

Joseph Eger (1920-2013)

Joseph Eger was a well-known horn soloist – perhaps the first American horn soloist – but also a conductor (serving under Leopold Stokowski with the American Symphony Orchestra) and founder of ensembles to advance social causes. He founded the Symphony for United Nations in New York in 1974. The New York Times called him "one of the greatest French horn players alive" in November 1957.

Joseph was born in Connecticut to an Orthodox Jewish family that had left Romania to escape persecution. Joseph grew up in western Pennsylvania, where he started playing clarinet but soon switched to horn. After high school, he lived with a brother in Connecticut, working at a jewelry store and taking lessons with the principal horn of the Hartford Symphony, where he played his first professional concert. The brothers moved back to Pittsburgh, then Joseph was accepted at Curtis, where Mason Jones, James Chambers, and Ward Fearn were already students. He studied with Anton Horner, a Nazi sympathizer who baited Joseph, perhaps influencing him in his later social activism.

Joseph completed his course work by the end of his third year at Curtis, was already playing in the National Youth Administration Orchestra, and won a position as principal horn of the National Symphony. But then came World War II, and Joseph joined the Army Air Force Band, which included John Barrows and Arthur, Harry, and Jack Berv. After returning from his posting in Europe, Joseph settled in New York City, playing in Broadway shows and Claude Thornhill's big band and subbing in the New York Philharmonic with Joseph Singer, whose warm-up routine he used for the rest of his career. He played associate principal horn in the NY Philharmonic for part of a season and then was invited by Alfred Wallenstein to be principal horn of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

In Los Angeles, Joseph was also principal horn in the Hollywood Bowl Symphony and eventually replaced Alfred Brain as first horn at 20th Century Fox. He also played an increasing amount of chamber music and eventually established a "concertizing" career as soloist and with his chamber music

group, the Eger Players. He was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951, where he refused to name any names. The next year he accepted Leonard Bernstein's invitation to play and coach with the Israel Philharmonic, afterwards returning to his solo and chamber music career. He was coached by Benjamin Britten in Canticle III during one of his tours to England. He also taught at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore; students included Christopher Leuba, Thomas Howell, and A. Robert Johnson.

Conducting took over in the 1960s as a result of a dentist's slip (jabbing his lip) and a summer at Pierre Monteux's conducting seminar in Hancock, Maine. Joseph established the West Side Symphony and also conducted the New York Orchestral Society, the Camera Concerti Chamber Orchestra, and the New York Symphony, which he also founded. He went on to blend classical music with rock and roll and jazz in various venues. The Symphony for United Nations took part in concerts and festivals that focused attention or raised funds for a variety of social causes.

Recordings include chamber works and a solo album, Around the Horn (1957). He wrote an article, also titled "Around the Horn," for Courier magazine, a book, Einstein's Violin (2005), about string theory and its potential connection with music, and transcriptions for horn. He also worked with composers in the creation of new pieces for the horn.

This information is taken from Kate Pritchett's article about Eger's life and career in the October 2009 issue of The Horn Call.

*From:
International Horn Society
Honorary Life Members and
Celebrated Horn Players of the
Past*

