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## Vacchiano and Voisin – the DiMaggio and Williams of the Orchestras: Stories and Personal Recollections

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Courtesy of the New York Philharmonic Archives



Courtesy of the Boston Symphony Orchestra

As a schoolboy growing up between 1939 and 1951 in Hastings-on-Hudson, a commuter town some 20 miles up the river from New York City, I was a baseball fan and, living almost in the shadow of Yankee Stadium, a Yankee fan. My baseball hero was Joe DiMaggio, whose huge, powerful swing at the plate and elegant command of center field were legendary.<sup>1</sup> Yet in those years I also followed the Yankees' traditional

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<sup>1</sup>DiMaggio was a three-time Most Valuable Player winner and 13-time All-Star player, the only player to be selected for the All-Star Game in every season he played. At his retirement, he had the fifth-most career home runs (361) and sixth-highest slugging percentage (.579) in history. His 56-game hitting streak (May 15–July 16, 1941) has never been equaled. A 1969 poll conducted to coincide with the centennial of professional baseball voted him the sport's greatest still living player. (Wikipedia, 4/13/2009)

rival, the Boston Red Sox. Their star, Ted Williams, whose prowess with his bat was electrifying, became my hero too.<sup>2</sup>

Hastings was also in the shadow of Carnegie Hall and the much-mourned Lewisohn Stadium at City College, the regular season and summer homes of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, respectively. By 1945, when I entered junior high school, I was a music fan as well as a baseball fan and began studying the trumpet, which I would go on to play for some 10 years. (Records with Verdi arias sung by Beniamino Gigli and bugle calls played by Harry Glantz that my father brought home may have got me started.) It was not long until I became aware of the aura around William Vacchiano, the principal trumpet of the Philharmonic. The teacher under whom I studied the trumpet, Melvin Warshaw, sometimes spoke of Vacchiano, who had been his teacher. The music director at my high school, Howard Marsh, was a member of Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale when it first recorded Bach's B Minor Mass with players from the NYPO and he told me how impressive it was to hear Vacchiano on the top trumpet part. When he played for me the awesome 1948 RCA Victor recording, Vacchiano became my trumpet idol.

What was most striking to me was the huge size of his sound. Howard told me how he marveled when one day Vacchiano forgot to bring his D trumpet and played the rehearsal with his B-flat trumpet, making an enormous sound.<sup>3</sup> Vacchiano said he owed some of this size to his experiment with a large mouthpiece in 1939. "Overnight," he

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<sup>2</sup> Williams was a two-time Most Valuable Player winner, led the league in batting six times, and won the Triple Crown twice. He had a career batting average of .344, with 521 home runs. He is the last player in Major League baseball to bat over .400 in a season (.406 in 1941) and holds the highest career batting average of anyone with 500 or more home runs. His .551 on base average held the record for 61 years. (Wikipedia, 4/13/2009)

<sup>3</sup> This story is somewhat at odds with an interview shortly before his death in which Vacchiano, discussing his years as a "specialist in the B Minor," remarked that "[today] even a high school student could play it" thanks to the D trumpet. But that is puzzling since he himself used a D trumpet and we can see them in the photograph of the players for Robert Shaw's 196x RCA recording – a photo in which the first desk trumpet has been cropped out of the picture. By the way, to my ear this recording has less presence than the 1948 recording and the trumpets sound more distant.

said, "I became a great player." Come to think of it, DiMaggio credited some of his performance to his large bat.

There was also the wonderfully burnished quality to his sound that he had. I read that in his youth in Maine he would play often a recording of solos by the same Harry Glantz in order to keep Glantz's tone in his ear.

Lastly, it seemed that Vacchiano's playing was always totally secure. He told the story of his 1935 audition for a position in the Philharmonic in front of the severe task master Arturo Toscanini, who was then conductor of the orchestra. Over and over again, the story goes, Toscanini demanded the same difficult passage in the overture to von Weber's Oberon. Evidently Vacchiano did not flub a note. (Years later, Toscanini was conductor and Glantz the first trumpet of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, and in their thrilling recording of Siegfried's Rhine Journey the possibly overexcited Glantz mis-hit the top note at the climax!)

But it is the magical performances that matter and I heard quite a few from 1948 to 1951. I was awed by the Philharmonic's performance under Leopold Stokowski of a selection of canzonas for brass instruments by Giovanni Gabrielli. I can still remember the sumptuous sound that filled Carnegie Hall that Friday afternoon. (If recorded it was never released. A pianist friend of mine told me that the Record Hunter clandestinely recorded the concerts at Carnegie for decades but, alas, after the equipment was uncovered during the huge reconstruction, the tapes were lost.) If memory serves, I was lucky enough to hear the great orchestra of that time play Brahms's 2<sup>nd</sup> and Tchaikovsky's 5<sup>th</sup>, with Vacchiano the rock solid anchor of the brass section. In those years Stokowski also introduced the orchestra to Tchaikovsky's virtuoso tone poem Francesca da Rimini, which I heard in the White Plains Civic Center, conducted that night by Alexander Smallens, if I am not mistaken.

The summer concerts under the stars at Lewisohn were very special. The acoustics seemed to me to be excellent. One of the orchestra's signature pieces in those years was Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F, which could be said to be for Piano and Trumpet. Gershwin's friend and actor-wit-musician Oscar Levant was at the piano. Vacchiano was in his element. No one who heard him in the long strange solo that occupies much of the second movement could ever forget his haunting and eloquent performance. Another high point came at the end of Gershwin's American in Paris when Vacchiano unleashed a high C of stupendous volume that reverberated off the buildings around the stadium like a DiMaggio home run ball bouncing off the seats in the bleachers.

Other than these memories, there are the recordings. Two stand out in my mind – one martial and virtuosic, the other lyrical and languid. He can be heard up close playing the cornet solos – a fanfare and a sort of obligato – with the Philharmonic in the recording of Bizet's Carmen Suite No. 2 conducted by Leonard Bernstein. It is superb in every way. Well known was his long solo with the Philharmonic in Aram Khatchaturian's Masquerade Suite in which he floats the mysterious theme over the rustling of the orchestra.

From 1957 to 1973, Bernstein was principal conductor of the Philharmonic and Vacchiano can be heard on all of the recordings with the orchestra made during that period – recordings of Copland, Ives, Schumann, Hayden and the others that Bernstein interpreted so well. Someone said in a blog that Bernstein's enormous success with the orchestra was due in no small part to his good fortune in having Vacchiano in the orchestra. Vacchiano retired from the orchestra in 1973, around the time that Bernstein left after nearly 40 years of service.

It must be a mark of Vacchiano's dedication to the orchestra that in all his years as a member he never missed a concert in which he was scheduled to play. In all fields, the greats seem to have a fanatical attendance record. My impression is that DiMaggio, a rookie with the Yankees around the time that Vacchiano started with the Philharmonic,

had a similar attendance record until 1941 when in August, batting over a phenomenal .450, an eye infection affected his performance and he finally had to go on the disabled list (ending the season at .361). But Vacchiano's attendance over such a span must be unprecedented and unequalled since his time.

One other statistic – one that must be a mark of his dedication to music: Soon after joining the Philharmonic, Vacchiano joined the faculty of Julliard, where he taught trumpet for an astounding 67 years – another record not likely to be matched. At one time he had at least one student in nearly every significant symphony orchestra in the country. One of his students commented that “we all wanted to play like him.”

Just as DiMaggio, in my ballgame-going years, soon had a rival for my admiration in the younger Ted Williams, the brilliant star of the Boston Red Sox, so, in my trumpet playing days, Vacchiano soon had a rival for my admiration in the younger Roger Voisin, the brilliant trumpeter of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Voisin joined the BSO the same year that Vacchiano joined the NYPO – 1935. But Voisin was a wunderkind. He was born in 1918 (the year Williams was born) while Vacchiano was born in 1912 (not much older than DiMaggio). When Voisin was auditioned he was only 16! – by far the youngest player ever to join the BSO. He had the advantage – and the disadvantage – that his father, René, was in the orchestra; he was fourth trumpet. According to legend, young Voisin was heard playing at a high school by another BSO member, who urged the orchestra to audition him, despite the doubts of the father. (“Roger, you don't know anything yet.” “I know, Papa.”) At the audition the conductor Serge Koussevitsky looked on warily at the excitement of the Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler. Finally, Koussevitsky, testing Fiedler, asked him whether he would be willing to hire young Voisin right away for the Pops' summer season. Fiedler said yes. Voisin was then hired as the BSO third trumpet assisting the principal and was soon principal trumpet of the Pops.

Voisin eventually figured importantly in the sound of the orchestra. Koussevitsky used some French musicians, but his *métier* was Russian music and the BSO was not a French orchestra. With the arrival of the very French Charles Munch as the new conductor, whose affinity was for French music and not at all for Russian or German music, there were new auditions in 1952. Roger Voisin was named principal trumpet. As a short history of the BSO appearing in the *New York Times* put it, with the appointment of Voisin “the fate of the orchestra was sealed.”

I first heard Voisin play in a December 1951 concert. A college classmate, Dick Davis, talked me into playing hooky for a day in order to catch a performance in Boston’s Symphony Hall of Handel’s *Messiah*, organized by the Handel and Hayden Society. I had never heard the BSO live before, and it was also my first experience of the sterling acoustics of that hall. I noticed that the strings had a sort of woody, full bodied sound. The trumpets, which remain silent for quite a while, start up in an exuberant chorus, entering on the words “Wonderful, marvelous...” Truly it was a wonderful sound: brassy, sharply accentuated and highly energetic. With the great aria for bass and trumpet, “And the trumpet shall sound,” Voisin walked to the front of the orchestra, looking like a giant holding his trumpet. (His gigantic appearance may have been an illusion created by the dwarf-like D trumpet he was using.) It was a stark and powerful statement. I had never before heard the sound he got with that instrument. My friend Dick exclaimed that it was “palpable.” At 33 and still a few months before being named principal trumpet, Voisin was already an accomplished artist as well as a virtuoso.

My next memory of Voisin is just outside Boston. It was the spring of 1963 and I was listening to a radio broadcast of the BSO, conducted by Erich Leinsdorf, who had taken over from Munch in that season. The concert was held in a hall in Cambridge that could not have been more than a mile from the apartment where I sat listening. What amazed me was Mozart’s “Posthorn” Serenade, with Voisin playing the clarion call on some sort of deep trumpet-like instrument that was nothing at all like the French horn

customarily used today. (I wish I had seen it.) His panache and the striking tonal color he got with that instrument were a joy. It is unfortunate that no recording was ever released, although I surmise there exists a private or underground recording somewhere.

Not much later, I was at Tanglewood one summer weekend to hear Wagner's Lohengrin with the BSO under Leinsdorf, a splendid conductor of opera. (The cast included Sandor Konya, Lucine Amara and Jerome Hines.) I was in the front row and when the trumpets entered the sound waves practically knocked me back in my seat. From then on, the performance seemed to be for tenor and trumpets. The sonic force of that performance was extraordinary. I bought the RCA recording as soon as it came out. (A few years ago I heard the Leinsdorf recording of Turandot with the Orchestra of the Academy of Santa Cecilia. It was the same thing: a very brassy and impassioned Turandot.)

Early in the 1970s, I returned to Tanglewood to hear the BSO in a program of mostly French music, probably with Munch. I caught the rehearsal, sitting in the front row, as the orchestra went through the whole of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* for what could have been the hundredth time. Voisin was leading the band, of course, and what a wild, explosive show it was.

There are few opportunities to compare recordings of Vacchiano and Voisin on the same material. Voisin got to record a lot of Debussy, Ravel and Strauss, which Vacchiano did not. Vacchiano did a lot of Schuman, Mahler and American composers, which Voisin did not. The BSO recording of *Symphonie fantastique* under Munch is justly famous. But I heard on the radio in Rome a recording of the same piece by the NYPO conducted by Mitropolous. In the latter, Vacchiano, phrasing impeccably, provides strong leadership for the brass section and, with his huge sound, soars over the orchestra. In the former, Voisin is the standout but there is also a great sense of spontaneity, of every-artist-for-himself. (When Munch died, Voisin told an interviewer

that “he understood we are all like children.”) I conclude that Vacchiano made me more grateful for Voisin and Voisin made me more grateful for Vacchiano.

Voisin was principal trumpet till 1973, the same year that Vacchiano stepped down.