Gunther Schuller on Edward Steuermann and Schuller's *Symphony for Brass*

Interview with Jon Newsom

gs: This is reaching back into my life fifty years.

jn: You were a student of Steuermann's?

gs: No, I was not actually a student of his, but my wife-to-be, Marjorie Black, was.

jn: As a pianist?

gs: Yes, as a pianist. We met in Cincinnati, when I played principal horn there in the orchestra, and we were both seventeen. She was studying voice and piano at the conservatory, and when I met her I was so smitten that I started courting her, and we were together most of those two years, 1943 and 1944. But as young men sometimes do, I had one little fling with another lady, and toward the end of that second year in Cincinnati I rather abandoned Marjorie for a little while, which I later very much regretted.

I went back to New York in the late spring of 1945, having been engaged to go to the Metropolitan Opera in the fall. Marjorie wanted to continue studying with her teacher, a singer from Vienna, Lotte Lenya, who was a protégé of Bruno Walter. She had a reputation as a singer and teacher, was a refugee from Nazi Germany and was quite well known in the high-level German-Austrian musical circles in America. When Marjorie found out that she was going to be at a summer camp in Gambier, Ohio, at

Kenyon College, she decided to continue studying with her during the summer.

Now, in the early weeks of the summer, my guilty conscience about having abandoned her led to a tremendous conversion, and against the wishes of my parents, I pilgrimaged out to Gambier, to be with her. That "camp" was in fact a Summer Institute, at which, if you were going to attend, you had to pay a fee or tuition to be enrolled. Well, I didn't know that; in my excitement that never occurred to me. I just got on a train and went via Cincinnati and Columbus to Gambier, and I presented myself at the front door of the Institute. They all said, who are you, you're not enrolled here as a student (mind you, I was nineteen years old), and I said I am looking for Marjorie Black, she is studying with Lotte Lenya. I had taken my French horn with me, and Fritz Cohn--who was the director of the Institute, figuring that maybe they could make use of me as a player in their chamber music concerts, and maybe because I had expressed my great admiration for Alban Berg's music and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*--took pity on me and let me stay at the Institute. But they didn't have any dormitory room for me, no bed was free, and so I had to sleep on a mattress in some dank basement in one of the distant unoccupied campus buildings.

At the Institute, apart from my wife-to-be and Lotte Lenya, there were Rudolf Kolisch and Edward Steuermann and, in fact, the American Schoenberg circle, except for Schoenberg himself. There were Sessions, K•renek, Graudan, Jalowetz, mostly German and Austrian refugees, who had gathered to celebrate and study and perform the music of the Second Viennese School, since at that time such music was almost completely unperformed and unrecognized in the United States. Also, at that time even Mahler was still virtually unperformed in the United States, except occasionally for the First and Second Symphonies. So that summer they played a lot of Mahler's music, not with orchestra (they had no such means), but on two pianos, with Steuermann as one of the pianists. That was the first time I heard the Third, Fifth, and Seventh Symphonies, which were all as yet unrecorded at the time. So during those weeks I got to know Steuermann and Kolisch. I was also already incredibly enamored of the Berg Violin Concerto and was beginning to understand that there was a whole school of music that at that time (the 1940s) was not only not performed and not heard in the United States, but was actually boycotted by the reigning Neoclassic camp.

jn: The Boulanger students?

gs: Yes, the whole Copland-Stravinsky school, to whom Schoenberg and his school were absolute anathema. But the Berg Violin Concerto had already come out on a

beautiful recording with Louis Krasner, Rodzinski, and the Cleveland Symphony. I was in love with that piece, and, by the way, it changed my life and put the final capper on the idea that I was going to be a composer and, as it turned out, a twelve-tone composer.

So here I met these great people that I had heard about, but had never met or thought I would meet. I didn't even know they were all in the United States. Rudolf Kolisch (whom I later brought to Boston, to the New England Conservatory) was the one for whom Schoenberg wrote all of his violin music, and Steuermann was the one for whom Schoenberg wrote all of his piano music. Steuermann took part in the famous *Pierrot Lunaire* performance in Berlin in 1912 and premiered many other important Schoenberg and Webern works. And both had played on the famous 1942 *Pierrot Lunaire* recording (which, by the way, Mayor LaGuardia banned from the radio in New York in 1942). So here I was, meeting these giants of music, and the next thing I knew, Rudolf and Edward were scheduled to do a chamber concert, and since I had my horn with me, they asked me to play the Brahms Horn Trio with them. I was not only meeting these people, I was playing with them, I was working with them! And of course, being barely nineteen, that was an incredible experience for me, rehearsing and playing with these great musicians. There were many other interesting concerts of modern music at Gambier that summer, including some fine chamber music and songs by Krenek, music which, as I say, at that time was totally neglected and unknown in the United States. I also met Sessions there. He was working on his opera *Montezuma* at the time.

jn: Yes, I remember looking at the sketches here at the Library of Congress. Had he written his Violin Concerto as yet?

gs: Yes, he had written that. I didn't know the Violin Concerto at the time, but I later conducted the first recording of it.

jn: Yes, and the only one, in fact, so far.

gs: Really? Sessions sort of picked my brains about the horn parts in *Montezuma*, about whether this was possible, or that was possible, and I gave him what advice I could. (I thought he was using much too much hand-stopping instead of plain muting, and I told him so.) But many years later, when I studied *Montezuma*, I realized he had not really

taken much of my advice.

But the main joy of being at Kenyon that summer was working with Steuermann and Kolisch. And Margie was of course doing her studies with Lotte Lenya, but then she also became enthralled with Steuermann's piano playing. (She had just played the Liszt A-Major Concerto for her graduation in Cincinnati, so she was no amateur; the A-Major Concerto is some technical achievement.) She decided that she would leave Cincinnati and move to New York with me, and then of course, she had the idea that she would study with Steuermann. He was rather little known in America at that time, working only as a private teacher. The poor man was completely ignored as a composer--he was a first-rate composer, by the way--and had to make his living teaching, and taught--I don't know what-- twelve hours a day at the time; it was a brutal schedule. He was always looking for more students because that was his only possible income, and he also took Marjorie on.

By that time I was so taken both with him and with what he stood for musically, that I practically wanted to study with him myself, which, in an informal way, I sort of did, by going to all of Marjorie's piano lessons and sitting quietly in the corner listening to Steuermann teach. And as we got to know each other we became close friends; he lent me some of his precious scores which I photostatted, and I built up a library of rare music that no one else had. Also, I worked with Steuermann and Kolisch and played the Brahms Horn Trio at Town Hall, around 1946. Some of the correspondence you have at the Library of Congress, I believe, includes mention of me as being a very talented, enterprising young musician, with words to the effect that maybe Gunther Schuller can do something for our cause.

jn: Indeed, we have Steuermann's own archives and Schoenberg's complete correspondence as well. I am sure both include many references to you.

gs: Steuermann also began to show me his own compositions. Some were written in Vienna and Berlin, before he had come to this country. I can't recall now whether he was working on the Brecht lieder at that time or whether he just showed them to me, but he was very keen about those songs. I don't know whether it was some great admiration for Brecht he had, or whether it was that these were just pieces that he felt were a particularly good or representative product of his work. I remember I was quite impressed not only by those songs, but by others as well. They were hardly ever for soprano, usually for bass or baritone, which, as you must know, in the whole history of the vocal literature, is rather rare. It includes a lot for soprano, and quite a bit for tenor,

but there is hardly anything in the way of lieder for bass or baritone. Steuermann would ask me who could sing these songs, thinking of some people at the Met, I suppose. At that time, there was a dearth of singers who could sing atonal music. Mind you, this was before Bethany Beardslee, Phyllis Bryn-Julson, Elsa Charlston, or Paul Sperry. Poor Steuermann could never find musicians or singers to play or sing his music, and so he hoped that I, being in the thick of contemporary music performance in New York (I was, for example, involved with the International Society of Contemporary Music (ISCM), various times as President, Secretary, Treasurer, Program Maker, with Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter), could get him performances. Steuermann was very fond of his chamber orchestra pieces. There was a trio which we finally programmed (I think Erich Itor Kahn played it). But I do remember that the Brecht lieder were his own favorite. I think he thought that that was the best thing he had ever written.

jn: Did Schoenberg write his bass solo in the Serenade op. 24 with a particular singer in mind? Is that why he chose that range--and was there any connection between that and Steuermann?

gs: Not that I know of, except perhaps by some kind of a general influence. The Serenade is a great bass-baritone piece, which Steuermann certainly knew and had in fact been involved with. But I think (this is conjectural) that Steuermann had an attitude about male voices that was related to his inclination to do things in music that were not the common practice, whether it was performance on the piano, or whether it was composing. He was in so many ways a typical Pole. First of all, he spoke five languages, as most educated Poles did at that time; he felt they were as persecuted as the Jews, and, of course, Steuermann was both a Pole and a Jew. In self-defense, Polish intellectuals developed an unbelievable sense of humor, an incredible wittiness, which Steuermann had, too. He could say the most sardonically funny things with such an absolutely straight face that you didn't know whether he was serious or not. He felt he was an outsider, neglected and rejected, like Schoenberg, and that the musical establishment was never going to recognize him, help him. And I think, almost as a kind of defiance, that (like his mentor Schoenberg) he did things that someone more centered in the musical mainstream wouldn't have done, including writing songs not for soprano but for bass. I suppose Ned Rorem and all those people, like David Diamond, Theodore Chanler, Richard Hageman, who were reigning song composers at that time, wrote for soprano because that is how they would get performances immediately. I think that Steuermann's writing for bass was part of a strange obstinacy and a feeling of neglect, an I-am-going-to-go-my-own-way-and-to-hell-with-everybody attitude, but always in his super-polite Viennese way, never harsh or bitter except in the sarcastic-humorous way. He once told me that Artur Rubinstein was the same way, that under that famous public veneer he had an incredible wit, with all this Polish dark humor.

But eventually, Steuermann did gain some recognition and respect and got a job teaching piano at the Juilliard School. Here was one of the great pedagogues of that time, and he was for many years simply ignored. It took the efforts of many other musicians finally to get him into Juilliard where he became famous as a teacher and pedagogue.

jn: What was the resistance?

gs: Well, look, if you were connected with Schoenberg in those days, you were automatically ostracized, you were rejected or ignored.

jn: Was there a political feeling that these people were somehow musically subversive?

gs: Even that--although that was more during the McCarthy era. No, mostly it was that they were considered irrelevant, incompetent, or ridiculous. Why did they write all that dissonant, ugly, harsh music? Why did they write twelve-tone music? The Schoenberg bashing goes on even now, as we speak, but way back then it was out of a great deal of ignorance and because no one really knew (or wanted to know) the music.

jn: And even more, because one could not purchase the music.

gs: Yes, and the interesting thing about that is that when the Nazis invaded Austria in 1938, Universal Edition, the major publisher of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, had taken all the plates of the music that Hitler had banned and buried them secretly in the hills outside of Vienna, with the result that for almost a decade the music could not be printed. When I wanted to buy the score of the Violin Concerto by Berg in 1943, it wasn't available anywhere. So there was a great deal of ignorance and prejudice. Again, to put it simply, if you were associated with Schoenberg and his circle in New York, you were pretty much ostracized.

I know that from my own experience, because once I became associated with Steuermann and Kolisch and the ISCM, and word got around that I was one of those

"Schoenberg disciples," I had the same problems getting my music played. I had almost no performances as a young composer because Copland and his group reigned supreme in New York and pretty much controlled the musical life of the time, as far as modern music went. And they thought of me as a traitor to their cause. That was ironic because I was as much an admirer of Stravinsky as I was of Schoenberg. They were both great composers to me.

jn: Now, where did Sessions stand? Sessions was involved with Minna Lederman, and the *Modern Music* group, was he not?

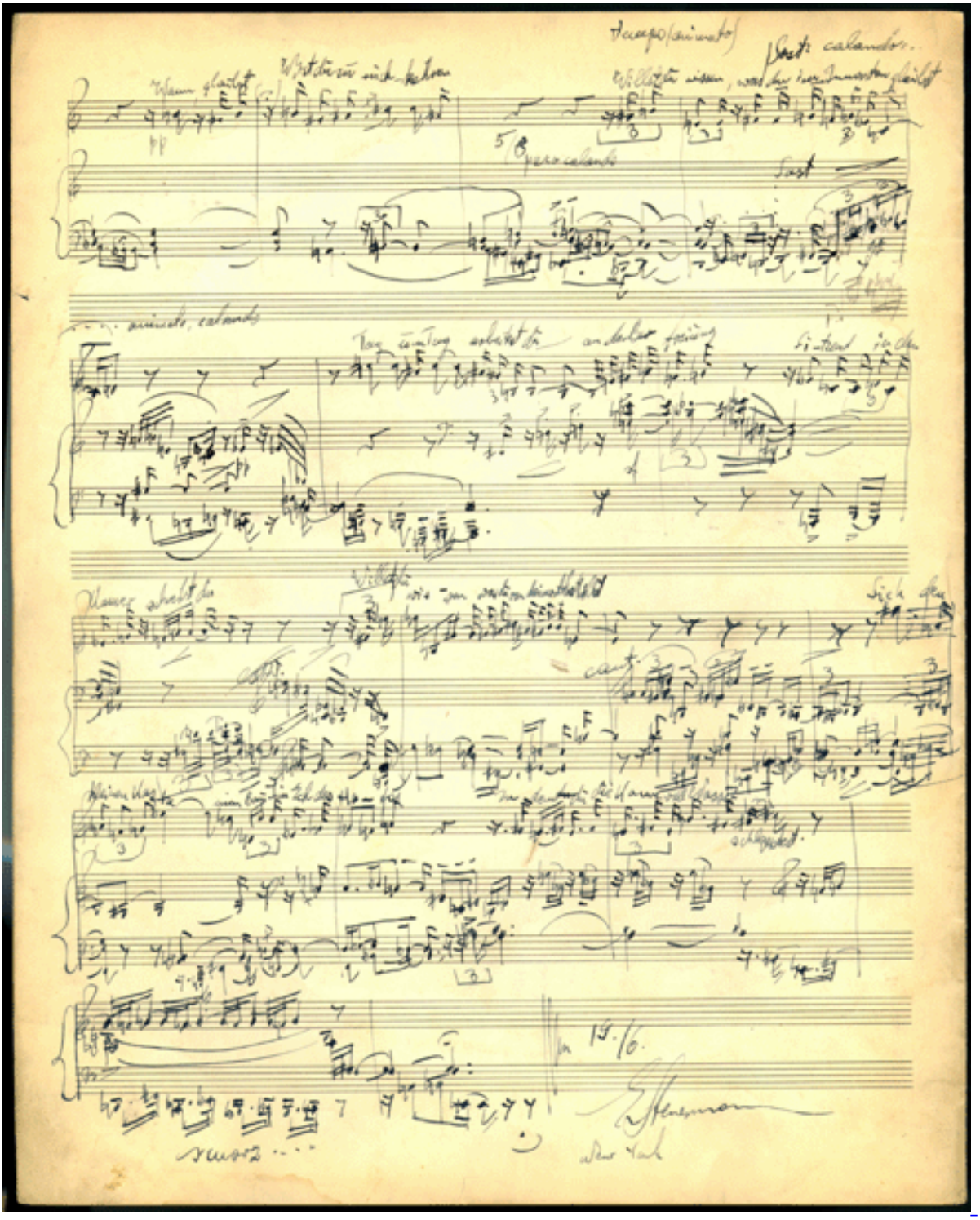
gs: Well, yes. He was the first to study Schoenberg's music and to teach it, talk about it--at Princeton. And out of that influence came Milton Babbitt and some of the other atonal and twelve-tone composers. That is why Sessions was at Kenyon that summer. I don't think his association with *Modern Music* helped him much, either, in the greater musical establishment. At least Roger had his position at Princeton, which couldn't be taken away. But for a young composer like me, it was really very difficult. And the *New York Times*, as the major newspaper, with Olin Downes as music critic, was also involved and was no friend of the Schoenberg circle. Steuermann often talked about it, saying he should really go out to Los Angeles, to be with Schoenberg, Thomas Mann, Eisler, and Brecht. They were all out there, and he felt isolated in New York.

Then later, when Dimitri Mitropoulos became music director of the New York Philharmonic, everything changed. We owe it to him that for the first time we heard the Webern Symphony, op. 21, or the Schoenberg Variations, op. 31, and many other great works. All those pieces were not recorded, so they simply did not exist. And then Mitropoulos stepped in and changed all that, and of course it also cost him his job.

jn: It killed him.[1]

gs: Yes, just about! People like Steuermann, and Krasner and Kolisch all benefited from Mitropoulos's presence in New York. They all got to do performances, at first just at Juilliard, then at Town Hall, and later even at Carnegie Hall and, of course, at the ISCM concerts. By the early 1950s, the previous, stultified, solely "Neoclassic" programming was beginning to loosen up. Then of course came the ultimate blow to the Neoclassic camp, when in 1952 Stravinsky himself abandoned Neoclassicism and became a twelve-tone composer. That threw the Boulangerie, as it was called then, into

a state of shock and consternation from which it didn't recover for a long time.



Edward Steuermann, *Drei Brecht Lieder*, no. III, "Gedanken über die Dauer des Exils"

So in the 1950s, Steuermann and Kolisch and their circle became much more accepted and respected. I was too, by the way. But earlier, when I returned to New York from Cincinnati in 1945 and realized that my first calling was that of a composer, the impression which we young composers got was that the Schoenberg and the Stravinsky camps were feuding with each other, and that we were expected to join one camp or the other. No one said that in so many words, but that was the implication. Of course, the further implication was that if you wanted to have your music performed, given the almost monopolistic hold the Neoclassic camp had on the music scene, you had better join the Stravinsky-Copland axis. But people like myself--other young composers of my generation--said this is rank nonsense. Stravinsky and Schoenberg are both great masters, and we did not have to choose between the two, we could learn from both of them. And to this day, I think, one can hear in my music the profound influence of both composers.

jn: Did Steuermann ever get any performances of his music?

gs: Very few, hardly any at all. And he died very sad and unhappy about it. He was really frustrated about this. If you read through his letters to his nephew, Michael Gielen, you feel all the constant agonizing, the frustration over not being able to hear his music. In a way, he was pigeonholed, typecast, as a teacher, a mere pedagogue, and very few people who could have made a difference even knew that he composed, or they just rejected his kind of composing. He was seen, if at all, as a kind of orthodox Schoenberg epigone. Little did people realize that some of his best music is as great as Schoenberg's. Anyway, he was pretty bitter about all this, and he died a broken man.

jn: May we turn to a piece of yours in the Moldenhauer Archives?

gs: Yes, the *Symphony for Brass*?

jn: Yes, and maybe in some way connect your discussion of Steuermann with it and describe what place it has in your own career?

gs: I can't relate it so much to Steuermann, except in the general way--as we've

described it--of my being introduced to twelve-tone music at Kenyon; and the *Brass Symphony* is one of my first twelve-tone pieces. But it was certainly my first big success piece, my debut as a composer. It does relate in part to my time in Cincinnati, because when I was there in the orchestra, the bass trombone player led a student brass ensemble. It was one of the very early brass ensembles in a major music school in the United States. They didn't have those things in the 1940s. They had bands and orchestras, but they didn't really have brass ensembles as they do nowadays. Anyway, this fellow, Ernie Glover, and I became very close friends, and in 1948 or 1949 he called me from Cincinnati (I was then back in New York playing at the Met) and he asked me if I would write a piece for his brass group, a rather unusual, almost radical idea at the time. I immediately said yes, partly also because, as a major brass player in New York and surrounded by amazing colleagues (trombone, trumpet, tuba players) in the Met, in the New York Philharmonic, the NBC Symphony, who had extraordinary technical capabilities but who were musically frustrated because there was no or very little challenging music for them to play, I was really inspired to write for them. (You realize, of course that most of us composers, even when we are asked to compose something for a specific group of players, we generally write for some ideal or idealized players.) For these players, the the most exciting, the most challenging thing, was Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, or Strauss's *Salome*, or once in a blue moon, Stavinsky's *Rite of Spring*. In those days nobody even performed pieces by Bartók, for example. The *Concerto for Orchestra* just came around at that time, but pieces like *The Miraculous Mandarin*, which is a brass player's feast, were never performed. Now you hear it almost every week. Also, there weren't any pieces for brass quintet in those days. That all came later in the 1960s.

So this young crop of brass players in New York, but also the ones that were coming out of Juilliard and the Manhattan School, Eastman and the other major conservatories, had nothing challenging to play. In those days, nobody even played the early brass music, say, of Gabrieli or Pezel, which is now so commonplace and has spawned dozens of brass quintet groups, for example. Anyway, I conceived of writing a whole four-movement Symphony for brass, which no one had ever done before. I said to myself, I am not going to write one of those little cute bagatelles that were coming out of the Paris Conservatory every three minutes, but a really serious, no-nonsense work, except that it would not be for orchestra but for a large brass ensemble. I sent the work to Glover in Cincinnati in 1949, and he performed the first three movements. It turned out that the fourth movement was too much for his students, too technically demanding, so actually the so-called premiere was not really a full premiere.

At that time I became close to Leon Barzin, who was at the time the director of the National Orchestral Association and a very much admired and respected, but also feared, conductor. This orchestra was a training orchestra. As in the case of Tanglewood, half the New York Philharmonic and half the Boston Symphony and other major orchestras had come out of Barzin's training orchestra, which I think he had

started in 1935. They gave monthly concerts in Carnegie Hall. Barzin rehearsed three times a week in the building that used to be called the Mecca Temple in New York, where the city opera started, where Bernstein had his concerts in the 1950s, and where now the ballet companies perform in New York.

Besides going to Steuermann's lessons, I went to Barzin's rehearsals. I just sat there quietly in the corner, a "fly on the wall" watching him rehearse; and it was fantastic. I learned so much from both of these series of lessons. Somehow Barzin got wind of my *Brass Symphony*--some of his brass player coaches must have told him about it. And so it came about that he did the real premiere for one of the ISCM concerts (I think it was in 1950 or 1951). I got together my best brass player friends and colleagues, for whom, in my own mind, I had really written the piece. I handpicked these great players, and Barzin rehearsed the work. It was quite a considerable struggle, even for those great players, but we did perform the complete piece. I must say, even though it is now considered a sort of national anthem for brass players, the piece remains difficult to this day. It was really difficult then, in 1950. Nowadays people in colleges and universities play it more easily.

It turned out to be a breakthrough piece for me. Eventually, Mitropoulos heard about it and, in 1956, he did an extraordinary thing, something unprecedented in the history of the New York Philharmonic. He presented a young composer (me) not in one performance that season, but in two. One was my *Dramatic Overture*, which I had written in 1951, and the other was this *Symphony for Brass*. The Philharmonic had quite a struggle with it, but it came off as a fine performance.

And then two things happened. I got letters (I was still working at the Met, of course, and still living in New York) from Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, and William Schumann and others. They had heard the broadcast (in those days the weekly New York Philharmonic concerts were broadcast every Sunday afternoon) and they wrote me these laudatory letters about my piece. I remember Copland including in his letter something about how he was terrified about brass writing and brass players. He was always afraid to write music that might be too difficult. My piece had overwhelmed him, because here there was a level of brass virtuosity that he hadn't realized was possible. I had made it a point in the piece to have brass players do what most people thought only violins or cellos or woodwinds, or like strings (the movement is almost entirely for muted trumpets).

I was, of course, very flattered by all this sudden attention. And I suppose as a result,

Mitropoulos made the recording for Columbia records in 1956, again with handpicked players, mostly the same players I had used earlier with Barzin. It is by now a legendary brass recording, and has been reissued--finally--on CD. It was for many years a rare collector's item and never reissued, because it was recorded in the earliest days of stereo, and --so I was told--the stereo equipment had broken down in the middle of the third movement. The story was that Columbia refused to reissue it because they could not put out something that was half stereo and half mono. The piece has been recorded by others since 1956, but that first recording is still for me the definitive one. I myself rehearsed and coached the piece with all those great players, and Mitropoulos came in for the kill, so to speak, and did the final two rehearsals and the recording, and put his stamp on it. Tremendous!

jn: It is interesting to note the relative lack of respect for the brass ensemble in this country, as compared to Europe and particularly Britain. There is our great Midwestern wind or brass tradition, but it is not what Frederick Fennell tried to do with the Eastman Wind Ensemble.

gs: No, not exactly. Fennell has had a considerable success with his Wind Ensemble. But you are right, the big musical establishments, the operatic, the symphonic establishment, haven't really recognized wind or brass ensembles at all. The CBDNA [College Band Directors National Association] people have for years put up a good fight for it, but it simply is not considered on the level of other things like the symphony orchestra or chamber music. And I don't suppose it will ever change, regardless of the fact that people like Frank Battisti at the New England Conservatory, Revelli and Bob Reynolds at Michigan, and Fennell and others do extraordinary work. The best young players are attracted to these ensembles, because it gives them an outlet for playing some things, which, with the standard symphonic literature, they would rarely get a chance to do. So my *Brass Symphony* was this kind of breakthrough, bellwether piece at the time. And I am very proud of it. Because I was a horn player, I had a certain intimate knowledge of the brass instruments, which I suppose someone like Copland couldn't quite have had. When Sam Barber wrote *Vanessa*, I was still at the Met, and he came to me several times to ask questions about the brass instruments. Many of these ideas he incorporated in *Vanessa*.

jn: I doubt whether there is anyone whose views of music in the last half of this century are as informed as yours are by personal experience-- regarding which we have not even begun to draw on your close relationship with the world of jazz. For the present, many thanks for your perspectives on an important and still controversial period in music history.