

Playing English horn for the legendary Fritz Reiner: An Interview with Richard Nass

December 11, 2010 and February 12, 2011
Pine Plains, New York

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Kingston, New York



INTRODUCTION

Richard Nass played English horn in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for forty-eight seasons. He played for Fritz Reiner during Reiner's years with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and he played for him again later during Reiner's years at the Metropolitan Opera. What has always been so impressive about Richard Nass is his intense devotion to opera and to music. He always considered it a privilege to be a part of the Metropolitan Opera. Even after almost half a century, it never got old for him.

I first met Richard Nass when I was playing bass oboe at the Met. Richard's English horn had stopped playing during a rehearsal, and I was just starting a business selling and repairing oboes. I had no tools with me at all, but I did have an idea. I suggested to we head off to the Met cafeteria, where we could surely find some spoons, forks and knives. I fixed Richard's horn with plastic utensils on a plastic tray. Payment was the biggest lunch in history—everything Nass could possibly fit on a cafeteria tray as thanks. Out of that a treasured friendship was born that is now about twenty-five years young.

Nass' talented and charming wife is Metropolitan Opera Orchestra cellist Marian Heller. She has been with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra since 1977, and was an invaluable help during my interview with Richard. The reader will see the initials 'MH' where Marian Heller graciously contributed to the interview. This project could never have been completed without her unflagging encouragement and support, not to mention her vivid recall of events and great stories in Nass' life. I would also like to thank the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Ar-

chives Consultant, Martha Berg, and Richard Wandel of the New York Philharmonic Archives, both of whom provided information I simply could not have found elsewhere.

After we finished the second part of the interview, we were all going out to dinner together. Everyone was hungry, and Richard started quietly humming a section from the first scene of Act I of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. It's the section where Siegmund, in a wounded state, stumbles into the unfamiliar dwelling of Sieglinde and her husband Hunding. Hunding tells Sieglinde to *bring food for us men!* Marian Heller said that Richard doesn't even realize he does this, but he always sings this when he gets really hungry. *Die Walküre*. This is clearly not what most people would consider singing for their supper....

Richard Nass (RN): I was born in Berlin, Germany in 1919. My family came to New York when I was five years old. I went to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, and then I went to Juilliard for a year, where I studied oboe and English horn with Michel Nazzi, the English horn player of the New York Philharmonic. I played for Fritz Reiner in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra for six seasons—from 1945 to 1951. Then in 1951 I joined the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in New York. Reiner was one of the conductors there at that time. I was playing there during his last two years with the orchestra. I played English horn at the Met for forty-eight seasons, until I retired in 1999. I have three children, three grandchildren and have had three wives. Everything in threes in my life...

Marian Heller (MH): Richard's father was in the German army during the First World War. He got injured, and he was in a German hospital. There was an orderly in the hospital and part of his job was to read everyone's mail—they did those things during the war. Richard's mother was writing to her boyfriend who was the injured soldier. The orderly was reading her letters, and he was so impressed by her letters that he started writing to her. And she started writing back to him! (Isn't this exactly what would happen today with the Internet?) Somehow he enticed Richard's mother to visit him when he was on leave in Berlin. They were both smitten with each other, and she went.

RN: My mother was about seventeen or eighteen years old. I find this so unthinkable.

Nora Post (NP): *Richard, don't be a prude! This kind of thing has happened since the dawn of history...*

RN: It's not that—it's that you didn't know my mother!

MH: So, she got pregnant, and *then* she found out the orderly was married with two children. The orderly's family in Berlin was horrified about what had happened to this young girl, and they had another son. They arranged for the other son to marry Richard's mother until the child was born, so the child would be legitimate and have the real father's name—Stein. As soon as Richard was born, the marriage was annulled. Richard was born as Werner Stein.

In the end, Richard's mother reconnected with the original soldier boyfriend, who had come home from the war. His name was Richard Nass. He knew she had had a baby, still loved her, and didn't care. They were married, and he raised Richard like he was his own son. The stepfather adopted Richard once they got to the United States. The stepfather came to New York in 1923; Richard, his mother and her mother arrived the following year on a boat. Richard was five years old at the time.

RN: The trip was a little over a week. We were in steerage, the section for the poor people. Just as we were coming into New York, there was a band that started playing for the first class passengers. I was fascinated by the music, and I somehow slipped into the first class section of the boat. There I was, standing with the band, and everyone thought I had gotten lost or fallen overboard! But everything worked out fine in the end.

NP: *Was this Ellis Island?*

RN: Yes.

MH: When Richard was about thirty, he found out that the man he thought was his father was actually his stepfather. The way Richard found out about all of this was that when he was working at the Met, he needed to get a passport for a European tour one summer. His mother was horrified at the thought of Richard having to get a birth certificate, since there wasn't one in the name of Richard Nass. She came to the old Met¹ after a performance, and was waiting for Richard at the stage door. She was crying. She told him the real story—sort of—since he was going to find out anyway. Only when Richard was over sixty did he accidentally find out that his biological father was Jewish!

RN: My stepfather was a mechanic who worked on the railroads, and my mother took care of a boarding house in Corona, Queens. That's where we lived, and where I went to grade school. Then I went to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan.² Stuyvesant was in lower Manhattan, and it was a specialized science school for boys at the time. You had to apply to get in, and the academic courses went about twice as fast as normal schools. It was all science, and I was planning on becoming a doctor. Stuyvesant High School had a full symphony orchestra, and I was playing the violin then. I was the section leader of the second violins, since I had great rhythm. I had no plans to become a musician, though, since I was going to be a doctor. But then I heard the sound of the oboe in that orchestra. That changed everything for me—that was it for me. It was a sound unlike anything else I had ever heard.

NP: So that was the end of Dr. Nass?

RN: Well, yes. The school loaned me an oboe, and one of the older students got me started. His name was Marty Leskow, and he became a professional oboe player. He was a big anti-Semite from the Ukraine.

NP: But hey, you didn't know you were half Jewish!

RN: Right. So he taught me.

NP: Tell me, how did you make the switch from oboe to English horn as your main instrument?

RN: When I was very young, there was a French repairman in New York. I can't remember his name now. When I picked up an English horn to play it, he looked at me and said: "Zhat Eez Your Onstrumont!"

Anyway, then I went to Juilliard, but I only stayed until I was nineteen. In those days, if you graduated, it meant you weren't a very good player. If you were a good player, you got work before you graduated.

Then World War II came along. I volunteered for the paratroopers. Parachutes were very basic back then—not at all like what they have today—and making a jump had the impact of jumping off a two-story building. That's why I've had so much trouble with my knees! Then I got hurt in an exhibition jump for a French general. It was terribly windy, and people got really hurt. I got really banged up, was in the hospital, and in the end, I got discharged. Suddenly, after three years, I was free. I couldn't believe it.

Right after the war, I got the job playing in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. This was the 1945-1946 season, and Reiner was the conductor. That was my first big job. I was in my twenties, and stayed with the Pittsburgh Symphony for six seasons. Three of those years were with Reiner (1945-1948). Then Reiner left to take the position at the Metropolitan Opera.

NP: How did you get the job in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra?

RN: I played for a German conductor at the Met, a rather weird guy named Fritz Stiedry. He *hated* Reiner and

¹ The old Metropolitan Opera House was on Broadway at 39th Street in Manhattan. The Met moved to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts at the beginning of the 1966-67 season.

² Stuyvesant High School opened in 1904 in Lower Manhattan. Specializing in mathematics and science, and boasting four Nobel laureates among its alumni, admission is by competitive examination. It has the highest admission standards of any school in the New York City public high school system. For most of the 20th century, the school was heavily Jewish. Nowadays about 70% of the students are Asian.



The oboe section of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra during the "Save the Met" demonstration in front of the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, September 1969 (oboe section from left to right: William Arrowsmith, Waldemar Bhosys and Richard Nass)

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the following spring. So I went to see one of the conductors at the Met, and I told him I was very interested in auditioning for the job. He said fine, but that the auditions were going to be in the spring. But by then, I would have to have signed for the following season with Pittsburgh. I asked if there was any way I could audition right then and there. He agreed to give me an audition, so at least I could say I had been heard. So, he got a few conductors together.³ This was at the old Met, and in those days, only conductors listened to the auditions. They all agreed to listen to me, with the understanding, of course, that there would not be an opening until the spring. That was fine with me—all I asked for was to be heard. Well, I started to play, and I have to say, I had a way with the English horn that came straight from the heart. Within about one or two minutes, they were up and running around, conferring with one another. They offered me the job right then and there! I only played English horn—I didn't even play any oboe for the audition. Reiner very quietly agreed with everyone and I got the job. I

Reiner hated him, too—Reiner was also one of the conductors at the Met at the time. Reiner knew I was going to be auditioning, he called me in and said: "Look. Just play like you always do. There's no question you are the best player available. I am not going to be there to help you, because if everyone feels that I am for you, they will be against you. But I will quietly vote for you after it's all over, and do whatever I can." It was all politics. As they say, upon such moments great music is made, you know (*laughter*).

NP: So you were already his English horn player in Pittsburgh, and Reiner was really telling you he would try his best to get you into the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Is that correct?

RN: Right. The way it all happened was that I knew the English horn player at the Met was going to be let go. I wanted to try for it. This was in the winter of 1951, and auditions were going to be held

³ In those days the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra had a number of regular conductors. The Met had been somewhat sobered by the outcome of Arturo Toscanini's seven years (1908-1915) as its artistic director. Toscanini (1867-1957), the most celebrated conductor of his time, had a most astonishing contract with the Met that gave him what can only be called absolute power. He used it to full advantage until he abruptly quit and returned to Italy with his wife after the scandal of his affair with Met soprano Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967). Farrar, the daughter of a Philadelphia Phillies outfielder, sang twenty-nine roles with the Met in nearly 500 performances. She and tenor Enrico Caruso were the two superstars at the Met during her years there. Irresistibly beautiful, talented and intelligent, she was a great singer and actress—an exuberant *femme fatale* who also starred in a number of Cecil B. De Mille films, and apparently drove her male admirers to distraction. Her many admirers (in addition to her husband) were rumored to have included the Crown Prince Wilhelm of Germany. But with Arturo Toscanini, with whom she had a seven-year affair, it was an open secret. It was her ultimatum that Toscanini leave his wife to marry her that resulted in his abrupt resignation from the Met in 1915 (see Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, p. 208).

started with the Met in 1951 and stayed for forty-eight seasons until I retired in 1999. I loved it. Even though you are secondary to the singers, there is something about opera repertoire that is so vocal and that really gets to me!

NP: So, you had the shortest audition in history, they heard exactly one person, they loved you, hired you on the spot, and that was the end of it?

RN: Yeah!

NP: What did they do about the auditions scheduled for the spring?

RN: They just cancelled them.

NP: Today hundreds of people apply. I hope you don't mind my asking, but do you remember what the salaries were like in those days? I would guess it wasn't even \$10,000 a year.

RN: It was about \$125.00 a week.⁴ It steadily increased over the years. But I never considered money to be the most important thing.

NP: Good Lord! But of course, that was real money in those days.

If I may, I would like to change the subject entirely and go back to your years as an aspiring young oboist. I wanted to ask you about Michel Nazzi.⁵ He was the English horn player in the New York Philharmonic when you were a student and, of course, he was your teacher. When did you study with him?

RN: I was just finishing high school and starting college. I was studying oboe with Nazzi. But in those days, if you had any talent at all, you got work right away.

NP: That's exactly what happened to Ray Still. He went to Juilliard for one year, landed his first big job and left.

RN: Me, too. I went to Juilliard and lasted a year. Then I got very busy with freelancing, and won the English horn job in Pittsburgh. I wasn't interested in music theory and all the academic stuff. For me, music was something that came in through my heart. It had nothing to do with the rules and regulations of Juilliard—or anywhere else.

NP: Do you remember how long you studied with Michel Nazzi?

RN: Not that long—just a couple of years. I am a German, and this guy was the English horn player of the New York Philharmonic. I respected him, and he is to be honored. Although he was a pain in the neck Frenchman! He showed me a little tiny scar, and said to me: "You see, this is what the Germans did to me!" (lots of laughter here)

NP: Did you ever read his biography? Nazzi's father was a piano maker in Algeria. They moved back to France

⁴ Nass' first season at the Met was 1951-1952. It was a thirty-three week season, so his income would have been \$4,125 that year. The orchestra members' contract at the time required seven performances a week. It was only after the contract of 1966-69 that the number of required performances by each musician was reduced to five performances per week.

⁵ Michel Nazzi was born in Algiers, Algeria, in 1896. He attended the Paris Conservatory, where he won a first prize in oboe. After an orchestral debut with the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in Paris, he went to Geneva, Switzerland, under the auspices of the Ministry of Fine Arts, where he taught oboe and played in the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. The renowned conductor Walter Damrosch brought Nazzi to New York in 1925 as the English horn player of the New York Symphony, a position Nazzi retained when that orchestra collapsed into a merger with the New York Philharmonic in 1928. Nazzi was one of only twenty members of the New York Symphony who auditioned successfully for Arturo Toscanini, who conducted the New York Philharmonic from 1928 through 1936 (see Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America*, p. 274). Michel Nazzi retired from the New York Philharmonic in 1961.

when Nazzi was about ten years old. But he grew up in Algeria, where the father made pianos. I thought that was the craziest thing I ever heard. Can you imagine what that must have been like in about 1900? It must have been like a movie set out of Lawrence of Arabia! When you once told me that Nazzi retired to Mexico, I thought maybe that wasn't so strange, since he grew up in Algeria. Maybe it all makes sense...

RN: Well, the sad part of all this was that the pensions in the New York Philharmonic were so terrible in those days that he simply couldn't afford to stay in the United States. That was so sad.

NP: *Richard, tell me about the musicians' unions in those days. And pensions. What was it like?*

RN: Well, it was like the beginning of fighting for *stuff*. Things were very difficult for quite a while, until things finally settled down over the years.

NP: *Let's talk about Reiner at the Met. Although he had been firing close to half the musicians in the Pittsburgh Symphony every year,⁶ when he came to the Met in 1949, he wasn't able to do that anymore. The way I put this all together was that since the Met had a number of in-house conductors—and Reiner was one of them—he just didn't have the power he had had in other positions.*

RN: Exactly. In Pittsburgh, yes, but not at the Met. When Fritz Reiner took the job as conductor with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in 1948, the union representatives and the orchestra committee met with him before he started. They told him that he had a very bad reputation and warned him that if he started firing people he was going to be thrown out.

NP: *Your first two seasons at the Met were Reiner's last two years at the Met. There were so many conductors at the Met in those days.⁷ Let's start with Fritz Stiedry. He detested Reiner and the feeling was apparently mutual. Stiedry was an old friend of Sir Rudolf Bing (the General Manager at the Met during those years) from the years Bing and Stiedry worked at the Städtische Oper in Berlin.⁸ Bing didn't like Reiner and certainly would not have hired him if it had been up to him.⁹*

What was Stiedry like? They said he was a very dedicated and sincere musician who would get lost in rehearsals—and sometimes in performances, too. A mixed review, for sure.

RN: I liked him because he really loved the music. It's true that he wasn't a very good conductor, but you could always feel his love for the music.

Fausto Cleva was a wonderful little Italian. He was the conductor of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus, and conducted the orchestra from time to time. He was a solid musician, but not one to inspire you because he was

6 Reiner was the music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra from 1938 through 1948.

7 During Richard Nass' first two seasons at the Met during the early 1950s, the list of conductors who conducted at the Met during both of those two years included Kurt Adler, Renato Cellini, Fausto Cleva, Alberto Erede, Tibor Kozma, Eugene Ormandy, Fritz Reiner, Max Rudolf and Fritz Stiedry (for further details, see *The Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*, pp. 613-632).

8 see Sir Rudolf Bing, *5000 Nights at the Opera*, pp. 41-44

9 Reiner came to the Met at the invitation of Edward Johnson, the then general manager. But just as Reiner accepted the position, Johnson announced his retirement, and Sir Rudolf Bing became the new general manager (a position he held for twenty-two years). Johnson did not approve of Bing's appointment and, therefore, Bing never sought Johnson's advice or approval for anything. Instead of appointing Reiner as artistic director (as Johnson had originally intended), Bing hired Reiner as one of several conductors at the Met. But no matter how anyone looked at it, musically speaking, Reiner was the maestro (see Kenneth Morgan, *Fritz Reiner*, chapter 7, "At The Met").

Reiner had made his Met debut in 1949, conducting Richard Strauss' *Salome* with Ljuba Welitsch as Salome. Reiner used to call her his Bulgarian bombshell and, by all reports, she was exactly that. Their first performance together was greeted by a fifteen-minute standing ovation, which was unprecedented in the history of the Metropolitan Opera; it was truly one of the great events in the history of the Metropolitan Opera.



At work in the pit of the Metropolitan Opera

Strauss.¹⁰ That's about as damning as it gets, although I must say that major 20th century composers were very critical and disappointed with influential conductors like Ormandy who played so little of their music. On the other hand, they all respected someone like Reiner who championed so much contemporary music, and conducted it with such impressive precision. Richard Strauss, Bartok, Gershwin, and Stravinsky, for example—they all admired Reiner enormously. He must have been the ideal conductor for any 20th century composer who wanted his music played accurately—and that would have been all of them.

RN: Right. Reiner was a peculiar guy, but he was a very thorough musician. He was no fake. He didn't believe in giving out any energy in making music! You had to know the music. He always said he wasn't there to teach the orchestra the repertoire—he expected we would know the pieces. That was his attitude. And he was right, although there certainly were people who had never played a certain opera at the Met, for example, and he really scared the bejeezus out of them.¹¹ He was very wonderful to everybody, and we actually loved him—that is, if you were one of the lucky ones that he left alone. But his great fault was that he needed to have a patsy.

¹⁰ Harold Schoenberg, *The Great Conductors*, p. 340.

¹¹ Ray Still told me the story of a Chicago reporter who interviewed Reiner. After complimenting Reiner on such a great orchestra, the reporter told Reiner that he had heard that the musicians were really afraid of him. Reiner thought for a minute and then said: "Only the bad ones..."

(Interview with author, April 25, 2011)

a real grump. It's like he was always waiting for the some catastrophe to strike. He was just grumpy.

NP: Yes. I remember reading a letter Rudolf Bing wrote concerning the diva Maria Callas. She had had a falling out with Cleva, and refused to appear in a production of Norma that he was conducting at the Met. Bing eventually convinced her not to cancel.

But tell me about Eugene Ormandy of the Philadelphia Orchestra. He was at the Met during your early years with the orchestra. What was it like playing for him?

RN: We were singularly unimpressed with him. I can't really tell you why. Conducting opera is different than conducting a symphony orchestra. You have to feel the conductor is with the singers. It's a hard thing to describe. He was just not inspiring at all.

NP: That's an interesting comment because Harold Schoenberg, the music critic of the New York Times at the time, wrote that Ormandy was "the best of the second rate conductors. Stravinsky contemptuously dismisses him as an ideal conductor for Johann

Earlier in Reiner's career, when I was with the Pittsburgh Symphony, he would look around the orchestra at the beginning of every season for someone who was scared. Not hard to find—young musicians who suddenly found themselves playing for someone like Fritz Reiner. The hunt was on, we were rehearsing, and we knew what was happening. Everyone was nervous. He was checking people out, just checking them out. He was looking for a patsy.¹² He would hone in on some poor guy and destroy him. And the horrible part was that for the rest of us, we were just so relieved that it wasn't *us!* You know—music history is such a wonderful history of human beings. The horrible cruelties that we can inflict on ourselves...

NP: *Did he pick only one? Then he picked on that player all season until he destroyed him?*

RN: That's exactly right. He ruined their musical lives. He was very quiet. He didn't scream or yell. But it was kind of like "You. Play that again. Not good. Play it again. No. Play again." He did this until they *couldn't* play it again. Then he was satisfied.

NP: *After Reiner had done this to someone, did the player quit or was he fired?*

RN: Most would just quit and leave the orchestra. If the person needed the money, he would stay through the rest of the season and then quit.¹³

NP: *God.*

RN: It was a terrible time. Not for us, only for the one he had picked on. He fired people like crazy in Pittsburgh, and they let him get away with it.

NP: *From what I can understand, the reason he got away with it was that there were no strong orchestra committees—there was no way for the players to fight back. There were unions in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, etc., but it's like they had no power. That's about the long and short of it from what I have read.*

RN: That's exactly right.

NP: *Tell me, was there an orchestra committee when you joined the Met?*

¹² Sam Denov, percussionist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra put it like this: "Reiner would test everyone who was new to his regime to see if he was weak or strong—personally as well as musically. Whatever his reasons, he made life hell for these men and women. If he found the kind of guy in his orchestra who had a thin veneer, who wasn't sure of himself or not confident of his own abilities, he would drive a crack into that veneer, and he would exploit the crack, and drive a stake through it. And that guy would be gone within a matter of a year or two. It had happened to every orchestra he had been with" (see William Furlong, *Season With Solti*, pp. 54–55).

Chicago Symphony violinist Fred Spector was a perfect case in point. He joined the orchestra as last stand of the second violin section in the 1950s. He was suddenly moved up to first stand, and Reiner just crucified him, saying: "Spector, you're doing it wrong, you are playing it wrong. It's not right." But Reiner never told the player *what* he wasn't doing right. Spector held his own, wasn't unnerved, and figured Reiner would have to tell him what needed to be changed if he was going to change anything in his playing. The abuse stopped as suddenly as it began. Years later, Spector asked Reiner about the incidents, asking what he had done wrong. "Nothing," said Reiner. "I just wanted to see if you would get nervous." According to Spector, that was the key to dealing with Reiner. "Obviously I didn't get nervous. Once he knew I wasn't going to get upset about something like that—well, that's the kind of player he wanted in the orchestra. Somebody who was able to keep his cool, no matter what" (see William Furlong, *Season With Solti*, p. 56).

¹³ During Reiner's initial 1922 season with the Cincinnati Symphony he replaced one-third of the orchestra. He fired between 15 to 29 percent of the players each season over the next five years (Kenneth Morgan, *Fritz Reiner*, p. 48). Later, during his years as conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony (1938 to 1948), he fired over 90% of the players in his first three years. Subsequently he fired about half the players each year. By the end of the 1943–44 season, only two members of the orchestra when he took over in 1938 were still there. At the start of the 1944–45 season, half of the orchestra consisted of new players. When Reiner fired over half the players in the orchestra during one season, a union protest led to an adjudicator from the American Federation of Musicians being appointed to examine the case. This alarmed Reiner. After that, if he wanted to get rid of incompetent players, he pressured them to leave the orchestra through intimidation and fear (see Kenneth Morgan, *Fritz Reiner*, p. 112).

RN: We had one, but it was pretty weak. Like other orchestra committees at the time, they just didn't have any power.

NP: *Let's touch on another subject here. You once told me that during and after World War II, there were many German refugee conductors at the Metropolitan Opera, and that you were the translator for them. Did you translate the rehearsals?*

RN: Sometimes yes. They all had some English, but some of them didn't have much at that point. But mostly I just helped out with the language issues that came up. Most conductors are bilingual.

MH: There's one story Richard always used to tell me. When the great conductor Karl Böhm first came to the Met, among other things, people had a lot of misgivings about playing for him, since there were a number of Jews in the orchestra, and Böhm had been a Nazi sympathizer. Böhm, of course, had been a conductor in Nazi Germany and was a member of the Nazi party. Tell Nora the story of Böhm and the dogs in *Rosenkavalier*.

RN: 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.

Animals in opera make wonderful stories. So many things happen that you can't anticipate. I miss Böhm, I really do. He had that—I don't know what it was. God knows he loved the music.

And I remember the wonder, the joy of becoming a professional musician, playing with groups like the New York Philharmonic, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. For me to be part of that—well, I could not have cared less what they paid me. I was rare in that. But to have the opportunity to play those fantastic operas and symphonies, and to get paid for it—well, it doesn't get any better than that, you know. It wasn't until years later that I realized it was important to fight for better working conditions.

NP: *I remember years ago that you told me you had a choice of going with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra or the New York Philharmonic. What made you decide to go with the Met?*

RN: The music. As an English horn player, the music in the operas is from heaven—it goes right to your heart. In symphony orchestras, there's not really that much for English horn. I would rather work long hours and be part of a great opera orchestra. I was an idealist—I still am. I like money, but it's not my purpose in life.

NP: *OK. Now what you really told me—and this could have been twenty years ago—is that you went with the Met because you said the Philharmonic was a bunch of bandits! What did you mean by that?*

RN: Well, the players in the Philharmonic always seemed to be fighting about money. At that time, they already had cushy jobs compared to the Met, and I just didn't like the attitude. If I was going to play music, I wanted to do it somewhere where I could love it. The Met let me love it.

NP: *I have a couple of last questions about your years with Reiner. Did you consider him one of the great conductors of his time?*

RN: No. He was a great conductor as far as controlling an orchestra with a minimum of effort was concerned.

But for me personally, something was missing from his heart.¹⁴ It's like he didn't really love the music enough. At least that's how it seemed to me. Of course, I was so young, so I would hate for anyone to take my word on this—it's just how I felt. You know, it's such a tough thing to judge. Is a conductor making those gestures because he means it or because it looks good? It's a very hard thing to judge.

NP: At the end of Reiner's five years at the Met, he took the job with the Chicago Symphony, which offered him three times the salary he was getting paid at the Met. Tell me, why don't you think the Met tried to keep him? When he left the Met, Sir Rudolf Bing graciously sent Reiner a telegram saying Chicago's gain was the Met's loss.¹⁵ But there didn't seem to be any effort to make Reiner the music director at the Met, like Toscanini, or later with James Levine, for example. I can only think that Bing was jealous of Reiner's abilities, he had never wanted Reiner there in the first place, and that Bing was such a dictator that he didn't want any competition. For most of his twenty-two years at the Met, Bing was against having a music director of any kind.¹⁶ A group of lower level house conductors apparently suited him just fine. Harold Schoenberg of the New York Times called them all hacks, and even Sir Rudolf Bing, who hired them, admitted that most of them were hacks. What do you think?

RN: Well, Bing and Reiner were both dictators, and two dictators can never coexist in the same organization. But I will tell you that the orchestra members were never aware of the politics. We just were not privy to what was going on, and we had no input at all into these matters. We were never consulted on anything. It's a shame

¹⁴ There is no question that Dr. Reiner's reserved, autocratic personality was the polar opposite of more flamboyant conductors like 'Lenny' Bernstein or 'Jimmy' Levine. But that doesn't necessarily quite mean he didn't have a heart, or that he didn't love the music. One story comes to mind that illustrates a rarely seen side of Reiner's personality: During his 1958 tour with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Reiner conducted what was, by all reports, an astounding program at Symphony Hall in Boston—a concert that must have been amazing from the first note to the last. It was one of the great moments in both the history of the Chicago Symphony as well as the career of Fritz Reiner. The program included Berlioz' Overture *Le Corsaire*, Brahms' Third Symphony, and Richard Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*. Reiner later described it as the perfect concert—he said that he had waited his entire life for that one moment. After the concert finished, Reiner appeared in the players' dressing room with tears streaming down his face. In an unheard of gesture, he thanked each member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (see Kenneth Morgan, *Fritz Reiner*, p. 163).

Ray Still tells a story that shows a more human side of Reiner, as well:

"Reiner was conducting the Chicago Symphony in a recording of the Rachmaninoff Second Piano Concerto with pianist Arthur Rubenstein. We had been recording all day, and it had been a very long day. Reiner was annoyed that he was accompanying *anybody*, since he had a recording contract with RCA at the time, and only wanted to record the big orchestral pieces. Everything was finally finished when the first horn player, Phil Farkas, told Reiner that he had made a mistake, and he asked if we could redo that passage. Reiner said, 'Oh, Phil, I didn't hear it.' But Farkas said the mistake was there and that he would not want other horn players to hear it. Then Rubenstein jumped up, too, with some things he wanted to rerecord. Rubenstein was famous for a *lot* of mistakes—he didn't really start practicing until he was about sixty years old! Reiner shot back at Rubenstein with: 'If we corrected everything *you* did wrong, we would be here all night!' Reiner and Rubenstein never spoke again after that."

The next day, my wife Mary bumped into Mrs. Reiner at Saks Fifth Avenue in Chicago. Mrs. Reiner was dressed in a fur and sneakers. Making conversation, Mary asked how Dr. Reiner was. Mrs. Reiner said he was in such dreadful shape. He had been up the entire night, so remorseful and upset about what he had said to Rubenstein."

(Interview with author, April 25, 2011)

¹⁵ see Kenneth Morgan, *Fritz Reiner*, p. 146.

¹⁶ Met violinist Sandor Balint was involved in the orchestra's contract negotiations with Met management as either a member or chairman of the orchestra committee for many years beginning in 1959. He was the chair for the eight consecutive contract negotiations from 1976 through 2003. Asked about his many years negotiating with Bing, Balint commented: "Bing was unpredictable, autocratic, nasty—a very brilliant and creative man, but very difficult to work with. He always expressed an enormous amount of contempt for the musicians, and for artists in general. He was a holy terror with singers, too. But some of the others were no angels, either."

My favorite was Joe Volpe, who retired two years ago. He had come up through the ranks—he started as a carpenter at the Met—and he was very sympathetic to labor. He gave us some marvelous contracts, and he was my favorite from that point of view. General managers at the Met usually come through the ranks of society, or as successful business leaders, so it was amazing that Volpe got the job, and that he was with us for sixteen years as general manager."

(Interview with author, January 31, 2011)

because I think we could have been very helpful. Because of the enormous complexities of running an opera house, opera orchestras have often been marginalized, and that certainly happened at the Met. But we could have been so helpful if anyone had ever thought to consult us!

NP: *To digress for just a moment, did you ever meet Reiner's wife?*

RN: Carlotta Reiner? Oh, she was a real doozie. She had a dog that she was very devoted to, and every time she went on tour with Reiner, she wrote the dog a letter every day. The housekeeper was supposed to read the letters to the dog each day. Whether she did or not, I'll never know!

NP: *She was Reiner's third wife, and I think it would be safe to say this was his only successful marriage—and even that depends on how you define successful. The love life of Fritz Reiner was quite something, and had some seriously negative effects on his career during his earlier years, meaning the years of wives #1 and #2. He lost the Cincinnati Symphony over the scandal surrounding the events of his second divorce. The board of directors during the 1920s was just unable to cope with what was going on. And just look at Toscanini, who left the Metropolitan Opera over a woman. There are a lot of fascinating parallels between Reiner and Toscanini—two absolute geniuses who didn't do so well when they weren't in front of an orchestra. They were both great opera conductors, they were auditioning so many beautiful, talented young singers who wanted work and, as the U.S. Secretary of State and Nobel Peace Prize winner Henry Kissinger used to say, "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac." Nothing changes. Toscanini was an attractive man and, like Reiner, he had tremendous power. At any rate, according to the historians, Toscanini was a notorious womanizer. He appeared to have two interests in life—music and women.*

MH: Absolutely. Think about Pavarotti. He used to attract all kinds of women. He had women right and left.

RN: For people with that kind of power, it would be almost impossible *not* to have all those women. There would have been so many opportunities.

Before we finish up, though, I have a Reiner story for you. The Pittsburgh Symphony was on tour in Mexico City, and it was the first night we got there. It was so hard to breathe the air there because of the altitude and the pollution. With lots of orchestras nowadays, they give everyone oxygen because the air is so thin at that altitude—but not in those days. We were playing Respighi's *The Pines of Rome*. It was the rehearsal for the concert the following night. I had a solo, but I just couldn't catch my breath. I just could not breathe. I was running out of breath *fast*. Reiner could see I was really suffering, and it was just the first night, so we hadn't been able to get used to the thin air at that altitude yet. I knew I was never going to make it to the end of the solo. So you know what he did? *He slowed it down!* And remember, I was one of the players that he *liked*!

NP: *So you were about to die, but he wanted it to be death by a thousand cuts?*

RN: Yes. I couldn't make it to the last note, and afterwards he told me I owed him a 'D.' But I got even with him. By the time we played it again the next day, I was adjusting to the altitude and could play again. We got to that solo, and instead of just playing one 'D' at the end, I played two 'D's! (*Richard sings the solo.*) Reiner loved it. He thought it was great—I got away with it, and it was a performance! ♦

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