

me on my career with that orchestra. Then there was that steamy week in July when Bob consented to come to a small college in Sarasota to join four other artists for the beginnings of the New College Music Festival which — with his help and inspiration as performer, teacher and advisor — has been developed into an internationally renowned chamber music festival. For many years now he has been joined at the Festival by Sally, who has also become a dear personal and musical friend, of mine, my wife and the music festival. I treasure my memories and our continuing friendship, which spans almost half a century. Bob has been a musical mentor, guide, friend ... an inspiration to us all!

**Richard Woodhams:** Congratulations! I know you are not a corny man, so I'll try not to be corny. You are an inspiration to all of us who try to make the oboe sound like something distinctive, and your talent, energy and inspiration I always feel within me when I play. Also, you are a poet, a practical man, and a nice guy to boot. The fact that you could retire gracefully and continue a vital and productive life as a musician, husband and father is equally remarkable. I look forward to continuing our friendship for many years to come.

**Eugenia Zukerman:** Only a few weeks one summer when I was nineteen — but how memorable a teacher like you can make those precious days! I will never forget my summer at the Yale Summer Music School and the joy of being coached by you. Your enthusiasm, dedication and love of music inspired me enormously and I am truly grateful for the care and guidance you gave me. As you enter your ninth decade, I wish you everything wonderful, and send you my warmest thoughts. As my grandmother said — bis hundert und zwanzig!

**Sol Schoenbach** was born March 15, 1915, in New York City. He studied at the Juilliard School and received the Bachelor of Arts degree from New York University in 1939. He has been awarded honorary Doctorates of Music from the Curtis Institute of Music, Temple University, and the New School of Music. He was staff bassoonist for the CBS Orchestra from 1932 to 1937; he founded the Philadelphia Woodwind Quintet in 1950 and was a member of that ensemble until 1966. He became principal bassoon of the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1937 and held the position until 1957, apart from two years in the military service during World War II. He has served on the Pennsylvania Council on



**Sol Schoenbach**

the Arts, and was Executive Director of the Settlement Music School. He has taught at the Curtis Institute of Music, the Banff Festival of the Arts, the Berkshire Music Center, and the New England Conservatory of Music. He was also the President of the International Double Reed Society from 1981 to 1984.

IDRS member William Dietz conducted a wonderful interview with Sol which was originally printed in the Winter, 1987, (Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 48-51) issue of *The Double Reed*. It is reprinted below.

### A Conversation with Sol Schoenbach

William Dietz

*In 1937, upon the untimely death of bassoonist Walter Guetter, Sol Schoenbach, at the age of 22, joined the legendary wind section of the Philadelphia Orchestra. The seasonal principal winds of that golden eras included William Kincaid, flute; Marcel Tabuteau, oboe; and Robert McGinnis, clarinet. In a recent interview with Dr. Schoenbach in his Philadelphia home, I asked him about his early years with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Dr. Schoenbach's reminiscences about this and events pertaining to the early years of his career lend insight to the origins of the "American system of bassoon playing."*

**WD:** I understand that at the time you started studying seriously, the French bassoon, was in effect, as popular in the United States as the German bassoon. Would you talk about that period and how it came about that you began to play on the German system instrument.

**SS:** To understand the story completely I must give you a little background. At that time there were two orchestras in New York, the New York Philharmonic and the New York Symphony. Walter Damrosch, the conductor of the New York Symphony, dominated the entire New York City educational system of music. He had a theory that all string players should be Russian or Polish Jews, that all brass players should be German, and that all woodwind players should be French. His orchestras was made of of these different ethnic groups and he would hire European musicians each year from these various countries to staff openings in his orchestra. Two important wind players who were involved in this European importation were the flutist George Barrere, and Marcel Tabuteau, the famous oboist. Others included the French bassoonists Auguste Mesnard and Louis Letellier. This fine group of wind players became part of the faculty of the Institute of Musical Art, which was founded by Frank Damrosch, the older brother of Walter Damrosch. The Institute of Musical Arts later merged with the Juilliard

School. At that time all the young high school age bassoon students studied the French bassoon.

By chance I happened to take a different path. My brother studied violin with Isidor Strasner, a member of the New York Philharmonic. Mr. Strasner conducted a children's orchestra in Harlem at the Hecksher Foundation. This children's orchestra lacked a bassoonist, so when I would accompany my brother to rehearsal, Mr. Strasner would always suggest that I learn to play the bassoon and join the orchestra. At the time I was studying the piano and didn't know exactly what a bassoon was. Nevertheless, I was fascinated with the idea, so they got me a bassoon and I began to study with Benjamin Kohon, the famous solo bassoonist of the New York Philharmonic! Naturally, since Kohon played the German bassoon, which was the tradition in the New York Philharmonic, I started on the German system and was the only young bassoon student in New York at that time who was learning the Heckel system. Kohon was a very strict teacher. A typical lesson assignment might include the preparation of three pages, by memory, from the Otto Langey Tutor which was popular then. In addition to this I also had to bring in something prepared on the piano! He was a fabulous pianist and felt it was very necessary to know how to play the piano.

Like most youngsters, I didn't want to spend all my time practicing the bassoon and the piano. I was more interested in baseball. Kohon felt I wasn't sincere and serious so he turned me over to the second bassoonist in the orchestra, Simon Kovar. This turned out to be very fortunate for both of us. At the time Kovar had just arrived from Europe. He didn't have any students and was totally unknown in this country. He spoke a language all his own with a mixture of Russian, Yiddish, Italian (a la Toscanini), and something which I never could figure out. I could barely understand what he was saying, but he was quite dedicated and devoted, and gave me enormous lessons.

As I improved I began to play around the city and think that I made quite an impression with my German bassoon. Other young bassoonists heard me and my German system bassoon, and over a period of time Kovar's class of students grew larger. Eventually the German system became the dominant instrument and the French system became secondary. Of course it happened gradually.

At Juilliard they maintained teachers for both systems. When I went to Juilliard and I was the first student on the German system and I insisted that Kovar be my teacher. Letellier was the professor for the French bassoon and had a class of students that included Leonard Sharrow. Eli Carmen was a close

friend of mine, and came at my encouragement to study the German system. Eli and I always had a sort of friendly rivalry with the students of the French bassoon.

I feel now that it was inevitable that the German system would eventually replace the French bassoon due to its carrying power. Also, the advent of sound movies helped the German bassoon gain dominance over the French because the German bassoon recorded better than the French bassoon on the equipment they had in those days. The engineers would complain that they couldn't pick up the French bassoon clearly on their microphones.

Of course there were marvelous French bassoonists around town like Letellier, Mesnard, and Duhamel. In Boston, Koussevitzky had inherited the French bassoonists Laus, and Allard, the uncle of Maurice Allard. Still, slowly but surely, the German instrument began to supplant the French. This happened not for any patriotic reason, but I believe, because people preferred the German sound. It is happening in France and other countries today.

I once received a letter from the Italian bassoonist, Muccetti of La Scala, asking me for fingerings for the German bassoon. It seems that when Toscanini went back to La Scala to rebuild it, he was so accustomed to hearing the German bassoon, that he bought four Heckel bassoons for the section there!

**WD:** So most of those gentlemen who had studied the French bassoon, including Sharrow, decided to make a big switch somewhere along the way.

**SS:** When Sharrow graduated from Juilliard we all went to a pawn shop and pawned his French bassoon. We got him a Heckel and showed him the fingerings. Sharrow went off right away to the National Symphony, which was under the direction of Kindler, and incorporated many of the fingerings and approaches that he had learned on the French bassoon.

But the Italians, the French, and the older generation of bassoonists all played on the French bassoon. In the Philadelphia Orchestra, which had a very Germanic background, there was no discussion about it. Even a man like Tabuteau had changed his oboe playing to fit more with the louder sounding German bassoons. He didn't have the narrowness of sound that was common to the French oboe players of that time. In the United States it seems the tendency is for all the various different sounds and styles to begin to conform to a norm.

**WD:** Do you feel that your sound evolved during your time with the Philadelphia Orchestra?

**SS:** Oh yes. There is no relationship between the way I play now and the way I played originally. The vibrato is completely tamed down, the basic tone

has changed, and so on. When you play with people like Tabuteau, you have to begin to hear what they are doing and try to work together with them. When I started out we weren't always doing things the same way. But after a number of years the Philadelphia Orchestra has a way of grinding everyone into a certain pattern. It's such a huge machine that people must change — even Garfield is not the same as when he started. I think that everyone reacts to their environment, unless they are completely insensitive.

**WD:** Do you think it is always a change for the better?

**SS:** Yes, I think so. The Philadelphia Orchestra has a unique and wonderful sound. Everyone there seems to be in accord. Sometimes I hear other orchestras in which there is little unanimity in phrasing or sound. Each person goes their own merry way. There were many heterogeneous sounding wind sections back when I was a kid.

**WD:** During the period that you were in the Philadelphia Orchestra, you mentioned Tabuteau as a big influence ...

**SS:** The greatest musical influence in my life.

**WD:** What was it about Tabuteau that influenced you and others so much?

**SS:** The French have a certain logic, and he brought this logic to music in a way that had always escaped me. Tabuteau contended that music has a certain inevitability inherent in it, especially the works of Beethoven. Furthermore, he believed that to achieve this inevitability, one needed to understand and utilize a logical system of execution which took into account the placement and ordering of the notes and their relationship to each other. This idea of a relationship of notes to other notes, was a novel idea for me. For example, a line of music has a relationship within itself based on pitch differences, rhythmic differences, and harmonic differences. These elements are basically the core of all music. Tabuteau was especially smart about the relationship between the rhythm and meter. I noticed that when he played, there was a special kind of flow to the music. He was able to transcend the bar line. He didn't hesitate at the bar line or start every bar with a new strength on the first beat. When I would ask him questions about his playing he would give me answers, but he would never volunteer any information, particularly to a bassoon player. Tabuteau had it all, plus a forceful personality. His musical ideas were presented with so much conviction that one could never consider that it could be any other way. I modeled my approach on his. I thought everything out carefully, and presented it with confidence, and nobody bothered me! I was just a dumb kid, so it was easy

for everyone to give me lessons. The conductors were all waiting for someone to jump on.

**WD:** What is the worst thing a conductor can do to a wind player.

**SS:** Interfere with his playing. The worst thing in the world is to be psychologically defeated. The only way you can avoid that is to get the upper hand. The only way you can get the upper hand is to be sure of yourself.

**WD:** Did the conductors allow you freedom to express the solo bassoon passages as you liked?

**SS:** Yes, because once I got myself organized they recognized that I had something to offer. But before that, everyone was ready with a suggestion.

**WD:** Were there others who influenced you?

**SS:** Kincaid was a wonderful colleague too, and had a lot to offer along the same lines as Tabuteau, but he still had plenty to contribute. McClain, the clarinetist, once pointed out to me that I had a tendency to mouth each note. He explained that by changing the embouchure for each note, I was missing the opportunity to have a genuine line of articulation, so that each and every note sounded as if it came from the same fellow. As you can see, I've had a lot of contacts with many people in my life, and I must say that there is nothing original in anything I've said. I've never thought of anything that's original. Everything I know I have picked up from working with other artists. I tried to find out what made them special and take it over for myself.

**WD:** Was it difficult for you to take all this advice and criticism?

**SS:** It depended on what they had to say. If I thought something was not valid, I just thanked them and went about my own way, which I often do anyway.

**WD:** Well you did have quite an extraordinary group of musicians advising you!

**SS:** Everyone! With everyone I ever played, I would listen carefully to see if they had something to offer me. If so, I'd learn it for myself. You can learn from everyone, and it doesn't cost anything. (Much laughter).

#### ***About the author ...***

*William Dietz, professor of bassoon at the University of Arizona in Tucson, has studied at West Virginia University, the University of Washington, and Florida State University. Mr. Dietz has performed with orchestras in West Virginia and Florida, and was principal bassoonist with the National Symphony of Costa Rica, from 1976-1981. He also served on the faculty of the Conservatory of the University of Costa Rica. In 1981 he was chosen by the Cultural Division of the Organization of American States to present master classes for bassoon students from throughout Latin*

America. In 1985, Mr. Dietz was invited to return to Costa Rica to present a series of master classes at the Programa Juvenil of Costa Rica. In addition to his duties as professor of bassoon and chamber music at the University of Arizona, Mr. Dietz performs with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra, and is principal bassoon of the Arizona Opera Orchestra, and the Flagstaff Festival of the Arts Orchestra. In 1986, Mr. Dietz presented a recital of contemporary works by American composers at the MTNA National Convention in Portland, Oregon, and appeared with the Arizona Wind Quintet at the MENC National Convention in Anaheim, California.

The reader is also referred to the articles: "Happy Birthday, Sol!" (*The Double Reed*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Winter, 1991, pp. 21-22), and "My Uncle Had a Radio: the Life Story of Sol Schoenbach as Told to the Students at Domaine Forget, June 21, 1995," transcribed from the video tape by Nadina Mackie Jackson (*The Double Reed*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring, 1996, pp. 13-20).

Honorary Members number fifteen and sixteen were elected to this position at the Conference in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in August, 1986. They were the distinguished American oboist **Robert Sprenkle** (1914-1988), and the venerable German bassoonist/composer **Victor Bruns** (1903-1996). Then Chair of the Honorary Membership Committee, Ed Lacy, and William Waterhouse, who had nominated Victor Bruns, filed the following reports in the Fall, 1986 (Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 17-19) issue of *The Double Reed*:

#### New Honorary Members of the IDRS

*Ed Lacy, Evansville, Indiana*

At the 1986 Annual Meeting in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the IDRS conferred honorary membership upon oboist and teacher **Robert Sprenkle** and bassoonist and composer **Victor Bruns**.

Robert Sprenkle was born October 27, 1914. Upon graduation from high school, he received two college scholarship offers: from Carnegie-Mellon in engineering, and from the Eastman School of Music in oboe. Howard Hanson convinced him to enter Eastman, which he did in 1932. In 1936 he graduated with a Bachelor's degree and the Performer's Certificate. At Eastman, his teachers included Arthur Foreman and Robert Bloom, who was elected to honorary membership in IDRS in 1985.

Sprenkle joined the Eastman-Rochester Orchestra, now the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, in 1936 as 2nd oboist and English hornist.

The following year he became principal oboist, a position he held until 1985, for a total tenure in the orchestra of 49 years.

He also was professor of oboe at the Eastman School of Music from 1937-1982. Many of his former students now hold positions in major orchestras in the U.S. and abroad.

He co-authored with David Ledet *The Art of Oboe Playing*, one of the most widely-used books of its type.

Mr. Sprenkle's solo recordings have been issued by RCA, Columbia and Mercury records.

Bob has not quite retired, as he will be teaching at Ithaca College on a sabbatical replacement in 1986-87.

For biographical information on Victor Bruns, see the following article by William Waterhouse.

(William Waterhouse provided a nice article entitled "Victor Bruns", which appeared in the Fall, 1986 (Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 18-19) issue of *The Double Reed*. It is reprinted below.)

#### Victor Bruns

*William Waterhouse*

On a recent visit to East Berlin I had the pleasure of meeting the composer and bassoonist Victor Bruns, at 81 one of the distinguished "elder statesmen" of our fraternity.



*Unter den Linden, Berlin (East), 30th September, 1985. The author with Victor Bruns and four colleagues from the Staatskapelle. L to R: Herbert Heilmann (principal), Holger Straube (asst. principal [prize-winner at Munich in 1984 and 1985]), William Waterhouse, Victor Bruns, Ottfried Bienert (contra) and Herr Erkens (bassoon, retired).*

While there have been a number of bassoonists who have composed a solo repertory for themselves (Ozi, Jacobi, Jancourt for example), Bruns' achievement in having combined a busy career of professional playing with the composition of a large number of major works of all kinds, as well as an impressive number of works for his own instrument, is surely