

teacher and performing artist at many music festivals, including the Casals Festival, the Aspen Music Festival, the New College Music Festival, and many others. He also serves as an editor of bassoon music for the International Music Company, with over 25 works having been issued under his editorship. He has appeared as soloist with many orchestras, including the NBC Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, the Aspen Festival Orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony and others in the United States and Europe. He appears as soloist on six commercial recordings, including his renowned performance of the Mozart *Concerto* with the NBC Symphony under Toscanini, issued by RCA.

It would be almost impossible to list all the honors which have been bestowed on this remarkable musician, but perhaps one of the significant was conferred in 1985, when he was the recipient of the first annual award of the Toscanini Collection Association in recognition of his excellence and dedication in perpetuating Toscanini's memory and high ideals.

The BSO's Ralph Gomberg: an Oboist and a Gentleman

Caroline Smedvig

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This article first appeared in BSO, the quarterly newsletter of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It is reprinted here with the permission of the author. The editor is grateful to Leslie Ploof of the Boston Symphony's public relations office for the photographs and for all her assistance.]

Throughout the musical world, the talents of the Gomberg family are widely heralded. And, closer to home, anyone who has attended a Boston Symphony concert within the last thirty-seven years has known the warmth and singing tone, "the darkling brilliance" as the same *Time* magazine article put it, of the BSO's principal oboist Ralph Gomberg.

After nearly four decades of that daunting position, Gomberg has elected to trade in his life of whittling reeds for perfecting his forehand, his fairway drive, and his lamb curry — just some of the many extra-musical interests he has never had time to pursue fully. He will play throughout this Tanglewood season, retiring in September, 1987.

"Of course retirement will be a tremendous change," he says. "I can't tell you how I'll miss my colleagues and my association with this great institution."

Gomberg and his wife, Sydelle, currently Director of the Boston Ballet School (the official school of Boston Ballet Company), and as integral and beloved a member of the BSO scene as her husband, are talking and reminiscing about their years with the BSO in Sydelle's Boston Ballet office overlooking Clarendon and Warren streets. Sydelle, her hair

swept up in a dancer's chignon, reflects between phone calls and consultations against a backdrop of leotards and legwarmers. "It truly has been like a close extended family all these years," she comments. "Our kids to this day refer to Uncle Sherman [Walt], Uncle Joey [Silverstein]. When you go through so many births, deaths, illnesses, weddings, bar mitzvahs — there's an unbelievable bond that's created within the orchestra over the years."

Gomberg was born in Boston's West End, the youngest of seven children, five of whom went on to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music. His older brother, Robert, was a violinist in the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski; brother Harold was, of course, principal oboist for thirty-four years with the New York Philharmonic; a third brother, Leo, was principal trumpet in the Radio City Music Hall Orchestra and the New York City Center Symphony under Bernstein. One of his sisters, Celia, was a violin soloist under contract at NBC while another sister, Edyth, was a cellist who married George Zazofsky, a longtime member of the BSO violin section, and whose son is Peter Zazofsky, the concert violinist. "It was a question of who would get what room to practice in," explains Gomberg. "Being the youngest, I got the bathroom. It gradually dawned on my mother that some of us were pretty talented," he continues. "She was told about this fabulous school in Philadelphia where all students were admitted on merit and went tuition-free. She packed up the whole family and we took a bus to Philadelphia — what a schlep that was — and five of us ended up at Curtis."

At fourteen, Gomberg became the youngest student ever accepted by the renowned oboe teacher Marcel Tabuteau. "He opened my eyes to what music was about," says Gomberg. "He understood the spirit of it, the beauty of music. He was like a surrogate father to me." At eighteen Gomberg became the first oboist in what was called the All-American Youth Orchestra. Its music director was Leopold Stokowski. "God, did I have nerves," sighs Gomberg, recalling the audition. Shortly after winning the position, he embarked on the S.S. *Brasilia* for a two-month tour of South America with Stokowski conducting every concert.

Gomberg then recounts getting a call from Eugene Ormandy in 1941. Ormandy had been asked by "some rear admiral" to assemble what became the Philadelphia Navy Yard Band, to play at parades, and the commissioning of aircraft carriers and ships. "Ormandy said to me years later, 'Boy did I fix you up.'" laughs Gomberg.

After a year playing principal oboe in Baltimore, Gomberg then left for Los Angeles to care for his



The Happy Couple — Ralph Gomberg embraces his bride of thirty-nine years, Sydelle, on the deck of their West Stockbridge residence.

older brother, who was taken seriously ill. While in southern California, he received a call from an aspiring young conductor in New York named Leonard Bernstein. “Lenny was looking for a first oboist for his City Center Orchestra,” explained Gomberg. “He hired me on the phone.”

“Those were wonderful days. I remember Lenny, who was about twenty-eight then, holding court backstage with the most interesting people in New York showing up — Judy Holliday, Adolph Greene, the Mayor.” The City Center Orchestra also played for the City Center Opera and Ballet, with one performance, recalls Gomberg, even conducted by George Balanchine himself. He also found time to play in the Mutual Broadcasting Orchestra and to found the New York Woodwind Quintet.

At the same time, Sydelle Gomberg was an aspiring young ballerina, dancing with the Metropolitan Opera ballet, and at Radio City Music Hall, which, as the only institution offering year-round employment, was then *the* training ground for dancers. In 1945 she landed a soloist role in *Lute Song* starring Yul Brynner and Mary Martin (and, Gomberg points out, also featuring a young unknown actress named Nancy Davis, who today goes by her married name, Nancy Reagan).

“During *Lute Song* I spent a lot of time at Leo Gomberg’s [Ralph’s brother, the trumpet player of the Radio City Orchestra] and his wife Helen’s house,” Sydelle explained. “Eventually my brother and sister-in-law got us together,” adds Gomberg, “and we went bowling —for the first and last time — on our first date.”

Sydelle remembers returning backstage at *Lute Song* to her dressing table and announcing to the cast that she had just met the man she was going to marry.

In 1950, two years after their wedding, Gomberg heard of the opening in Boston. “In those days,” he explains, “Boston was the only orchestra that provided 52-week-a-year employment. It was definitely *the* job to have. I was so thrilled to win it. I know Thomas Wolfe said ‘You can’t go home again’, but here I was, coming home to Boston.”

Gomberg remembers the first two years as somewhat difficult in that the orchestra was tuning to 444 cycles per second as opposed to 440, the international standard pitch. “Koussevitzky had liked the higher pitch because he thought it made the orchestra sound more brilliant,” explained Gomberg. “It was really difficult for me since it greatly affected the way I had to make the reeds.”

“My first rehearsal with the orchestra, I was so tense,” Gomberg recalls. “It was with Munch, of course, and we were playing [Roussel’s] *Bacchus et Ariane*. There’s that little oboe solo of three quarter-notes. I had no idea from his beat — which looked like he was making French mayonnaise — if it was in six or three. So I didn’t come in. He stood there and looked at me and then smiled. I figured it out and came in the next time.”

Both Gombergs break into knowing smiles as they recount the 1960 *eight-week* tour to Taiwan, Japan, and Australia. “Eight weeks, can you imagine the orchestra on an eight-week tour now?” says Sydelle. “I’ve never been so depressed as the day he left, me standing there with four little kids and a German shepherd.”

After the forty-eight-hour trip from Boston to Taipei, it turned out that the hotel in the city was overbooked and a portion of the orchestra had to be bused to Peitu, ten miles outside the city. “When I arrived, I was so mad. Some of the guys were already there and they came out onto a balcony, all smiles. I couldn’t believe they weren’t upset.” Then, Gomberg continued, he learned that the Shakespeare Inn, where they were staying, was actually a government run bordello — closed down for the week to accommodate the Boston Symphony!

“You know, I feel so good about retiring,” Gomberg says. “I feel I really gave of myself, always tried to keep the standards of playing to what I wanted, and I received so much back. I played with Stokowski, Reiner, Bernstein, Klemperer, Mitropoulos, Koussevitzky, Munch, Monteux, Ansermet. Those are incredible memories.”

What are some of the masterpieces he’ll miss the most, oboistically speaking? “Brahms I, the slow movement,” he muses. “The *Eroica*, Berlioz’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the slow movement of the Brahms *Violin Concerto*, Ibert’s *Escales*, and Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*.” This summer at Tanglewood will afford Gomberg — and audiences — the chance to enjoy

some wonderful oboe writing in Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin*, Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony*, and Mozart's *Serenade for Winds*.

"If I've learned one thing, or if I could pass on one thing, it's that music is not a technical art, it's an expressive art," he adds. "The oboe is such an expressive instrument. When it starts to play, it's a unique sound and everyone is intrigued with it — I hope!" he adds, laughing.

"I feel we've been truly blessed," says Sydelle. "We have four wonderful children, we've made such friends in the orchestra and among those associated with the orchestra. Whenever I meet other oboists' wives, there's a real camaraderie between us. Try living with someone who goes around the house dropping little shavings from their reeds everywhere."

"It's the law of compensation," adds Ralph. "If you play the oboe," he says, emphasizing both syllables, then you figure *something* good has to come back to you from all that suffering! I have the happiest memories of my years here. And now there's the excitement of the years ahead with Sydelle, my kids ..."

"And our new baby," injects Sydelle. "A Siamese blue point."

"What more could you ask?" concludes her husband, with a shrug of his shoulders and that characteristic Gomberg grin.

French bassoon legend **Maurice Allard** (b. 1923) and American oboist/teacher **Jerry Sirucek** (1922-1996) became IDRS Honorary Members number nineteen and twenty at the Conference in Victoria, British Columbia, in August, 1988. Their pictures graced the cover of the Fall, 1988 (Vol. 11, No. 2) issue of *The Double Reed* in a composite photograph, and the following report was printed on page 8 of the same issue:

**IDRS Welcomes Two New Double Reed Artists
As Honorary Members of the Society**

Ronald Klimko - Moscow, Idaho

By unanimous acclamation at the second general meeting of the International Double Reed Society in Victoria, British Columbia last August, the members of the Society voted approval for two new members into its ranks of distinguished Honorary Members. The two members elected are Maurice Allard and Jerry Sirucek.

MAURICE ALLARD

Maurice Allard was born in Sin-le-Noble (Nord) on March 25, 1923. He first studied at the Douai Conservatory and then at the Paris Conservatoire, winning Second Prize in bassoon in 1939 and First Prize in 1940 at the age of 17. Two years later he

first appeared as solo bassoonist in the Concerts Lamoureux and the Concerts Oubradous. In 1949 Allard took First Prize at the Concours International de Genève. In the same year he was appointed principal bassoon at the Opéra, a position he retained until retiring on July 16, 1983. He



Maurice Allard

succeeded his teacher, Gustave Dhérin, as bassoon professor at the Conservatoire in 1957. In 1975 Allard founded and is currently president of Les Amis du Basson Français, an organization devoted to promoting the French bassoon. Allard has also written a *Méthode de Basson* (Billaudot, 1976), a collection of 30 solos entitled *Courtes pièces dans tous les tons* (Billaudot, 1975), and some study material called *Tablature, trilles, gammes diatoniques et Chromatiques pour le Basson* (Billaudot, 1974). Among the many works written for Allard, those by Bitsch, Gotkovsky, Jolivet, Rivier, Tomasi, and Vaubourgoin have been used as *concours* solos.

[Biography reprinted from The Paris Conservatoire and the Contest Solos for Bassoon, by Kristine K. Fletcher, 1988 Indiana University Press, pp. 35-36.]

Maurice Allard gave an interesting "Address on the French School and the French Bassoon" to the IDRS Conference in Toronto, Canada, in 1976. It appeared in the Vol. 6, No.2 (p.1) issue of *To the World's Bassoonists*, and is reprinted below.

**ADDRESS ON THE FRENCH SCHOOL
AND THE FRENCH BASSOON**

by Maurice Allard

(Editor's note: Following in its entirety is the talk given by Maurice Allard at the conclusion of his magnificent performance at this August's IDRS Annual Meeting. I wish to sincerely thank oboists Stewart Grant and Karen Rottenberg for their beautiful assistance to the Society in not only translating Mr. Allard's talk but in serving also as full-time hosts/guides/translators for our honored guest during the entire six days of his Toronto visit. Bravo and MILLE MERCIS.)

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you and to be received by you. The letters I exchanged with members of the IDRS Committee during the past few weeks and months foretold the very good atmosphere of your meetings and assured me of a warm welcome in Toronto. The descriptions I