

JAMES CHAMBERS

Interview by Jeff Silberschlag

James Chambers, although still very active, has already assured his place in the annals of musical history through his significant contributions as musician, pedagogue, and orchestral manager.

The youngest of five children, James Chambers was born in Trenton, New Jersey on December 15, 1920. His parents were amateur musicians, and one of his grandfathers was an organist, pianist, choral director, and teacher. One of Mr. Chambers' brothers is a trumpet player and music supervisor of a California school system.

Mr. Chambers began to play the horn at age ten. He made his debut with the Trenton Symphony Orchestra at age fifteen, two years before he began formal study. Discarding his early ambition to be a chemical engineer, he accepted a scholarship for the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Mr. Chambers studied there from 1938 to 1941 with Anton Horner, solo horn for the Philadelphia Orchestra. He received his first appointment to a major orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony under Fritz Reiner, after his graduation from Curtis in 1941. The next year he was engaged as solo horn of the Philadelphia Orchestra where he remained for five years. In November 1945 he appeared as soloist with the Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy in Strauss' Horn Concerto; at Robin Hood Dell in 1946 he was heard in the Mozart horn Concerto No. 3 under Dimitri Mitropoulos.

In the fall of 1946 James Chambers was engaged for his solo post with the New York Philharmonic. In December he made his solo debut with the Orchestra at a concert at the Hotel Plaza, again in the Mozart Concerto. Mr. Chambers remained solo horn until 1969.

Among Mr. Chambers many notable recordings include: three recordings of Mahler's fifth symphony: 1947 with Bruno Walter, another with Mitropoulos, and the third with Leonard Bernstein. He also recorded Kindertoten Lieder and Tchaikovsky fifth both with Leonard Bernstein.

In 1969, Mr. Chambers assumed his present position of orchestra personnel manager for the New York Philharmonic where he has worked closely with Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, and most recently Zubin Mehta.

The following interview took place on January 20, 1982 at Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center.

JS: What inspired you to play horn?

JC: I picked the horn because I felt there were fewer good horn players than there were good violinists and pianists. It was a pragmatic decision born out of hard economic times. I realized at ten that I might be picking a vocation. The horn was the first instrument I tried. I began to play the horn at age ten, but my formal studies began at age seventeen, with Anton Horner.

JS: Tell me about Anton Horner.

JC: Maybe this story will give you an idea of what Horner was like. At the break of my first rehearsal with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Mr. Ormandy came over to me. He started to go over the whole solo from Tchaikovsky's 5th with me—"play a little longer her, louder here, shorter here, more accent here etc." Anton Horner came over to Ormandy and he knocked



Picture featured in Life Magazine.

him on the shoulder. It was a way of punctuating his statements, and a gesture his students knew very well. Horner said "Let the boy alone, I taught him how to play this solo. If Rachmaninoff was playing a solo you would follow him, wouldn't you?" Ormandy said, "Of course!" Then Horner said, "so follow Chambers." Ormandy just shrugged his shoulders and walked away. He never bothered me again. Horner was a pretty tough bird. When Toscanini came to the Philadelphia Orchestra, one of the pieces he did was Death and Transfiguration. Horner was nearing the end of his career and was playing fourth horn. There is a fugue in the end that starts with the fourth horn and Toscanini wasn't happy with the way it was going. He started talking in Italian—"do this, do that." Finally Horner stood up and said, while waving his horn, "Here, play it yourself." He was kind of a crusty individual, but in the most benevolent way. He was really very much interested in the teaching of his students. Anything he did, even though it may have seemed gruff, was always in the interest of his student.

JS: You are considered to be among the finest horn teachers in the world. How is your philosophy of teaching different or similar to Horner's method?

JC: It is certainly similar, in terms of stressing the lyric aspects of the horn. I often say to my students we only have one thing to sell on the horn. That is the unique and beautiful sound which is particularly the horn. Anything else we try to do there are countless other instruments that can do it more easily and more securely without the difficulties of the horn. So my philosophy is very similar to Horner's and for the most part I use the same material. Although I have expanded on that material and we do go on to more modern repertoire.

JS: Expanded the repertoire indeed, for it was Mr. Chambers who organized and edited for International the Orchestral Expert books, including books on Strauss and Wagner. Mr. Chamber also edited the Kling, Gullay (with Cerninarol), Kopprasch, Grugel, Belloli, and the Mozart Concertos.

JC: Basically I am adding what I learned, my experiences playing and teaching, to what I had learned from Horner.

JS: Do you also see your rapport with your students as similar to your rapport with Horner? Are you an authoritative teacher, or a coach, a friend?

JC: Sometimes that varies with the student. However, I think that after a student has had several years with me he looks on me as I looked on Horner. That is one who is above all interested in their progress, and turning out a product that both the student and the teacher can be proud of.

JS: What is the difference between your usage of Bb and F horn, and what someone else might adhere to?

JC: Many or most players that come to me at Juilliard are primarily Bb horn players.

JS: You mean something like 75% of the freshmen play Bb?

JC: It has more to do with the register. There are certain registers in which everybody plays the Bb horn. That's fine, because in the high register the Bb horn tends to be more precise in response and intonation and the basic sound is not diminished in any way in that register. I am constantly surprising students by telling them, without looking, that they are playing Bb horn and that it would really be better if they would consider playing it on the F horn. My usual advice is don't discard the F horn so easily. People think the Bb horn is more secure but my contention is that it isn't really. The danger is if you play the Bb horn all the time the embouchure is not developed to the same extent as it would be if you have been through a selection process. The process of selection is a learning process in which you have to learn how to produce pitches and make intervals. The player must refine the control of his embouchure so that he is in total control of the situation and not hampered by a lack of knowledge of the F horn. When you are playing exclusively on the Bb horn you are depriving yourself of a safety margin. If you play something on the Bb horn that you would ordinarily play on the F horn and on a particular day you're tired or must play an especially difficult piano entrance, that's the time to go to the Bb horn. Use the Bb horn as an insurance. I realize this is a highly individual philosophy, but I really believe it, and of course coupled with that is the belief that the F horn sound is preferable. Now, I would be the first to add that even in what I consider basic F horn territory there are many exceptions. Technical problems or jumping in and out of a register may require you to play on the Bb or to mix the two. What I am trying to express is flexibility. Try to have all the options at your disposal.

JS: Is your hand position different or similar to other players?

JC: Well it is similar in that the hand is in the bell, but the similarity ends there with many schools of horn playing, although certainly not with all. Basically my hand position is a little more clockwise and a little more closed than that of most people. One of my problems in teaching is that students know that or learn that very quickly and you get exaggerated results. Then I have to say no that is too closed. We want warmth and depth of sound but we must have clarity and that is not clear. You are muffling the sound, making the instrument too closed causing too much resistance. So it takes a long time before we get to a point for that player, with his instrument, mouthpiece and size of his hand that we've found the optimum position. Then, when we have achieved this position you have to say immediately that the hand changes position with regard to playing: loud or soft, ascending or descending and to temper the intonation. The hand is a wonderfully flexible part of horn playing. I often say that 50% of horn playing is taking place where you can't see it. The hand should not be an inanimate object inside the bell.



Trenton Backyard dressed in Marching Band uniform.



American Youth Symphony: Stokowski, Chambers.





Teaching at Aspen Festival.



JS: What type of material did you practice to keep yourself in shape?

JC: I would like to say I practiced regularly but unhappily this was not the case. The jobs I found myself in were so demanding that there was a limit to the amount of lip energy I could expend outside a normal rehearsal and concert time. So I realized early that I was going to limit my practice to what one normally considers a warm-up period. There were exceptions of course, when something especially difficult was on the agenda I found the time and energy. Generally I think this is true of most busy wind players. They tend to come in earlier than string players and warm up slowly incorporating into their 20-25 minutes difficult passages that immediately confront them.

JS: What type of equipment did you use?

JC: When I started at Curtis I had no instrument. The instrument that I had played the audition on was an Alexander double horn owned by the high school. I had to borrow a horn for the first six months at Curtis. The scholarship I received, for graduating first in a class of twelve hundred, specified that the money had to go directly to tuition. Here I was at a school with no tuition, but no instrument. I had to convince the editor of the local newspaper, which gave the scholarship, to allow me to use the money for a horn. Finally after three visits to the editor, armed with letters from Curtis and Joseph Hoffman he released the money to me. In the meantime the local music store dealer ordered a Conn 8D for me. It is one of the first run of 8D, you seldom see one with an earlier serial number. I took that horn into a lesson with Horner and he played it for about five minutes and then said, "It is about time they started making a fine horn in this country." So that horn stayed with me all my playing years, except for a short period of three years while I was developing a Chambers Model Horn for Reynolds. The horn that was finally developed was a much improved horn over what I started with and I actually used it in the Orchestra. Unfortunately, that horn is no longer being produced, nor is my name associated with it. So except that one short digression, it was not only Conn 8D, but the same horn. John Cerniard now owns that horn.

JS: Your Orchestral Repertoire class is one of the most sought after classes at Juilliard. Would you talk a little about the class?

JC: I select the repertoire, although I am open to suggestions. There is a kind of scheme where I try to follow quickly on the heels of Philharmonic programs. If we are doing a Bruckner symphony here, it is likely to show up in my class. That thought is simply that students at Juilliard sometimes avail themselves of the opportunity to attend a Philharmonic rehearsal or concert and when a student hears a spectacular passage, or something obviously difficult, they'll have some idea of tempo, and phrasing. The student will know that they will have to seek out the part. This makes for a learning experience, everything ties together.

JS: When you discuss a piece do you sometimes point out that a certain piece may be interpreted differently?

JC: Very often. In fact sometimes I'll tell them that this section can be done in two or four... look out two bars before letter "T" there may be a ritard etc. Then we play the passages again. I don't tell them what I'm going to do. I want them to stay on their toes and I hope they'll always remember that this particular passage is tricky. So there is a tremendous amount of passing on the things that can only be learned through years of experience. The students in the class are all such marvelous young players I never need to discuss anything about instruments. We only concern ourselves with particular difficulties of a piece, balance, intonation, and ensemble. The reason that I got involved in a class like this was because of the knowledge I gained during my own studies in Marcel Tabeteau's class at Curtis, and later Sol Caston's class for brass. There is a very interesting story about a bassoonist who after completing my class took

a responsible summer position with a major symphony orchestra. One of the last pieces we studied that year was the Bartok Concerto for Orchestra and the first piece he faced was the Bartok. He wrote me a wonderful letter thanking me on how prepared he felt. This is the type of thing I try to accomplish. I have great enthusiasm over this class. It is very challenging simulating a conductor—directing the interpretations and pointing out the pit falls.

JS: You have pianists to simulate the string parts.

JC: Some of the pianists have been James Levine, James Conlon, and Leonard Slotkin. People who really have a gift for reading scores at the piano. They were aspiring conductors interested in the repertoire.

JS: From your vantage point as personnel manager of the New York Philharmonic and Retired Solo Horn, could you comment on the state of the Orchestral job scene?

JC: Generally speaking, I feel the job prospects are brighter today than when I entered the job market. There are more jobs being filled and that means, from time to time, being refilled. In the early years of my career there were fewer orchestras and the major orchestras only worked eighteen weeks. Later those same major orchestras were working twenty-eight weeks. Now most orchestras work fifty-two weeks and many orchestras are on a similar pay and benefit parity to the major five orchestras. Jobs were not always

advertised in the International Musician, and jobs are more plentiful and more desirable.

JS: Did you do any outside work?

JC: Oh yes. I played with Mitch Miller and horns. There was a time Mitch Miller always recorded with three or four horns. I played on "Yellow Rose of Texas" for one. I've worked with John Barrows, Jimmy Buffington, Tony Miranda, Clark Terry and Bernie Glow to name a few. Commercial recordings were something I enjoyed very much because it was something that played off the severity of the Philharmonic. I would try to get to a date first and put my horn on the fourth chair. I played on vocal backgrounds for Sinatra on Capitol, RCA and Columbia. I recorded for the Operatic field at the Manhattan Center. The first recording session I played was for Fran Warren and the arranger was Chuck Naylor. The part started with a Seligfreid style call up to the high Eb and then the rest of the song was high sustained playing. When I finished I thought this free-lance jingle music was really hard. I later found out that they had concerns for the part and that was why they had called me in the first place.

I have had, and still have a rich relationship with brass players throughout the music community.

JS: Thank you Mr. Chambers for an inspiring session.

JC: Thank you.

Partial List of James Chambers Horn Students

Alonge, Raymond
Ashby, Jerome

Barnewitz, William
Belenko, William
Bentham, Eve
Berg, Richard
Bergstone, Frederick
Billings, Kay
Bloom, Myron
Bobo, Robert
Bolter, Neal
Bracegirdle, Lee
Brown, Gerald
Brubaker, Scott

Cahill, John
Carabella, John
Cecil, Robert
Cermignano, John
Chaussov, Eugene
Cox, James
Crites, David

De Angella, Joseph
De Intinis, Ranier
Di Bello, Lawrence

Elliott, Barbara

Facenda, Aubrey
Fisher, Zoe
Frank, James
Froelich, Ralph
Funkhouser, James

Gibson, Jeannine
Graham, Robin
Gresh, Robert

Habig, Dorothy
Haddad, Donald
Haraden, Emerson
Havens, Daniel
Heckheimer, Charles
Holden, Thomas
Hollander, Eli
Hotz, Ralph

Jackler, Jay
Johnson, A. Robert
Johnson, Gary
Jolley, David

Karlens, William
Kehayas, Nicholas
Kalom, Charles
Kent, Douglas
Kilne, Peter
Kniaz, Abraham
Kruse, David
Kuntz, Leon

Landman, Julie
Lantz, Janet
Larken, Patricia
Lawrence, Larry
Lesnick, Adam

Machala, Kazimierz
Martin, Micheal
McAfee, Priscilla
McCathern, Judith
McDonald, Charles
Meier, Daniel

Nesbit, Phillip

O'Bannon, David
O'Bannon, William Neal

Pierce, John
Pledger, Duncan
Powell, David
Price, Richard
Purvis, William

Questad, Mark

Reissig, Richard
Rosevear, Lloyd
Routch, Robert
Rudolf, Paul

Shultz, John
Signell, Karl
Slocum, Williams
Smith, Dennis
Snyder, Kurt
Sours, James
Stacey, William
Stephens, Mary Anne

Tarpley, Joel
Taylor, Paul
Taylor, Ross
Thyberg, Scott
Tillotson, Brooks
Towick, Paul

Van Norman, Clarendon
Vaughn, James

Wakelield, David
Weber, Frederick
Weisser, D. Meier
Wilson, Richard S.
Woodward, Sally
Wunderlich, John

PARTIAL LIST OF JAMES CHAMBERS PERFORMANCES ON RECORD

Beethoven Symphonies Complete

N.Y.P.—B. Walter (#6 Walter w/P.O.)
N.Y.P.—L. Bernstein

Berg—Wozzeck

N.Y.P.—D. Mitropoulos

Brahms Symphonies Complete

N.Y.P.—B. Walter
N.Y.P.—L. Bernstein
Violin Concerto—Szigetti—Ormandy/P.O.
Piano Concerto—#2 Serkin—Ormandy/P.O.

Bizet Carmen Suite

Sir Thomas Beecham—Columbia

Copland

The Tender Land—N.Y.P./Copland
Concerto for Piano and Orchestra—
Copland/Bernstein
Symphony #3—Bernstein/N.Y.P.
Appalachian Spring—Bernstein/N.Y.P.

Debussy

Two Nocturnes—Ormandy/P.O.
Fetes—N.Y.P./Kostelanetz
La Mer—N.Y.P./Bernstein

Dukas

Sourceras Apprentice—N.Y.P./Bernstein

Dvorak

Cello Concerto—Platgorsky—
Ormandy/P.O.
Symphonies 7, 9

Franck

Symphony in D Minor—Ormandy/P.O.

Gershwin

An American in Paris—Bernstein/N.Y.P.

Grieg

Piano Concerto—E. Kurtz/Columbia

Haydn Symphonies—82, 88, 93, 94, 102, 104

Hindemith

When Lilacs Last in the
Door-Yard Bloomed N.Y.P./Hindemith
Concert Music for Brass and
Strings—N.Y.P./Bernstein

Ives

Symphonies #2, #3—N.Y.P. Bernstein

Kodaly

Janos Suite—N.Y.P./Mitropoulos
Janos Suite—P.O./Ormandy

Liszt

Les Preludes—Mitropoulos/N.Y.P.
Stokowski and his Orchestra

Mahler—Complete Symphonies

N.Y.P./Bernstein
Symphony #5—Water 1947
Kindertotenlieder—Bernstein

Mendelssohn—Nocturn—Szell/N.Y.P.

Midsummer's Night Dream—Szell/N.Y.P.

Mussorsky—

Pictures at an Exhibition—N.Y.P./
Bernstein

Nielson Symphonies—#2, #4, #5

Prokofiev

#5 Symphony—N.Y.P./Bernstein
Romeo & Juliet—N.Y.P./Mitropoulos

Ravel

Rhapsodie Espagnole—Ormandy/P.O.
Bolero—N.Y.P./Bernstein
Daphnis Complete Ballet N.Y.P./Bernstein

Respighi

Fines of Rome—P.O. and N.Y.P.

Rimsky-Korsakov

Sherazade—N.Y.P./Bernstein

Shostakovich

Symphonies 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, Sythian Suite
(Shostakovich 5 Symphony
Stokowski/Stadium S.O.
Mitropoulos/N.Y.P.
Bernstein/N.Y.P.)

Sibelius Symphonies 1-7—N.Y.P./

Bernstein

Strauss

Till Eulenspiegel—Reiner/RCA
Stokowski/Stadium S.O. Bernstein/N.Y.P.
Don Juan—B. Walter/N.Y.P.
Death & Transfiguration—Walter/N.Y.P.
and P.O./Ormandy
Suite from Der Rosenkavalier—
P.O./Ormandy
Don Quixote—N.Y.P. Bernstein
Zarathustra—N.Y.P. Bernstein

Stravinsky

Firebird—Stokowski/RCA
Firebird—L. Bernstein/N.Y.P.
Petrouchka—Stravinsky, Bernstein/N.Y.P.
Rite of Spring—Stravinsky-Bernstein/
N.Y.P.

Tchalkovsky—Symphonies 1-6

Symphony #3—Max Rudolf Stokowski/
RCA
Mitropoulos/N.Y.P.
Bernstein/N.Y.P.
Letter Scene from E. Onegin—Stokowski

Wagner

Siegfried's Rhine Journey—
Stokowski/N.Y.P.
Wesendonk Songs (E. Farrell) (Stokowski)

Weber

Oberon—Szell/N.Y.P.
Der Freischutz—Szell/N.Y.P.

P.O. # Philadelphia Orchestra
N.Y.P. # New York Philharmonic