

*Driving Mr. Jacobs** by Luther Didrickson

The following article is the story told to me by my friend John Cvejanovich. Based on conversations and a taped interview in November 1998, I have written down the present memoir, as it is certain to be of great interest to many.

While I was attending college in Chicago a fellow student asked me to play the trumpet part to Bach's Cantata No. 51 on her recital. I worked at it but found that Arnold Jacobs' Methods and Materials of Pedagogy at several things continued to elude my efforts to master them. Eventually I decided to take the advice of several friends and have a lesson with Arnold Jacobs, the tuba player in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. It was 1957 and he was already known as one who had answers that worked for brass players' pernicious problems. Besides the expected schedule of students, he was even being consulted by working, established professionals.

At that time he did his private teaching in his home on Chicago's south side. The student's experience of descending those back stairs to his basement studio has been described well by others. Already a large collection of medical and acoustical devices were sitting all about the room. At this, my first visit, we chatted for a while before he asked me to play for him. I proceeded to negotiate the Bach part and, after a few lines, he leaned back, put his fingers of both hands together in that characteristic way of his, and said, "I see that out of habit and for a very long time now you have been a very, very shallow breather. And, as a result of this, a number of things are happening. First of all, you're violating Boyle's law and interfering with the Bernoulli principle. And because of this (i.e. shallow breathing) you are playing in the lower quadrant of the pulmonary function curve. And because of this, you're going into isometric contractions and triggering the Valsalva reflex." He paused a moment with that typical knowing smile on his face before he concluded, "but you know something? You're playing very well!"

I was absolutely staggered. I felt like suddenly sifting down except I already was. No previous teacher had ever said anything remotely like this to me, and my head was swimming. Despite his characteristic compliment at the end, I was stunned and overwhelmed. His evaluation of my playing that day in 1957 made such an impression I have never forgotten it. In a brief, spoken paragraph, he opened up a whole new world I have explored and inhabited ever since.

In the following years, as it turned out, I had only four or five additional lessons with him. But I did see him frequently during those times we performed together. In particular this would include the weeks when I played extra with the Chicago Symphony. Very often we would ride together, and he frequently talked about his ideas and discoveries. He was a continual reader and had many areas of interest which he actively pursued. I especially valued our long trips up to the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park for this reason.

In 1991 Arnold called me about something or other and also mentioned his need of someone to drive him, especially to his studio on Michigan Avenue. I offered my services and thus began a most extraordinary relationship and a long series of "excellent experiences." As it worked out my main responsibility was to see that he got home often teaching Wednesdays and Saturdays. And early on, as a kind of appreciation for this, he invited me to bring my trumpet along and have a lesson before we went down to the car. He often ran late on his schedule and I was frequently asked to come in and observe

the lesson in progress until it was time for mine. Thus, over the following years, my firsthand exposure to his ideas and teaching style became considerable. (It could not be otherwise inasmuch as I eventually had somewhere between 400 and 500 lessons with him)!

During a typical lesson, as I was playing he would often sing along. And this helped me. The singing tended to distract me from paying as much attention as was accustomed to my sensory feedback, and some of my inhibitions began to lose their grip. Besides working with me on improving my playing he also discussed and tried out ideas of his ever evolving pedagogy. Many people do not realize that even Arnold Jacobs could be frustrated in his attempts to teach at least some of those who come to him for help. [He felt the fault might lie with his approach and he would try various differing methods on me and discuss how he hoped they might work in some of these particular situations. I was thus a student, test-subject, sparring partner and friend.

During many of these lessons my greatest playing success came when he gave me an image to contemplate. I was told to forget the mechanics and concentrate on recalling the pitches and tone quality of the music I was intending to play. One especially successful and repeatable experience was playing Here's That Rainy Day, a great favorite of mine, while imitating Billy Butterfield, another favorite. On these occasions my embouchure, moments before seeming to be wasted and beat, was now suddenly alive and responsive. A great lesson here!

Jake worked to improve my playing in other ways too. I remember him saying, "John, when you play you sound like you're asking questions (i.e., "Is this it?"). You should, instead, be issuing statements: "This is it!" He had a favorite analogy involving the musical message being like a brilliant light bulb that is vivid and strong. It doesn't flicker. A player should aim to "send this message and play by sound" instead of reaching to the way things feel. Virtually everyone who worked with Arnold and received this kind of instruction from him left sounding better, whether it was a private lesson or public instruction during a master class. Part of Jake's teaching success had to do with his demeanor. He evoked a calming, quieting effect. His reaction to the mistakes and frustrations of students was of non-threatening, even fatherly mentoring style. And therefore he acted as the needed counterbalance to the frequent turbulent emotions of frustration being experienced by the student. His aim always was to help the player find the best in musicality without conscious interference. He could, on the other hand, almost confound you with a personal vocabulary taken from medicine, physics and literature, but then immediately restate his ideas with such simplicity and clarity that a brilliant light bulb of recognition and understanding would go on in your mind. His major insight was that the brass player needed to become immersed in the sound, pitch and the art form of music and forget about sensory awareness as being any kind of reliable guide on which to build. While in the act of playing, one is never to pay conscious attention to "managing meat." In this connection his interest in equipment was near zero.

I found it significant that he was able to help so many who were established, working professionals. Though experienced, intelligent and alert, all had in some way fallen into the trap of self-analysis and experienced the subsequent erosion of reliable skills this can cause. Because of him a great many (including woodwind players, singers, radio announcers even a fine harmonica player) were able to successfully address their problems and continue their careers. Jake was very generous in his appreciation and praise of others. He enjoyed their successes and frequently spoke of them. He was especially pleased and appreciative of what a "collaborative team" he and Ed Kleinhammer had been and how this great working relationship had made such a wonderful difference to him over the years.

For a very long time Arnold had to contend with the symptoms of his declining health, and it was no idle pedagogical strategy that prompted him to advise students to flood their minds with the recall of fine sound and the 'musical story' they wished to tell. His own use of this approach was at once necessary and what contributed to his success when he performed. He frequently went to play a concert "feeling like hell" and proceeded to "fool" the audience and anyone else who might be listening. One could never tell how he felt by how he sounded his love of music and his well-maintained high level of professionalism never allowed him to give in to personal discomfort as an excuse of any kind. Even when he was finally reduced to the use of a walker he would still look up and, in a mock-challenge tone of voice say, "I'll race you." That great attitude and spirit never deserted him."

On Wednesday, October 8, 1998, he arose as usual and sat down to breakfast. This particular morning he chatted with his son Dallas for awhile. Then, feeling more tired than usual, he decided to return to bed to rest up a bit more as a full schedule of teaching awaited him later in the day. Since I was to drive him home that evening I stopped at my place after work to get my trumpet. Glancing at my messages, I found one that informed me that I would not be needed that evening. I read it twice and suddenly sat down. A brilliant light had gone out that day. I sat for a very long time.

** A Tribute to the Legacy of Arnold Jacobs, Copyright 1999, Luther Didrickson
Didrickson, Luther, Driving Mr Jacobs, ITA JOURNAL, Volume 28, Number 3, Summer, 2000*