

John Minsker – Gentle Giant

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John Minsker and Robert Huffman.

The oboe world lost one of its giants a year ago August, in the passing of **John Minsker**. Mr. Minsker was a student of **Marcel Tabuteau** at Curtis and joined the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1936. His physical height was a fitting metaphor for his stature as a man and a musician. The list of his students reads like a who's who of the 20th century oboists among whom are **John Mack**, **Lou Rosenblatt** and **Al Genovese** and my own teacher, **Earnie Harrison**. What follows are my own reminiscences and experiences with this legendary man.

It was from **Gene Montooth** that I first heard the name John Minsker. Gene taught his students their oboistic legacy - starting with his own teacher - Earnie Harrison, Harrison's teacher Minsker and Minsker's teacher Tabuteau.

It would be twenty years later that I finally meet Minsker. Taking a deep gulp, I phoned and explained that I was a student of Earnie Harrison and asked if I could stop by for a visit. When he opened the door of his apartment. He had put on a tie!

Immediately he began reliving his memories of

playing in the Philadelphia Orchestra, working with Tabuteau, hearing Kreisler, Callas and playing for Stokowski. He had left the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1959. After about 20 minutes I worried about wearing out this 'old man' - at the time, he was about 78. This is really quite funny in retrospect - as you will learn a little later. He replied that he hadn't "thought about these things in a long time" and that he "was kind of enjoying it." Well, if he was enjoying this I wasn't going anywhere!

We talked about me coming back to play for him. He worried that it would disturb the neighbors in the apartment nearby, that we would have to go to his son's house and that would just be too much trouble, and besides he hadn't

taught in decades. To visit with him, to listen to his explanations of how wonderful Tabuteau's playing was - working with Tabuteau, preparing his cane and keeping him company in his studio, how Tabuteau would make one glorious reed after another, his own history of coming to Philadelphia, immediately dropping out of Ithaca College after his first lesson with Tabuteau, how he learned that the musical line went 2-3-4-1 instead of 1-2-3-4 (i.e. across the barline) was such a revelation and how he knew from that first lesson that he simply had to study with Tabuteau and that choice in turn determined his destiny - this was more than enough.

During the conversation - he kept coming back to teaching and how that just wouldn't work. He said "study with the girl - she'll take care of you" referring to **Cynthia de Almeida**, with whom I was studying at the time. He had heard her on a TV broadcast. He just lit up when he talked about her playing. But then after a couple of hours - he said - "Come on, we're going to my sons house, I want to hear you play." Well this presented a couple of small problems and no small panic.

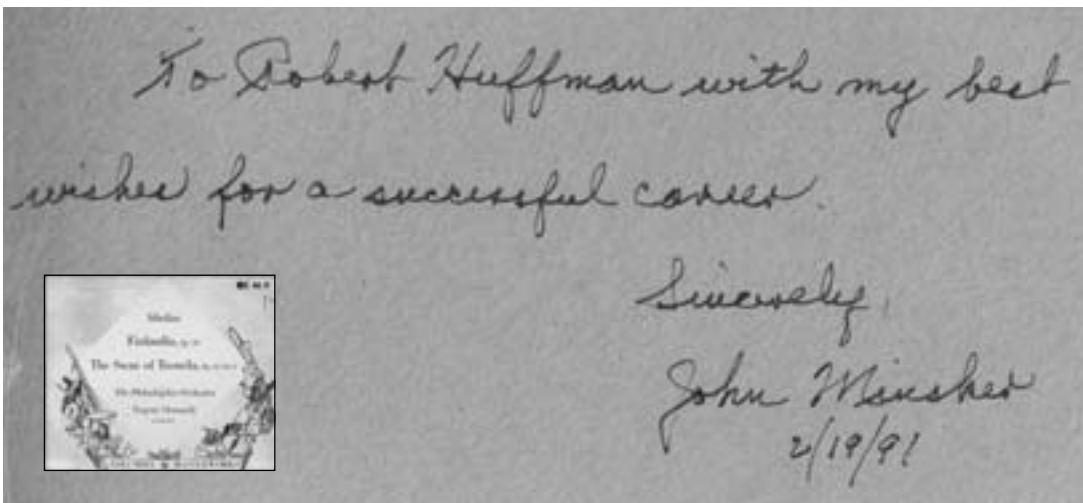
I had an oboe but no music, there would be no warm up and I was about to play for ‘the man!’ Om’gosh! On the way – he talked about his favorite conductors. He mentioned that Szell and Reiner were quite good but then he said with the most profound admiration, “Stokowski - there was no one like Stokowski” - and then just as immediately he pointed and said “now I didn’t say that he was my favorite person.” We both laughed. He had the biggest smile.

We arrived at his son’s and the moment of truth had arrived. He brought out a little glass of water for my reeds - I played a scale of five half notes - just to get some blood flowing in my lips. He all but shouted, “No! That’s all wrong!” (That got my attention) “Everything needs to be on a line!” (Line, Line, think Line!). He sat in a chair on the far end of the room and I proceeded to play Barret Melodic Study No. 26. He sat there motionless. When I was done he smiled and said “Now that was pretty nice.” Then he wanted hear something else - so I played Melody No. 1. In the second measure, which consists of a half note followed by a quarter - I tongued it. He stopped me and said that it was supposed to be slurred. I apologized and mentioned that I was doing this from memory. He smiled and said “Well I am too, and I haven’t done this is 30 years!” It was a terrifying moment to be in the presence of a brilliant man of his stature and accomplishment. This one comment brought into clear perspective this giant of a man sitting across the room.

He wasn’t pleased with No. 1 though - what he taught me in the fourth measure was like a revelation.

I had always been under the impression that one of the secrets of Tabuteau was the amazing control he had of crescendo and decrescendo. But in the fourth measure, what Minsker taught was that the quarter note relaxed. It was in effect a decrescendo of intensity. What he explained was that, yes, there was an important role for the dynamics but that there was an equally important role for the role of intensity, that after the point of intensity there had to be a release or relaxation. He talked about how Tabuteau taught that the sound had to be alive, that it always had to be growing. He talked about how Tabuteau was committed to playing every note as beautifully as he could, whether what he was playing was a solo line, an accompaniment or a buried unison. He mentioned specifically a Beethoven symphony where Tabuteau was in unison with the violins. There was no way to hear what he was doing in the audience, and yet Minsker said that what he did with the music was simply beyond belief.

Another revelation took place at that meeting. As he began to speak I realized that he was using not only the same concepts but the exact same mannerisms and on several occasions, the very words that Earnie Harrison had used. It was like watching Earnie in another man’s body. But the truth of the matter is that so often when Earnie was teaching we were hearing and seeing Minsker. It doesn’t take too much of a logical extension then to realize that there was no doubt a great deal of the influence of Tabuteau in Minsker, and just as likely Gillet in Tabuteau. We are part of a wonderful heritage that has been passed



A note from John Minsker to Robert Huffman on the back of the *Swan of Tuonela* album cover.



John Minsker and Earnie Harrison.

down over the generations It really is quite something to be a part of it.

On every visit with Minsker he always did or said something completely over the top. Five years ago we had gone out and when we came back to his apartment, I pushed the button for the elevator. He said "I think I am going to walk." Well, I wasn't going to leave his wife. When the elevator door closed, she said (it was so cute), "You know, I am worried about him. Don't you think he's a little old to be taking the stairs?" Now getting between two 91 year olds didn't seem like a good idea – and then she turned and said, "You know, when I get to my floor, he usually is waiting for me." They lived on the FIFTH floor!!

Well, when we got to their floor, he wasn't there. What if he had fallen, or who knows what? We waited for a bit and then I walked Mrs. Minsker back to their apartment and I planned to check on him if he didn't get there real soon, but he was waiting in the apartment for us! He smiled and gave Betty a big hug and a kiss. He knew she was worried - we both were. And I was worried about wearing him out when he was 78!!

Last year when I went to see him - he was visibly weaker and using a walker regularly. I realized that his unbroken string of blowing my mind was probably over - not that it was a rule or an expectation. I reminded him about this story and he asked if I knew why he made it so quickly? Actually, I hadn't thought about it. He went on to say that it was because he had taken two steps at a time. Even in his weakening condition. Once again - unexpectedly - he floored me!

A couple of other comments that bring some per-

spective to this gentle giant: we were talking about his first experiences being in the Philadelphia Orchestra. I suggested that it must have been very exciting working there with Tabuteau, Kincaid and Stokowski. In his usual understated and yet dignified way, he said: "Actually I was kind of scared." All but fresh out of Curtis, sitting amongst legends like those, who wouldn't be? Earnie told us that Minsker would warm up at orchestra concerts playing pianissimo long tones - and yet even with the rest of the orchestra warming up you could hear Minsker clear as a bell. (If you don't think that is a good trick, try it some time!) Yet in telling this to Minsker he responded that he didn't remember anyone telling him that before. If you will pardon a little sermonizing: we as musicians in general, and oboists in particular have so many obstacles, and often try so very hard. Sometimes I think we honestly don't know what we actually accomplish. My point is this - if we see or hear something good we need to say so. Minsker left the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1959 in the midst of growing frustrations and difficulties. He seemed so amazed by Tabuteau's playing that he had little concept of his own gigantic stature. I have to wonder if maybe he had a better concept of what he was accomplishing, he might have continued on.

Another illustration came from **Don Hefner**, one of Tabuteau's last Curtis pupils. Don showed up for a lesson a few days after Minsker had played *Roman Carnival Overture*. Don said that Tabuteau was really never impressed by anyone, and yet several days after hearing Minsker he said that Tabuteau was visibly still affected by Minsker's playing.

Mrs. de Lancie was the one that told me about Minsker's leaving the orchestra. She spoke very highly of him. (It was Minsker's first wife who had helped Mrs. de Lancie with her English). Later one of Mr. de Lancie's friends was surprised to learn that Mrs. de Lancie even knew Minsker. Relating this conversation to Mr. de Lancie he just roared with laughter. He went on to explain that after concerts his wife would go on and on about how beautifully Minsker had played, about his tone and his phrasing. He said: "she never said anything about my playing - it was always 'his' playing!"

The very week that Earnie Harrison turned 80, we drove up to see Minsker. Minsker had said that Earnie was one of his favorite students and had played many of the Barret studies better than any of his students. Minsker met us in the hallway - he was so happy to see Earnie. It had been 40 years!! He looked to be in a little discomfort though - and he was. He explained that he had broken a rib the day before - "but it was all my fault!" Bear in mind that he was 87. Brace yourself: "I was playing baseball (i.e. hard ball - fast pitch) yesterday, the batter hit a line drive, I was on first base and I just didn't get out of the way in time."

He was a wonderful man and a giant among musicians. I hope these reminiscences help to let you get to know him a little better.

John Minsker: you tried so hard to stay out of the limelight and you mostly succeeded. You were and still are a hero to a lot of us. Your influence however will be felt for years to come. May your memory be blessed. I sure do miss you and I sure am going to miss our visits. ♦