Recollections by Laila Storch and Arthur Grossman, Members of the Soni Ventorum Wind Quintet

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Terry B. Ewell
Towson University, Maryland

Terry Ewell (T. E.): It is my pleasure to be interviewing two of my teachers who both are esteemed members of the IDRS: **Laila Storch** and **Arthur Grossman**. I want to start out by asking about your experiences with **Marcel Tabuteau** and his chamber music classes at the Curtis Institute of Music.

Laila Storch (L. S.): That is a really interesting question. Certainly those classes left an indelible impression on anyone who attended them. It was a privilege to be there but also a terrifying experience. What I do remember is that he started out with basics in the class.

Arthur Grossman (A. G.): I remember two factors that were of great importance for anyone who was going to go on in the profession: the absolute high standard you had to achieve in the class and the control. You had to make your reeds in such a way that you could play at a very low dynamic level. Another very important factor was that it was so terrifying. He was so insistent and rigid about his demands that anyone having been in the class would no longer be frightened of the demands of a conductor. This prepared you for all sorts of situations in orchestras. Conductors could terrify other people but would no longer terrify you because it was not nearly as frightening as playing in a class with Tabuteau.

L. S.: That is absolutely true, but Art told me just the other day about his later visit with Tabuteau.

A. G.: I visited him in France when he had retired. I was in the Army and I took a leave of vacation to see him. I told him how terribly frightening it had been in that class. He said, "No! You were not frightened of me! No, not really?" You knew then that the whole thing was calculated. He was acting a role. Some of that role was in conscious imitation of his own teacher. This even included the breed of dog he owned. Tabuteau had two German shepherd dogs because **Georges Gillet** had two German shepherds. As students we didn't know about this role-playing. The image we saw at the time was terrifying.

L. S.: You mentioned the very high level of expectation. He instilled an ideal of absolute dedication to what you were doing. The most important thing was to reach this high level of artistry. He would talk about how you must be distinguished to play the oboe. That was the center of everything. It was never just that we were in the class for two hours and then you go away and think about something else.

When he would talk about his numbers, for instance, sometimes he would take a stick and beat on the table to the numbers: **3** 1 2 **3** 1 2 **3**; **4** 1 2 3 **4** 1 2 3 **4**; **5** 1 2 3 4 **5** 1 2 3 4 **5** (bold indicates beat). This would indicate division of time with the phrase ending on the downbeat. He would say that if you couldn't do this you should practice it while walking down the street. There was constant thought about these things and also about the wind.

T. E.: What about the wind?

A. G.: Well, you did everything "on the wind" or "with the wind," but never what he called "winding the note." Winding the note meant starting the note and then the wind came later—much like messa di voce. That was absolutely forbidden. Every note had to start at the level you intended the note to sound. Then, of course, you could make a diminuendo or a crescendo.

L. S.: If there was a big upward interval you had to prepare to get to the level of intensity for the upper note already on the lower note. His interest was playing between the notes, not just note to note.

A. G.: I used to say to **John de Lancie**, who was, of course, one of his most famous students, that I couldn't always tell from just one note who was the oboist, but from two notes I could discern that it was de Lancie.

T. E.: You both mentioned that the influence of Tabuteau impacted the Soni Ventorum Wind Quintet.

A. G.: All except one of us had been at Curtis. Most of us also had been at Marlboro together. There were certain personnel changes through the years, but we had a similar approach to how one constructed a phrase, how one balanced a chord, and how one approached an intonation issue.

There was a kind of homogeneity in the way that we played, that many quintets don't have because they went to different schools. An analogy would be the Philadelphia Orchestra. Almost everyone in the string section had studied at Curtis. They had a unanimity of playing that you just don't hear anymore and I hadn't

heard anything like that until a couple of years ago with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. They obviously had all studied at the same school. It wasn't the same kind of playing as Philadelphia, but you could hear the unanimity of approach from the entire string section. That is the kind of unity that the Philadelphia Orchestra had. We felt we had it in the quintet also because of the similar background and the similar way of approaching music.

T. E.: I think you both worked at Marlboro and performed with Casals. Is that correct?

A. G.: Well, I played with Casals more in Puerto Rico. Laila, did you perform with him in Marlboro?

L. S.: One year, I think. The first year I went to Marlboro he was not there yet. My major association with Casals was in France because I had the marvelous opportunity to play with him in the first festival he directed, which was in Prades in the Pyrenees. It was organized for the 200th anniversary of Bach's death in 1950. Everywhere they asked Casals to come out and perform, but he didn't agree. At the time, he was living in exile so to speak. They brought a Bach Festival to him with musicians from the United States and Europe. The two major wind players who were invited were **John Wummer** from the New York Philharmonic and Marcel Tabuteau from the Philadelphia Orchestra. They asked Tabuteau for two other oboists who were his students. I was planning to be in Europe anyway and although I wasn't a student at the time, you were always a student in relation to Tabuteau. **John Mack**, who had not yet graduated from Curtis, was the other one invited and so we were the three oboists for the *First Brandenburg Concerto*. That is when I first played with Casals. That experience remains very vivid in my memory. The things that happen to you in an early period in your life when you are especially striving to learn, remain so fresh in your mind. It seems like yesterday to me. It is surprising that it was half a century ago.

A. G.: I first played with Casals in Marlboro, but then we had many years with him in Puerto Rico at the Casals Festival in San Juan. We saw him as a conductor, as a cellist, as a chamber musician. I actually decided that I wanted study the Bach *Cello Suites* with him on the bassoon. So I went to his house several times and had him coach me on his interpretation of the Bach *Cello Suites*. That established for me a slightly different relationship with Casals than I would have had otherwise if I had just played in the orchestra. We didn't live very far from him and we would visit sometimes. He would take our daughter, who at the time was two years old, and put her on his lap—we had a very personal relationship.

Those years at the Casals Festival were amazing. He was able to bring together some of the very best orchestral players in the whole country. That was really a very fine orchestra.

L. S.: You know, it really was. I think I appreciated it even more when I went back to Puerto Rico years later and visited the Casals Museum. I saw some of the video broadcasts. I remember especially hearing the *Overture to Die Meistersinger*. What a fantastic performance that was! They were incredible performances with full symphony orchestra. In Prades, (I played with him four summers there), the largest group we had was for the Schubert *5th Symphony*. There was one exception; we recorded the Schumann *Cello Concerto* with him.

T. E.: Was Puerto Rico a formative time for the Soni Ventorum?

A. G.: Yes, but the Soni Ventorum actually had three antecedents. There was a Curtis quintet that Felix Skowronek and I played in. Then there was the Seventh Army Quintet with Felix Skowronek (flute), Bill McColl (clarinet), and myself. And there was a quintet in Vienna with Laila and Bill McColl. When we came to Puerto Rico the quintet consisted of Felix Skowronek, Bill McColl, Christopher Leuba on horn, **Jimmy Caldwell** on oboe, and myself. Chris Leuba only played one year with us; then Bob Bonnevie came. Then Jimmy left and Laila came and the quintet was stable for quite a while. Bonnevie then left and at that time the University of Washington was looking for a quintet but we didn't have a horn player. Chris Leuba, however, had applied for the job at the University of Washington as a horn teacher. At that point we came back together as a quintet. Chris and Laila had actually never met. That was the quintet that stayed together for eleven years.

L. S.: I was three years in Puerto Rico and twenty-three years in Seattle: a quarter of a century playing quintets.

A. G.: I did it for forty years.

L. S.: I don't think we ever got tired of playing the quintet repertoire. We made a big effort to squeeze every drop out of whatever it was we were playing. We really tried to bring the music up to as high a level as we could. We would get together, making decisions on our own about how we wanted to play something. We were not facing…

Both: A conductor!

A. G.: That made a big difference.

T. E.: To what do you attribute the long-term success of the Soni Ventorum?

A. G.: I think that musically it has to do with what we said earlier. We came from similar backgrounds and had a similar approach. I also think it came from a way of dealing with rehearsals that many groups don't have. Maybe it is not ideal, but we were very circumspect in criticizing one another—we were very careful. We really didn't get into fights in rehearsals about musical things. We were able to stay on a personally friendly basis.

For instance, there are touring groups that never see each other except for the concert. But when we toured we had most of our meals together. We would go out sightseeing together. When we were in Greece, for example, or South America, we would all travel together to archeological sites. Our continued friendships made it possible for the quintet to perform together that long. Look, Laila has now been out of the quintet for eleven years. We are still friends and we see each other. So the friendships extended beyond just music.

L. S.: I must say that when I look back on it and we talk about some of the experiences we had, those tours were really wonderful. We were always interested in seeing whatever we could in a particular place. The State Department sponsored many of our tours in the 70s so the consulates or embassies always hosted us wherever we went. If they found out we were interested in archeology they were happy to drive us around. One time they said, "The last group that was here didn't want to go anywhere." They were pleased to take us places. Art, Bill, and I used to attend operas. If there was an opera anywhere we would attend. We went to the opera in Portugal, in Hungary, and in Athens we saw *Madama Butterfly*. That was when Art used his several words of Greek to ask some people to stop talking.

A. G.: In *Madama Butterfly* there is a long orchestral interlude and as the orchestra played, the people sitting next to me started talking. They talked louder and louder. I turned to them and used my one or two Greek words, saying, parakalo, which means "please." The man turned to me and said, "Now is nozzing! (nothing)" They were not singing on stage so there was nothing.

L. S.: We used to always repeat, "Here is nothing," or whatever. It was a great joke.

T. E.: Tell me about some of your travels.

L. S.: I actually made a condition for going on one tour. I was not that eager to go to high altitudes such as La Paz in Bolivia. Felix had called me and said, "Is there any place you would not want to play?" I replied, "Well, I think at 12,000 feet. I am not crazy about going to La Paz." He said, "Well, that is where we have been asked to go." We were going to Cochabamba first, but that is at 8,000 feet. That was supposed to get us accustomed to the higher altitude. But I said, "However, if you can promise that we will get to Lake Titicaca I will consider it." I had learned about the lake by reading the National Geographic.

A. G.: Getting to Lake Titicaca turned out to be quite an experience. When we arrived in Bolivia everything was under a curfew, a state of siege. There was no transportation at all. They told us that we would hear gunfire every night but "if it sounds a block or two away, don't worry about it."

L. S.: This was in Cochabamba.

A. G.: I had actually promised to Laila that she would get to Lake Titicaca so I wanted to be sure that it happened. She asked me, "What are you going to do now?" I said, "Laila, don't worry, I will take care of it." I went out on the street and found a taxi driver.

L. S.: That was in La Paz.

A. G.: Yes. I asked, "For $5 a piece, can you get us to Lake Titicaca?" It turned out that the driver had a relative with a little house on the shore of the lake, which was also the "restaurant" that fed us. And another relative who took us on a boat to the island that Laila wanted to visit. That was where Thor Heyerdahl built the reed boats.

L. S.: Those were great adventures then. I read that now there is some sort of inn on the shores of Lake Titicaca. We came back through the high plains (altiplano) with the snow beating down. We saw llamas grazing. It was really fascinating. Then, of course, we made a side trip to Machu Picchu. I almost wondered if we ever played concerts!

A. G.: This was before tourists overran it. It was wonderful; there was hardly anybody there. And then remember when we played in Turkey and we were taken to Ephesus? We had a private guided tour and played a concert in an amphitheater for the Turkish television. This was in the antique Theatre of Ephesus.

L. S.: Cyprus was interesting.

A. G.: We had a concert one night on the Greek side and the next night on the Turkish side. At that time you couldn't easily get from one side to the other. You had to go from the Greek side to Athens, from Athens

to Istanbul, and from Istanbul to the Turkish side. But it was impossible to do it in one day and we had a concert the next night. We told our driver, "Let's just drive across the green line." He said, "You can't do that." We replied, "Well, you have to." So we did. We drove over the green line and explained to the guards that we were just musicians. We said, "We had a concert last night and another concert tonight and no other way to get there." They let us through. We were the first people ever to cross the green line by land.

L. S.: The musicians on one side who we met at a party afterwards said, "Please give our regards to our friends on the other side."

A. G.: There used to be a Cyprus Philharmonic that had a mix of Greek and Turkish musicians. Later the Greeks had to remain on one side and the Turks on the other side. Then, of course, there was no orchestra at all. They remembered each other fondly, and had worked together with no animosity at all.

T. E.: The Soni Ventorum was distinguished by its championing of new and under- performed literature. We were talking before this interview about the Reicha quintets and chamber music by Villa-Lobos.

A. G.: We were the first, I think, to have all 24 Reicha quintets, which we obtained in microfilm form and printed out. At that time I think the only Reicha quintet being played was the one in Eb (Opus 88, No. 2), and that was in the truncated version. We decided that this was music that was really worth hearing so we played a lot of his quintets. We set out at one point to record all his 24 quintets. We managed to record five and then the grant funding ran out so that we never finished. We felt that it was at least important to play that music.

The music of Villa-Lobos was something that we just fell in love with. He was a great composer of wind music. I think we played and recorded nearly everything he wrote for our instruments.

L. S.: I remember that I found it very exciting working on the trio, which really wasn't being performed much around 1968 to 1975. I think we went to Brazil twice to perform...

A. G.: ...in 1972 and 1973.

L. S.: We recorded all the Villa-Lobos wind music before then. Those recordings had a certain amount of recognition at that time. Then the Duo was reissued on a tape.

A. G.: I just saw that tape advertised somewhere last week.

L. S.: It was a very unusual company (Barclay-Crocker), which existed for a little while and received some incredible reviews. Carlos Coelho just mentioned to me the other day that he was impressed that we had actually known Villa-Lobos' widow.

A. G.: Yes, she came to several of our concerts in Brazil. An interesting sideline to that is how we often think it is important to play an Urtext edition to be sure that we get the right notes and what the composer intended. There was one note in the *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 6* (for flute and bassoon) that I always felt was wrong but there was no way to prove it. So when we were in Brazil I asked Arminda, who was Villa Lobos' widow, if I could see the original manuscript so that I could check out this note. She said, "Well, that disappeared years ago and there is no manuscript." She is a musician, so I asked her if she would look at the score. "Let me know what you think, if I am right or wrong about the note." I showed her the passages in question. She said, "Well, you've played this piece more than anyone else in the world, you decide." So I think there are a lot of times when you have to take with a grain of salt that composers know exactly what they wrote.

Another example is the *Seven Impromptus for Flute and Bassoon*, which we commissioned from Jean Françaix. The music came and of course each movement had a metronome mark. When we started reading it we had the feeling that all the metronome marks were slow by 20 to 25 percent. So we just played it faster. It did, however, say at the end of the manuscript circa 17 minutes. We actually didn't time it; we just took the tempi we thought should be correct. When we recorded it I noticed that the elapsed time of the recording was 17 minutes and 10 seconds. So we had come very close to what he wanted, but if we had played the metronome marks it would have lasted some 22 or 23 minutes. So I think you have to use your musical judgment.

We had experiences with other composers where they would ask, "Why are you playing it at that tempo?" We would say, "Well, that is what you wrote." "Well, that is not what I wanted." Then they would say the tempo they wanted, but it would bear little relation to the metronome marking. Other composers when asked, "Do you want an F or F# here?" said, "Well, what do you think sounds better?" Well, none of us can know with any degree of certitude what Mozart, Haydn, or Beethoven would have said had you asked, "Do you really want an Eb here?" We don't know, but based on experiences with the living composers I tend to think that the ideal of being "authentic" is not really possible. We just don't know.

L. S.: Speaking of little known works, I have been hearing whole symphonies and compositions by people whose quintets we played; for instance, Onslow. They

are now bringing out these very little known composers—some of the 19th century works that aren't well known at all. Many years when we did the larger concerts, when the Soni Ventorum would play with students, we would play these lesser-known works; for instance, the *Nonet* by Reinecke. They were quite nice works.

A. G.: I love the Bernard too. It is a wonderful piece.

T. E.: Both of you were symphony musicians and I know that most of your colleagues remained in orchestras. Did you view it as risky to become chamber musicians exclusively?

A. G.: Well, there was a risk involved, sure. The symphony musician was at the time the standard way to make a living as a wind player. On the other hand, when you asked about the quintet staying together for so long, I am sure that to be honest, the reason we stayed together was that we had two residencies of employment. The Conservatory of Music employed us in Puerto Rico and the University of Washington in Seattle. So we were not totally dependent for our livelihood on quintet concerts. The fact that we were all at the university made it less easy to change personnel than it might have been if we had been freelancers. We all had teaching positions and in most cases tenure. This added a kind of stability to the quintet.

L. S.: It was unique that the University of Washington hired the quintet as a whole. So many quintets have been put together with the faculty that happen to be there, although in some cases this has led to some very fine results. There are so many more wonderful wind players now than there used to be that a fine wind quintet isn't such an unusual thing. At the time they hired us, however, it was exceptional. I think there were only two places with quintets.

A. G.: At the time we were hired there had only been three hires of quintets as a group. Two of those were ours: at Puerto Rico and the University of Washington. The only other hired quintet was when the North Carolina School of the Arts employed the Clarion Quintet. Typically, universities hire five individual people and then form a quintet.

T. E.: One last question for you. You both have been involved with the IDRS for many, many years. How has the IDRS changed over the years?

L. S.: That is an interesting question. I remember my first connection with the IDRS. Someone asked me to write an article about Tabuteau. They had first asked John de Lancie and then John Mack. John Mack said to ask Laila Storch. I was very hesitant; that was in the early 1970s. I stated in the beginning of my article that I felt it was impossible to write about Tabuteau. I still find it hard even though I am trying! I saw Madame Tabuteau in Paris and asked her opinion, if I should do it. She was very ill at the time and could hardly get a word out but she said, "Yes." So I decided to go ahead. I put some pictures with it.

T. E.: Was this the article about the fisherman?

L. S.: No, that came much later: "Marcel Tabuteau From a Different Angle." That was the one about fishing. The earlier article was in a three or four page publication. Someone referred to that publication this morning; it was like a little folder. I have saved all of my journals, from the folders to our present thick magazine. The journal size is one amazing thing, of course, that has changed.

A. G.: One of the things that make the magazine thicker is that the IDRS has so much corporate sponsorship and advertising. There is now support for the organization.

I started by subscribing to *To the World's Bassoonists* edited by Gerald Corey. That was my initiation. Then when it merged with the oboists it became the IDRS. I have been a member since it started. In the beginning the conferences were much smaller. They were much less complexly organized. You could actually attend every single event at the conference. You never had to miss anything. Maybe there were four or five events in a day and then an evening concert.

L. S.: How many people attended in those years?

A. G.: Maybe 200. So now there are two, three, or sometimes even four things happening simultaneously. One simply cannot attend everything.

L. S.: Yes, it is amazing. It is really fascinating how it has grown. There are more players of oboe and bassoon. Hans Moennig predicted 30 years ago that there was a veritable "oboe explosion" coming. Now when I looked around this morning and saw the huge audience at the conference and the attendance even two years ago at the IDRS Conference in South America, it is really exciting.

A. G.: I believe that one thing that might tie this whole interview together would be to go back to the first thing we talked about: Tabuteau and his influence on wind playing and now the IDRS. Something started when Tabuteau trained so many wind players on all instruments, especially the double reeds. Now the IDRS and the level of wind playing is so much higher today

than when we started. I think this is amazing. It is a tribute to Tabuteau and his teaching. It is a tribute to the IDRS and the work it has done and to all of us who have been teaching at universities and trying to raise the standards.

T. E.: Thank you both very much for your time.

(IDRS members interested in learning more about the Soni Ventorum should read this excellent and comprehensive work: Megan C. Lyden, "The Story of the Soni Ventorum Wind Quintet," [DMA dissertation, University of Washington, 2000]. This dissertation contains a history of the quintet, interviews with the members, a complete discography, and a list of programs from their performances. Also see Laila Storch's article "Across the Andes with Soni Ventorum," To the World's Oboists, 3/1 [April 1975].)

IDRS Sponsor-a-Member Program

Nancy Ambrose King
Ann Arbor, Michigan

The IDRS established a Sponsor-a-Member program in 1995 for the purpose of enabling double reed players from around the world to participate and enjoy the opportunities of membership in our organization through the sponsorship of current members. The primary purpose of the Sponsor-a-Member program is to attract to our society double reed players who because of economic circumstances would not otherwise be able to join the IDRS. This is an important outreach mission of our society. Since the program's inception, sponsored members from the Peoples' Republic of China, Vietnam, Lithuania, Ecuador, El Salvador, Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Ukraine, Tartartstan, Russia, and South Africa have become IDRS members through the generosity of sponsors. This coming year, a special effort will be made to assist our fellow double reed players in Argentina, whose hospitality was so enjoyed by all at our Buenos Aires conference, but who have been unable to sustain membership due to the economic crisis in their country. An additional aspect of the program has been the exchange of letters and communications between sponsors and new members.

In coordination with Norma Hooks, Executive Secretary, I will be pairing sponsors with potential adopted members. IDRS will honor sponsors' requests for specific adopted members as well. Anyone may become a sponsor by requesting an adopted member and paying one year's dues for that individual. Sponsors may elect to pay an additional fee for first-class postage so that publications arrive more promptly.

IDRS is thankful to all sponsors who have participated in this worthwhile project in the past, and looks forward to new sponsors becoming active in the program. If you are interested in sponsoring a member, or know of a potential member who needs assistance, please contact me for more information at:

Nancy Ambrose King
University of Michigan School of Music
1100 Baits Dr.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
nak@umich.edu