



CHAPTER 5

Honorary Members of the International Double Reed Society

Part One: To 1988

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One of the earliest and most significant activities by the Executive Committee of the International Double Reed Society was to bestow Honorary Membership on some of the most distinguished members of the modern double reed community. Already the first draft of the Constitution of the IDRS, adopted at the Second Conference in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 1973 contained the following declaration:

"A special category of Honorary Membership may be created for persons of unusual distinction. Such persons can be nominated at any time by the Society's membership and may be elected to honorary status upon receiving two-thirds vote of the voting members at the annual business meeting.

A candidate for Honorary Membership should have completed meritorious service to the area of double reed performance, teaching, instrument making, repair or reedmaking, etc."

The first Honorary Member was elected to that position at the Third Conference in Miami, Florida, in 1974. He was **W. Hans Moennig** (1903-1988). In the Summer, 1974, (Vol. 4, No. 1., p. 4) issue of *To the World's Bassoonists*, editor Gerald Corey wrote:

FIRST HONORARY MEMBER

"The name of **W. Hans Moennig**, woodwind artisan-repairman of Philadelphia, was placed in nomination to the the first recipient of Honorary Membership into the International Double Reed Society. The nomination was seconded, and after a short discussion of the legendary work of this gentleman, a vote was taken and carried unanimously. On June 19, 1974, the following telegram was sent to Mr. Moennig: 'Happy to announce your election as the first Honorary Member of the International Double Reed Society, June 17, 1974. You have given us more than we can ever repay. Warmest greeting from the Society to you and your family. Gerald Corey, President, IDRS'."

When Hans Moennig retired in 1983, music critic

Daniel Webster of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote a touching tribute to him. Originally printed in the July 10, 1983, issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, it was reprinted with the author's kind permission in the Winter, 1983, (Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 8-11) issue of *The Double Reed*, and is reprinted below:

FAREWELL TO THE MASTER LEAVING HIS MUSICAL MECCA

Daniel Webster - Inquirer Music Critic

(Reprinted by permission of The Philadelphia Inquirer, July 10, 1983. Ed.)

Seen empty, the second-floor rooms where Hans Moennig worked are a shambles. The walls have not been painted in 52 years, and what paint there had been has long since turned smoke-brown. Years before, a quarter of the ceiling had fallen in, and Moennig had nailed up two boards to keep the rest from collapsing on his workbench.



Hans Moennig

Despite its chaotic appearance, the shop at 15 S. 21st St. was the mecca for woodwind players from around the world who looked to Moennig to keep their instruments in playing trim. But a few days ago, an era came to an end. Just before Independence Day, Moennig, who is 79, closed the workshop and moved his tools, his lifetime accumulation of wood, cork, leather and felt and his memories to his house in Roxborough.

Musicians who have relied on Moennig over the years regard the change as far more than simply a real estate event. Whether or not this marks his official retirement—Moennig says he will probably continue to repair instruments in his home—the event has, without question, been heavily weighted with emotion.

Sol Schoenbach, formerly principal bassoonist with the Philadelphia Orchestra and head of the

Settlement Music School, was near tears in talking about Moennig's retirement, if this is what it is. "I went up there a couple of weeks ago and got my photograph off the wall," Schoenbach said, alluding to Moennig's office, which once had been filled with pictures signed in admiration by Moennig's customers. "I can't believe this is happening," Schoenbach said.

Why this upheaval in a pattern of life that has scarcely varied since 1926, when Moennig first came to Philadelphia?

"I'll be 80 in December," he said wryly. "Don't you think that's a good excuse to retire?"

He doesn't, obviously. But he had surgery last winter and was away from his shop for a few months. He had spoken to David Greenfield, the building's owner, about retiring, and Greenfield set an April deadline.

"That didn't please him at all, so I had tentatively changed it to Labor Day," said Greenfield, who operates an audio sales and service business on the building's ground floor. "But when I talked to Mrs. Moennig, I had the feeling that she wouldn't mind if he retired earlier, so I played hardball and said he would have to be out by the end of June.

"I don't feel very happy about having Benny Goodman and musicians from all over the country call up and give me hell for doing this to Moennig," Greenfield acknowledged. "But I desperately need the space for my business."

In his last week in the shop, Moennig, as ever, sat at his bench, his patched seersucker trousers and short-sleeved shirt covered by his gray apron. He has been at the bench at this spot six days a week since 1931. As he worked, his wife, Gertrude, and his daughter, Elise Wendell, filled trash bags with the shards of a life lived in combat with slipshod craftsmanship.

The two women, tired and distraught at what their work meant, were finding amid the dust such relics as tire patching kits, eye cups, a black bow tie, bits of cord, metal and cork—all crammed in the hundreds of cigar boxes that made up his storage system.

Moennig, meanwhile, was reconditioning four clarinets that had been brought in that day by Julia Vaverka, a Boston player who brings the instruments here every six months for adjustment and repair.

Vaverka's clarinet absorbed his interest. Working with one section, he pressed one end against a knob attached to the workbench, and the other end against his chest, leaving his hands free to remove the intricate pattern of screws, springs and pins that hold the key system together. He dropped the screws in his apron and deftly cut new cork pads for the keys.

Since professional instruments are handmade, each is slightly different, with a configuration and

personality of its own. Each repair had to be a new improvisation as Moennig discovered the personality of the instrument and the effect of the player on it. The work is painstaking and demands intuition almost as much as dexterity.

He noted that Vaverka wore some keys of her instruments more than others, pressed some at unusual angles to induce wear that he would have to counter with cork, felt or wood. To correct one key that was not completely covering a hole, he pared a sliver of wood with a razor blade, then, heating the key over the brass Bunsen burner that burned day and night on the bench, he held the sliver with tweezers and attached it to the underside of a key, using a stick of amber-colored glue. Though the sliver was barely visible, it took three adjustments to find the precise placement for it.

Moennig worked steadily over every key. Vaverka sat beside him, trying each piece of the instrument as he finished it.

"If you have ever played a well-adjusted instrument, you don't worry about the trouble involved in having it adjusted," said Vaverka, who has been coming here for as long as she has been playing. "You travel."

As Moennig worked on the clarinets, he reminisced. The reality of his retirement, if it is retirement, intruded periodically, but in his mind's eye he saw some of the long procession of musicians who have climbed the stairs to wait in those dingy rooms while Moennig made their instruments live again.

"Marcel Tabuteau came to me," he said, recalling the august French oboist who had been a principal in the Philadelphia Orchestra until the 1950s. "He said his oboe always leaked and said he doubted if I could do anything for him. I told him I would use cork on some keys, and I did.

"He sat right here," Moennig said, motioning. "He was very critical, but when he tried the instrument he said, 'For the first time in my life, my oboe doesn't leak.'"

For Moennig, that was a testimonial and the start of an association that lasted until Tabuteau died — one of many such relationships with gifted musicians that would be part of his life.

"He is a crusty man," said Louis Rosenblatt, English hornist with the Philadelphia Orchestra. "If he felt you were the right sort, he'd do anything for you. If he had heard you play and didn't like what he'd heard, he wouldn't touch your instrument."

Hans Moennig was born to his work. His father and uncle were instrument-makers in Markneukirchen, a German town near the Czech border, in the center of a region of instrument-makers. Most of the Moennigs and Guetters, two related families, were

violinmakers —William Moennig, the violin-maker on Locust Street, is a cousin. The young Hans became an apprentice at the age of 16.

“An uncle was the first of our gang to go to America,” he recalled. “He went as a bassoonist with the Boston Symphony. He came back when he got a job in the Royal Opera in Berlin, but he said the musicians in America needed someone to keep their instruments in shape.”

In 1923, Hans Moennig left for America, making clarinets first in Providence, R.I., and later in Boston. A cousin, Walter Guetter, became bassoonist for Leopold Stokowski, then conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Moennig came to this city in 1926. His first shop was on North 15th Street where Hahnemann Hospital stands. Moennig had an upstairs room above the Guetter and Seidel violin shop. In 1931, he moved to the shop on 21st street.

Settled, Moennig sent back to Markneukirchen for a wife; his was something of a mail order marriage. When Gertrude Dressel arrived in New York, Moennig met her at the ship. He was carrying a bassoon he had repaired for a New York player.

Some time after Moennig established himself in Philadelphia, his cousin reported to Moennig that Stokowski had fired three bassoonists because their instruments gurgled. Moennig devised a way to change the instrument so that the player’s saliva did not seep into the keys. “My cousin said I saved his job,” said Moennig, “but he later took my idea to Germany and said it was his own. All the bassoon-makers use that idea now. I never patented it.”

Despite all his disciplined training and methodical life, Moennig is described by virtually everybody who knows him as a terrible businessman.

“He never charged for his work,” says Stevens Hewitt, a Philadelphia Orchestra oboist who has been a customer for 40 years. “When I was a student, I would take my oboe to him, he would work all day on it and charge \$7.50.”

Greenfield, the owner of Moennig’s building, recalls the time he was approached by a parking lot attendant who worked across the street from his building.

“He said he was a little afraid of Moennig, and wondered if I would have him look at a flute he had bought for his daughter,” Greenfield said. “Well, Moennig wouldn’t touch a cheap instrument, and he said so when I showed him the flute. But when I said it was a little girl’s instrument, he stopped what he was doing, spent most of the day working on it and charged me \$4.”

Shirley Curtiss, bassoonist with the Pennsylvania Ballet orchestra who first went to Moennig in 1957, remembers a similar instance of generosity.

“I took my new instrument to him a few months ago because there was a click somewhere in the keys,” she said. “He spent about an hour and a half and finally charged me \$10. A few days later, he sent me the check back, because he was chagrined at not having found the click. I’m keeping that check.

“He’s so kind to students. He’ll drop anything to do work for them,” she added. Pictures of the woodwind quintets she coaches at the Settlement School were still on the wall as Moennig was closing down his place.

“If you ever wanted to meet players from foreign orchestras or other American orchestras, you just went up to his shop,” she said. “On the other hand, I would get calls from people wanting the ‘Curtiss Hotel.’ Moennig told people who came to his shop that they could stay at my house.”

“He would do anything for you, but he also had his own ideas about what was right. I had an instrument with a key he thought I didn’t need. He took it off, but said he would leave the pins which had held it in case I wanted him to replace it. Well, the pins were sharp, and when I unconsciously reached for that key, I would bloody my fingers. He was breaking me of the habit of that key.”

According to Rosenblatt, the English hornist who first went to Moennig 42 years ago, Moennig invented parts to extend the range or flexibility of the oboe and English horn.

ENORMOUS UNDERTAKING

“He redid my instrument to make a note possible,” Rosenblatt recalled. “And he devised an extension for my English horn which lets me play a half tone lower than the instrument normally can.” For years, said Rosenblatt, Moennig experimented to redesign the oboe. “It was an enormous mechanical undertaking, but one which involved a lot of mathematics, both of which intrigued him.”

For years, Moennig sold as well as repaired instruments. Rosenblatt remembers that when a famous English horn company made a slight change in its instrument that Moennig disapproved of, he canceled his arrangement with the company, whereupon it changed the instrument back to suit him. Moennig often became so involved in adjusting the instruments he sold, he ended up rebuilding them completely.

“He could not sell something that wasn’t perfect,” said Rosenblatt, “but he invariably sold new instruments for less than anybody else was asking. “I never figured out how he charged for his work. He did a lot of figuring on paper. He never took inflation into account.”

CHARGING BY THE PIPE

Shirley Curtiss, who watched Moennig regularly light his pipe with the Bunsen burner as he worked, has a theory: "I think he charged by the number of pipes he lighted."

Moennig's customers worried about him, but they also worried about who might take up his work. Unlike his cousins, the violin makers who have become a four-generation dynasty here, Moennig's only son, Hans D. Moennig, had no interest in taking up the business. He worked with his father for a while, but eventually went to college and is now with the U.S. State Department.

Once, Moennig had a partner of sorts, a man named Casimir Luczycki. Luczycki learned the trade from Moennig, and when he became adept, Moennig told him he should strike out on his own. Luczycki did, working on his own instruments at the bench, beside Moennig, who never charged him a penny of rent.

Over the years, some young musicians spent a few months working with Moennig to learn to repair their own instruments, but none decided to follow his methodical lead. Now a note of panic intrudes when his customers ask about the future.

"We're in trouble," Rosenblatt said. "There are other repairmen—New York, Baltimore—and we encourage them, but we've been terribly spoiled here by having Moennig up there in his shop."

David Greenfield, who bought Moennig's building about 20 years ago, recalled that when he met the instrument repairer, he went home and said to his wife: "Remember the story of Pinocchio? Well, we have a Gepetto, only he's on the second floor, not the basement."

"We renovated the building when I bought it," Greenfield continued, "but he wouldn't let me touch his rooms. When the electric company did some blasting nearby, it cracked our building, but we had to try to repair it from outside because Moennig wouldn't let us in." According to Greenfield, Moennig was never charged more than \$100 a month in rent, and he paid only \$2 a month for gas.

"Those gas burners raised my fire insurance premiums more than the rent I received. We never had a lease, but I know he is an international celebrity, and I let him go ahead."

As of a few days ago, Moennig no longer continued the routine of working at the bench. He hustled around the shop, boxing tools, sweeping shavings and scraps into trash bags. But his bench was still in working trim; the pedal-powered lathe at which he fashioned screws, keys and delicate fittings was oiled.

"See this?" he asked, reaching across the still-lighted burner to retrieve a small box and pulling out a whistle made of cane. "I used to make whistles for

my children from willow. One day when Stokowski was getting ready to do Schoenberg's 'Gurrelieder,' his piccolo player came to me. The piccolo has trouble playing a high B, and the piece requires four of them, played softly. The piccolo player asked if I could make a whistle to play the note. "Moennig did so, using oboe cane. When Stokowski recorded the music, Moennig's "Gurrelieder whistle" was used.

"Stoki wrote me a nice letter, and had me send the whistle to him whenever he conducted the piece," Moennig continued. "It's been used in some other orchestras, too. See, I put my name on it."

He blew the note. Then he packed the whistle away in its cushion of testimonials.

(Editor's note: In a recent letter, the author of this article added an appropriate footnote that bears repeating: ". . . I'm glad your publication is honoring Moennig. He is an institution: irreplaceable and unique.")

The reader is also referred to the article: "Remembrances of my Father..." by Elise (Moennig) Wendel, printed in the Spring, 1989 (Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 17-18) and "A Pictorial Essay on Hans Moennig" by Stuart and June Zetzer on pp. 23-28 of the same issue of *The Double Reed*.

The second person to become Honorary Member of the IDRS was the oboist **Fernand Gillet** (1882-1980) at the Fourth Annual Conference in Evanston, Illinois, on August 12, 1975. In his report of the Fourth Meeting (*To the World's Oboists*, Vol. 3, No. 2) IDRS President Earl Clemens wrote:

"At the final general meeting, the name of **Fernand Gillet** was placed in nomination, seconded, and unanimously approved as our second Honorary Life Member. Consequently on August 13, 1975, the following telegram was sent to Fernand Gillet: 'Very happy to announce your election to Honorary Membership, International Double Reed Society, August 12, 1975. You have given us more than we can ever repay. Warmest greetings from the Society to you and yours. Earl L. Clemens, President, IDRS.'"

In the Volume V, No. 2 issue of *To the World's Oboists*, IDRS member Jean Northrup wrote a comprehensive article on Fernand Gillet. It is reprinted below.

FERNAND GILLET
by Jean Northrup

At the International Double Reed Society Convention in Evanston, Illinois in August, 1975,

Fernand Gillet was made an Honorary Member of the Society. While his name is familiar to many through his twenty-one years as solo oboe of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and as composer of several technical methods, his contributions to the world of oboe playing are perhaps too little known to the younger players of today.

When a man has had three careers, it is difficult to know just where to begin recounting the many professional highlights, not to mention the personal qualities, that make up the picture of this legendary musician.

Here is his brief autobiography, written in 1973, which contains the charming flavor of his French/English syntax.

FERNAND GILLET BORN OCTOBER 15, 1882

I was born in Paris, my parents were French and when I was six years old they took me with them to live in London where I stayed six years. After having been in a boy's school for about 4 years I studied the piano for 18 months.



Fernand Gillet

Then my parents took me back to Paris with the idea that I could become a pianist. Once there, my father asked his brother (my Uncle) Georges Gillet to introduce me to the best piano teacher in Paris. My uncle answered right away: Why don't you give him to me! And that is how I became an oboe player! After 18 months of study with my uncle I joined his class at the Conservatory (like everybody else) and at the end of the scholar year I got a second prize at the competition. I was then 14 years old! The next year at 15 I got the first prize and was asked by the Director to play at the commencement. This was in 1898 and the next year I got a first medal of solfege. In 1901 there was a vacancy in the oboe section of the Lamoreux orchestra, I competed and was taken as first oboe. In 1902 there was another opening at the Paris Grand Opera I competed again but against 9 other first prizes of the Conservatory, and won. I never made any personal records - I hated it, but I often concertized as soloist.

In 1908 I founded a chamber music group which we named "Le Decem" because we were ten: string quintet and wind quintet. All of this without interfering with my obligations with the Opera and Lamoreux Orchestras.

Then came the 1914 war. When I was 20 I had been dispensed of military service so I enlisted in August 1914 as Motorcyclist and became attached to the "Royal Naval Air Service" (as I spoke English). In 1916 I asked to be a flyer. Out of flying school I was sent to a night bombardment squadron. After awhile

I got the "Croix deguerre" and later on I crashed on the ground with my plane on top of me. Result three months in a hospital. After recovering I was back flying up to the armistice when I was sent to Morocco in a flying squadron at Fez. Six months later I was discharged and went back to my music occupations as before the war. This was guaranteed by law. Around 1922 Koussevitsky formed an orchestra in Paris and gave a series of three concerts in the fall and in the spring. This orchestra was made up of musicians selected from several orchestras in Paris. I was one of them. At a rehearsal Koussevitsky told me that he was planning to conduct an orchestra in America and if he succeeded would I come with him. I said yes and that is how in 1925 I joined the B.S.O. To recapitulate I had been 25 years with the Lamoreux Orchestra at the same time 24 years at the Paris Opera. Then in Boston 21 years with the B.S.O. during that time I was on the Faculty of the New England Conservatory where in 1969 I was awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Music. I was also on the Boston University Faculty. After I retired from the Boston Symphony in 1946 I taught for seven years, twice a month a Master Class at the Montreal Conservatory. In 1973 I was awarded an Honorary Doctor's Degree from the Eastman School of Music. So far I have been teaching 74 years. I like teaching. I am still teaching at the N.E.C. and at home.

Fernand Gillet's "professional debut" was an inauspicious beginning to the brilliant career that followed. Shortly after joining his uncle's class at the Paris Conservatory at age 14, he was asked to fill in the second oboe chair at the Opera Comique for one night because his roommate, the regular player, had accepted a better paying job. F. Gillet arrived at the opera house in due time to be briefed about tempi, cuts, etc., and the performance of Carmen began. About halfway through the Overture, the principal oboist turned to Fernand and said quietly, "Just turn your chair around and watch the rest of the performance."

Evidently the next year was a profitable one as M. Gillet won the coveted First Medal in Oboe at the Conservatory annual Competition. In those days (1898) the competitions were attended by the music critics and reviews appeared in the Paris papers. From *Le Journal*: "The very remarkable oboe class of Mr. [Georges] Gillet benefited for their competition piece as well as sight reading of two absolutely charming pieces written by Mr. Paladilhe.

Mr. Gillet, the nephew of the professor, unanimously obtained a brilliant 1st prize. His quality of tone is exquisite, his playing is, at one and the same time, filled with "brio" and elegance. He is a real thoroughbred."