He offered guitar classes for the first time and stressed chamber music as a way of bringing people together, he said in a 1984 interview.

He did much more. In conjunction with Moss Rehabilitation Hospital, Settlement offered a therapeutic program for the handicapped. It offered a program for the visually handicapped and a summer music program.

He expanded both the Germantown and Northeast branches and found them permanent homes, and he upgraded the headquarters on Queen Street.

During the year at Settlement, Mr. Schoenbach made music himself, playing and conducting at Marlboro and other music festivals. And he continued to teach at Curtis Institute of Music.

He won many awards, one of which was the Philadelphia Award. He and seven other Philadelphians were given the award in 1976 in recognition of their work among youth.

He is survived by one son, Peter, and two grandchildren, Alisa and Hana Schoenbach. His wife, Bertha, died in May. Donations in his memory may be made to the Kardon Institute of Music for the Handicapped.

Services are private. A memorial concert for Sol and Bertha Schoenbach is being planned for June. ♦