

# The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra Remembers Richard Nass (1919–2015)

Nora Post  
Kingston, New York

## Introduction

**Richard Nass** was born in Berlin, Germany in 1919. He arrived in New York at the age of five, and lived the rest of his life in the US. He attended Stuyvesant High School (the highly competitive specialized science and math high school in New York City) and then The Juilliard School. Nass had planned on becoming a doctor, but once he heard the sound of the oboe at Stuyvesant, everything changed. Nass served in the US Army Paratroopers during World War II. As soon as the war was over in 1945, he joined the Pittsburgh Symphony under Fritz Reiner, where he played English horn for six seasons. Then in 1951 he won the English horn position at the Metropolitan Opera, where he stayed for forty-eight seasons until his retirement at the age of seventy-nine in 1999.

When Richard Nass joined the Met, the life of professional musicians was certainly not easy. At that time, Nass's salary was \$125 a week, and orchestra members often had to play seven performances a week. But, the way he looked at it, he couldn't believe he was getting *paid* to play such glorious music. For him, it was always such a privilege to be a part of the Metropolitan Opera.

Nass is survived by his wife of thirty years, Met Opera cellist Marian Heller, by three children—Lesly Livengood, Christopher Nass, and Jennifer Nass-Fukai—and three granddaughters.

Knowing that I wanted to create a tribute to Richard Nass, I felt that some of the most wonderful reminiscences and legendary stories about him would come from his long-time colleagues and friends in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. So I reached out to players who were close to Richard; I am indebted to each one of them for their enthusiastic cooperation.

But before we get to these wonderful tributes by his colleagues, I have one personal story to tell. Anyone who knew Richard was familiar with his love of critters, both large and small, so no tribute to Richard could possibly be considered complete without at least one reference to his animals. Among the menagerie, he usually had two German shepherds. He often kept his diesel Mercedes in the parking lot at Lincoln Center with the two dogs in the back seat, so that he could walk them during breaks from rehearsals. When he needed his



Marian Heller and Richard Nass celebrate his 80th Birthday in Pine Plains, New York

English horn repaired, he drove out to my shop in Jersey City. In those days it was really a tough neighborhood; nothing could survive Jersey City unless it was bolted down! Richard understood all of this, but insisted on leaving the Mercedes unlocked. He was convinced no one would go near a car with two dogs like that inside, and he was absolutely right. After I fixed his horns, we usually took the dogs for a walk, and it was like Moses and the Red Sea parting with those two dogs!

Somewhere along the line, one of the dogs didn't like the sound of Richard making reeds. And as several generations of shepherds came and went, the older one always taught the younger one, so they all howled and barked like crazy when they heard the sound of an English horn reed. My shop was on the top floor of an old brownstone in Jersey City. Richard used to open the 4th floor window, and make just the smallest, tiniest little crow on his reed. Somehow the dogs always heard it, they went ballistic, and the Mercedes started lurching up and down and side to side with dogs jumping every which way as all hell broke loose below!

## Elaine Douvas

Met Opera Principal Oboe since 1977

As a newcomer to the Met Opera in 1977, I was struck and awed by how many orchestra players knew not only all the plots, but also all the actual words, spoke the foreign languages, and could render large sections of the music from memory. Chief among these sages of the Met was Dick Nass, who epitomized the “old guard,” the keepers of the ideals, the ones who knew every word and every note, and who gave so much of their lives to the job. It was very inspiring to sit next to someone who loved opera so much. Indeed, Dick could close the book on *Rigoletto* and play the whole thing without the music. Dick played with unfiltered passion, very expressive, plaintive, sensitive, and personal. His connection to the music was direct, and equipment, such as reeds and instruments—the bane of most oboists' lives—was of no earthly concern to him. Rumor had it that he left his English horn in the trunk of his car overnight each evening! He was sharply critical of the new generation of oboists, often stating loudly, “In my day they taught music, now all they teach is carpentry!” He made an exception, praising the lovely playing of Met oboist **Laura Ahlbeck**, of whom he said, “She tends to sing, and not just blow.”

His sense of humor was similarly unfiltered, and I laugh out loud remembering all the outrageous things he came out with in his booming voice! Much of it is not fit to print, but here is one anecdote: On tour in Cleveland, we played in a cow palace called the Public Auditorium. There was no pit; the orchestra sat on the main floor on risers with a raised stage platform behind us. Toward the end of *Madama Butterfly*, during an intense, hushed moment when the heroine is reading the inscription on her father's sword, intent upon using it to commit suicide, a percussionist knocked a suspended cymbal off the riser onto the floor. The noise was deafening—and ludicrous—at this very emotional point in the plot. Even more hilarious than the original clatter was the voice of Dick Nass yelling at the top of his lungs, “*Madonna!*” Everyone in the woodwinds was doubled over with stifled laughter; I don't know how we got to the end of the opera!

Dick Nass could also entertain us for hours with stories of funny happenings in the history of the opera house. Besides the well-known story of the male and female dogs on stage in



The Met Opera oboe section celebrates Richard Nass' 76th birthday in 1995. Front row: John Ferrillo, Susan Spector, and Richard Nass. Back row: Elaine Douvas, Sharon Meekins (chocolate-covered cherry cake by Elaine Douvas)

*Der Rosenkavalier*,<sup>1</sup> I loved his story of the drunken Wotan in *Die Walküre*. Apparently the original Wotan couldn't continue after Act 2, so the understudy was called in for Act 3. He hadn't expected to be singing and had had a lot of wine with dinner. Dick did an excellent impersonation of the covering singer, staggering to the edge of the pit, looking over the edge, eyes rolling backward, slurring all his words! Wotan lasted only about four minutes; conductor Erich Leinsdorf ordered the curtain down, and they had to go back to the original singer to finish the opera! It must have been amazing!

Sometimes Dick was hard to take; he was a crusty fellow, and he often seemed to be purposely tearing down anything I might hold dear: He thought **Tabuteau** destroyed the tone of the oboe, he thought **John Mack** was a carpenter, and I am sure he thought I only cared about my reeds. You can't teach anybody anything they are not ready to learn; I had my hands full at the time learning so many new works, and I wasn't in the mood to be a student, but, Dear Dick, I did learn something from you; really, I did. By his total devotion to his job, Dick Nass exerted a powerful influence for good. To me he was the Sage of the Met, the Keeper of Ideals, and the musical antidote to "carpentry."

1 Here is the story as Richard Nass told it: "Böhm was conducting *Rosenkavalier* at the Met, and he had very, very limited English during his early years with us. In the Second Act of *Rosenkavalier*, two dogs are supposed to come out onto the stage. They did. The audience became absolutely hysterical with laughter. Böhm was conducting, but the orchestra couldn't see what was happening on stage since we were busy playing. Finally Böhm (who could see everything) turned beet red, started to laugh, and cried out: "Zhay ahr fooking!" He said it over and over again while the audience went wild with laughter! He had a wonderful time with that one—he was laughing his head off! That was the last time at the Met that they ever used two dogs that were of opposite sexes together on stage." (From Nora Post, "Playing English Horn for the Legendary Fritz Reiner: An Interview with Richard Nass." *The Double Reed* volume 34, no. 2 [2011]: 45.)

## Désirée Elsevier

Met Opera section viola since 1987

Richard Nass was the first person I met in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra on the day that I won my audition. He was waiting in the orchestra office for Marian (Marian Heller, his wife of then two years), they were getting ready for a park concert, and Marian had been listening to auditions that afternoon.

Of course, I admired Richard's musicality, and loved sitting next to him—he could spin a phrase from his English horn that could make you cry in *Don Carlo* or in *Tristan und Isolde*, or laugh in *Siegfried*, but since I'm a violist, I will leave space for the double reed players to pay tribute to him in that way.

Because of where the English horn sits relative to the violas, I frequently had Richard on my right, and he was ever the gentleman, in a very old-fashioned way, making room for me to come into the pit before the show, or waiting for me to exit before him—so nice, so generous and always so encouraging. Even though I was only twenty-six years old at that time, and he was older than my parents, Richard was not only the first person I met, but he was really my first friend in the orchestra all those years ago.

Of course, there were moments when his humor took quite a jocular turn. The opening opera my first season in 1987 was *Otello*. In the old production there was a huge scene change with a complete blackout into the second scene of Act 3. Although it was a tremendous shift of sets and personnel on stage, because of the complete blackout, in the pit we all sat *very* quietly, waiting for the lights to come up and for the onstage trumpets to start. During the rehearsal, at that very moment of total quiet, with his booming voice, Richard bellowed, “Désirée!!! Get your hand off my *knee*!!!” As the lights blasted and the trumpets blared, the entire orchestra was laughing, and I was beet red! But a solid friendship was formed with a common sense of humor and theatrical chicanery. Richard, I'll miss you! You were larger than life—a living legend.

## John Ferrillo

Met Opera Principal Oboe, 1986-2001

Boston Symphony Principal Oboe since 2001

I was so sad to hear of Dick Nass's recent passing, and yet a flood of happy memories came back to me. I have never known anyone to take more joy from his work than Richard Nass. His experiences were as rich as anyone's in the profession—Reiner, Mitropoulos, Fausto Cleva, Leinsdorf, Karl Böhm—the list was endless. His memory was phenomenal—he loved turning off the stand light halfway through the evening, particularly during the Old Italian favorites, just to show how well he knew the repertoire (I don't remember him doing that in *Wozzeck*, though).

His sense of musical poise and line were impeccable. His oboist's heritage was very distinct from the Tabuteau lineage that so many of us now share. He had tales of **Bruno Labate**, and his own teacher, **Michel Nazzi** (careful of the spelling!),<sup>2</sup> and their New York peers from the pre-war period. His sound was distinct—reedy but characterful. It was a glimpse into the wonderful past of the great Metropolitan Opera. He was representative of so many of the people from an earlier era that were still performing when I joined the Met in 1986. They were passionately loyal to the institution, and opera was in their very bones.

2 Bruno Labate was principal oboe of the New York Philharmonic from 1920 to 1943. Michel Nazzi was the English horn player of the New York Philharmonic from 1928 to 1961.

Our performances of that period were a wonderful blend of technical command and deep, deep character.

Dick was hilariously dismissive of our modern concerns with reeds, gouges, and the like—modern flummery! He was not at all shy about his opinions, and loved to bellow out solo lines that anyone missed (I believe there was at least one review that noted this contribution).<sup>3</sup>

He was plain fun, and his attitude was infectious. Any newcomer found an immediate welcoming embrace—what a gift that was for a nervous young oboist playing in a great orchestra for the first time! I will be eternally grateful to him.

One thing he didn't convert me to, though: blutwurst.<sup>4</sup> Actually, two things—add roasted turkey tail to that blutwurst.

There will not be another like him.

## Toni Lipton

Met Opera contrabassoon and bassoon, 1979-2008

I played bassoon and contrabassoon at the Met from 1979-2008, and of course sat directly behind Richard all those years. He was a really big guy—and I was forever asking him to move so I could see over him. He gave me hell about that for those first few years at the Met. We had a big fight about it! But eventually, he grudgingly forgave me because he liked the way I played this little solo in *Die Walküre*. For Richard, music making was everything, and so as long as I did honor to his music, he would forgive me for being a pain in the ass about seating! He and his wife Marian became very, very dear friends to me and to my husband Scott.

I don't even know where to start with all the stories about Richard. He sang endlessly during the operas, especially the German ones, stomped his feet to the music; he was completely involved all the time. It was really a fantastic education for a young kid to see someone who had been playing for so many years remain so completely involved in his art.

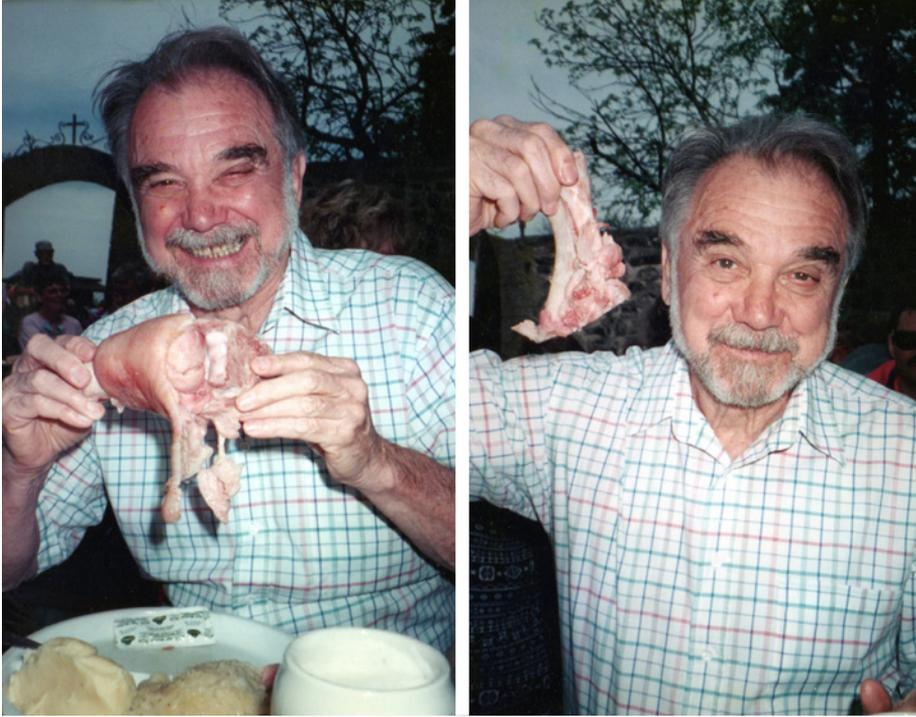
Another wonderful side of Richard and Marian was their incredible generosity and love for adventures of all kinds. So, I will tell a little story about what it was like to be on tour with them:

Richard and Marian were fantastic colleagues to hang out with on tours. They loved an adventure, which almost always involved food, even if it took them many miles away. And they were incredibly generous and loved nothing more than to share these adventures with their friends. Thus, we were on tour in Germany, and Richard and Marian proposed renting a car and driving out into the countryside to what I think was a monastery that was famous for serving pork dishes and beer. Did I mention that Richard loved nothing better than pork and beer?! So, Richard, Marian, violinist Ivey Bernhart, cellist Judy Currier, and I piled into a car and before you knew it we were on the Autobahn. Richard was an excellent driver, but still, these were unfamiliar roads, it was the Autobahn, and he was driving way over a hundred miles an hour. We three guests were completely white-knuckled in the back seat,

3 Richard Nass' wife, Marian Heller, recounts one of these instances: The Met Opera was on tour in Cleveland, the conductor was second-rate, the performance was mediocre, and the critic excoriated everyone and everything. She just blasted everything. At some point in the evening, the principal flute missed a big solo entrance completely, and Richard cued the flutist by singing the part. In the review, the critic wrote that the only saving grace of the entire evening was when the conductor sang someone's missed entrance with a very nice voice. Richard read the review, and called the critic to tell her that it wasn't the conductor singing, it was *him*. The critic printed a formal retraction, giving Met English horn player Richard Nass full credit for his singing!

4 Blutwurst, or blood sausage, is a dark, almost black sausage made from fresh pig's blood, diced pork and pork fat, salt, pepper, and assorted seasonings. Blutwurst comes in varying sizes from about two inches long to large, bologna-sized sausages.

thinking a sausage and beer were not worth dying for! But arrive we did, and Richard ordered a pig's knuckle and beer, and that pig's knuckle still had hair on it! Richard was grinning from ear to ear, grease dripping down his chin as he dug in while the rest of us, still a little queasy from the drive, tried not to look. But it was a beautiful afternoon, and soon enough we were having a fantastic time, sharing friendship, music stories, beer and food—another wonderful time with Richard and Marian.



The pig's knuckle: before and after

### Leonard Hindell

Met Opera contrabassoon and bassoon 1964-1972

New York Philharmonic second bassoon 1972-2005

In the early years at the Met, I just wanted to stay out of trouble and not draw attention to myself. I think that's pretty normal for people starting out. But after a while, I started to feel more confident, I knew the repertoire much better, and, of course, I loved the music. During one performance during this time period, Richard thought I had done a good job on something. He leaned over to the bassoon section behind him and said to me, "Well, well, now you are finally making a contribution around here!" This was around 1967 or 68. I remember thinking to myself, finally, after three or four *years* I'm making a contribution?

Of course, I also played the many contra solos and felt that in that capacity I was contributing from the beginning. My first real test that first year was when *Salome* came up with Karl Böhm conducting. That was the first time I was really on the spot. Being a little guy, I was sitting with the contrabassoon in front of me. Böhm wanted to know where the contrabassoonist was! Once he was convinced I was really there, we went through it, and it went very well. Böhm stopped after the solo and congratulated me. Then my dear colleague Richard—although I could have killed him at the time—announced to Böhm that was the

very first time I had ever played *Salome*. Böhm was very nice about it, and suggested we go through it one more time, which we did. Fortunately I didn't embarrass myself the second time!!<sup>5</sup>

Dick had so much enthusiasm and love for music, especially the opera. He also always enjoyed a good meal, and we had many memorable dinners together. One of his favorite places that we went to many times was a wonderful Spanish restaurant in Greenwich Village called El Faro. He loved the seafood in green sauce. Alas, it is no longer there!

When we talk about contributions, well, Richard Nass was a man who undoubtedly made a lifetime of contributions to the Met.

## Nancy Wu

Met Opera Associate Concertmaster since 1988

I met Richard shortly after joining the Met in December 1988. I think it was because I had recently returned from studying in Vienna, Austria, that Richard, with his strong ties to Germany, was curious to speak to me. He and Marian were extremely welcoming, and in a short time we were very close friends, sharing meals of bratwurst and sauerbraten.

In my first year playing opera, I was saying something to Richard about liking *La Bohème* better than *Rigoletto*. He rather gently answered that Verdi might grow on me as I got to know his music better. He was so right and now I would put *Otello*, *Falstaff* and *Don Carlo* on my desert island list of music! As I played longer in the opera, I became more and more appreciative of the fantastic musicianship of colleagues like Richard, night in and night out. He spoke often of his admiration of Renata Tebaldi and her beautiful, seamless legato, and I could hear how much his English horn playing imitated her in singing long, beautifully



At the Met

5 These stories mentioning Nass originally appeared in Nora Post, "An Interview with New York Bassoonist Leonard Hindell." *The Double Reed* Volume 37, no. 1 (2014): 107-120.

paced phrases. I will be forever grateful for Richard's generosity, as a friend and as a musician, offering up his beautiful music, performance after performance.

### Jim Ognibene

Met Opera clarinet and bass clarinet since 1986

When I joined the Met in the mid 80s, Richard warmly welcomed me into the orchestra and kindly offered much needed and appreciated advice and support. He was like a mentor and father figure.

People of all ages enjoyed being around him. It was not unusual to see Richard sitting in the cafeteria during intermissions surrounded by the orchestra's youngest players eagerly listening to stories of the great singers and conductors of the past with whom he had worked.

It seemed that Richard's love of his work never waned even in his final seasons. I loved how he would sing through his instrument with his heart on his sleeve, much like the great singers whom he admired. If you looked his way as Mimi was dying in the final moments of *La Bohème*, you'd see tears in his eyes. His love and unflagging enthusiasm for his work inspired us and reminded us of how privileged we were to play this wonderful music.

We loved him and will miss him forever.



At home in Pine Plains, New York