



Ray Still  
(Photo by Mimi Still Dixon)

# Ray Still Reflects on Forty Seasons with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

October 17, 2010

New York University

New York, New York

Nora Post

Kingston, New York

**R**ay Still, the principal oboist of the Chicago Symphony for four decades, has enjoyed a long and distinguished career in orchestral, solo, and chamber music. He has played for nearly all the major conductors of the second half of the twentieth century, and has recorded much of the oboe solo repertoire with such artists as Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zuckerman, Lynn Harrell, Kathleen Battle and the Fine Arts Quartet. His many students now teach and play in symphonies and universities throughout the world. Since his retirement in 1993, Ray Still has toured Europe, Ireland, Canada and Japan. He has taught at Northwestern University and the University of Maryland, and is currently writing a book on oboe playing. His distinctive sound and style have influenced and inspired oboists everywhere.

## INTRODUCTION

*In the fall of 2010, I was asked by my dear friend **Matt Sullivan** to interview Ray Still as part of a woodwind event at New York University honoring Still's legendary career and legacy. This is really the unique story of a great oboist playing for the great conductors of his time beginning after World War II. It's also the story of emerging orchestra committees that began to negotiate successfully for better working conditions for musicians. And it's the story of playing for the great conductors from the genteel to the tyrannical. As Ray Still once commented about the transition from Jean Martinon to Sir Georg Solti: "It was like going from the ridiculous to the sublime."*

*One of the more dramatic events in Ray Still's distinguished career was when Chicago Symphony Music Director Jean Martinon fired him from the orchestra in 1967. I interviewed Jerry Kaplan, the attorney who defended Still in the ensuing trial. Jerry remembered everything like it was yesterday, and did so with great flair and humor, so readers will see these two interviews together (Kaplan's interview follows immediately after this interview on page).*

*Some of these great orchestral players like Still would have played in the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra or the Chicago Symphony for nothing if that were what it would have taken. They loved it that much. Of course, their complete devotion and dedication is why they persevered and became the Ray Stills of this world—it was an inspired love of music that transcended anything else in their lives. History will be the judge, but players like Ray Still may well turn out to be the stars of an era that I suspect will become known as the Golden Age of American orchestras.*

*My thanks to all the people who helped in so many ways: Richard Wandel of the New York Philharmonic Archives, Steve LaCoste of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Archives, Frank Villella of the Rosenthal Archives at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Ken Cro-Ken, Peter Bergstrom, **Michael Henschel**, and **Jerry Kaplan**.*

**MATT SULLIVAN:** *It's a pleasure today to combine two important voices in the oboe world. Nora Post has been a close friend for many years; she is a former student of Mr. Still's, and a great interviewer, so I thought it would be wonderful for Nora to interview Ray Still about his life and career as part of this tribute to Ray Still at New York University. May I present Nora Post and Ray Still...*

**Nora Post (NP):** *Thank you, Matt. Before we begin, I wanted to thank all the faculty, staff and students at New York University who worked so hard to create today's event honoring Ray Still. It is a rare opportunity to hear directly from someone like Mr. Still, who is certainly one of the legendary oboe players of the 20th, the 21st, or any other century, as far as I'm concerned.*

*I'd like to start by going back many decades to the beginning of your career as principal oboist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Could you tell me what the audition was like?*

**Ray Still (RS):** I was playing with the Baltimore Symphony at the time—this was 1953—and we were just about to go on tour. That's when I got a call from New York about auditioning for Reiner. I had played during the 1953 summer season with the New York Philharmonic in a series called the Lewisohn Stadium Concerts.<sup>1</sup> At the time, these were the summer concerts of the New York Philharmonic. I was asked to substitute for their English horn player, **Michel Nazzi**—an Italian player who I admired greatly and had been a big influence on me.<sup>2</sup> He took a long vacation that summer, and so I played with the orchestra and quite a few people heard me play. **Robert Bloom** was my teacher at the time, and he recommended that I audition for Fritz Reiner. Now, in those days, it wasn't like today where you have what the kids tell me is a real cattle call, with 500 oboe players showing up for a second oboe job somewhere. In those days Reiner had a contact in New York whose name was Fabbroni.<sup>3</sup> He was a second fiddle player at the City Center, but he had his finger on a lot of pulses. He got eight oboe players together, including Leonard Arner and myself. Remember Leonard Arner?

**NP:** *He was one of my teachers.<sup>4</sup> He was the top solo oboe player in New York at the time. He was a founding member of the Alice Tully Chamber Music Society, principal oboist for the Mostly Mozart Festival, the New*

1 The Lewisohn Stadium was part of the City University of New York. One of New York's public landmarks, it was built in 1915 and was located between 136th and 138th streets in Manhattan. The summer concerts at Lewisohn Stadium included performances by the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera. Soloists included Ella Fitzgerald, George Gershwin, Jascha Heifetz, Yehudi Menuhin, Jack Benny and Leontyne Price. The stadium was demolished in 1973.

2 For a short biography of Michel Nazzi, see Nora Post, "Playing English horn for the Legendary Fritz Reiner: An Interview with Richard Nass," *The Double Reed* 34, no.2 (2011), p. 41.

3 Joseph Fabbroni was the most powerful contractor in New York at that time. As the legendary bassoonist **Loren Glickman** (who was himself a contractor of very considerable influence) commented:

The contractor "...is the arbiter of all disputes. In short, it is *his (or her)* orchestra, and heaven help the individual who questions his authority. My first introduction to the power of a New York contractor of musicians was at the New York City Symphony and the New York City Opera. This particular contractor was Joe Fabbroni. Everyone who worked for him was considered very fortunate. They also learned to tread very lightly in his company. Fabbroni functioned in the freelance world, and was not only the contractor of the New York City Symphony and Opera, but also of the classical section of RCA Victor Records, of a weekly radio program known as the Sherwin-Williams Hour, of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and a variety of other small jobs that came into his hands. If a musician fell out with this 'boss,' he also lost the opportunity to work in many other venues.

"Fabbroni was not a very good violinist, so he always seated himself at the back of the second violins. During one RCA Victor recording session, the orchestra was recording some music with quite modern arrangements. Fabbroni was sitting with Al Breuning, then the concertmaster of the New York City Opera, on the last stand of second violins. The orchestration called for the second fiddles to swoop up in a fairly difficult technical passage to very high notes in the sixth or seventh position. Al negotiated the passage with relative ease. Fabbroni stopped playing, and while Al held his high note, Fabbroni looked over at him and said: 'Alfred, I haven't been up there in years!'" (See Loren Glickman, *Maestro! Where's the Beat?* pp. 35-36.)

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra violinist Sandor Balint also worked for Fabbroni, and offered his assessment:

"Fabbroni seemed like a humble primitive Italian peasant. But he was as shrewd as a fox. His rise in the musical world, as I understand it, went back to Italy, where he had some close associations with the Ricordi family. Ricordi published all the Puccini music—and a lot of other things, too, of course. When Fabbroni came to America, Ricordi made him their agent. Before anyone could perform any work by Puccini in the United States, he had to get permission from Joe Fabbroni that he was artistically qualified to perform the music. I know Richard Rogers and Hammerstein had something like that at the time; you had to get permission if you wanted to produce one of their shows—summer stock, on the road, etc. They had a group that went over who you were, what you wanted to do, and they went over everything with a fine toothcomb to be sure it was at the artistic level they wanted. I think Fabbroni parlayed this concept into his connections with Ricordi.

"I worked for Fabbroni for about ten years. I started with him the spring of '46 and I played with New York City Opera until the fall season of '56. Then I got into the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and that was the end of it. But Fabbroni still liked me, and he asked me to play with the City Opera. At that time, the New York City Opera season and the Met didn't overlap much. This was back at the old Met. The New York City Opera had a very early season, and the Met didn't start until well into October. So Fabbroni asked me if I would play at the City Center until I had to bow out when the Met season began. So I did that through about 1959. Then Fabbroni got seriously sick. He had been a chain smoker, and it turned out that he had lung cancer. He died in the fall of 1959, and everything was taken over by another contractor. Fabbroni had a lot of activities, but I didn't even try to keep up with them, since my interest was just playing. But I knew he had connections everywhere. He was a big name in the music world with major connections." (Interview with author, January 30, 2011)

4 Leonard Arner passed away in January 2011, two months after this interview took place. He was eighty-seven years old.





Reiner and new musicians of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1953 (left to right): Nathan Snader, violin; Juan Cuneo, violin; Joseph Golan, violin; Alan Fuchs, horn; Sheppard Lehnhoff, viola; Ray Still, oboe; and János Starker, cello. (Photo courtesy of the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra)

*York City Opera and Ballet, and he did a huge amount of freelance and recording work. He played the Casals, Spoleto, Aspen and Marlboro festivals—he did it all. Artistically speaking, his only competition in New York was Harold Gombert, the first oboe of the New York Philharmonic at the time. But Gombert just wasn't the solo oboe player that Arner was, so Lenny pretty much had everything to himself. He never had more than three reeds to his name, whether he needed them or not. He was incredibly bright, and had an enormous natural gift for music. He never really had to work at anything—he made his three reeds a month and just didn't worry about it.*

RS: Anyway, all of us played, and then Fabbroni came in and said only Still and Arner could stay. So, we both went in together and then Reiner came in. By the way, Lenny Arner had a sardonic kind of a wit. Lenny was quite tall, but not quite as tall as me. Talking to me about Reiner, he said: "I hear he *hates* tall guys."

Anyway, we started to play. Reiner had us do the usual excerpts, and then he saw that we had a book of excerpts. So, he came up close from where he was out in the audience, and he stood right between us. So, here are these two tall guys and this little guy in between, and he had Leonard play *La Scala di Seta*. Then I played it, and then he played it, and then I played it. So, he was hearing stereo oboes. And it turned out that he said Arner could go home. I don't know why. Maybe he felt that Leonard was a little bit too fiery a guy. Arner was in the Buffalo Philharmonic before I was there—I was there in '47 and '48. Remember that the conductor, William Steinberg,<sup>5</sup> had no hair at all on his head. Arner came out from a rehearsal one day and was standing outside the stage door.

5 William Steinberg (1899-1978), a protégé of Otto Klemperer, escaped Nazi Germany in 1936 after being removed by the Nazis in 1933 as the conductor of the Frankfurt Opera. Arriving in the United States in 1938, Steinberg was the Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra from 1945 to 1952. He is best known for his tenure as Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra from 1952 to 1976.

There was a limousine parked at the curb. The orchestra's personnel manager was standing there, and Arner said to him: "Who are you waiting for? Old egg head?" The window rolled down from the limo, and the famous hairless head slowly emerged. I have the feeling that was the end for Arner with Steinberg. Maybe Arner mouthed off too much, but of course it turned out that I shot off my mouth much more than Arner ever would have.

**NP: *Once you won the Chicago job, what were the biggest kinds of challenges you faced in the orchestra?***

**RS:** Well, Reiner was a big recording star. And the minute he came to the Chicago Symphony, RCA wanted him to record everything.

**NP: *That was 1953?***

**RS:** Yes. Actually, I was the assistant principal in 1953. If you listen very carefully, you can hear me as assistant principal in the recordings of Strauss' *Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben*, but in the fall of 1954 I became principal oboe. Reiner was very demanding but, well, I would say I was the most demanding on myself. I was very hard on myself, and so it was tough. We made oodles of records. I think I must have made 250, maybe 300 recordings between Reiner and Solti, as well as a bunch of others, too.

**NP: *So, you were really in the hot seat?***

**RS:** Yeah.

**NP: *Tell me something. Today things are so different in family life. Men are expected to be more involved parents than they were a generation or two ago. In those days, the wives took care of almost everything, thus allowing their husbands to do the kind of demanding job that you did, for example. Do you think that in today's family world you'd be able to do your job?***

**RS:** You mean, because they expect more of the parents these days?

**NP: *Yes.***

**RS:** I don't know. We had four children. Mimi, my gorgeous redhead is right here today. You wouldn't know it—she doesn't have a gray hair—but she'll be seventy in a couple of years. She's my oldest. Then there's Tom, who lives in Montana now, and then my Susan and James. I don't know, but I think we had enough time for the kids. We sent them to very good schools, and that certainly cost us a lot of money.

**NP: *Your comments lead me to another question I wanted to ask. There were virtually no women in principal positions in American orchestras at the time you began your career, and that's another major change that has occurred over the years. Imagine, for just a moment, that you had been a single mom with three children and no help. Do you think it would have been possible to be principal oboe in the Chicago Symphony?***

**RS:** And make reeds, too?

**NP: *I guess that's the answer.***

**RS:** Right. I doubt I could have done it.

**NP: *I am curious about oboe players who influenced you when you were just starting out. Can you tell me who some of them were?***

**RS:** To me, Labate<sup>6</sup> sounded marvelous and I thought his playing was really great on all those broadcasts with

6 Bruno Labate (1883-1968) was the renowned principal oboist of the New York Philharmonic from 1920-1943. Born in Reggio, in the province of Calabria, Italy, he decided he wanted to become an oboist at the age of twelve. At seventeen, he was engaged as first oboist of the Bellini Theatre at Naples. Then he went to Greece, where he played in the Royal Greek Opera Orchestra and taught at the Athens Conservatory. He came to the United States in 1905, and before joining the New York Philharmonic Orchestra was at various times a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the New York Symphony and the Minneapolis Orchestra. He played principal oboe for Toscanini for many years, and was reputed to be one of the few musicians who could stand his ground with Toscanini—who was infamous for his wild rages during rehearsals. Labate taught at both The Juilliard School and the Manhattan School of Music. Among his colleagues, he was known for two things in addition to his musicianship and virtuosity—his sunny disposition and his fantastic disregard of the rules in dealing with the English language (see *New York Philharmonic Archives* material on Bruno Labate).

Toscanini—which I listened to every week. He had a beautiful way of singing on the oboe. **Tabuteau** once said that there was **Fernand Gillet** in Boston, Labate in New York and himself in Philadelphia. Tabuteau himself said that the best of the three was certainly Labate. Labate put together a book of oboe transcriptions—it was certainly a lot more interesting than the Barret studies! It was lyrical, singing, totally unlike the Tabuteau School. I took six weeks of lessons with Labate one summer. I came in playing really loud, since Labate sounded so big on all those broadcasts. But he told me: “No, no! *Dolce, dolce, leggiero...*”

**Henri de Busscher**<sup>7</sup> had a wonderful singing style. He played in the British Halle Orchestra, then with Damrosch in New York and, of course, with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which is where I heard him so many times. I worked for free there as an usher during my last two years of high school. The late clarinetist Mitchell Lurie said that although he admired Tabuteau, whenever he heard the big, long orchestral oboe solos he always thought of de Busscher. They said de Busscher was also a very good tenor, although I never heard him sing. He had as many singing students as oboe students. He always had that wonderful, long singing line when he played. He was always the player I had in mind when I played the long solos.

De Busscher was certainly my biggest influence. Then there was Michel Nazzi, the English horn player in the New York Philharmonic, and then there was Robert Bloom. Bloom's style was a lot like de Busscher's. In fact, de Busscher wrote a letter to Bloom in 1937 saying he really admired Bloom's playing. He invited Bloom to visit him in Los Angeles in 1937. Bloom told me he got the letter, but that he had no idea who de Busscher was!

**NP: What were some of the biggest non-musical challenges you experienced in your years in Chicago?**

**RS:** We had no orchestra committee. When I was still playing with the Baltimore Symphony, Britt Johnson, the first flutist of the orchestra and I and a few other people started a committee there. It was underground at first. We were threatened with the loss of our jobs by starting a committee, and I went through the same terrible situation in Chicago. At the time, Chicago was the only major orchestra that had no orchestra committee representing the players in new contract negotiations. We had nothing. Boston, New York, Philadelphia all had orchestra committees. So, I helped start one in Chicago. We formed the committee secretly at first, just like we did in Baltimore. The principal bassoonist, **Leonard Sharrow**, and I were the first two principal chair players on the committee. Sharrow was on management's list of players to be fired because of this. You won't find a **John Mack** or a **Gomberg** who stuck their necks out the way I did!

The head of the orchestra association was a neurosurgeon named Dr. Eric Oldberg—we called him the Evil Brain Surgeon.<sup>8</sup> The head of the Chicago Musicians' Union was James Caesar Petrillo.<sup>9</sup> The two of them made all

7 Henri de Busscher (1880-1975) was born in Brussels, Belgium. While de Busscher was principal oboe in the Halle Orchestra (the oldest extant orchestra in England), the soon-to-be-famous young British oboist Léon Goossens (1897-1988) heard him play and it changed Goossens' life. Up until that point, Goossens had been somewhat uninspired by the playing of some of his oboe teachers. “The great breakthrough came when Léon heard the Belgian oboist Henri de Busscher play at the Queen's Hall. De Busscher's playing was delicate and expressive, with a marvelous singing quality about it. His long, sensitive phrases were a marvel. His cameo-like tone was endowed with a warm vibrato. This was the inspiration that Léon had yearned for. Night after night he listened to de Busscher's solos, then went back to his room to emulate and aim for the same subtle and singing control over his oboe. He was an eager and gifted pupil, so much so that when de Busscher left for New York, Henry Wood chose the 16-year-old Goossens to take his place” (see *Melvin Harris Collection of Leon Goossens Complete Recordings*, 2002).

De Busscher was principal oboist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic for twenty-five years, from the 1920/21 season through 1945/46. These were the years Ray Still would have heard him play. The principal oboe position of the Pasadena Symphony is endowed in the memory of Henri de Busscher.

8 Eric Oldberg, MD, PhD (1901-1986) came from a very musical Chicago family. His father, Arne Oldberg, was Professor of Composition at Northwestern University in Evanston, and his nephew, Richard Oldberg, was third horn in the Chicago Symphony for thirty years. Dr. Oldberg was the chief of the Department of Neurology and Neurosurgery at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Chicago. He was also the President of the Chicago Board of Health. He served on the Board of Directors of both the Chicago Symphony and the Chicago Lyric Opera. He was President of the Chicago Symphony Board of Directors from 1952 through 1964.

9 James Caesar Petrillo (1892-1984) became President of the Chicago Local 10 of the American Federation of Musicians in 1922, and went on to become the national president of American Federation of Musicians from 1940 to 1958. Educated through only the fourth grade, Petrillo went on to become one of the most colorful, powerful and controversial labor leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Petrillo ruled with an iron fist; he was beloved by some and despised by many. Many considered him the Al Capone of music; his office at the Chicago Musicians' Union was encased in bulletproof glass, and he always had a personal bodyguard outside his office. During the summer of 1942, Petrillo visited Boston Symphony Music Director Serge

the decisions together, and never consulted with any members of the orchestra. When they reduced everyone's salaries for the Ravinia summer season of the Chicago Symphony without consulting with any members of the orchestra, that was it. That was when we started the orchestra committee. They wanted to make the first chair people into the aristocracy of the orchestra, to keep us separated from the other guys, the so-called *tutti* players—the scale players. But we didn't go for it. I actually got fired in 1967 because of my union activities in starting an orchestra committee, after I had been in the orchestra for fourteen years. That took away a lot of my energy and was really a hard thing. But I'm glad I did it now. I have several other students who have followed in my footsteps. Jane Marvine helped start an orchestra committee in Baltimore, and she's been the head of the committee for many years. So, I think if you're an—I'll use a nice word—apple polisher, and you play it safe, you might get a higher salary. I don't know. I suffered a little because of that with my salary, because I had helped start the orchestra committee. But you know, I'm very glad I did it.

**NP:** *Good for you. Could I go back to the conductors for a minute?*

**RS:** Sure.

**NP:** *One of the other ways times have changed is that at the time you were playing in the '50s and the '60s, and even in the '70s, major orchestras were linked to legendary great conductors—Ormandy in Philadelphia, Bernstein with the New York Philharmonic, Szell in Cleveland, Ozawa with the Boston Symphony and, of course, Reiner and Solti with Chicago. That doesn't exist anymore. It's a global village now, and today's great conductors live on planes. There aren't these long tenures of great conductors with the resultant signature styles and sounds that resulted from these unique musical partnerships. When I was a teenager, for example, I could listen to the wind section of the Philadelphia or Cleveland Orchestras on a radio broadcast, and I knew who I was listening to right away—I could just pick them right out. Now I wouldn't be able to do that—things have become much more homogenized. And, you know, there were certain sounds associated with these great conductors, like the strings of the Philadelphia Orchestra, or the brasses of the Chicago Symphony. What are your thoughts concerning these changes over the decades?*

**RS:** Well, the conductors who draw people at the box office are in such demand that they fly all over the place. But they don't usually stay very long. In fact, some of them get fired. Barenboim was fired from the Chicago Symphony, for instance. He tried very hard to get the orchestra to unanimously reinstate him, but they wouldn't do it. You mentioned Ormandy in Philadelphia. They were so happy to get rid of him after all those years! A very wealthy man in Philadelphia kept him in his position, and the orchestra was so glad to see him go. After that, of course, they got some others they weren't too happy with, either. Familiarity breeds contempt, I guess you'd say. After you have a conductor for a while you begin seeing all of his weaknesses. Solti had a lot of weaknesses. You know, Solti was so awkward when he conducted. He actually stuck himself in the head with a baton.<sup>10</sup> We were all going to come to rehearsal the next day with hardhats! Once he actually put the baton right through his hand. He was wild, but he had a lot of integrity, and he was a real *mensch*. He was a person you could trust, he was a very admirable guy, and he did almost all the repertoire well. He loved Mozart to death, yet he just could

---

Koussevitzky at Koussevitzky's summer estate near Tanglewood. Petrillo arrived in a bulletproof limousine accompanied by bodyguards (see Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, pp. 299–300). As President of Chicago's Local 10, Petrillo was the boss of the Windy City musicians from 1922 until dissidents dethroned him after his reign of forty years. The union activists in the Chicago Symphony worked hard to oust Petrillo in the early sixties. He was finally run out of Chicago and then decamped to New York.

10 Chicago was not the only city where Solti impaled himself with his baton. When he was recording *Parsifal* in Vienna, he put his baton through his left hand. A similar event occurred when he was conducting a 1976 performance of *Figaro* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York with the visiting Paris Opéra. As Sir George described it: "During the Count's aria, at the beginning of Act III, I stabbed myself in the head with the baton. I went on conducting, but blood began to run down my face. At first I tried to stop it with my handkerchief, and during the harpsichord accompanied recitative that follows the aria, which lasts for about twenty seconds, I left the pit, wet the handkerchief in a drinking fountain backstage, replaced it firmly on my head, and returned to the pit. The stage manager, who had noticed the empty podium, had given the order to lower the curtain; but when he saw me reenter the pit, he made the curtain change its course in midair. I arrived just after the sextet had begun and took over from the concertmaster, who had stood up to conduct. After the performance the house doctor bandaged my head, and the next day I went to another doctor for stitches. 'You're lucky,' he told me. 'If the point had entered one centimeter to the left, it would have hit the main vein, and you wouldn't have stopped bleeding.' Since this mishap, I have always used batons with rounded tips" (see Sir Georg Solti, *Memoirs*, p. 209).





The wind section of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in performance about 1975.  
(Photo courtesy of the Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra)

not conduct the Mozart symphonies. Yet he could conduct the bigger Mozart works and the operas just fine. I was so fortunate that I had Reiner for ten years and Solti for twenty-two years. So, that's quite a few good years. I was in the Chicago Symphony for forty years altogether.

The very first time I met Solti was at Ravinia one summer. He had a sort of singing falsetto voice and he was singing. He was just another guest conductor as far as I was concerned. He was singing my solo along with me. I just put the oboe down. He stopped and asked me why I put the oboe down. I asked him how he could possibly hear me if he was singing my part! But of course, we always got along so well.

**NP:** *You mentioned all those recordings with Reiner and Solti. Just off the top of your head, does anything in particular come to mind as something you're particularly proud of?*

**RS:** Yes. *La Scala di Seta*. I talked to Reiner, and said: "Dr. Reiner, we're doing *La Scala di Seta*. What articulation would you like?" He said, "Oh, it doesn't matter, use your own articulation." So, I came to the first rehearsal and I played [sings] a two and two kind of thing, and he stopped, whacked his baton and said: "Hey, I don't want any slurs." And I thought, "Oh, my God." He was taking a really fast, bright tempo [sings], and I said, "Dr. Reiner, I can't do it at that tempo without any slurs." And he said, "You must." At that time I had a method of tonguing I called my *tuckus* tonguing; in Yiddish *tuckus* means your rear-end. But anyway I did [sings], my [throat] made it sound like I was tonguing the second note of two and two—although I wasn't. So, I whizzed through it at that ridiculous tempo, and he stopped and the orchestra shuffled and applauded, and he said: "See, I told you that you could do it." And I said: "But Dr. Reiner I *didn't* do it. I was—I sneaked in a few slurs." And the orchestra laughed like crazy and Reiner said: "You are very sneaky, I did not hear." In the meantime, I practiced a lot and I was able to do all the staccatos. That was one moment, yes, that was one.

**NP:** *Do any other great moments come to mind as you look back?*

**RS:** Well, the famous one I'm sure you know about—I had been in the Kansas City Symphony and the Buffalo Symphony, so that was eight years in the minor leagues, you know. We were doing the Beethoven 6th Symphony,



*The Pastoral*, in Chicago, and we were at the section where [sings] and then the strings [sings]. So, I started playing, and Reiner said, “No, Ray,” and then he made something like [puffing sounds]; he was describing to me how I should play it. I couldn’t tell what the hell he was really trying to explain to me, but I thought I’ve got to do it better, and so [sings]. He stopped the orchestra again. He said, “No!” Then he asked, “Have you ever even played this symphony before?” I was mad as hell by that time, and I said, “What do you mean? Of course I’ve played it.” And he looked around and he was setting me up, you know. He said, “Where did you play it? In Baltimore with the Orioles?”

He used to love to use his American humor. He knew all of the funny things about American humor.

You know, I loved all the great guest conductors we had, too. We had Carlo Maria Giulini;<sup>11</sup> we had the great Hungarian conductor István Kertész.<sup>12</sup> We had so many great ones. Eduard van Beinum<sup>13</sup> was marvelous—he was a great conductor.

**NP:** *Of all the recordings you made with the orchestra, which ones come to mind as the most outstanding?*

**RS:** One of the best with Solti was the Brahms *Requiem*, with Kiri Te Kanawa. It was incredible—she did a fantastic job. We also did it with Kathleen Battle with James Levine conducting. We only recorded it with Solti and Levine, not Reiner.

With Reiner, you could name a whole slew of recordings, and it sounds kind of silly, but the Strauss waltzes was one of the best recordings we ever did. If you hear that sometime, it is incredible how Reiner goes from one waltz to another; he makes a seamless connection between them. And, of course, there’s the recording of *Scheherazade* with Reiner. Mahler’s *Fourth*, Stravinsky’s *The Fairy’s Kiss*. And there were so many Stravinsky works. The Spanish recording we did with Reiner of de Falla’s *El Amor Brujo*—some of the best sounds that I ever made on my oboe were on that one. But there is so much more—de Falla’s *The Three Cornered Hat*, and *La Vida Breve*—and so many other Spanish pieces.

Reiner was so great partly because he had such a wide range of musical interests. We recorded six of the nine Beethoven symphonies with him. He wanted to do them all. But I was happy with six. When you play with a symphony orchestra for a long time, Beethoven is not the composer you’re happiest to see coming along. It’s Haydn and Mozart and Bach that you want to play more than anyone else, at least for me. Some people say Mahler, but we’ve done all ten Mahler symphonies, and all the Bruckner symphonies, and I just get—I have just had my fill of Mahler. You know, it’s a funny thing. I said to Neil Black, who played in the English Chamber Orchestra all those years: “Oh, my God, Neil, I’d love to have your job where you just play Bach, Mozart and Haydn.” And he said, “You know, Ray, I’ve been doing that for so many years—Haydn and Mozart. I’d just love to play a Mahler symphony once in a while.” Be my guest.

**NP:** *I guess there’s no accounting for taste. But we are almost out of time, so I’d like to ask just a few quick final questions. We have an audience of aspiring young musicians here today. It’s obvious that times have changed a great deal in terms of professional opportunities in the arts. In the past few years the Chicago Symphony has experienced serious financial challenges. Likewise the New York Philharmonic, the Metropolitan Opera, the Philadelphia Orchestra and, of course, the Detroit Symphony.*

**RS:** Are they all having trouble, too?

11 Carlo Maria Giulini (1914-2005) began his career as a professional viola player, going on to become the music director of La Scala Opera in Milan, the Vienna Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He made his American debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1955, leading to a twenty-three-year association with the orchestra.

12 Like Sir Georg Solti, István Kertész (1929-1973), was born into a Hungarian Jewish family. His immediate family went into hiding during World War II, although most of his extended family was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and did not survive. After the war, Kertész became the conductor of the Budapest Opera. After the upheaval of the Hungarian Revolution, he and his family left the country in 1957. He was the principal conductor of the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra, the Hamburg State Opera, the Augsburg Opera, the Cologne Opera and the London Symphony Orchestra. He was a frequent guest conductor of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, where he was the principal conductor of the Ravinia Festival from 1970 to 1972.

13 Dutch conductor Eduard van Beinum (1901-1959) conducted the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam beginning in 1931. He later served as conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

**NP:** *Yes. It's unlike anything that's ever happened in my life. If you had to do it all over again, what would you do? What would you do if you had to make those decisions today?*

**RS:** I'll tell you a story. When I was in junior high school, and I was still playing clarinet (it was the year before I switched to oboe), there was a kid who also played clarinet named Leon Bloomberg. He asked me: "What do you want to be a professional musician for? You can't make much money, for God's sake." He said, "I'm going to be a lawyer so that I can make lots of money." I was shocked. I thought to myself, "I can get *paid* for playing music?" I had no idea that you could get paid for playing music, I really didn't—I mean, I would have done it whether I got paid for it or not. I think that first of all, to make it in this field, you have to be a fanatical music lover. It's hopeless if you're not. You have to love music so much that you'd sacrifice everything for it. I think that it doesn't matter to somebody like that if the economic picture is deteriorating.

As far as going to a conservatory is concerned, I was kind of an unusual case, because World War II had just come up; I had switched over from music to electrical engineering, and I was in that for a while. And then I got into the army and more than anything else in the world, being in the army made me want to get out and play music. It made me want to be a musician. When I got out, I went to Juilliard, because I figured I'd get a stipend for going to school. I had two kids at that time and the GI bill paid me \$80 a month. That was a big amount of money for me at the time. So, I went to Juilliard for one year, and that was the extent of my formal musical education. The reason I didn't go back was because I won the job in the Buffalo Philharmonic. So, I didn't have much education—I did a tremendous amount of research on my own. I was always getting records out of the library, copying scores, learning how to read them, and I was just a total fanatical idiot.

**NP:** *If you had to do it all over again, are there any important things you would change, and are there any important things you'd want to keep just the same?*

**RS:** One thing I'd like to change is that I'd like to really take playing the piano seriously. I just sloughed it off at Juilliard. I had piano lessons, but I couldn't have cared less. I only wanted to get that oboe out; that's all—that was it. If I could do it all again, I'd really study piano seriously. That plus I would have really studied conducting so that I could have done a better job with the Mozart *Serenades* and so many other things I have conducted in classes and master classes over the years. ♦

---

## REFERENCES

Balint, Sandor. Interview with author. January 30, 2011.

Glickman, Loren. *Maestro! Where's the Beat?* Norwich, Vermont: Terra Nova Press, 2002.

Harris, Melvin. Liner notes from *The Collection of Léon Goossens Complete Recordings*. Seattle: University of Washington Music Library, 2002.

Horowitz, Joseph. *Classical Music in America: A History of its Rise and Fall*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005.

Los Angeles Philharmonic Archives.

Post, Nora. "Playing English horn for the Legendary Fritz Reiner: An Interview With Richard Nass." *The Double Reed* 34, no.2 (2011): 37-48.

New York Philharmonic Archives.

Rosenthal Archives of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Solti, Sir Georg. *Memoirs*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1997. Reprint, Chicago: A Cappella Books, an imprint of Chicago Review Press, Inc., 1998.