

Oboist Leaves Orchestra After 35 Great Years

Donald Rosenberg
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One day in the mid-1960s, George Szell called **John Mack** into his office at Severance Hall, a potentially frightening situation for any member of the Cleveland Orchestra. Szell, the orchestra's musical director, had heard that Mack, his principal oboist, had shot a stunning 71 on a golf course.

"I understand you're a magnificent golf player," said Szell, a compulsive (but terrible) golfer.

"Well, Mr. Szell, I was that one day," replied the oboist, relieved that he hadn't committed an artistic crime.

One over par would impress just about anyone, but Mack's musical record is far more imposing. As oboist, teacher and raconteur extraordinaire, he holds a special place in the pantheon of orchestral players.

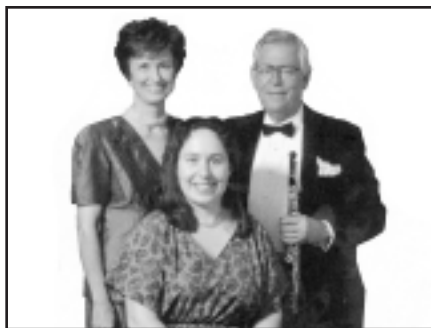
For decades, Mack has loomed as one of the greats of the oboe world – an artist who has combined utmost taste with penetrating interpretive ideas. He has guided legions of younger players who have become members of the world's major orchestras. His annual oboe camp in Little Switzerland, N.C., is a magnet for musicians seeking answers to this recalcitrant instrument's myriad mysteries.

But it has come time for one aspect of Mack's life to reach the 18th hole – his tenure as principal oboist of the Cleveland Orchestra. An eye condition that affects his ability to read music and function on the highest level led him to make the difficult decision to retire from the orchestra at the end of the current season. He will have been Cleveland's principal oboe for a record 36 seasons.

Mack won't play his last concerts until August at Blossom Music Center. But he will make his final appearances as soloist with the orchestra this week at Severance Hall in Handel's *Oboe Concerto No. 1* under music director Christoph von Dohnanyi.

"I hate leaving the orchestra, because it's so gratifying," says Mack. "But at the same time, somebody else has got to do it."

Mack, 74, began doing it in Cleveland in 1965, when Szell hired him to succeed **Marc Lifschey**, the orchestra's longtime principal oboist, whose relationship with the conductor had become increasingly tense. By 1965, Szell was already familiar with Mack's playing. He had auditioned the young oboist in 1953 at the Casals Festival in Prades, France, where Mack was



L to R Christina Price, Soprano; Elizabeth De Mio, Piano; John Mack, Oboe

playing assistant to his teacher, **Marcel Tabuteau**, the legendary principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

The audition took place in a 1,000-year-old abbey with a gravel floor and amorphous acoustics. Mack played orchestral excerpts from memory for 35 minutes.

"Thank you," Szell told him at the end. "I found out what I wanted to know."

But Mack didn't see Szell again until 1959, when he was principal oboe of the New Orleans Philharmonic. With Lifschey headed for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York, Mack was the first to audition for his Cleveland post, but Szell decided to hire another player. As it turned out, Lifschey, who returned to Cleveland a year later, would be sacked by Szell in early 1965, this time leaving the spot open for Mack.

Ironically, the moment that Szell phoned Mack – then principal of the National Symphony in Washington, D.C. – to offer him the Cleveland position, longtime friend Lifschey was sitting right there at Mack's breakfast table.

However turbulent the relationship between Lifschey and Szell may have been, the rapport between Mack and Szell was healthy. The conductor always treated his principal oboist with respect. Szell even spent hours alone with Mack during his first few seasons, coaching him in upcoming works.

"A lot of people didn't like working with him because he was tough," says Mack. "I loved him. As demanding as he was, it seemed to me always for the sake of the music. It was never for self-aggrandizement."

And Szell could even display a subtle sense of humor when Mack tried something the disciplinarian conductor considered slightly out of bounds musically. During a rehearsal of the third movement of Haydn's *Miracle* Symphony, for example, Szell stopped the orchestra and turned to his oboist. Here's Mack doing a dead-on Szell imitation:

"No, John," the conductor said, "We're not going to use the house sauce on this one."

Mack's style of oboe playing is a flavorful extension of the highly seasoned artistry he absorbed from his teacher, Tabuteau, with whom he studied at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. The French-horn oboist came to the United States in the first decade of the 20th century, playing principal in the Met orchestra under Mahler and Toscanini before serving in the same post with the Philadelphia Orchestra for almost 40 years.

Upon his arrival in the United States, Tabuteau sounded like a French oboist, with a quick vibrato and nasal tone, but soon picked up elements from immigrant colleagues in the Met orchestra, a veritable melting pot of musicians. He "made the oboe tone much more cosmopolitan than before," says Mack, who grew up in Somerville, N.J. "I've gone even further. I try to make it sound right and suitable for what we're doing."

Mack believes he has developed a "tone of complexity and completion" that listeners can hear no matter what surrounds the oboe. "The tone has to have enough gumption," he says. "Szell wanted the tone to be heard, even if it sounded false to you [onstage]."

Achieving that tone is a matter of personal taste and good reeds, those thin, temperamental pieces of cane that must be shaved carefully if the sound is to project adequately and beautifully. Mack began

making his own reeds as a young oboist, and he helped colleagues, including Tabuteau, with this fine art.

He teaches the art at his oboe camp in North Carolina, where 60 or so students have been listening to his words of wisdom every summer for 26 years. After he leaves the orchestra, Mack will continue to teach at the camp and at the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he has been a faculty member since coming to Cleveland, and will fly to New York every other week to guide students at the Julliard School.

The current faculty oboists at Julliard are Mack students who serve as principals in the Met orchestra: **Elaine Douvas**, who studied with him at CIM; and **John Ferrillo**, who worked with him at Kent/Blossom Music, and who becomes principal oboe of the Boston Symphony in the fall. Two Mack students also play in the Cleveland Orchestra: **Jeffrey Rathbun**, who succeeds him next season as principal; and **Elizabeth Camus**, who first worked with Mack as a 13-year-old in New Orleans.

So, what does it take to be an oboist?

"If you're going to play the oboe, you have to have elementary bravery," Mack says, "or you're in big trouble. Some of them are nutty, wild and unreasonable. I call myself a quintessential Cleveland Orchestra player – orthodox, but zippy, and nonwacko. I hate wacko."

He still loves golf, however, and looks forward to the time when his eyes are "peachy-pie" so that he can get his game back in shape – not to mention play recitals with pianist Elizabeth DeMio and keep musical flames burning for generations to come.

"My fondest wish is that Mozart should be alive and well 400 years from now," he says. "The passing on of knowledge is the only thing I can do anything about."