

An Interview with Stephen Maxym

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About one year ago I began my DMA studies with **Stephen Maxym** at the University of Southern California. I had studied previously with some of his former students, so I had heard many stories about him. Over the year I quickly learned why he had such a great reputation, and why so many of his students have become so successful. I consider him to be a true master teacher. Doing more and more teaching myself, I interviewed him to find out how he has come to where he is today.

How **Sol Schoenbach**, some dumb luck, a hot temper, and a lot of hard work got **Stephen Maxym** a job in the Metropolitan Opera.

Stephen Maxym began his musical studies at Stuyvesant High School. His first instrument was the violin. When auditioning for the freshman orchestra, he made the mistake of bragging that he also played the viola. This of course condemned him to months of rehearsing after-beats in the Strauss waltzes the orchestra was working on. So he quit the orchestra and took up woodworking. Stuyvesant at the time had a very strong music department. During the assembly period some of the more advanced music students would play for their classmates. Mr. Maxym remembers being very impressed with the students who played flute and bassoon. He thought the bassoon was an odd instrument, but this student made it sound beautiful. So later in the semester, when the orchestra director was trying to get him back into the orchestra, he was given the chance to switch instruments. Maxym's first choice was the flute, but the school was out of flutes. So he chose the bassoon. The only bassoon the school had left was a French system. This was during the time the German bassoon was taking prominence in America, and the French bassoon was in decline. Maxym was introduced to the young man who had played in the assembly. That young man was **Sol Schoenbach!** (who later had an illustrious career

in the Philadelphia Orchestra.) Schoenbach gave him a reed, told him a little about embouchure, and showed him the fingerings for F, E, D and C. Schoenbach played a German bassoon, and wasn't sure about the other fingerings, so he left Maxym with those four notes.

During the 1930's most American orchestras hired their musicians from Europe. Juilliard and Curtis had just opened, so there were few well-trained young Americans. The New York Philharmonic formed a scholarship committee to promote American talent. They gave six scholarships per instrument for students in New York City to study with members of the Philharmonic. The orchestra director at Stuyvesant convinced the committee to hold the auditions at the school. Maxym, living across the street from the school, decided "What the heck?" He auditioned on viola and received a scholarship to study with Renee Polane, principal violist in the Philharmonic. Knowing only four notes on the bassoon, he was reluctant to audition on it. But his orchestra director appealed to his sense of school spirit and convinced him to audition. Fifteen minutes before the audition, the three bassoonists from Stuyvesant are sitting outside the audition room. They were the only ones there. **Simon Kovar**, a bassoonist in the Philharmonic, was about to give six scholarships, and only three students have shown up to audition. Half an



hour later, they were still the only ones present. So Kovar impatiently waved his hand and said, "You all have scholarships! I'll see you next week for your first lesson." He took a look at Maxym's old French bassoon and convinced the committee to buy him a new one. He asked Maxym to play the violin for him, since he was such a beginner on bassoon. He liked his violin playing, and it turned out that Kovar himself had started on violin. The committee wasn't going to let him keep both scholarships. Armed with a new instrument and feeling an affinity for Mr. Kovar, Maxym chose bassoon. At this point

he had no thoughts of music as an occupation, so it didn't seem like an important decision. He wanted to pursue an engineering career, but enjoyed music as a hobby. When he showed up for his first lesson, there was a hoard of people there expecting to audition for the scholarships. It turned out that a secretary made a mistake when assigning audition times and told them all the wrong date. So by the good fortune of a misprint, **Stephen Maxym** became a **Simon Kovar** student.

Stuyvesant was turning out many talented musicians at that time. In addition to **Sol Schoenbach**, Mortimer Rapvogel went on to play flute in the New York Philharmonic, and Carmine Coppola later played with Toscanini in the NBC Symphony. The school's orchestra played very sophisticated repertoire. After three years of study with Kovar, Maxym began playing professionally in the city. The orchestras at City College, NYU, and Columbia hired Stuyvesant students to fill in their orchestras. These were the depression years, so earning money was very important. Maxym had an older sister attending NYU. He applied to the engineering school there and was accepted. His parents told him they couldn't afford to send him until his sister finished. Being an impatient teenager, he couldn't see himself waiting around to go to college. So he auditioned for Juilliard and got a scholarship. He says now that he would have ended up there anyway. During this period he was becoming more and more involved with the bassoon, doing lots of playing, and "getting hooked." His interest in the violin had taken second place, and his viola was getting lent to Mrs. Kovar when she played quartets.

Juilliard opened a whole new door for him. The best players in the country were there, and he felt the pressure to keep up. Many of the students there had come from more privileged backgrounds than himself, so he also felt pressure to prove he was as good as they were. He feels that his strong work ethic came from these years of his life. At one point, the director of Juilliard was encouraging him to play for Koussevitzky at the Boston Symphony. Maxym didn't want to, he was afraid he would freeze. He was advancing faster than he could accept,

and was worried that people would find out that he wasn't really as good as they thought he was. This feeling stayed with him for quite a while.

Mr. Maxym is a little embarrassed to admit that he never finished his studies at Juilliard. "I'm a dropout!" he told me. After his third year, he was offered a position in the Pittsburgh Symphony with Fritz Reiner. He described it as "walking into something wonderful." He also said he was scared stiff of the demanding Maestro Reiner. This was a good motivator. Apparently it paid off, because he was re-engaged for a second season. Being the depression, he asked for a raise. But the orchestra was in financial trouble, so they told him maybe next year.

By the end of his second season, the orchestra was on better footing, and Reiner had paid him some generous compliments. So when he was asked back for a third year, he again asked for a raise. The orchestra manager said he would talk it over with the Maestro. At the next rehearsal, Reiner's glasses are on the end of his nose and he's looking down at Maxym. "You're too sharp." "Maxym, too loud." "Too short." Maxym couldn't blow his nose! This went on for three or four rehearsals. Maxym was only 24 years old at this point, and a bit hot-headed. So he went to the manager at the end of the week, and quit. He didn't want to continue playing in a situation where there was a threat over his head. The manager tried to calm him down, and said he would have a talk with Reiner. So the next week, Reiner is all smiles. "Very good Maxym." "Why don't you all phrase it the way Maxym did?" "Very nice today Maxym." This was turning Maxym's stomach, and making him more determined to leave. When Reiner realized he was serious about leaving, he got even madder. Reiner could be a dragon, he would burn people alive. How dare this kid turn him down.

So Maxym left. He went home to New York and auditioned for the Metropolitan Opera. He won the job. He realizes now, that if he hadn't won the job, everyone would have thought Reiner fired him. No one would have believed he quit. The previous bassoonist at the Met had passed away suddenly, so the position had



to be filled quickly. Erich Leinsdorf conducted the auditions. When the other conductors came back from Europe, they were kind of annoyed to find a kid playing principal bassoon. At 25 years old, Maxym looked 16. Panizza (Toscanini's former assistant) came to conduct *Marriage of Figaro*. The manager assigned Maxym to it, "feeding him to the wolves" so to speak. Luckily Maxym had recently played it, so he was ready, and gave a solid performance. Then he was assigned to play for Bruno Walter. After a few performances, Walter went to the management and complimented them on hiring a talented new bassoonist. Now Maxym had passed all their tests, and had freedom to play without having to prove himself.

After two years in the Met, World War II broke out. Maxym went into the service as a radio operator. He served on convoy duty for three years, during which time he did not touch his instrument. When he was released from the service, he only had four or five weeks to prepare for the new opera season. During the war, the musicians had been hired on contract, so the opera wasn't sure they could legally hire him back. Now he was faced with a year of unemployment. His father had a stroke, and Maxym was a newlywed. He desperately needed a job. He considered taking a job in South America as a radio man. The Chicago Symphony had an opening for an assistant principal bassoonist. He had some friends there, and arranged for an audition. It was scheduled three weeks after he returned from the service. He began to practice like he had never practiced before! He started with 10 minutes a day, and by the end of three weeks, was up to eight hours a day. With this kind of intense work, he found that technical things had gotten easier. He was planning to take the Chicago audition, but went to the Met and told them that Chicago was "interested" in him, a half-truth. They offered him a contract the morning of his Chicago audition. So he returned to the Met. After a few years, he was feeling comfortable again. He had settled in with his wife, his finances were stable, life was good.

Later on, Fritz Reiner joined the Met as one of the resident conductors. Apparently he had a good memory, because again Maxym was hearing "Too short." "Not enough." "You're flat." So he approached Reiner at break. Still a little bit of a hothead, he said, "It's been a few years since we've seen each other. I'm older and hopefully a little wiser. I will always do my best, because it is a matter of personal pride. But I consider the way you are treating me to be

harassment. If it continues, I will take you down to the union and prosecute." Reiner still hadn't forgiven him. Had Maxym been playing in some other orchestra, Reiner would have had the power to fire him. But since the Met had several resident conductors, his job was safe. Reiner didn't speak to him for three days. Then one day at break, he came down behind his chair and said "Stephen, I would like you to play this passage..." Maxym couldn't believe it, "Stephen? What happened to Maxym? It was the first time he had addressed me by my first name." From then on, the two of them had a wonderful relationship. At the end of his life, Reiner was ill and resigned his position in Chicago. But he was conducting a performance of *Gotterdammerung* at the Met. In rehearsals it seemed that this would be a magnificent performance. Sadly, he passed away during the rehearsals. Later, Mrs. Reiner would tell Maxym that Fritz admired and respected him very much. Maxym had always enjoyed performances with him, and considered him an excellent conductor.

During his tenure at the Met, Stephen Maxym had the privilege of working with some of the century's finest conductors. Around the time that James Levine took over the podium, Maxym decided he would retire. Better to retire at the top of his game, than when he was sliding downhill. He had seen it happen with so many artists, and didn't want it to be the case with himself.

MAXYM AS TEACHER

Throughout his time at the Met, Maxym was teaching at The Juilliard School and at Manhattan School of Music. When his golf buddy, the singer John Brownlee, became the president of Manhattan School, Maxym got roped into teaching there. He cites curiosity as his main motivation for teaching. The longer he taught, the more he understood about his own playing. The process of teaching made him a better artist and player. The questions that had to be answered for students had to be answered for himself as well.

A pattern began to emerge among his students. During the year he would give assignments, and the students would do them dutifully. But over the summers, he would not see them for a few months. Somehow their progress would seem to disappear over the summer. It dawned on him that his students were relying on him for their progress. They weren't solving problems for themselves or making demands on

themselves. They needed to be more involved. He decided that work with his students should be more of a collaboration. He didn't want them to rely on him to lead them to the "golden land." He believes that once you get the desire going, the fire in the belly, that is when real progress happens. His students must have a curiosity and understanding of what they are doing. They need to have a work ethic and be able to establish goals. If a student is asked what his or her goals are, the answer is often, "I want to play in the New York Philharmonic." or something similar. That is a great, if not remote, goal. But what is the student going to do that year to accomplish that goal? What are they doing this month, this week, or this day? There needs to be some sense of accomplishment every day. You can practice for three hours, looking at your watch, and hope the good Lord will take care of you, but that probably won't get you very far.

Maxym relates a story. A farmer has a very successful farm, at a time when other farms are doing badly. He hasn't been attending church very often, so the pastor goes out to visit him. The pastor tells the farmer how great the farm looks. He says, "You and the Lord are doing a great job." The farmer replies, "Yeah, but you should have seen what a mess it was when the Lord was doing it on his own!" Maxym says, "You can look to the Lord if you wish to, but you better practice!"

He feels that it is frustrating for younger students to be asked to do sophisticated musical things. They don't have strong control of pitch, tone, and dynamics yet. They get so concerned with making sure that notes come out at all that music takes a backseat. You may have a very musical person who simply does not have control over their instrument. I have heard him say many times, "Art begins where technique leaves off." You have to have the physical control, so your spirit can soar musically. He uses the musical demands to show where the physical demands are needed. When those two things are put together, there can be a quantum jump in someone's playing. Almost every week I hear him say, "Don't play as if you are following instructions. Play it the way YOU want it." Be committed to your idea, even if a conductor or someone else suggested it.

He believes in developing an individual. Each person has their own personality, and that needs to come through in their playing. He is proud that his students do not all sound alike. They are themselves. They know that you

don't touch people's hearts when you are following instructions. You touch people's hearts by being convinced about what you are doing and communicating your own feelings.

I asked Mr. Maxym if there has been a change in the students he's worked with from the beginning of his career and now. He does see a big change in the amount of talented students. He attributes part of that to an increase in opportunities for students to learn instruments. In the early days, the students at Juilliard were superb, but there were only three really good music schools at that time. Juilliard would take four bassoons, now they have fifteen or twenty. Since they were so selective, the standard was very high. Now there are so many good music schools, that high standard is spread around a bit more. At an audition today, you probably find many more qualified people than in Maxym's day.

Since there are so many talented people, they don't get the same opportunities to play at school. When he was a student at Juilliard, he played about 15 concerts a year. Students here at USC are lucky if they play six. The faculty back then was much more likely to play for the students and with the students at school. Maxym remembers playing close to twenty concertos with people like Rudolph Serkin when he was a student. When his colleagues graduated, they went right into the great orchestras in New York. Ten or so would go to the Met, ten to the NBC orchestra, and some to the NY Philharmonic. You don't see that happening now. It's hard for a student today to get the experience they need to win a job. If you were auditioning for an opera orchestra, you need a real understanding of that music, which you may never have played before. It is important for students to seek out the opportunities to get this experience, and to get advice from people who have it. You have to play more than what is on the page. You have to have presence and personality. You have to be an individual.

I also asked Mr. Maxym about his former students. So many of them have ended up with wonderful careers. Was there something that stood out about these people when they were students? He said that they all had a certain level of intelligence. They all were able to incorporate his suggestions into everyday practice. They also had the ability to understand what was needed, and *why* it was needed. Not just to blindly accept something because they were told, but to understand its importance. The ones that tend to succeed are the ones with the biggest appetite for knowledge.

That is why he encourages his students to ask questions, because he doesn't always know what they are puzzled by. He tells them that every time they have solved a problem is a moment that they have advanced. You advance on your adversities, not on your good qualities. Your good qualities don't need work, they won't take you father forward.

My last question for Mr. Maxym was about his longevity. So many bassoonists of his generation are no longer actively teaching. What keeps him going? He told me that he often wonders when he should stop. While the physical demands of commuting to school in southern California are getting to be a drain on him physically, he feels an obligation to the students. He feels that he still has an important

contribution to make and can still make a difference. He also swears that it is not an ego trip, but that the personal relationships are still very important to him. He makes it clear that if his students feel they would do better with someone else, that's OK. He stopped playing professionally in 1976, which is before some of his students were born. But if he had stopped everything and completely removed himself from the musical community, that would have been the end of his musical career. The fact that he is still teaching means that he is still participating in the world of art he chose for himself, which is very important to him and very valuable for his students. His only regret is that he didn't have all the wisdom he has now at the beginning of his career.

Karl Öhlberger (1912-2001)

Word has sadly been received that Viennese bassoonist and Honorary Member of the IDRS, **Karl Öhlberger**, passed away on October 9th, 2001. One of the truly legendary bassoonists and teachers of the twentieth century, Professor Öhlberger will be greatly missed in the double reed world. The IDRS deeply mourns the loss of this great artist.

Bassoonist **Judith Farmer** of Los Angeles, California, has added the following biographical tribute to her former teacher:

Professor Karl Öhlberger was principal bassoonist of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra from 1936-1974. He played under all of the great conductors of this time - Strauss, Fuertwaengler, Karajan, Boehm, Knappertsbusch, Szell, Toscanini, Bernstein. He also performed with all of the leading soloists and singers who appeared with the orchestra in concert and in the opera. Karl Öhlberger taught bassoon and chamber music at the Hochschule fuer Musik und Darstellende Kunst over a span of fifty years from 1938-1988. All of his experience from the orchestra was brought into his teaching and coaching.

I had the privilege of studying with Karl Öhlberger from 1976-1979. We would have lessons twice a week on Monday and Thursday afternoons. There were about twelve bassoonists in his class on average. We were expected to all be present when he arrived at 2 o'clock. He would start by teaching the youngest students. The older students listened so they would know how to teach beginning students themselves someday. The younger students would then stay and listen as the more advanced students had their lessons, so they would learn by listening. There were no assigned lesson times, one would play as long as one had material prepared. There were many advantages to this system: one learned so much by listening to one's classmates and there was always an "audience", so one got used to playing in front of others. Also, having 2 lessons a week, one usually went home from one lesson and started practicing for the next one! Öhlberger had a large personal music library, which he kept in the classroom and generously permitted his students to borrow from. This was all on the honor system, though we had "library cards" upon which

we notated what we had borrowed and the date we returned it. I have a photocopy of my cards which I treasure as a reminder of what I studied with him and in what order, which helps me know what to assign to my students.

Öhlberger was a great believer in etudes and had a large collection of lesser-known intermediate ones. He said "Many bassoonists start with Weissenborn and then go straight to Milde." By doing several books of intermediate studies after Weissenborn (Hofmann, Schmidt, Bruns, Pivonka) one had a very solid foundation for approaching the Milde etudes. He also wrote 2 books of etudes based on orchestral excerpts with piano accompaniment. Once one has mastered the etudes the excerpts seem easy by comparison! (These are published by Musikverlag Hilaria, Austria)

Of course we all had to study the Mozart and Weber concertos with him. He prided himself on being the 8th teacher at the Hochschule since Beethoven and felt strongly that the tradition of how to play this music had been handed down from generation to generation. He was tireless in his dedication to his students. When one of us had an audition he would always make extra time to make sure we were well prepared. As a result the large majority of the bassoonists in the 5 major orchestras in Vienna are students of his (or students of his students). His students are not only working in Austria, but in other European countries, the United States, Japan, and South Africa. He kept a record of all of his students over the years. They numbered well over 200 when he retired.

It is impossible for me to express the admiration and gratitude I feel for this man. I feel extremely fortunate to have known Karl Öhlberger. He will be sorely missed.