

Ferdinand Del Negro had a long and distinguished career as bassoonist and contrabassoonist with the Philadelphia Orchestra—a tenure which spanned the years from Walter Guetter to Bernard Garfield. When he died in 1986, a picture of him appeared on the cover of the Fall, 1986 (Vol. 9, No. 3) issue of *The Double Reed*, and in the same issue his long-time friend and colleague in the Philadelphia Orchestra, Sol Schoenbach, wrote a wonderful tribute to him.

**Ferdinand Del Negro
(1897-1986) — Remembrances ...**

by Sol Schoenbach

I knew Ferdinand Del Negro before I knew him! Every young bassoon student in New York had heard of this remarkable musician who had gone to Philadelphia to fill in at the Summer Concerts in Fairmont Park and had remained as a valuable member of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Besides, his sister, Connie, was a fellow student at the Institute of Musical Art (later merged with Juilliard), and his brother, Luca, was the hornist in the first professional quintet I joined. My first actual meeting with Del took place when the Institute of Musical Art celebrated its 25th Anniversary with a Carnegie Hall concert. Such distinguished alumni as William Kincaid and Ferdinand Del Negro joined us on the stage for a late rehearsal of *Scheherazade*. When I tearfully told Del of the many rehearsals we had been thru he gallantly let me play my few solo notes. Little did we both realize that seven years later we would be in the same orchestra!

His father was the highly esteemed tuba player with Damrosch and the New York Symphony, and he had arranged for his son to get *one* bassoon lesson with a German colleague. Del always talked about that lesson in the old Union Headquarters on 86th St. in the German section of New York known as Yorkville. The union was an outgrowth of the Aschenreitel (Cinderella) Society, a totally German musicians guild. Above the meeting room was a huge ballroom for dances. In the darkness of the unoccupied ballroom and sworn to secrecy Del got his first (and probably only) bassoon lesson.

After World War I service on the presidential yacht, the *Mayflower*, Del returned to New York and began his life-long friendship with Benjamin Kohon, also ex-Navy, who had left the Philadelphia Orchestra to get back to New York. When David Dubinsky, personnel manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra contacted Kohon for a player for the Lemon Hill series in the park, Kohon recommended Del. The result was 43 years of excellent service to the orchestra!

As associate solo bassoon and contra bassoonist, Del soon found himself in the first chair. Walter Guetter's health was precarious, and he took an entire season off to recuperate at a sanatorium. This was no doubt an indication of the disastrous cancer that destroyed Walter Guetter in 1937 at the age of 44. After the founding of the Curtis Institute in 1924 Guetter taught there for a few years, but decided to quit teaching because he felt the field might get overcrowded. (His prophecy proved correct!) At his suggestion Del began teaching at Curtis and guided many outstanding players until his departure in 1943. He found in teaching a dedication which became the main theme of his life. When he was faced with compulsive retirement he came to see me as Executive Director of the Settlement Music School. I assured him that he had a place as bassoon instructor with the School, and was relieved. The School's bassoonists blossomed under his instruction — no one was too small or too untalented to get his full devotion. Without meals or rest he'd drive from branch to branch to carry out his duties as well as his teaching at many other Philadelphia institutions. In return his pupils became devoted to him and established the Ferdinand Del Negro Scholarship Fund at the Settlement Music School to honor his memory and perpetuate his work.

For those who would look for outstanding examples of his prowess on the contra, they should listen to the Philadelphia Orchestra's recording of Gliere's *Ilya Mourametz Symphony* and the Ravel *Left Hand Concerto* with Casadesus. The recording of the Ravel took place on an early Wednesday morning following a Tuesday evening performance in New York. In subfreezing weather our instruments had spent the night in the van, and we struggled to get them warm. "Smoke" rings from my bassoon were trouble signals, but poor Del, who had to begin the Ravel, was a half tone flat. Columbia Records saw dollars vanishing as we tried to get the contra warmed up. As we grew desperate Del began to dismantle the contra until only enough was left to play the opening solo. Judging by the results it was clearer and better than ever. Listen to the recording for proof.

After each concert Del would say goodnight to the bassoon section as we packed up with the same phrase: "Well, fellows, another day nearer the grave." I'm the only one left of the Fisnar, Gruner, Del Negro section, and I know what he meant. But it would be a great thrill to see him and my other colleagues again up there ... or wherever.