

Bobo, Roger, "An interview with Arnold Jacobs (12-3-79)", BRASS BULLETIN, n33:p 43-50 & n34:37+ (1981)

That Arnold Jacobs was one of the worlds first great tubists would be an understatement to many people. His playing in the Chicago Symphony has served as the definitive model of symphonic tuba playing for conductors, colleagues and students for over a quarter century. As a teacher he is known for his great knowledge of human physiology regarding wind instrument and vocal performance and his students of all the wind instruments and of voice can be found all over the world. (RB)

Bobo: Let me ask you this: if you could give a short message to the brass community, what would you choose to say?

Jacobs: I would choose to put a heavy dominance on the sounds that are so interesting to brass players, and with the definite recognition of the tendency to become so involved in the brass instrument that you forget about the music that you play on the brass instrument. While the instrument is important, it is still an extension of the person, essentially; and it shouldn't become so all-consuming that all you think about is mouthpieces and horns. The music that you make with the instrument has to be really dominant.

B.: In teaching, how do you differentiate one from the other?

J. : You have to talk to the student and get an insight into his motivations. If you have a student who tends to think very mechanically, and he becomes very involved in playing an instrument like the tuba, very frequently his thoughts will be on his instrument: on the fingering patterns, the parts of his tissues, embouchure, respiratory system, tongue - and very frequently the music is a minor part. You'd give it a rating of maybe 15% of his intellectual capacity and attitudes, and 85% would be on the technique. I always like to reverse it, so that 85% has to be based on the phenomenon of sound that is inspirational thinking, on intuitive aspects of the brain, and 15% is awareness of structures and functions of all types including the instrument. Usually if you find a person who likes to sing music vocally, you find that he is very easy to maneuver into this type of approach To his instrument. For any brass instrument, that is an extremely healthy approach. If you find a student who is much more interested in the chemistry of the person who plays, the engineering principles, and so forth, it is a little dangerous unless he also has the inspiration to make great music.

B.: Do you see a tendency among students to hyper-concentrate on the clinical aspect?

J. : Much too much. It's the type of learning you get in the school system. So much of a young person's life is spent in acquiring knowledge in an art form you are always imparting information - whether it comes from you or is transferred from somebody else through you, you are in a process of imparting knowledge to others. In other words, you use different nerves. It's the psycho-motor aspect of being a musician. Your thoughts have to come from the brain and be, imparted to somebody else as a form of communication, whereas the act of going to school, of acquiring knowledge as a youngster, is receiving, not sending. It has to be turned around so that performance is always being able to tell a story in music, even from the most elementary stage. The attitude must always be that of somebody imparting knowledge to somebody else, even while he is learning.

B.: What do you think about when you play?

J.: I sing in my head what has to go out of the horn. It's like the relationship between a player-piano roll and the keyboard. I'm always on the player-piano roll, and never at the keyboard. I don't care how the lip feels; I don't care how I feel. The psycho-motor aspect of playing is a message from one part of the brain that is fed to the lip through the seventh cervical nerve. It goes through a computer activity that you have in the brain, but you are always seeing the message, just as though you had vocal chords but had them in the lips. So my whole concentration is not on what I feel like or what I sound like, but what I want the audience to hear. It's like telling a story, but instead of words you tell it with concepts of sound.

B.: How do you stay healthy? What do you think about during the first three movements of the Fantastic Symphony while you're sitting there on stage?

J. : I welcome the first three movements. I love music, so very frequently I am thinking of my colleagues and listening to their performance around me, because there is always a freshness when you are in public performance or in recording, where you have fine artists like Bud Herseth on trumpet, Ray Still, on oboe, Larry Combs on the clarinet - I enjoy listening to my colleagues. We have one of the finest brass sections I've ever heard in our orchestra now, and I sit and listen to these new players coming in and enjoy it.

B.: How would you advise tuba players who are coming up who have jobs and are playing full-time making their living as tubists to avoid boredom?

J. : There is a series of challenges you have to focus on. Recognize that the orchestral portion of your life is just one phase. For a tuba player, or for any instrument that is primarily an accompanist to others or an ensemble instrument, you must have the proper amount of playing alone, of inspiration. I always tell my boys, "You are a soloist when you practice at home", and then you accept the variety of challenges of being a fine symphonic soloist. So when you interpret music at home, even there you are on the stage. You are simulating as best you can the conditions of performance. You always have material that you are not just reading for yourself, but are performing for others. Whenever you have a chance to play for somebody else, it's very important to do so, but the main thing is that you have a constant challenge that keeps you trying to play better. Otherwise, as you get older, you are going to play worse. So we slow it up a little by constantly trying to improve. That means that part of the practice - say, 60% of the practice time - should be interpretive and stylistic rather than the orchestral parts; 40% in routine drill forms, and so forth. But a drill form... if you do a scale, it could have been a scale out of Brahms, it could have been a scale that you would use in a rock group - it doesn't matter, but it's still a performance situation. So practice for us is always extroverted.

B.: The Chicago Symphony brass section is one of the most famous brass sections in the world. What kind of association do you feel with your colleagues in regard to working things musically together.

J. : We very infrequently have a sectional rehearsal. If something comes up that we need to work on, we always have time before concerts or rehearsals. We may try a few parts over together, but we have been playing together so long - we see more of each other on stage, probably, than we do of our families - that we know how each one thinks. We have a magnificent head in Herseth, who plays with very high standards and great authority all the time; and right on down the line everybody follows along.

B.: A few minutes ago you spoke in future tense of five years from now, as though you would still be in the Orchestra. Having heard you recently, I would say that is a fair assumption. At 64 do you feel like you will still be in the Orchestra five years from now?

J. : If my health holds up, I could be. I must say, my pension would have come through four or five years ago if I wanted to retire, but I still love to play.

B.: If you retired, what would you do?

J.: I don't know. Probably vegetate! I could teach, or I could play in some small orchestra - but why should I go to a small orchestra when I can play with this one? And I am teaching. I am doing the things I enjoy, and my conductor likes my work and has asked me to stay on, so I would rather do that than just retire for the sake of doing nothing. I think I have one of the best seats in Orchestra Hall, where I sit. I hear wonderful concerts, and I enjoy it, and they pay me - I don't pay them! So I'm still enjoying playing. Tuba has been a part of my life; teaching has been a part of my life; and listening to music has been a great part of my life; so I'm still with it.

B.: I know that tuba players from all over the world come to you. When one travels 1,000 or 8,000 miles, he usually is fairly interested in the coming to study. What do you say to your students regarding the rather new supply and demand situation?

J. : Disastrous.

B.: But say you have a student taking his first lesson, who has expressed enormous enthusiasm for becoming a professional tubist, and it's the only thing in his life. What do you tell him?

J. : If they have that sort of dedication, then I let them go ahead. I warn them of the scarcity of jobs, but study of this type is never wasted in any case. Anything that develops the human brain is never wasted, and there is so much development in the study of any art form. The average person who plays tuba will rarely find himself in actual practice over three hours a day. There will be all sorts of other commitments that will run it up to six, eight, twelve hours a day, but in time of actual practice, most of them will be under three hours, so that you have all sorts of other learning. But in addition to that, I think this is a wonderful thing to do. I usually tell them, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Get a great deal of pleasure out of it; study; do what you want; take the necessary steps and take up some hobby that you can go into full-time as well."

B.: How do you explain what has been referred to as the "tuba explosion" this increase of 7,000 or 2,000% in the number of tubists in the world in the last 70 or 72 years?

J. : I think there is a great deal of interest focused on it through increased publicity of tuba, through Harvey [Phillips], through a great deal of writing on the subject, a great deal of promotion, and the recognition that it is a musical instrument - rather than just putting a person who might have some deformity or some infirmity into bass clef instead of treble! I do think that it's just a normal situation now. In other words, we are just brought up to what, for example, a trombone player has been all along.

B.: The tuba as a solo instrument - we both agree that the capacities are enormous and we both agree that there is limited material for the tubist as soloist. Will this develop? And is there a problem with it, not because of its being a tuba, but because of the tessitura where a tuba plays? Is there an audience that likes to hear music in that register for a whole evening?

J. : We are developing an audience. There are so many tuba players that you are automatically starting to have an audience of just tuba players! But virtuosity on any instrument is usually recognized. In terms of competing with the violin soloist, I think there is a long way to go. Each generation changes. It's an evolving situation: the audiences of tomorrow will be much more F-clef oriented than the audience of a previous generation. After all, there is a tremendous conditioning that goes on from childhood on.

B.: I think that my further question might be, "Is that because virtuosos in the bass clef are just starting to develop, or is that a much more basic and instinctive thing : Do we relate to treble clef sounds, as human beings, in a different way:"

J. : I can't give a very knowledgeable answer on that because of my own experiences and concepts. It has always been my experience that audiences are much more receptive to high pitches than to low pitches, even in the vocal family. The basso profundo is probably the least-used voice of the vocal school. The tenor is the one who gets the girl, of course! I was a basso profundo as a young man (I studied voice for many years) and the few times that I sang I would take an old man's role. I never had a chance to get the girl. The writing, the tradition of thought, everything was such that F-clef was always shunted aside, compared to the treble clef. Now what the psychological reasons for that are, I am not so sure about. How receptive they are in terms of actual quality of sound, I just don't know.

B.: I wasn't even trying to go so far as to ask the question of whether there is a feminine appeal to treble clef and a masculine appeal to bass clef because of the mother and father voices that we first heard.

J. : You could also state it as an appeal of youth versus age. It could go either way. I do think there is a much larger audience today that is enjoying low-register sounds, regardless of what they come from. I always get a kick out of tuba players who want to end a piece on C above high C on the tuba, which comes to the audience's ear as just a normal mid-range. The tuba player will appreciate C above high C (remember Dick Snyder?). The tuba player will recognize and enjoy the extremely high register, but the audience in general is merely going to hear midrange sounds, and unless they see you turning red or blue they won't appreciate it. But end on a very low note, and you will have the exact reaction that the trumpet player will have on a very high note: lots of applause and amazement. We are much more receptive to sounds of bass and contrabass today. The conditioning as children will carry on, and I think that the audience will grow proportionately. I could easily conceive of a much larger mass audience based on what the child hears. You know, when I was a youngster living in California, if somebody came in and sang a soprano solo ending on a high C, the audience in California at that time, in the towns that I lived in, would laugh. They didn't know how to receive that. It was strange, and so they would laugh. In Italy that could have been received with a lot of applause. Now, the conditioning today is such that high C would now be appreciated much more. The low C's, the sounds that we make, are actually being received much more than they were when I was a young man, thanks partly to yourself and various players who are in public, performing a great deal of solo work. Naturally, you have to have a product, and then you sell it to your audience, and that is how it grows.

B.: Can you see any common personality trait that exists among tubists? If so, was it there before we chose the instrument? Or was it there because we chose the instrument?

J. : First of all, one of the common traits (other than drinking beer) is that we all love music. In other words, most tuba players are tuba players because they love music, and frequently they love the sound of low-register instruments. I know that even though a bandmaster was responsible for my playing tuba, my staying on it was because I did enjoy the sounds.

B.: Can the love of low-register sound be correlated to any personality aspect?

J. : I doubt it very much. In my own acquaintance over the years, I have seen so many diversified types of personalities playing the instrument. I think we are generally seeing people who like to eat a great deal playing the tuba, people who like to imbibe a little playing the tuba. I think if you look at the present run of tuba players, you will find this a very dominant situation. But it is also that way among many brass players, I think because we have certain things in common: we tend to hyperventilate, and hyperventilation will tend to change the pH of the body slightly. We have itchy noses because of that; is one of the symptoms of hyperventilation. When you finish a concert you usually find you are hungry and thirsty...

B. : Always !

J. : Then, we have lots of time off, in Beethoven, Haydn, and Mozart, and the coffee shops are available to us during rehearsals, so generally one becomes somewhat overweight over a number of years. Things like that may be brought about by conditions such as I am describing rather than personality traits.

B.: So we are in fact bent a little bit by the trade that we have chosen.

J. : Certainly. We have a certain amount of leisure which they don't have in the other instruments. That means tuba players very frequently have hobbies that are interesting. Mine happens to be the structure and function of the human being. I have some friends who are photographers, or have various hobbies that are very interesting ones. In other words, you have time to do things that you wouldn't have, let's say, if you were a violinist. When you have lived as long as I have, and played as long as I have, and met as many musicians, you find that generally among the brass players you have a pretty fine bunch of people. They are calmer than so many of the string players, because they are not so harried. We do have to practice if we are doing very difficult solo material - you are putting in as many hours as a Heifetz or anybody else - but when you look at the literature that so many string players have to play if they are sincere, you can see a tremendous involvement and preparation. I think the brass player has certain advantages in that respect, and we do have, I think, a little more freedom for development of our own personalities and hobbies, and so forth.

B.: The Chicago Symphony is not the first orchestra you have played in.

J. : No. I started out at the Curtis Institute of Music around 1930. I was there for six or seven years, with Fritz Reiner as my conductor.

B.: Then you started very young at Curtis.

J. : I was 15, I believe. And then I went to Indianapolis for two seasons with Fabian Sevitsky then five years with the Pittsburgh Symphony with Reiner, then I came to Chicago and I've been here 36 years.

B.: Did you ever have chances to go to other places while you were there?

J. : Practically every orchestra in the country. George Szell tried to get me to go to Cleveland...

B.: Tell a story about when you had such a big choice.

J. : Well, my last year in Pittsburgh I was offered the Boston Symphony. I had been offered the Boston Symphony when I was 18 years old. Koussevitsky wanted me to go, but he wouldn't give me a contract because of my youth. I had never played with an orchestra other than at Curtis, but he liked my playing. He said I was too young for a contract; he wanted me to start in the middle of the season, so that at the end of the season, if I made good, he would give me a contract. Well, the orchestra was non-union at the time, and they offered me \$90 a week to start, but I was working at a night club in Philadelphia making about \$90 already, and I had heard how tough he was as a conductor and was afraid that if I didn't make good I would be fired and would be out of the union and out of the Boston Symphony - in other words, I would be out of business! So I turned it down. And then I was offered the St. Louis Symphony and given a contract. This is an interesting story, because two weeks before I was to go to St. Louis, I got a telegram from the union saying they weren't going to accept my transfer because they had a good local tuba player (it was Johnny Bambridge, who was a good tuba player). And so I had quit my job in Philadelphia in the night club, and I had picked up a full dress suit, and I thought I had no place to go, so I went back to Curtis and was still a student there. The reason St. Louis is so interesting is that, about ten years ago, when Makinalty went there, the head of the union called and wanted me to test a local tuba player because they didn't want an importation; and they described to me over the phone a situation in 1936 where they had a similar case and held a tuba player out because they had a good local player! They said it turned out very well. I didn't tell them I was the man they held out! But anyway, I listened to the man they wanted me to test, and he couldn't play anything close to what was needed in a symphony orchestra. So I recommended that they hire Makinalty, and I never did tell them that I was the man they held out. Then, after that, I went to Indianapolis with Fabian Sevitsky for two years. It was rather interesting there, because I had signed a contract and I was always broke and always borrowing money from management so that I could get back on the job between pieces. I owed the Indiana orchestra quite a bit of money when Fritz Reiner sent word for me to go to the audition for the Pittsburgh Symphony the following season, and so I sent word to the orchestra in Indianapolis and there would be no use in my auditioning. I turned it down - but two weeks later the personnel manager came to my home in Philadelphia and asked me again, regardless of the contract. One of my students was going to audition for the Pittsburgh job in New York at Steinway Hall, so I said, "All right, I'll drive up with the student", and so I did. I drove to New York, and there were about 25 tuba players trying out.

B.: What year was that?

J. : This was 1938.

B.: That was the year I was born. I don't think anybody knew they ever had auditions with that many people.

J. : It was a large group. Anyway, Reiner knew my work. I had been with him for about seven years at Curtis. He didn't need to audition me, but he made me play for about three-quarters of an hour. Then he offered me the job and I said, "I'm already contracted for in Indianapolis". He knew that. But anyway they got me out of it. They traded their first cellist to Indianapolis for me - it was like a baseball team: they traded the first cellist and I went to Pittsburgh. I stayed there for five seasons with Reiner, then I had various offers: Philadelphia had offered me the job while Donatelli was still under retirement age, and I turned it down because of my friendship with Donatelli. Then the year that I came to Chicago I was offered the Boston Symphony - Koussevitsky came through Pittsburgh so I played for him, and he tried

hard to get me, but his management would never pay enough money. Anyway, I told him I couldn't afford to go to Boston for what they were offering; and in the meantime I had played second tuba in the Berlioz Fantastique here with the Chicago Symphony and I was offered the job immediately. I also had a call from the personnel manager at the NBC Symphony in New York about that time. Bill Bell was leaving to go to the New York Philharmonic, but negotiating a contract - he was giving the New York Philharmonic a bad time, so they contacted me also in case Bell were to turn it down. They said they could import me into New York; they were allowed to import principals. So I had all three major orchestras at that time, except for Philadelphia. My wife is from Chicago, and, as you know, she's small but she's mighty, so anyway I decided to take the Chicago offer, and it's worked out very, very well. But the first four or five years I was with the Chicago Symphony, the Boston Symphony contacted me every year to try to take me away to Boston. Our manager, George Kuyper, who was from Boston, used to be assistant manager in Boston and knew about the offers before I did. I had a very enjoyable situation where he would call me up and say, "Well, Arnold, what's it gonna cost us to keep you here?", and he let me name my price.

B.: That isn't an unusual situation in present day times, to suddenly get a raise in an orchestra the year there's an opening in another orchestra.

J. : That's right - it's very nice! Anyway, Ormandy asked me to go to Europe with them on their tour in 1949, and then he tried to get me to join the Philadelphia Orchestra. In fact, he went so far at one of our Board receptions as to talk to one of our Board of Trustees to try to get them to transfer me back to Philadelphia for his orchestra, because I was a member of the Philadelphia local branch of the union. At that time I enjoyed Chicago very much, and I used to do a great deal of dance work on string bass. It was such a lively situation for me musically that I decided to stay in Chicago - and it worked out very well. The offer that tempted me most was out in California; I had one some years ago when Herb Jenkel passed away... no, it was before Jenkel came that they wanted me to go to California. This was a long time ago. I can't even remember the date. It might have even been before Jenkel.

B.: It was before Jenkel.

J. : And I had to turn that down because I was advised by some friends of mine in the orchestra that the union would be waiting for me and that I should do everything straight. So I turned that one down, because of the complications, and then some years later I was offered the San Francisco Orchestra...

B.: I should have asked, "Are there any American orchestras that you have not been offered? "

J. : Well, the only ones I was really interested in would have been the three big ones on the east coast, or the California orchestras because I was raised in California. But time had moved on to such a point that I actually couldn't afford to leave Chicago any more.

B.: How many students do you have now?

J. : My enrollment is in the hundreds, but they are all instruments and voice and woodwinds, brass, because I am not working with them so much as developmental instrumentalists as working on normalizing their respiratory functions, making sure that their syndromes in terms of muscles are not involved in the wrong aspects of pressures or immobilizations.

B.: What do you call your specialty?

J. : It's just a form of therapy, as though I were a physical therapist, in the sense of normalizing respiratory muscles, establishing the psychological, general attitudes in the brain as far as what thoughts to think in the art form. In other words, what thoughts will bring about motor responses necessary for function in this art form. And we have to create the conditions where the brain can think properly and the body can respond, and because I have a wide knowledge in that particular field and in music, so we go heavily into putting the dominance of being a man in music over being a musician. I do the physiotherapy, normally, away from the instrument, normalize respiratory function away from music, establish patterns of normalcy, and then transfer them back to the instrument, so the brain is free to concentrate on the musical message.

B.: Is there anything I haven't asked, or anything further you want to say in this interview?

J. : Well, if I were to make one statement, I would say, "Make it an art form that should be enjoyed by all the participants." I would keep a heavy dominance on this thought: that no matter how elementary a person's command of an instrument, as soon as he picks that instrument up, even if he's rotten, he is an elementary performer. Bad sounds can be made into good sounds; silence can't.

B.: That's great.