

Stanley Drucker

CLARINET MASTER

A biography by

Mitchell Estrin

Foreword by

JOHN CORIGLIANO

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Foreword

I was ten years old when Stanley Drucker came to the New York Philharmonic. He was nineteen. It was 1948. In many ways, I grew up with the Philharmonic, as my father had been the concertmaster of the orchestra my entire childhood. I was amazed to see this young man sit in an orchestra of master musicians much older than he, but Stanley's musical brilliance and warm personality won over all of the Philharmonic artists—including my father. He admired Stanley's love for music and almost supernatural talent, and so I got to meet him when I was still a child.

I heard Stanley play concerti with a theatricality that one does not expect from an orchestral musician. The experience of this brilliant and soloistic side of Stanley remained with me—and I wanted to hear more of it.

In high school, I took several clarinet lessons with Stanley. I was not a good student, and quite lazy about practicing, so the entire episode ended when my clarinet was stolen from my gym locker in high school. That was the end of my clarinet career. But I did have an urge to make music—not as a performer, but as a composer. This became a passion, and I worked to learn to write music—a hard, but rewarding profession.

Stanley kept up with my progress as a composer, as did Carlos Moseley, President of the Philharmonic, as I sent them recordings of performances of my work. And so, it came to be that when the Philharmonic wanted a new concerto especially written for Stanley Drucker, they asked him who he wanted to write the piece—and he chose me.

I was thrilled, honored, and terrified. Writing my first work for an orchestra I knew so well and a soloist I so admired was both wonderful and very scary. And, to put a cap on it all, Leonard Bernstein was going to conduct it! (The piece is dedicated to Stanley and Lenny.) From the beginning, I knew that this piece must feature the virtuosity of its soloist. Stanley was famous for having the most brilliant technique in the world, and I was going to test it with my concerto. The first movement is called “Cadenzas,” and it is two wild, accompanied cadenzas—one soft, the other loud and wild with an interlude separating them.

Obviously, not all of the piece was going to be fast. There is another kind of virtuosity—that of playing a long lyrical line. A great artist must inflect the long line with his own interpretation, and Stanley is a very great artist in slow movements.

Tragically, my father died in 1975 from a stroke. He was playing my violin sonata for friends on his birthday, August 28, and he immediately fell unconscious and died.

Naturally, this affected me deeply, and the sorrow I felt was the inspiration for the second movement, an elegy dedicated to his memory. In this movement, Stanley had a long dialogue with the concertmaster—my father’s position for so many years.

The third movement involves all of the players of the Philharmonic—over one hundred musicians. I had to write my first piece for the Philharmonic for the entire orchestra. It just seemed inevitable. But it created the problem of having too many players drowning out the soloist. So, I removed several players to clear the air a bit: the other two clarinets, two of the four trumpets, and five of the six horns. I knew they would play sometime near the end of the piece, but wanted them out of the orchestra until then.

This led me to the idea of putting the players around the hall—the five horns spaced in the first boxes, the two trumpets together in the second tier, and at the top of the hall, spaced far right and far left, the two clarinets. And *that* idea led to the possibility of using the instruments antiphonally, as Gabrieli did in his early antiphonal *Sonata pian e forte*, composed in 1597.

And so, the last movement became a highly theatrical antiphonal toccata, in which Stanley had to play rapid staccato notes (a very hard thing for the clarinet) in a wild twelve-tone toccata, and the orchestra played—first on the stage, and then around the hall—antiphonal music. Two sets of dueling timpani were on the right and left side of the stage, and the two trumpets were on one side of the stage, while the trombones were on the other. Notes raced from one side of the stage to the other, as the strings passed them from one stand to another, and a portion of that Gabrieli sonata was played by four double basses.

This circus of a last movement prompted Leonard Bernstein to tell me that my piece was “a test for conductors.” In the center of the circus ring was Stanley, overpowering everyone with an amazing high register which could drown out the orchestra, or shifting to an amazing high *pianissimo*.

When I first showed the score of the concerto to Stanley, he turned white. “But,” he stammered, “there are no bar lines here!” And, indeed, there weren’t. A series of cues often was the way the piece was constructed, especially in the cadenzas of the first movement.

But, Stanley being Stanley, he studied the score again, and saw that he could do it.

And do it, he did! Stanley climbed what clarinetists now call “Mount Everest.” The first breath alone contains 133 notes, to be played as fast as possible. He met that initial challenge, and each one thereafter, so brilliantly that on opening night (December 6, 1977) there was a reception from the audience that the management of the Philharmonic told me they had never seen before.

And Stanley continued to play the concerto, touring Europe with Zubin Mehta, and playing numerous guest appearances. One of the most meaningful performances I heard him give of the piece was in New Orleans in 2006. He had offered his services to help raise money after the horrific devastation from Hurricane Katrina. His performance was at the same level it was at the premiere.

Stanley will play on brilliantly as long as he lives. He is a miracle.

—John Corigliano
New York City
2016

Introduction

In 2009, Stanley Drucker retired from the New York Philharmonic after a legendary sixty-one-year career with the orchestra. His musical career is unique for its longevity, and because he was the right genius at the right time. His level of skill on the clarinet is unparalleled, and the evolution of his profound artistic voice was fostered by the musical climate from which he grew.

Drucker was exactly the right age to achieve what few others have done. He started his professional orchestral career in 1945 at the age of sixteen and continued until 2009 when he retired at the age of eighty, a remarkable span of sixty-four years. What is even more remarkable is how his career perfectly aligned with the golden age of the American symphony orchestra. He played under virtually every major conductor of the twentieth century and was a part of the evolution of the American symphony orchestra. He began his career at a time when being in a major orchestra was a part-time occupation, and he became a member of the first orchestra to achieve a full fifty-two-week season. He knew and collaborated with the greatest composers and instrumentalists of the last century. Modern technological developments in radio, television, and recording were also evolving during this period, and Drucker was at the frontline of these emerging technologies.

Throughout my own career journey, the subject of Stanley Drucker has always been at the forefront of everything I have done. Not only because he was my principal teacher, but also because of our close professional and personal relationship. Wherever I go, people ask me about the legend, and I am pleased to oblige with history and stories. Drucker's life and career are fascinating subjects for a multitude of reasons, as described in this narrative. His is a story that must be told, not only because of his immense musical achievements, but also because he is the blueprint for the history of classical music in America.

In 2012, Vandoren invited me to interview Stanley for a film documentary entitled *Conversations in New York*. The result of these interviews was a four-hour video encompassing an overview of his life and career. As I prepared my questions and went through the interview process with him, I realized that we had only scratched the surface of the complete story. It was then that I decided to

undertake this project and create a complete permanent written record of his life and career. Throughout the information gathering, interviewing, and writing, friends and colleagues in the field have greeted me with unabashed interest, excitement, and enthusiasm to read about Stanley Drucker and his marvelous life and career. He is a private man, but the comfort of our long friendship allowed him to be open and frank throughout the entire process. I know readers will find his history and stories fascinating. Undertaking this project has been one of the great joys of my life and gave me the opportunity to spend a considerable amount of quality time with my teacher, mentor, inspiration, confidant, colleague, and dear friend.

One cannot successfully complete a project like this one without the assistance and support of many people. I am grateful to Stanley Drucker and his family—Naomi, Rosanne, and Leon—for allowing me the privilege to be a part of their lives for more than forty years and for committing so many hours of their time to complete all of the interviews. Thank you to Michael Skinner and David Gould at Vandoren/Dansr for stimulating and supporting the genesis for this project. Special thanks to the brilliant John Corigliano, who graciously agreed to write the foreword for the book. I am grateful for the encouragement and support I have received from Dean Lucinda Lavelli and Dr. John Duff at the University of Florida. I also want to thank Dean Emeritus Donald McGlothlin for believing in me. My gratitude to Barbara Haws, the New York Philharmonic's Archivist/Historian, for kindly assisting me with gathering information and archival materials for the book. Grateful appreciation to my superb editors, Dr. Morgan Rich and Jenny Maclay, whose literary skills have provided this book with clarity and cohesiveness. A very special thank you to Carl Schiebler for his assistance with the book and for everything he has done for me throughout my career.

—Mitchell Estrin
Gainesville, Florida
2017

Chapter 1 - Early Life

On February 4, 1929, Stanley Walter Drucker was born in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York. Although his earliest years were during the Great Depression, Stanley had a happy childhood, never feeling deprived or poor despite modest beginnings.

Both of his parents were from small cities in the Galicia province of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire that are now a part of the Ukraine. His father, Joseph Drucker (1892–1950), was an émigré from the city of Drohobych who maintained his own business as a custom pants maker. His mother, Rose Oberlander (1895–1953), an émigrée from the city of Sambir, was a first-generation American housewife. In 1909, Joseph came to America and, in only one year, managed to save enough money to bring his mother, father, and nine brothers and sisters to the United States. Stanley describes his father as “a terrific guy, fine person, and a private person,” while he recalls his mother “told the jokes and was more fun.” The family lived together in a three-room Brooklyn apartment.

Stanley’s memories of his paternal grandparents are vivid. Leip Drucker was a tailor who boasted a long white beard, and his wife Ethel was a short and slender woman. His mother’s parents never came to the United States. Both sets of grandparents each had ten children, so young Stanley grew up surrounded by family. He had one sibling, sister Sylvia (1923–2012), six years his senior. Sylvia was extremely bright and was employed by the Office of War Information during World War II. Following the war, she lived in Florida for most of her life, working primarily as a municipal government employee.

Stanley received his first clarinet at the age of ten. He and Sylvia shared the instrument, which cost eighteen dollars and change, and both learned the rudiments. Reflecting on his youth, Stanley stated that his progress was not immediate: “I was a very slow starter, because everything seemed difficult and I didn’t love it at the beginning. I remember playing on the mouthpiece for the first week. The instrument had a wooden body and a Bakelite barrel and bell. We each got our own mouthpiece, though! We got this fellow to come to the apartment. His name was Arthur Small, an accomplished woodwind doubler, and he gave private lessons for three dollars. I don’t particularly remember too much about the lessons, except I remember playing from Klosé, and there might have been Kroepsch and something else. It was a slow process for me.”



Stanley with his first clarinet (1939)

Chapter 4 - Busch Little Symphony and the Buffalo Philharmonic

After finishing his first season as a professional musician in Indianapolis, Stanley Drucker had completed the first of what was to become sixty-four consecutive seasons of orchestral playing. Word spread quickly about this musical wunderkind, and he soon had an invitation to audition for another orchestral position. After this audition, at the age of seventeen, Stanley received his second professional appointment, with Adolf Busch and his Little Symphony, a touring orchestra comprised of twenty-seven virtuoso performers.

Reflecting on receiving these professional appointments as such a young age, Stanley commented, “I think I was the youngest everywhere I played in those years. It was like being with friends in a way, once you got to play with them. People were always talking about the next place to go, where you could make more money. When the Indianapolis season ended, I already was scheduled to play an audition for Adolf Busch (1891–1952), who had a conductor-less orchestra, like Orpheus is today, called the Busch Little Symphony. One of the musicians I played with in Indianapolis had spoken to Busch about me, and said this would be a great experience. It was a touring ensemble that paid twice as much as the Indianapolis Symphony! There were friendly faces moving on to this next place. A few of the musicians that I played with in Indianapolis also auditioned and played in that orchestra. Oboist Jerry Roth and cellist Paul Clement (1920–2002) were in that orchestra. Rudolf Serkin (1903–1991), who was the son-in-law of Adolf Busch, was the piano soloist with the ensemble. They both belonged to the family that founded Marlboro. One of the violinists, Bjoern Andreasson (1922–2001), was married to the daughter of flutist Marcel Moyse (1889–1984), who was also one of the founders of Marlboro. Bjoern Andreasson later moved on, and so did Jerry Roth and Paul Clement, to the New York Philharmonic. Interesting thing, Bjoern Andreasson’s father was the second violinist of the original Busch String Quartet. The father of viola pedagogue Paul Doktor (1917–1989), Karl Doktor (1885–1949), was the viola player of the original Busch Quartet. The other quartet member was cellist Hermann Busch (1897–1975), the brother of Adolf Busch. In addition to being in the quartet, Hermann was also in the Busch Little Symphony. Adolf Busch was like a father figure to everybody in that orchestra. It was like a private club.”

Stanley remembered the repertoire he performed with the Busch Little Symphony: “Mostly classical music—Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, Beethoven Piano Concerto when Serkin played, music from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Beethoven Symphony No. 8, Schubert *Unfinished*, and various overtures. My colleague in the clarinet section was Benjamin Garry (c. 1913–c. 1988). He was older than most of us, and I had never met him before. The whole season with the Busch Little Symphony was eight weeks.”

When asked about solo opportunities during the early part of his career, Stanley spoke of performing with a woodwind quintet while with the Busch ensemble. Reflecting on performing in the Busch Little Symphony he observed, “The music itself was quite soloistic because there was no conductor, and you played music that was very transparent.”

“Busch liked me and spoke to a few conductors about me. He said he was going to speak to Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957) and Bruno Walter (1876–1962) about me, but, of course, there were no openings at that time. At one point, he said, ‘you must play for William Steinberg (1899–1978),’ who was the Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic. There was an opening in Buffalo for principal clarinet, so I went and auditioned. The audition took place in New York City at the studio of Steinberg’s manager. Steinberg was very impressive. He was a protégé of Toscanini and a master conductor. I remember playing the excerpts from *Dances of Galánta*, *Francesca da Rimini* of Tchaikovsky, *Scheherazade*, *Capriccio espagnol*, and a variety of things. As it was with other auditions, I began with my music of choice, and then he asked for various excerpts. I was engaged by Steinberg and played the 1947–48 season with the Buffalo Philharmonic. Had I not been hired in Buffalo, I don’t think I would have gone back to Indianapolis. I was ready to move on. I think the fact that I did the Busch tour spoiled me a little bit. The quality of playing was higher and it was more like chamber music—it was just on a higher level.”

Stanley Drucker won his third professional position when he was hired as principal clarinet of the Buffalo Philharmonic in 1947. The Buffalo Philharmonic was founded in 1934, and by 1947 it had established a reputation as a first-rate ensemble. They performed in a new state-of-the-art concert hall and had a world-class music director, William Steinberg. Steinberg was a conductor of international pedigree and an assistant to Arturo Toscanini at the NBC Symphony, prior to his Buffalo appointment.

When asked about his season in Buffalo, Stanley remembers, “The Buffalo Philharmonic had a major concert hall, Kleinhans Music

Chapter 9 - Philharmonic Premieres and Special Performances

An orchestral musician, especially one with a career spanning over sixty years, will play a great amount of repertoire. In addition to programming the great repertoire of the past during its entire history dating back to 1842, the New York Philharmonic has always been at the forefront of premiering the newest music and performing music by living composers. The Philharmonic's long-term commitment to new music includes commissions, world premieres, and American premieres of works by an unparalleled list of composers throughout Western music history.

Representative list of composers commissioned by the New York Philharmonic:

Barber	Ginastera	Schuller
Berio	Holst	Sibelius
Carter	Messiaen	Stravinsky
Copland	Milhaud	
Corigliano	Poulenc	

Representative list of composers receiving world premiere performances by the New York Philharmonic:

Barber	Hindemith	Respighi
Bernstein	Ives	Schoenberg
Britten	Liszt	Sibelius
Copland	Messiaen	R. Strauss
Dvořák	Poulenc	Stravinsky
Gershwin	Rachmaninoff	Tchaikovsky

Representative list of composers receiving American premiere performances by the New York Philharmonic:

Barber	Ginastera	Saint-Saëns
Beethoven	Holst	Schuller
Berio	Mahler	Schumann
Berlioz	Mendelssohn	Shostakovich
Brahms	Messiaen	Sibelius
Carter	Milhaud	Stravinsky
Copland	Poulenc	Tchaikovsky
Corigliano	Prokofiev	Vaughan Williams
Debussy	Ravel	Wagner
Elgar	Rimsky-Korsakov	

During his sixty-one seasons with the New York Philharmonic, Stanley Drucker certainly performed in a sizeable percentage of these premieres. He was familiar with a vast amount of orchestral repertoire, yet there were occasions when even he was put to the test, having to step in at the last minute. I asked him to relate these most unusual performances at the Philharmonic. “One time was during my last season before retirement. I wasn’t to be playing in a certain work that I assigned to my assistant. It was the violin concerto of Shostakovich. I was playing in the concert, but not in that particular work. I was downstairs when I was paged to go to the backstage area, where they told me your colleague isn’t here—he didn’t show up—maybe he is ill or something happened. I asked what the piece was. They told me that it was the Shostakovich Violin Concerto with a fine international soloist. I had played in that piece when it was premiered in the 1950s with David Oistrakh, for whom Shostakovich had written the work. I hadn’t played it since, and that first performance had been over fifty years ago! There are quite a few technical passages in that concerto, especially in the last movement. So, I went out on the stage and tried to cram by looking at this music for the minute or two that was left before the soloist and conductor would come out. I didn’t faint, and I didn’t mess up! Everybody around me said I did well, and I learned that I didn’t get too nervous in this kind of last-minute situation. There was also an earlier time when I had to step in and play a work I had never played or even heard of before. This was a set of variations by Gunther Schuller (1925–2015) based on the painter Paul Klee (1879–1940). A colleague of mine who was to play in that piece became ill, so I had to go out and perform this piece that was completely unfamiliar and was very technical. I think I did OK—I was very focused and immovable in my mental process at the time. That was another instance where there was no time to get nervous. These things do happen on occasion where you have to jump in and do something that you weren’t prepared to do.”

“I remember a couple of occasions at the Philharmonic where I had to step in as soloist at the last minute, due to unusual circumstances. One performance in particular stands out in my memory. It was a Tuesday night. The typical week was four concerts, with the fourth being on Tuesday night. There was a work on that program being sung by a famous soprano, Jessye Norman (b. 1945), for soprano and orchestra by Poulenc. It was a major work. When I arrived at the concert hall, there was a telephone call from the managerial offices to the dressing room where I was. The manager said that Miss Norman was ill with the flu, and Zubin wanted to know if I would play the Mozart Clarinet Concerto tonight—and this is a little over an hour before the performance. I agreed to do it, but then realized I didn’t

have an A clarinet with me. I called up Mitchell Estrin (b. 1956) who was living a few blocks from Lincoln Center at that time. Luckily, he was home! I told him to come quickly and bring his A clarinet, which he did. I played the Mozart on his instrument, which was probably better than mine. The performance was so last minute that I didn't even have time to let my family know so they could come to hear the performance. That was a wild jumping in at the last minute, but thrilling in a way."

Two points I can add to this story: One is that I did have a truly outstanding A clarinet. I selected the instrument in 1985 at the Buffet Crampon clarinet factory in Mantes-la-Ville, France during a New York Philharmonic European tour. The instrument was play-tested and given the final seal of approval by Stanley Drucker. The other point was mentioned during a moving documentary tribute to Stanley produced by the New York Philharmonic. The occasion was Stanley's final solo appearance with the Philharmonic in 2009, where he performed the Copland Concerto. Before he came onstage, the lights in Avery Fisher Hall dimmed, and a giant screen was lowered for the audience to see the eight-minute film. The film featured his Philharmonic conductors and colleagues paying spoken tributes to their legendary principal clarinetist. In one of the tributes, the orchestra's longtime personnel manager, Carl Schiebler (1937–2016), recounted his memory of that particular concert. He remembered talking to Stanley on the phone in the dressing room and telling him he would run up to the orchestra library and get the music. "The music for what?" Stanley asked. "For the clarinet concerto—for the Mozart—I'll get it down for you," Carl replied. "What do I need the music for?" Stanley asked. "I haven't used music for that piece since I was seventeen!" Hearing this last story, Stanley remarked, "It is a staple, but even so, it's a big piece. Probably the most famous piece written for clarinet and orchestra. That was a very special event, and one of many performances that remain with me all the time."

There was another instance when Stanley took the stage as soloist at the last minute. The orchestra was on tour in India in 1984. We were about to perform a concert in a large indoor sports arena in Calcutta. For some reason, the program needed to be changed at the last minute, and Zubin Mehta asked Stanley at the sound check to perform the Weber Concertino on the concert in an hour. They ran the piece down once, and he performed brilliantly in the concert, as he always did!