

What Arnold Jacobs Taught Me

by Thomas Jöstlein, associate Principal Horn, St. Louis Symphony



Lessons with Arnold Jacobs were memorable from the second you entered the Fine Arts Building in downtown Chicago. There was the next door "Artists' Cafe" (that must be where the CSO players all eat after shows!), the ornate iron, glass and woodwork, and of course the smiling older gentleman who operated the elevator, with its accordion-style metal door. *Seventh floor!*

I arrived early enough for my first lesson to look around: the broom closet at the end of the hall ("William Shatner School of Acting," it read), the shrill voice lessons next door, and of course Jacobs' Santa Claus voice wafting out to the hallway.

The door finally opened, revealing both the legend himself, and also my former Interlochen Arts Camp horn teacher, Randy Faust, smiling from jowl to jowl. I knew I'd be fine.

Jacobs, the longtime Tubist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, was known as THE brass teacher for decades. I have my summer horn teacher, Nancy Fako, to thank for the idea of seeing him ("maybe he'll put a bug in your ear"), and my teacher at Rice University, Bill VerMeulen, for the phone call to Jacobs that got me "in." (I remember Jake testing and teasing me for a year, having me call every three weeks at certain times, to see how committed I was. My pay phone call from super loud Comiskey Park was especially tricky to manage, but it paid off).

My first lesson began with the usual measuring of my vital capacity on a large metal machine, resulting in a rather paltry five liter reading. "With your height (6'4") and age (21), you ought to be well in excess of six liters."

"Unfortunately, we need to work on respiration, and not music."

Out came the breathing bags, the tubes with ping-pong balls, the anatomy charts. I mastered these quickly enough to warrant a try on the horn.

What followed next sticks with me to this day: Jake quickly put the focus NOT on the respiration, but indeed, on the MUSIC.

"Be first class in your mind."

"I sing the notes in my head and get out of the way of the body."

"Fill your mind with the greatest horn players you can recall."

"Imagination and imitation are your two great tools to success."

"Be a story teller."

"Get out of the way of the body."

Yes, he eventually did go back to the breathing talk: Dolly Parton; piston up/piston down; the Valsava maneuver; the pressure/volume diagram; the two lines on my music, one depicting volume, and one air pressure; and blowing air on the back of my hand using the words "key" and "hoe."

Thankfully, what I brought home that day was his edict, "if you can sing it, you can play it." I sat down in my practice room and played through the Mt. Everest of pieces, the Schumann Adagio and Allegro for the first time in my life. Yes, I had to stop numerous times, but I got all the notes out by insisting on the *song*.

There is much more to tell of my fifteen lessons and countless Northwestern University masterclasses (especially of my somewhat bumpy transition from Jacobs to my current "guru," Tubist and longtime Jacobs student, Roger Rocco), but the lessons learned in that first lesson were what enabled a career in music, and for that I am ever thankful.