

Frederiksen, Brian – Interview with Arnold Jacobs, April 1994

BF: This is an interview that I did with Jake in the car on route to Bloomington, Indiana.

BF: You first started playing professionally in the Indianapolis Symphony.

AJ: This was the first year Seivitsky was in there. Basically it was his first year it was my first professional job. Frank Brouk was there.

BF: What was the audition and how did you get connected with them?

AJ: He came to the Curtis institute to audition players and one of our bass players was given the assignment to ask the players to play for him because he needed a wide range of players to join the Indianapolis Symphony and I was one of those that was asked and I had a very interesting audition. He liked my playing very much and this bass player Portnoy (who was with the Boston Symphony for years). There was a Henry Portnoy who played first clarinet in Philadelphia for many years and I think he was in Indianapolis,

BF: I checked the rosters and it seems that the trombone section was primarily a Curtis section.

AJ: Guy Boswell, we used to call him Duffy, that was his nickname. There was a local man, a second trombone who later became the conductor of the Long Beach Band, Long Beach, California for many years in fact. We had Max Woodbury on first trumpet. Basically it got down to Curtis Trombone Section that you brought in.

In Chicago we had the Siegel twins, Harold and Ray. They played for the Chicago Symphony for quite a while, but he and his brother were from Indianapolis and Frank Brouk started his career about the same time I did. He did the commute between Chicago and Indianapolis.

Twenty weeks for the season and then there were tours primarily through Indiana. It was like going to school but with a small salary, in other words it was a learning situation for us, and it gave us a chance to play professionally and get a very modest salary but it was a stepping stone. When Gizella and I. were there, we never made enough money to live on while we there so during the summer I had to go back to Philadelphia to work and then I had to call them up and ask them to send money so we'd have enough to get back to Indianapolis. So the second year, I was already indebted to them and that's when Fritz Reiner called and asked me to take the audition for the Pittsburgh Symphony.

I remember when he sent us his first manager job to see us John Harmaala, another Curtis graduate, I told John I can't take it because I had to borrow money and I owed them quite a bit and I had already signed the contract for the Indianapolis Symphony. Anyway, he let it go but a few weeks after that I came over to the house again in Philadelphia and he said he thought I ought to audition. I was teaching in those days in Philadelphia and one of my students was driving up to New York and take the audition in Steinway Hall. There was about 25-30 trying out. I agreed to go as long as I could go up with my student, we drove up there, I took the audition and he offered me the job right

away and I told Mr. Reiner that I was under contract in Indianapolis. He said he will take care of Indianapolis. I didn't hear anything further from him until two weeks before the symphony season was to start in both Indianapolis and Pittsburgh. We were packing but we didn't know where we were going yet. We got a contract from the Pittsburgh Symphony with a note saying they traded their first cellist to Sevitsky for me.

BF: I was trying to track down that Cellist. (Auber ??) Norman Schweikert thought why would someone want to go from Pittsburgh to Indianapolis. I checked the personnel list myself and there was no one from the Pittsburgh roster in Indianapolis those years. Maybe the cellist was part of the Fritz's casualties. Fifteen or twenty people got replaced in Pittsburgh from the season before when you were there including one person in the low brass section.

AJ: It might have been Howard Kohl. This would be the Ossie's first year. What a great player he was, you would have loved to hear that boy play. He was like Ursa except on trombone. Really a great artist. He stayed in Pittsburgh and left the year before I did and I forget whether he had to go in to the service. There were a lot of people in service due to the war era so you would get a lot of people would get in service and then come back like Ed Kleinhammer.

BF: In Pittsburgh Hugh Cowden also played with you.

AJ: He was a great low horn player. When they brought him to Chicago and put him on high horn. He was assistant principal, just where he didn't belong. He could play high horn, he was absolutely outstanding low horn player.

BF: So you were in Pittsburgh 4 or 5 years. That season was also 20 weeks. What were you doing during the summers?

AJ: From Indianapolis we went back to Philadelphia twice and then Pittsburgh also in 1939 or 1940 before Dallas (his son) was born in Philadelphia. I played with dance bands in Philadelphia for 2 or 3 years and then we went to Chicago. I think we started to come to Chicago around 1940 between seasons because there was so much more work there. I played with Meyer Davis' orchestra. part time work that paid very well.

BF: So you were actually doing some jobbing in Chicago before you got into the Symphony?

AJ: Oh yes, I did a lot of extensive work on string bass. I never played tuba in Chicago until they called me at CBS staff. I had to substitute for their tuba player for the wartime shows which I cannot remember the names. I was playing tuba, which they called me for, but there were some string bass parts in there and there was a bass sitting there so I played the bass parts also, and a lot of it was pretty good jazz things. So they hired me right away on staff on account that I could play bass. They tried to get me away from the symphony orchestra (Pittsburgh???) but I was there for at least two summers.

BF: So this is in addition to the 20 weeks season in Pittsburgh before going to CBS?

AJ: Well first I did a lot of other work actually the Blackstone Hotel with Neil. Another funny situation, they asked me to come in and hold the bass and look busy because their bass player had to leave suddenly for California since his mother was ill. I used to play in Howard Lannon's Orchestra. Meyer Davis I knew from the Book Society banks very well and the businessman thought well with the playing and all. Anyway, I went in there and they hired me right away also for permanent, in fact, every time they would come to Chicago after that, they would give their bass player a vacation, with me on. They liked my work very much. They took me to St. Louis to play at the Chase Hotel. I played cocktail lounges, bars, lots of freelance work, the old Chez Paris. Played with Lou Diamond who used to do all the substitute work, like the off nights, at the hotels, like Mondays off at the Palmer House, Tuesday night off at the Hilton, Wednesdays at Chez Paris and we would play those nights, the Diamonds Banks for MCA. I used to do that even when I was with the orchestra I kept doing that. I used to play the style shows at Marshall Fields for ten years but I was still with the orchestra (Chicago), working the Walnut Room and getting a discount. it was very nice you know. But I loved to play bass and I didn't stop until 1959 when everything just got too busy, too much teaching, so I finally decided to stick to tuba.

BF: In Chicago, you had actually gotten a job by playing the second part on Symphonie Fantastique?

AJ: Yes, I was hired right after I played the Fantastic Symphony.

BF: How did they ever get a hold of you for Fantastique? Was it that you were in town?

AJ: They knew that I was in town, I was staying in Chicago during the summer. I had talked to a lot of Chicago Symphony contemporaries that I played with on a number of jobs and they had told their personnel manager about me. Anyway, he called me one day and asked if I would do the Symphonie Fantastique with George Hamburg playing first and I played second. I played for them and they came back and offered me the job. I told them that I was already signed up for Pittsburgh but they said we'll hold this for you and you can come with us next season. I agreed.

BF: So there was lapse of a season?

AJ: Yes, from when they were going to hire me.

BF: So this was in 1943 that they had offered you the job to start in 1944?

AJ: It must have been. It was Desire Defauw's first year I joined him in the second year. The Symphonie Fantastique must have been in his first year.

BF: Do you remember anything about George Hamburg?

AJ: Very much, he was a very nice man. I got so embarrassed because I called him Mr. Hamburger when he called me one time and I'll never forget that. He laughed, he'd been called that before.

BF: Do you know very much about him? We have not really been able to find a lot of information about him?

AJ: I think he was having some sort of health problems that he had to leave or something like that. I'm not sure. He had his larynx removed due to cancer. I remember going up to see him and he asked me to buy his tubas. I bought both of his horns.

BF: Per chance were they Yorks?

AJ: No, they are Alexanders.

BF: I'm asking this because there was an ad that York put out saying that their tubas were played by the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony, implying of course that Hamburg played a York.

AJ: Was that before I got there you mean?

BF: Yeah. It was in the mid 30's.

AJ: They probably gave him one so that they could run the ad. Same thing with Donatelli.

BF: That's an area we really have not been able to find too much about him.

AJ: I don't know anybody alive that knew him. We'll just have to go with whatever info we have. Milt Preeves knew him. He might be able to help you. In fact, he's one of the main one that went up to Hamberg and said you better hire this man. That was at Orchestra Hall. I did play at Ravinia on Symphonie Fantastique the following summer. Then he asked me to play first.

BF: With the transition from Hamberg, was he running into problems?

AJ: Yes, actually they were phasing him out, there were problems.

BF: Basically, it was like that. No auditions, no nothing?

AJ: No I didn't have to audition. I took a lot of auditions when I was young. Well, in Boston I auditioned for Koussevitsky and they wanted me to start right away but it was non-union so I turned it down because I was afraid because the conductor had a reputation to be quite difficult and I was afraid that if he didn't like my work he wouldn't renew my contract and I'd be out of the union and I'd be out of a career.

BF: What other auditions did you take?

AJ: I auditioned for the St. Louis Symphony and they hired me. I was all set to go to St. Louis. even bought a full dress suit and I had a contract and two weeks before I was to go I got a telegram from the union saying they wouldn't accept my transfer that they had a local man that they wanted to put on this job. I didn't fight it, I just let it go.

I was offered the Philadelphia orchestra when I played in concert with the Curtis institute and Opera Orchestra. We did the Amelia Goes to the Ball, and there's a nice tuba solo in there and Ormandy heard it and the next day Sol Caston came over to see me and said Ormandy was interested in having me join the Philadelphia Orchestra but I wouldn't take it because of my teacher being there and fairly close to retirement.

BF: Did you every play with Philadelphia Orchestra with Donatelli?

AJ: No, my teacher would never hire me for anything in Philadelphia. We had a tuba player name Ross Wyre who didn't play nearly as well as I did but he did all the work in Philadelphia and any out of town work I got hired.

BF: Ross Wyre graduated a couple of years before you at Curtis?

AJ: That's right.

BF: So the two of you were at Curtis?

AJ: Yes.

BF: When you first got into Curtis, were you playing the orchestra or him?

AJ: I played to school orchestra. He was a school teacher and I don't know if he was teaching school at the time or what, but he had other things he was doing so I got the orchestra.

BF: Ross Wyre was another name that came up. As a matter of fact, you were in a high school before you got into Curtis and he was teaching there?

AJ: Much later.

BF: Back to Curtis, someone has said that apparently Reiner had heard you out in Long Beach?

AJ: No, he never heard me until I joined the orchestra in Curtis.

BF: You did not audition for Reiner?

AJ: No. I auditioned for my teacher Donatelli and Joseph Hoffman, the head of the school. One other man - I think it was the concertmaster of the Philadelphia Orchestra or first trumpet I don't remember which. There were 3 people I remember at the audition. I played Stars of the Velvety Sky and the Carnival of Venice. Then they put out the Flying Dutchman. First time I ever saw high C. I brought it down to b fiat. I didn't know the tuba. They laughed when I sat down to play it.

BF: Curtis was the first orchestra that you had ever played in?

AJ: That was it. It was with friendly Fritz.

BF: Must have been a rude awakening?

AJ: Well, I always got along with him well. He was very nice to me. But I tell you I used to die when I'd hear he was working some other people. I was a very good tuba player as a young man. I could play anything then that I practically couldn't play 30 years later, master technique and range. I was playing all the fiddle parts and best overture and all sorts of materials that my mother used to bring home, incidental music for silent movies. She used to play with the piano and I'd play along with it. I never played the bass parts though. I could hardly read bass clef, I was a trumpet player.

BF: What is it you remember about Donatelli?

AJ: Very strict discipline. He was a fine musician.

BF: I understand that he did not really speak much English?

AJ: I didn't think so then, I probably wouldn't mind today. As a 15 year old boy my impression was I didn't understand half of what he said, but I worked with so many Italians since that it makes sense to me now. If I missed a note or made a mistake, I had to take a whole work over another week. Everything was very strict discipline.

BF: John Taylor has located one of Donatelli's daughters down in DC purely by accident?

AJ: I think his son was going to medical school and became a physician.

BF: We really are not able to find much on Donatelli. Apparently he died in 1954. Do you remember what the circumstances for him leaving the orchestra?

AJ: He left at age 65 when he had to retire, that was when they had the mandatory retirement age. I remember Tabuteau also retiring when he was 65. There were some stories going around about how they were trying to get rid of him (Donatelli). They were. They tried to get me to go over there. I was very tempted to take that job in 1936 when we did Amelia go to the Ball. I was asked to join the orchestra then but Donatelli came to me and asked me not to and said if I don't take it there is nobody else they can get in Philadelphia, he said I would be the only one. I did turn it down because I did like the old

man and I figured I would get something someday and I did very well with the dance work. Then, I did get a call from Ormandy when we were in Philadelphia.

One year they called from the New York Philharmonic and they said if Bill Bell didn't take the job, I could be imported since principal players could be imported without a transfer and I could go directly to the New York Philharmonic and they said Bill wasn't sure if he was going to leave NBC so they said they'd like to hire me if he turns it down. Then I had a call, a while later, of Ormandy offering me again the Philadelphia Orchestra and I was already promised the Chicago Symphony.

BF: What year was this you were promised Chicago?

AJ: My last year in Pittsburgh, 1943. I joined the Orchestra here in 1944. But anyway, I had all these different orchestras offered to me, NBC offered it to me if Bill left and he says if they called me and said if Bill takes the Philharmonic then you can come and join us but you have to wait six months, we can't import you directly in you have to put your transfer in for six months. I said that I would consider it and so forth, but when we had to make the choice I chose the Chicago Symphony because Gizella liked it the best. Well, besides that we were from Chicago. Gizella's home was there and I had been doing very well by working summers, there was a lot of work in Chicago. So that's how I got it.