

Alan Goodman — Bassoonist, Author, Humorist: An Interview

By Ronald Klimko
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If you haven't met **Alan Goodman**, then you are missing something in your life! Please do so the next time you spot him at an IDRS Conference, or at a summer music camp, or-easiest of all—after another wonderful concert by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he resides as co-principal bassoon along with **David Breidenthal**.

Having known Alan since his early years as principal bassoon of the Milwaukee Symphony when I was finishing up graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, I was well aware of his marvelous wit and that devilish twinkle in his eye. In a sense, Alan's personality is that of the quintessential bassoonist—a real pro who can see the true “craziness” of this crazy profession of ours and appreciate and love it and equally mock it at the same time. To me, Alan is what the very best in “bassooning” is all about.

A trip to Los Angeles last September enabled me to conduct two wonderful interviews: a long one with reedmaker **Scott Vigder** on the trials and tribulations, as well as the myriad of techniques involved in making a living as a reedmaker, which will appear in a future *Double Reed* issue, and the other with the trials and tribulations of “being Alan Goodman”.

We met appropriately enough at Art's Deli on Ventura Boulevard in L.A. — also a “quintessential” kind of place, whose colorfulness was only matched by my interviewee! The following is a transcription of our conversation:

RK: It is September 15th, 1999, and I am here with Alan Goodman. We are at Art's Deli on Ventura Boulevard in Los Angeles, and I'd like to begin by asking you: When was the first time that you became interested in music?

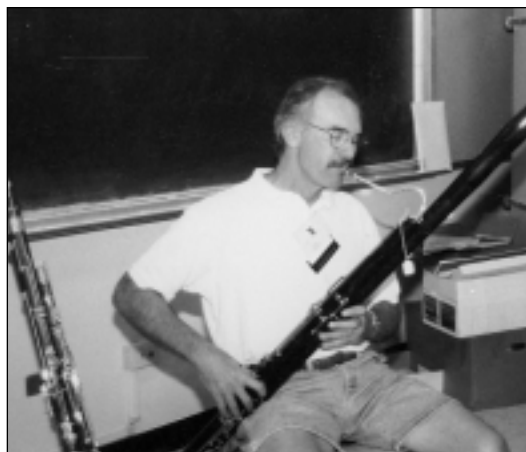
AG: How many shots do I get at this??

RK: (Laughter) As many as you'd like.

AG: I could tell you the first time I realized I WASN'T interested in music, it was when my mother decided I should play the piano at the age of six or seven! After she gave up on the piano she went for the clarinet. But nothing took. And I hated it. I thought: “This is awful”. I think the first time I actually became interested in music was when I was 13—when I got hooked up with a bassoon.

RK: What kind of bassoon did you play on initially?

AG: I started out on a Heckel bassoon. The school bought a Heckel bassoon – 5000 series for five hundred bucks!



Alan Goodman “sampling” the wares at the Madison IDRS Conference last August.

RK: Wow! What year was this?

AG: You're asking tough questions ... EMBARRASSING questions!

RK: It WAS in this century wasn't it??? (laughter)

AG: I'm not sure, I think that's when I was studying with Karl Almenrader. He threw me out if I remember!!

RK: Couldn't play those high g's eh?

AG: They hadn't invented high g's yet. Let's see, that was 1956.

RK: My first Heckel cost eight hundred bucks in 1961.

AG: Actually the school had bought two bassoons. There was another kid who was more talented, and they gave him the better bassoon.

RK: Where is he now?

AG: He's probably a success—President of IBM now-making money!!

RK: He probably held on to his bassoon and just sold it last year and RETIRED! (laughter)

AG: Anyway his was the expensive bassoon. It was the six-hundred dollar bassoon!

RK: Wow! It had “overdrive” huh?!! So you were spoiled right away with a Heckel bassoon. Who was your teacher at that time? Did you study privately then?

AG: My first teacher was **Bill Katz**, who was the school band director. He recently retired from the same school. Over forty years there I think. A great teacher. He had studied bassoon with **Simon Kovar**, and he also played the other woodwind instru-

ments. All of them. He was in the 802 Union book as an oboe player, and a saxophone player. He could play flute, clarinet. He was a natural teacher. I mean he would have to be to get me to stick with it!

RK: How long did you study with him?

AG: Bill was my teacher for over a year. He used to come to my house and give me private lessons—it took me a while to learn how to put the thing together—only about three months—but Bill was a patient guy. I was a talent! A real protégé! A virtuoso! Then he told my parents that he thought I should go study with Kovar. Bill probably needed a rest.

My father used to drive me into the Bronx to study with Kovar every Saturday. The first time we met Kovar he stood there in the doorway with an impish grin, egg drops all down his shirt, and a glass of steaming hot tea.

RK: And you knew you wanted to be a bassoonist right there!!! (laughter) What do you recall of the years you studied with Kovar?

AG: I studied with him for about a year and a half before he left for the (West) coast. I was almost sixteen. I thought he was two hundred years old! I'm probably about as old now as he was then. I was impressed by the experience. I was just awed by the fact that he had bassoon players coming in and out of the place all the time. He was such a wonderful character. Instead of suggestions, he made proclamations. He told me one day: "I'm going to make you, keed, the best bassoon player in the world!" Another time I went in and he was busy throwing another bassoon player out. It was the first time in my life I ever heard a guy play a bassoon so good. The guy was a great player, and Kovar was throwing the guy out! He was three times Kovar's size and Kovar was screaming: "Get out! Get out! I never want to see you again! Get out!" So I looked at my father and said: "I think we'd better leave!"

Kovar's wife would always come in to the room where he gave his lessons. He wasn't allowed to smoke cigarettes and he usually threw them out the apartment window when he sensed she was around. I don't know who they landed on when he threw them out the window. But this one time she came into the room without warning, and he put the cigarette under my right hand between me and the bassoon, and I reacted by picking my hand up. He whispered to me: "Keep playing, keed! Keep playing!"—all the while she circled around us smelling the air. All she must have smelled was burning flesh. I was more afraid of Kovar than I was of my hand going up in flames.

RK: Did it work?

AG: It did. While I kept on playing and Kovar got unusually interested in the music on my stand, she

circled the room several times sniffing the air, giving him a dirty look. And then, while she was leaving, rather than let her go out in peace, he looked up and asked innocently: "Is everything OK, dear??" (laughter)

He liked my father to come into the lessons, because my father smoked a cigar. He'd practically light the cigar for my father. Between him with the cigarettes and my father with the cigar, we could hardly see each other, let alone the music!

RK: Were you doing any playing at this time with any groups?

AG: Yeah, I guess. As one of the few school aged bassoon players in the area-at that time —there still weren't many bassoon players around—I'd get calls from community orchestras. Once Manny Vardi, who was a pretty well known viola player in the New York area called. He was Toscanini's viola player. He wanted to conduct—like everyone else—and was conducting an orchestra in West Hempstead, New York. He spoke to my father, who acted as my agent: "Hey, can we get this kid over here to West Hempstead on Tuesday nights? We need a bassoon player." My father, who didn't know music from a hole in the ground, agreed to take me if they let me play first chair.

RK: What did your father do?

AG: He was a salesman. And he was a sports fanatic. He had played some sandlot baseball. He wanted me to be a ballplayer, but I was a disappointment (to him). I had a baseball swing like a broken gate. I couldn't hit air. Just now, in his mid-eighties, he's resigned to my being a bassoonist! He's finally given up on my baseball career!

Anyway, this community orchestra conducted by Vardi was my first experience in hearing classical music. I went there with my bassoon and my father, neither of us knowing what to expect. And what were they playing but Tchaikovsky's "Sixth"!

RK: Oh boy!

AG: Yeah! Oh boy is right! Here, I barely knew the fingerings for a C major scale. The opening note in the solo is the low E, and I was looking down at my thumb to see if I could get it on the pancake key. They went over this opening solo about six times. Finally Vardi put his baton down and he said: "Look, kid, without this bassoon solo the orchestra can't go on. You're the whole show for the first minute! So go home and get it right!"

That was my first experience with the Sixth. They did bring in a 'ringer' from the city to play it at the performance, and my father blew a fuse. He used to give up his Tuesday evenings to get me to the rehearsals and he got into it with Vardi over the ringer. He said: "You told me my kid was first chair if I brought him here, and then you bring in a 'ringer'

to do the show. You're a bum!" And Vardi sputtered over that one. My father was working up a head of steam. He said, "You're messing with the future greatest bassoon player in the world!"

That brought Vardi up to fighting speed. The two of them got into it, nose to nose. All the while I was pulling at my father's sleeve. "Dad, let the other guy play it. I don't want any part of that solo!" The old man was shaking me off like he was arguing with an umpire about a bad call.

RK: Somehow, you never forget that first orchestral experience.

AG: Everytime I play that solo, I think about looking around for the pancake key. And about Vardi and my father going at it. I think back and wonder, "How the Hell did I ever end up doing this for a living?!"

RK: Where did you go from there? Did you go on to a college or a conservatory after high school?

AG: After high school I went to college. My parents sent me to the State Teachers College up at Potsdam, New York, and I studied with **Robert Reinert**, who was actually the biggest influence on my playing I would say. He taught me that there was such a thing as music—that it wasn't all scales and notes. That you weren't only playing the bassoon, there was music too. For me up until then it was just scales and the mechanics. But Bob Reinert was a real musician—a wonderful singer as well as a fine bassoonist. And so he was the one who sat me down where I began to consider music as some real life force with emotional impact.

For the first six months that I studied with him every lesson was playing low G. And I couldn't get it right. He kept singing a beautiful low 'G'. I would try to imitate him on the bassoon, only mine was out of tune, thin sounding, poor attacks. He'd sing beautifully. I'd play rather pitifully trying to imitate his voice. So, you know, my first semester I majored in "Low G"! (Laughter) But things eventually got better because the second semester I majored in "Low A"! Then he even allowed me to combine the two notes!

RK: And go from one to the OTHER??

AG: Yeah! I got pretty good at it! (Laughter) And after college, I went into the Army because of the draft. My number was pretty high, so I went into the West Point Band, and I got thrown out almost immediately for insubordination.

RK: Did you really?

AG: Yeah, humor in the Army is grounds for insubordination. They threw me out of West Point and sent me down to a line band, which is essentially a 25-piece band. Actually it was better in some ways because it was at Fort Jay, which is in New York's harbor, just off the southern tip of Manhattan.

RK: Right in New York!

AG: Yeah. And the commander down there took a liking to me. A stroke of luck. He made me the drum major. Also he didn't want a bassoon player—he made that clear. He said: "I don't want a bassoon player. You have to play the oboe. Can you play the oboe?" People were leaving every day for Viet Nam and coming back in boxes. I said: "Are you kidding? I'm the world's greatest oboe player! Let me have it!" (Laughter)

RK: What year was that?

AG: I was in from '63 to '66. So because I played the oboe for him, he kept me right there at Ft. Jay. I avoided getting sent overseas. I took classes at night at Hunter College towards a master's degree. When I was discharged I got the job playing first bassoon in Milwaukee for three years. Boy that was heaven.

RK: When you auditioned for Milwaukee, just to compare it to the situation now, how many others were auditioning?

AG: I think there were just under 40, something like 34 to 40 people.

RK: Even back then things were starting to tighten up, weren't they.

AG: Oh yeah! But if you went to an audition today and there were only 35 players, you'd be in Seventh Heaven! I mean your odds are only 35 to 1 as compared to today at 100 to 1!

RK: When did you join Milwaukee?

AG: That was in '66. '66-69 in Milwaukee. Oh God, it was like being let out of a cage after the Army.

RK: Who were the conductors of Milwaukee.

AG: Well, it started out with Harry John Brown who was not a very good conductor. But, you know, I was very hard on him, because my sense of what a conductor should be was so screwy. I thought that these were guys who made music. But in retrospect it wasn't that bad, because (I've learned that) there's no such thing as a "good" conductor! It takes you a long time to figure that out! It's just a matter of degree. How bad are they? Are they mean-bad? Are they nice-bad? Then it comes down to the question of "Do they leave me alone-bad"? They're bad, but they leave me alone—that's a "good" conductor! (Laughter.)

RK: I agree! Just out of curiosity, what were salaries like back then?

AG: Coming out of the Army they offered me a salary of \$180 a week for—I forget—was it 36 weeks? I jumped at it. I was making \$140 a month in the Army. When I got there guys were telling me: "You should have held out for \$200." I was saying: "Are you kidding?" I took the job and wanted to sign before they changed their minds! To worry about \$180 or 200!!

RK: (Laughter.) Well what got you here to L.A.?

AG: An airplane! (Laughter.)

RK: Oh, there were other orchestras in between weren't there? Where did you go from Milwaukee?

AG: There was one orchestra, Pittsburgh. I was a year in Pittsburgh. Steinberg was there. It was interesting because he was a great conductor. I couldn't follow any of his beat though. His beat was something—if you can imagine one of these pretzels roasting in an open fire and slowly becoming unraveled, or throwing spaghetti up in the air and watching the ends flail around. (Laughter.) But the orchestra was incredible!

I went back stage when I got the job and I listened to a few guys warming up. And I thought: "What is this, junior high school band? These guys can't play at all!" They were awful. Most of the guys were playing cards anyway. Nobody was interested in leaving the card game long enough to warm up. Then, when they went out on stage, it was an incredible transformation. They sounded incredibly wonderful! But offstage, they sounded awful—it would sound better if they just dropped their instruments on the floor! So that was a big lesson for me. It's not always how you play as an individual, but how you blend in, which is what their forte was. They didn't have to follow Steinberg. They knew what he wanted intuitively. He had terrific rapport with the orchestra.

We did *Das Lied von der Erde* by Mahler at Carnegie Hall, and it was probably the most wonderful performance I ever will do of anything. Steinberg was late in years, and his wife had recently died, and he was starting to have his own health problems. He stood there conducting with his back to the audience, of course, crying through the whole performance. He just had tears streaming down. And the orchestra played like it was the last performance in the world of anything — like it was possessed! I was playing third bassoon, and I had the luxury of laying back a bit and taking this all in. To me I just thought. "This is it. This is music, the ultimate!"

RK: Now you were principal at Milwaukee?

AG: Principal at Milwaukee and afterwards, associate in Pittsburgh. And then I came to L. A. (Philharmonic) in 1970 as co-principal. There were two co-principals in each section. So you were equal principal. Eventually they changed the title to principal. They just called everybody in the orchestra a principal. There's not anybody in the orchestra who's not a principal, because now instead of giving you a raise, they make you a principal!! I think there are two people that are not principals in the orchestra! (Laughter) It's a very short waiting list to be a principal!

RK: "Too many principals spoil the pot!"

AG: All chiefs—no Indians. So I've been here since 1970. Zubin Mehta hired me. I was here Mehta's last seven years before he went to the New York Philharmonic. Giulini followed him. Giulini was here about five years.

RK: Comparisons?

AG: Mehta was intuitive. Everything was intuitive.

RK: That's when you did the famous television tape?

AG: The *Bolero*. Right. We got to the recording of the thing, and as I said, Mehta was intuitive. He liked to squeeze and push. There was nothing really intellectual about his approach. So we got to the *Bolero*, and the engineer complained that the tempo was wavering this way and that. So they tried a couple of different things, and Mehta kept stretching the music here and there, which was fine. But the engineer didn't like it. And since the engineer ran the show, they put a metronome on the stand with just the light in front of Mehta. And we followed the light. The recording was metronomically "perfect"! I can't for the life of me figure out what the point was, but that's how we did it! And, you know, Mehta just shrugged his shoulders. "If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do."

RK: His ego didn't get in the way!

AG: Right! I was amazed. I thought he'd chew that thing up.

Giulini was the kind of conductor with a poor beat, but a tremendous sense of music and sound. He felt that music was a mystery. He kept saying that he couldn't explain what we were doing to get sound to come out of an instrument: "I have no idea how an instrument works." And he would work on passages to get a specific texture — tone and inflection. It was a rich, subtle sound quality.

He was a mystic. He thought the music was something mysterious and wonderful, and he wanted to get it just right. I still remember him on the podium struggling to get us to recreate the sound in his head — it might be the highlight in terms of my total musical experience. We did some wonderful things. His repertoire was limited, but who cares?

Then we went to (Andre) Previn. I like Andre a lot. He's very talented, but he had political troubles with the manager. And the manager got the upper hand. Andre never did anything that was not musical. The complaint about him from the musicians was that his music making was 'dull'. But I never felt that. He's got a wicked sense of humor. I like to throw a "quip" out once in awhile. Mehta hated it, because the orchestra would roar in laughter, and he never had a comeback. He hated to

be “one-upped”. And of course Giulini didn’t understand English enough to know what was happening. When I said something, he looked around as if a missile had shot by!

But Andre—if you threw a “quip” up—he’d come back with some three or four word ‘shot’ that would just cut you to ribbons. You’d have to break up and laugh. But what a wonderful musician! He sat down, I remember, in one of our first concerts together. We played a concerto when we toured to Philadelphia. He did a Mozart concerto and conducted (too). The thing sounded wonderful. I was just knocked out. And his compositions were great. So I liked him. I think he got a real short shrift with the orchestra. His tenure was—I don’t know—four? Five years?

RK: Sometimes it just doesn’t “fit”- the conductor and the orchestra?

AG: True, but I don’t think it was his fault. There was a lot of political animosity, and he got caught by it. But I liked him. I miss him. Then we went to Esa-Pekka (Salonen). He’s been here five years. He’s a young guy. He’s technically sound, but he leaves me cold. He’s a very impersonal music maker. He doesn’t seem to think of music in the same way as I like to—the traditional something from the heart as well as the mind.

RK: Well I understand too, from what I’ve read, that the orchestra is kind of going through a tough transition just trying to reach a broader audience.

AG: Yeah, what you have is a young conductor who is devoted to contemporary music, who has, I think, a limited exposure, himself, to the classical repertoire on which the orchestra is historically grounded. So it can be interesting, but you lose your audience. In a place like Los Angeles the audience comes to be “entertained” Where you have so many choices. Lakers games. Dodgers games. To this show. To that show. You’re competing... The audience isn’t that sophisticated. They come to hear what they want to hear.

In his first four or five years I think he didn’t understand the dynamics of what you have to do as a commercial necessity in order to keep an audience. And as a result our audiences suffered tremendously. I mean they disappeared! So now that is changing. Now he’s making an effort to play more classical things and to bring modern music more in balance as something the people should hear. I think this has been forced on him by economic necessity. You can’t play a concert to an empty house. The Board sees an empty house and has a fit, and in fact it means you’re just not going to stay in business. So I think he’s gone from being a youthful idealist to getting closer to being a middle-aged realist.

RK: You hear a lot of good contemporary music, but also a lot of bad.

AG: I think a lot of the modern music we do for orchestra is not as bad as people think it is. As a personal opinion, I just think that we very often don’t play it well. One of my complaints about Esa-Pekka is that he doesn’t sense a real ‘sound’ in the orchestra. The Philadelphia Orchestra to me has a wonderful sound. I always love to hear that sound—especially the strings. The strings are the ‘heart’ of the orchestra. And I think if you could bring that warmth, that human element into the playing of contemporary music, you’d make the contemporary music much more accessible. It’s just played like, you know, a hammer and an anvil—hack away at it!

RK: In my own experience with my own compositions, one of the reasons I’ve written less and less over the years was exactly that! It always seemed to me that when my piece was played by a good orchestra, it was the last thing that they worked on right at the end of the rehearsal. They’d spend the last 15 minutes on it when everybody is looking at their watch, and they’d never really get into it! And so, of course, they hated it!

AG: Right! I suspect it’s frustrating for composers. Look at Mozart’s time. How many composers were there during Mozart’s time? There had to be hundreds of composers, and you rarely hear of them today. You hear of Salieri because of the movie and because of his relationship to Mozart. But my point is that it’s very difficult to come across great works in any era. In any case it’s unrealistic to think you’re going to play great works all the time. I still think you can play everything — and make it sound better. I’m as guilty as anybody of “dismissing” a work. I don’t claim to have any different attitude than any other orchestra musician. You get jaded. But I always feel that a lot of these things don’t come across because they’re just not played with the same warmth of sound and devotion to detail that the more traditional works are. If you play Mozart badly, it’s going to sound like bad Mozart!

RK: What has your bassoon teaching career been?

AG: Checkered! (Laughter)

RK: Next question?

AG: Let me put it this way. I wouldn’t let you near my students to ask them about me.

RK: (Laughter) Where have you taught?

AG: I taught at Northridge, which is part of the California State system. I taught a semester at UCLA, subbing, and I thought: “Oh great. I’ll teach at UCLA and put that on my resume!” I went there and I had two students. One was a beginner who didn’t want to be there, and another was an English girl who

actually played quite well. I enjoyed teaching her. But the guy came in week after week and never practiced.

We finally made a deal. I told him: “Look. You don’t want to be here and I don’t have the heart to make you be here. So if you don’t bother me any more, I’ll give you a C. But if you ever show up again, I’ll have to fail you!” (Laughter) He took the deal, to his credit. He’s probably a big success somewhere now! (Laughter)

RK: Have you had any students that have gone on and done well?

AG: I’ve got a girl that I’m very proud of that plays in Mexico, **Kathy Snelling**. She came to me in Northridge as a saxophone player, and she made the switch to bassoon at 17 or 18. She practiced morning, noon, and night. She just sent me a recording she made. She sounds terrific on Baroque bassoon. I was impressed by her dedication. There are several others who play for fame, fortune or plain fun.

There’s a former student I bumped into recently. He is now the head of the IRS Investigative Division looking for scam artists. I told him I don’t want to talk to him anymore! (Laughter) He was a real rebel. It wasn’t that he became a great bassoonist, but what I enjoyed was to see that he had gone from this pony-tailed wild rebel into a full-fledged human being. He has a family and a kid. And miraculously, he talks in SENTENCES!

For me, that is just as rewarding as seeing anybody succeeding on the bassoon. That’s happened to me with a couple of students. They don’t have to become bassoon players, but just to see them.

RK: To see them become nice people?

AG: Yeah.

RK: Now you’ve been associated with Yamaha bassoons. Are you continuing to play on the Yamaha?

AG: Yes, I’m playing on my Yamaha bassoon now. When you say I’m affiliated with them—it’s pretty loose. The Yamaha bassoons that I have, I got both of them in Japan when we toured there. The first one I got was a prototype. It’s just a wonderful bassoon. I sold it to **Mike di Pietro**, because I had started using the second one I got, which was a little heavier sounding, and better in the orchestra. As many times as I’ve had two bassoons—as many times as I’ve tried to keep them both going—it’s impossible. You favor one, and you think: “I’ll never be able to pick this other one up and go into the orchestra with it.” So I sold one of them. And I have a Fox 240, which is my ‘backup’ bassoon. I took it (the Fox) on tour not too long ago, and we played the *Firebird*,

And that thing sounded great! People asked me: “Did you get a new Heckel bassoon?”

RK: Tell the story of how you got this bassoon.

AG: Oh yeah.

RK: Because I played on it. It IS a fine horn!

AG: When I sold the Yamaha to Mike, I thought: “Well, I’d better have a ‘backup’ horn.” So I called **Alan Fox**, and I said: “This is me, Mr. Importance!” (Laughter) “You know me, Mr. Celebrity. I don’t have to tell you my name!”

RK: And he answered: “Now which Mr. Importance are you?” (Laughter)

AG: I said: “I like the 240 bassoon. I tried a couple of them. How about giving me a chance to come to the factory and pick one of the ‘many’ that come along the assembly line?” You know, he didn’t miss a beat. “Nice to talk to you, Mr. Important”, he says. “No, that won’t be possible.” So we talked and we dickered. And he said: “I don’t have any! They sell too fast! Try a couple of these mail-order outlets that sell bassoons.” Which I did. I bought my bassoon from a mail order outfit. They sent me a couple of bassoons to try, and I picked one. And that was “right off the rack”. No tailoring. I did have the bassoon ‘tweaked’ recently. I sent it back to the factory, and **Mike Trentacosti** said he would open it up a little, which he did. I think it helped the bassoon a great deal. But right off the rack I took it on tour. And, you know, the bassoon cost around fifty five hundred bucks, and it just sounded all over the hall. And the thing about it is that it’s easy to play. I don’t have to work as hard. People ask me if it’s a Heckel and I say: “No, I got it at a five-and-ten-cents-store—Woolworth model! (Laughter)

RK: Well now, anybody who has read the *Double Reed*—all five of you out there—has noticed over the years that you have a new ‘career glitch’ of late: the *Bassoon Lite* articles which we all enjoy a great deal. Tell us how that all got started.

AG: You ‘discovered’ me! Right here at Hollywood and Vine! I was drinking a soda and you came up and said: “I’m gonna make you a STAR!” And you’re destroying the magazine in the process! (Laughter)

Well, that was the deal where we had these second bassoon auditions, and we slipped **Ray Pizzi** the jazz bassoon player into the auditions as a gag. And Esa-Pekka, who is not noted for his sense of humor, is listening to Ray, who’s crawling across the stage on his knees, playing his own piece, ‘Ode To A Toad’ on the bassoon with rubber gloves coming out of the top of the bell. Esa-Pekka isn’t cracking a smile. He’s looking at the score of the Mozart *Bassoon Concerto*, and he’s saying: “Mr. Goodman, where IS he in the score?” I have tears coming down my cheeks from laughter and I

manage to say "I think, Maestro, he's starting with the cadenza." (Laughter)

So you wanted a story about that audition and I wrote up the story and sent it to you. And you said: "This is pretty good. Do you have anything else?" Which I didn't, but I told you-like every other opportunist: "Yeah, I've got a WHOLE ROOM full of stories!" So I sat down and wrote one or two others, and you fell for them, and so it's YOUR entire fault! It's not my fault. (Laughter) I mean, if you encourage a criminal, you get CRIME! (Laughter)

RK: When is your first book coming out?

AG: Who would buy it? Geez, I've got enough stories to put in a book, and for buyers I think my mother will buy one. She might even buy two!

RK: Well I notice in a lot of the stories the venue is Wyoming. What's the history behind that?

AG: My wife is from Wyoming. I met her at a track here in Los Angeles. I was jogging off the aggravation of a divorce, and she was running in the other direction. So I turned around and ran after her. And I put my big 'moves' on her—I was charming—I still had a lot of hair then—it was all over my face, but I had it. I asked her if she'd like to go out to dinner, and she told me: "No." She was going through a divorce too and she didn't want to talk to men. She thought they were ugly and rotten. I was trying to be agreeable. I told her that's my strong point, that I'm ugly and rotten. So we got to talking. I managed to get a date about a month in advance. I kept offering days on the calendar until she ran out of days saying she was busy.

I remember I asked her where she was from and she said she was from Wyoming. And I thought: "She's got to be lying. Nobody lives in Wyoming! I never in my life met anybody who lived in Wyoming." Then she took me up there to meet her parents. They have a ranch on the western border, about 60 miles due south of Yellowstone Park.

RK: Near the Teton Mountains. That's got to be gorgeous!

AG: It really is. It's Star Valley, which is a high alpine valley surrounded by mountains. It's got three major rivers running thru it. It's got the Salt, the Grey's and the Snake Rivers running thru it. The Snake River just nicks the corner of Star Valley and goes into Idaho, into the Swan Valley. There's Palisades Lake there too. It's absolutely beautiful. So she brought me up there. I've always loved the country. I was born in upstate New York. So we've been going there about fifteen years now.

RK: How long did you go together before you got married?

AG: We went together about two years.

RK: Is she a professional woman?

AG: She's a secretary. She doesn't know

anything about music. I talk to her about musicians, and she just shakes her head and says that we're all crazy.

RK: Have you given her the reed tests? "Honey, which reed sounds best?"

AG: Oh yeah, I do that with reeds, bocals, everything. Her stock answer is: "That's nice, dear. And THAT'S nice, dear."

I love to fly fish. And that's what we do when we go to Wyoming. We camp out in the seventeen years we've been together. We get up there every summer and winter. You get to love it. I built a house up there. And I'm going to retire up there. I designed it myself, something I never dreamed of trying. It's a nice house on seven and a half acres.

RK: Speaking of retirement, I noticed from a recent article in the L.A. Times that a number of artists have retired from the orchestra. Apparently Salonen wants to get some young blood into the orchestra.

AG: Yeah, he doesn't like to see gray heads, which doesn't bother me, because I don't think my hair will stay on my head long enough to be gray. He didn't say anything about bald heads. (Laughter)

Ten people retired, and they went out on a buyout, essentially. They were into retirement age, but they weren't motivated to retire because the pension wasn't where they wanted it. We switched to a better pension plan, and they gave them a better retirement incentive, so they took it.

RK: Have they all been replaced?

AG: No. They're auditioning people right now. They're having trouble getting a principal cello—I don't know why. Gratefully, I'm not part of the auditioning committee. And they're having trouble getting a principal trumpet. By the way, can you play the trumpet? (laughter)

RK: Who are the members of the bassoon section at the present time?

AG: **Dave Breidenthal** is my colleague on first.

RK: How long has Dave been there?

AG: Longer than me. He's been there about thirty-four years. He was a student of **Frederick Moritz**. I think he came to the orchestra in '66. And **Michelle Grego** is our second bassoonist. She is our newest member and has been in the orchestra for about four years. She beat out **Ray Pizzi** for the job—I don't know how she managed to do that. (Laughter)

RK: Where is Michelle from?

AG: She's a native of Minnesota. She's lived here quite awhile. She studied with **Norman Herzberg** and **John Miller** too, I think. I give her advice, but she's wise enough to ignore it. Or maybe she's too busy making sure I don't steal her reeds. (Laughter) And then we have **Patti Kindel** on contrabassoon. Patti has been here I think since about '83.

RK: Where is Patti from? Who did she study with?

AG: She also studied with Norman. She went to USC, and I think she might well be a native of Los Angeles. I'm not absolutely sure about that. I know David is a native.

RK: You don't live in Los Angeles, do you?

AG: Los Angeles?? There is no such thing as Los Angeles. And yet it's impossible for ANYBODY to not live in Los Angeles! It's a city where you can drive for half a day in a straight line and still be in the 'city'.

I live 38 miles north from the Music Center in the next valley-Santa Clarita Valley. When I moved up there it was empty. I used to be able to take hikes and be out in the open. But now there's a building boom there, and I can't step out my front door without having a bulldozer come by and move me down the street!

RK: The next question is an "intelligence test" question: Do you make your own reeds? (Laughter)

AG: Can't you tell by listening to me?? Do you think if I played on somebody else's reeds I'd sound this bad??? (Laughter)

RK: Have you used California cane to make your reeds?

AG: Yeah, I spent a period where I went out and picked it, cut it down, and aged it. I even bought a gouger. The stuff was GOOD!

RK: Where did you get it from?

AG: Huh, I don't know if I should remember for you.

RK: Right!

AG: Actually it grows along the Santa Clarita River, which flows near my house out to the ocean. I picked some stuff half way between my house and the ocean. When I started picking it, it was open land. Recently they fenced it off. I had to get permission one time to get in there. Now I can't get in there even *with* permission! It was beautiful, golden cane. The last time I went there, they had cows trampling it.

RK: Vernon Reed up by San Jose told me he also uses California cane. He found some really fine stuff along a canal near his home. But I recall him saying not too long ago that they had come in and cut it all down.

AG: Down here it's considered an environmental danger. And they're serious about wanting to get rid of it. They pull it up with bulldozers — and the newspapers report that this stuff has absolutely NO redeeming value or use!

RK: They hit that on the head! (Laughter)

AG: Amen!! But I thought the stuff was real good, and I used it for a couple of years. The only reason I think I got away from it was because it was so much

work to get done, and I was getting just as good results from some other profiled cane. But it's good cane, and it's out there—I think that it is every bit as good as French cane.

RK: It would seem that the conditions here would be pretty close to the conditions you would find along the Mediterranean coast.

AG: I can take you down roads here where this stuff is just growing wild, as tall as single story buildings! You drive by and think, "I know there's at least one good reed in there somewhere!" (Laughter)

RK: It's like the optimist who looks into a stall of horse manure and says: "There's got to be a pony in there somewhere!"

AG: The comparison smells perfect! (Laughter)

RK: What advice do you have to students that think they'd like to be a professional bassoonist?

AG: (Pause! Laughter!)

RK: That's good advice!

AG: "You've got to be kidding, kid!" Well, if you can be a professional bassoonist, I think it's a wonderful life. But there's so much luck involved. You might as well take a hundred bucks and go to Las Vegas and put it in a slot machine hoping to hit the jackpot!

I will say this: Despite the vast numbers of bassoonists who show up for auditions, the ones who really play beautifully—and we're talking out of a field of 100-125 bassoonists—comes down to maybe a handful. So, while we kid about the large numbers, most candidates play somewhat coarsely. They just seem to blow into the horn without any sense of blending, matching or achieving a singing smooth line. I often miss some sense of their communicating through the instrument. When you listen at an audition, it is these qualities you notice.

It's rewarding to hear someone come into an audition and play in a very singing style, a soft quality over a large dynamic range with sensible phrasing. I'm not sure, but after all these years of playing I often think I have fewer answers than when I started. Maybe it comes down to visualizing what you want and just doing it. For those who play in this way there has to be a ray of hope at these auditions, because they stand out in the crowd.

But, to answer your question: To me it's been a wonderful life. You live a dream! It's not clear sailing all the way. Sometimes the conductor is driving you nuts! But by and large, you're doing what you want to do, and it's a good life.

RK: On that note we'll call it quits. Thank you, and?

AG: You're not really going to PRINT this are you???

(Laughter) ❖