

Playing Second Clarinet in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
An interview with Gordon Miller, former second clarinetist of the
Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

by Edward Palanker

EP- Where and with whom did you study?

GM- Peabody Conservatory of Music with Stanley Hasty

EP- When did you join the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra?

GM- I joined the Baltimore Symphony in 1944 after playing in the
Coast Guard Band in Curtis Bay, MD during WW II. I always
played second but also played Eb clarinet and Sax until we went
with four clarinets in the 60s. A few years later, I let the assistant
take over playing Eb. but played most of the sax solos for most of
my tenure.

EP- How many years did you play in the BSO?

GM- 51 years. The 1st year I made \$60 a week for 16 weeks, drove
a cab, played summer band concerts, taught lessons and
performed at the local Burlesque house, playing Sax and Clarinet.
Anything to pay the bills.

EP- Who were the principals you played with?

GM- Gilbert Stange, Stanley Hasty, George Silfies, Ignatius "Iggy"
Gennusa, Frank Cohen and Steve Barta.

Hasty asked me to audition for principal when he was leaving, but
I told him I didn't think I had the personality for it. I regretted that
decision later.

EP- Who was the easiest to play with and why?

GM- Stanly Hasty, he would go over passages with me to blend
and play in tune, and he did it in a very patient respectful way. He
was a very nice, relaxed guy and a fine player.

I also found George Silfies to be very easy to get along and play
with. He was also very low-keyed.

EP- How many principal conductors did you play for and who was
your favorite and why?

GM- Reginald Stewart, Peter Herman Adler, Sergiu Comissiona and David Zinman.

By far Zinman was my favorite. He was very respectful and a great musician and conductor.

EP- Who was your least favorite and why.

GM- Comissiona. He was not a nice person, very difficult to follow and was very disrespectful to many musicians. Adler was the weakest of them all.

EP- I often heard you say he should be arrested for impersonating a conductor. We all had a good laugh at that, and we all agreed.

EP- If you were putting together an excerpt book of important 2nd clarinet parts, what works would you include?

GM-

Bartok Concerto for Orchestra

Miraculous Mandarin Suite

Ravel Daphnis and Chloe suite #2

Tchaikovsky symphony #5

Beethoven 5th & 9th

Brahms 4th

Mendelssohn Symphony #3 & #4 & Fingal's Cave

Rimsky-Korsakov Rapsodie Espagnole & Scheherazade

Shostakovich Symphony #1

Stravinsky Petrushka

Strauss Don Juan

EP- Are there particular characteristics a 2nd clarinet player must have, both in his playing and in his personality?

GM- One has to be very willing to cooperate and be respectful.

You need to be able to take criticism and be willing to work at blending and playing in tune with the principal.

EP- What are your pet peeves with some principal clarinet players you have played with?

GM- Making disparaging remarks about certain passages and not being equally respectful. Thinking that they are superior players

because they're playing principal.

First players depend on having a strong second player capable of being flexible. Both need to be equally good in their prospective positions. They should respect each other equally because they depend on each other equally.

EP- Were there works that you never tired of playing?

GM- Not specific pieces, but composers. Mozart, Verdi, Brahms and Tchaikovsky.

EP- How about pieces or composers that you never wanted to play again?

GM- A lot of contemporary works.

EP- What special tuning problems does a 2nd clarinet player have to deal with?

GM- Not over blowing the 1st player, you know, balancing. Playing in octaves, especially when playing in the lower register and the 1st is playing in the throat tones.

EP- Do you feel that a 2nd player needs to use the same type of equipment as the principal or could they blend and play in tune using different brands and models?

GM- It's probably better in most cases if both used the same brand clarinet since the tendencies will be the same but it may not be necessary depending on the player. I don't think it's important for the second player to have to use the same type of mouthpiece because it is far too individual. There are too many personal factors involved in being comfortable with choosing a mouthpiece. Pretty much the same with reeds.

EP- What do you think is the main difference in personality between a successful principal and a successful 2nd player?

GM- Many principals have bigger egos, are more outgoing, cockier and flamboyant. A 2nd player needs to be more submissive and be willing to take criticism more easily from a peer. They need to be able to accept that they work just as hard but don't get the credit or the recognition.

EP- Do you think most 2nd players really want to be principals or do you think they are happy playing second.

GM- I think many 2nd players are satisfied playing 2nd, but many may have the desire to play 1st, especially the younger ones. Some don't want the responsibility or have the temperament to be in the "hot seat" or have the nerves, desire or personality to be in the limelight.

EP- There's a quote I've heard credited to Bonade, in reference to his tone having a little "noise" when hearing him up close. I'm paraphrasing, "I don't play for the 2nd player, he just wants my job anyway. I play for the conductor and the audience." I can't say for sure where I heard that.

EP- What is the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?

GM- We were playing Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel on a run out far from our home base when I was the Eb player. I forgot to look at the schedule and didn't notice that we were doing a different program than we did the day before. I didn't have my Eb clarinet with me and didn't realize it until the bus was well under way. You drove that day and when you pulled up in your car I ran out and asked you if he had your Eb clarinet with you. Do you remember, you looked at me and said "why would I have my Eb clarinet, I'm playing bass," So I had to transpose the Eb part on my Bb clarinet. It wasn't pretty. I don't think the conductor was too pleased, but it was good for a laugh later, and my colleagues obliged.

Edward Palanker <http://eddiesclarinet.com>

Check out my website for my bio, articles, fingering charts, pictures and recordings. I have many articles on it that have appeared in the Clarinet Journal in past years.