

## Interview with Dr Francis Helfrick

Tuesday, September 22, 2009

About 7:30 pm at his home at The Arbors in Manchester, CT

Interviewer: Richard Burgess

RMB So, I play French horn in the Manchester Symphony, and I'm on the board, and I'm on the publicity committee for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

FH Yeah. OK.

RMB What we're hoping is to get some stories and maybe some really good quotes that we can put in our publicity materials. Maybe if we get a good audio file some good quotes on the internet site. To kind of find out what things were like back when it started, some of the things that happened over the years.

FH Yeah. Well, I'll help you in the best way I can.

(Hands RMB a photocopy of a newspaper article) I'd like you to read that article because it gives the bare bones of some of the early years.

RMB. OK.

FH There were a group of us, mostly physicians, who met in our living room periodically to play some music, and we soon found that we weren't getting anywhere and we needed some kind of professional guidance. And fortunately somebody thought of John Gruber. John Gruber, I don't know if you know or not, was the music critic for the *Manchester Herald*.

RMB OK.

FH And he was very popular at that. People went out of the way to buy the *Herald* in order to get his writings about music. He was a very good pianist and had quite a good career at one point, but the Army interrupted it and he never quite got back onto schedule again. And when somebody approached him about giving us some guidance, he said he had been thinking of organizing an orchestra himself. And so he jumped at the idea right away and began to ask around for musicians, all volunteer musicians, and called meetings, and we all got together and started to play music.

And, he was quite a frustrated musician, and he wasn't too easy to get along with, but he had quite a temper when he got irritated. But, he was an excellent musician, and we put on some concerts that were really very good. The first concert, he played a concerto. And I remember we played Beethoven's first symphony and a couple other things. It really went over big.

RMB We're playing Beethoven's first symphony for our first concert this year kind of in honor of that.

FH Good. OK.

I hope that somebody has kept a lot of programs that really know what we did. I know that I had a lot at one time, but I've moved so many times and had so many surgeries that that kind of thing got lost. But I hope they're around.

RMB Do you know anybody that might have a lot of programs? I don't think we have a complete set yet.

FH You could talk with John Eddy. Dr Eddy retired after (unclear ). He played the first trombone. He was playing first trombone; I played second trombone.

RMB How do you spell his name?

FH Eddy. John Eddy. E-D-D-Y.

RMB E-D-D-Y. Yeah.

FH He just might have a bunch of material. You never know.

RMB How did you spell it, was it John Gruber?

FH Yes. G-R-U-B-E-R.

RMB OK. . G-R-U-B-E-R.

FH There might be some others whose playing goes way back. I'm sure there are.

And I want to mention that in the early concerts Vivian Ferguson was a very helpful advisor. I don't know whether she's still around or not. At that time she was wife of the owner and manager of the *Manchester Herald*. And they were a great support initially. And of course that's where John Gruber wrote his articles on music, and it was a very nice connection.

RMB Yeah.

FH I'm trying to remember how many years John Gruber was conductor, but I'd say about four or five. And then he just decided he'd had enough of it and resigned.

And the second conductor was a person who taught conducting at the Hartt School. Vuytautus Mariosis. I'll spell it if I can. His first name: V-U-Y-T-A-U-T-U-S-. The second name was M-A-R-I-O-S-I-S, Mariosis. A real professional conductor. And he was real good for us. Very gentle. Very easy to work with. He knew what kind of music we could play, and that's what he selected. So we really had a good time with him. And he was

the one who got a chorus started. And that was the beginning of the chorale section of the orchestra chorale.

RMB Do you remember when that was?

FH Ah, No, I don't. I'm just guessing. If John Gruber was there about five years, this would be in the late 60's. And, I think the reason he wanted a chorus was because he wanted to perform "The Virginia Voyage", and that required orchestra and chorus. And as I understand it, a number of the people in the chorus enjoyed working with a live orchestra so much that they wanted to continue. And so they've continued ever since.

RMB Who was that piece by, "Virginia Voyage"?

FH I don't know.

RMB I never heard of it before.

FH You didn't? I hope I remembered right.

And, Mariosis was with the orchestra, oh maybe, another five years or something like that. I'm just guessing at that.

And then Jack Heller, from UConn in Storrs, was the next conductor, and he was really wonderful. He was the only one of our conductors, except for maybe the first two, who really understood the way a community volunteer orchestra works. None of the subsequent ones knew the difference between a volunteer orchestra and a professional one. They just didn't seem to get the concept clearly. An example was that Jack always selected music that involved the entire orchestra. Nobody was left out of the music that he selected. And he knew what their capacities were, and he included all that in his selection of music. One of our later conductors had a whole concert which didn't include any brass, and that didn't make the brass section feel very good. Because they didn't really understand the role of a volunteer community symphony orchestra.

But Jack Heller was really wonderful, and he conducted us for I believe it was 17 years, a nice long section of time. And from then on we had several conductors for a shorter period of time. None of them were quite as good as Jack. Jack Heller was really my favorite.

RMB Sounds like a good guy.

FH Yup.

RMB So, how long did you play with the orchestra?

FH 19 years.

And, then we had better players. I wasn't awfully good. In fact, I wasn't good at all. And I think Jack just put up with me. And there were better players, and so they played. Jim Lendvay was very good, and Dr Eddy was much better than I. But we got along very well, and I enjoyed every bit of it.

Now, I don't know what else I can tell you. If you have specific questions maybe I can help.

The article that I gave you I thought was very well written and very precise and accurate in everything it said. Some of the things it said about my own personal music experience and my wife's were not pertinent to the orchestra, but the timing and the location and the conductor were absolutely accurate.

RMB: OK. Is it OK, is this for me to keep or should I make a copy of this. Is this your copy?

FH: That's my copy. Take it with you, but I would like to have it back.

RMB I'll make a copy and get it back to you.

So you with the orchestra from the very beginning then.

FH Yes

RMB Was that pretty exciting?

FH Oh yes.

RMB Did you really expect that it would last this long?

FH No. I had no idea.

We didn't realize from year to year how we would exist. The first few years, and I don't know how many, we were very simply organized. We simply had a president and a secretary and a treasurer, and that's about it. And then later on we developed a board that had more power and status. And we first called ourselves the Civic Orchestra, but then when we organized into a board we called ourselves the Symphony. We thought that sounded a little more elegant than just the Civic.

RMB: It's funny how names become important sometimes.

FH Yup.

RMB I'm not sure this is working. I think it is. It doesn't show you much while it's going, but it's got the record light on.

So, what was the highlight of those early years for you.

FH (pause while thinking)

I don't think anything more specific than simply the first concert, which I thought was a very good concert. I remember that at the close of it Mr Peterson, who was a very well known high school vocal teacher, a very respected man, walked out on stage and made a little speech about what an enormous event this was, that little Manchester would have its own symphony orchestra and how proud we should be of that. There was a nice article about it in the *Herald* of course because they were big supporters. And I think probably that first concert was a big event.

RMB You said they played Beethoven's First Symphony.

FH Yes.

RMB What else did they play?

FH I think the concerto was a Rachmaninoff. Again, I'd have to refer to a program if somebody could find one. And there was something else that we played too. I don't remember.

RMB That's kind of ambitious for a first concert.

FH Yes.

RMB Rachmaninoff is not extremely difficult, but it's not something that falls together on its own.

FH That's right.

RMB And Beethoven. I don't think you ever get good enough to play Beethoven right. Always challenging.

FH Well, Gruber was a rather ambitious guy. And since he was a particularly good pianist, he took advantage of that to play a difficult concerto.

So that was very interesting.

I think one of the other things that was a little bit unusual about the concert is that when we were on the stage, ready to play, the curtain was drawn. The curtain was in place, I should say, and then when it came time to play the curtain was pulled back. And we were off and going.

RMB Which isn't very common for orchestras.

FH Not it certainly is not.

RMB Where was the first concert at?

FH At the high school.

RMB At the high school?

FH Yup.

RMB So that's basically the same as it is today.

FH Well yes. It's the same stage, the same setting, the same seating as the one right now, and it's a very excellent auditorium.

RMB It is. They just remodeled it a year ago. So we're back in it now. We did one concert last year. Yeah, it's a nice auditorium. In fact they put a ceiling on the stage now.

FH Oh good.

RMB It had that high, you know where they fly all the things, and that absorbs all the sound.

FH Most of the sound got lost up the

RMB Yeah, I saw this just last night. They have those little angled things, like bumpers, so that probably half to two thirds of the ceiling is actually covered now.

FH Oh, that's good.

RMB Yeah.

FH That should make a difference.

RMB It's especially important to horns because in the back by the time the sound goes down it goes up and we get lost.

FH You play horn.

RMB Yeah.

FH Good. Who else plays with you?

RMB In the horn section?

FH Yeah.

RMB Let's see. The section leader is Victor Perpetua. Then the second horn player is. I'm having trouble with names tonight. Karen Buckley, the conductor's wife. And then the third player is Kerrie Verrastro. She teaches music, I forget which town, in Eastern Connecticut. And then I play fourth. We rotate around, but those are our official positions.

FH Well, we've had some very good, very good players.

Do you enjoy it?

RMB Oh yeah. Yeah, I've played horn since I was ten years old. I've played in a lot of different groups. I especially like playing for this conductor, Lew Buckley. He knows what he's doing.

FH That makes a lot of difference.

RMB So, have you kept up with the orchestra over the years? Go to the concerts?

FH At a distance, but not very intimately, unfortunately, because I've been in and out of hospitals and moving around so much. But, this anniversary sort of restimulates me quite a bit. I like the idea of celebrating 50 years.

RMB Yes. It's kind of exciting to think of something lasting that long.

FH Yes.

RMB Have you heard the orchestra lately?

FH No.

RMB It's probably hard to get there.

FH About a year and a half ago, or something like that. I really want to go this year. I'd have to go in a wheelchair, but that's manageable.

RMB Do you have a way to get the wheelchair there? Do you have a van or somebody to give you a ride?

FH My son-in-law will, I think, give me a ride.

RMB If you have any trouble, just call me and I'll see what we can do.

FH Oh, that's nice to know.

RMB We'll see if we can help.

I guess that's all I have for now. Do you have anything else?

FH No. Not in particular. I want to subscribe to the whole package. I'm about to write you a check. And I would like to go to the June 12<sup>th</sup> meeting too. That's not a concert, as you know. It's just a, what, a celebration?

RMB That's the banquet?

FH Yes.

RMB Yeah. I forget the name of the place. It's. I'm not from Manchester.

FH It's in Bolton. The (Boar's Head? Boarders?), isn't it?

RMB That sounds right. I think it's just going to be a big banquet. So I assume there'll be a speaker of some kind.

FH There will be a speaker.

RMB And probably some kind of recognition for various people. No one's said.

FH Well, I want to go to that, and I think I can get my son-in-law to take me. He can handle the wheelchair.

RMB I don't know how limited the seating is. I know we're supposed to get reservations in advance.

FH Well, that will be included in my application.

RMB Yeah. Did you get a package of information?

FH Yeah, I got the . . .

RMB With the form for . . .

FH By the way, I would like some copies of this. Do you have any with you?

RMB No, I don't, but I can get some for you.

FH Good.

RMB How many would you like?

FH Oh, about a dozen.

RMB OK. So, you're going to be one of our sales people?

FH OK. I'll try. (laughs)

RMB Sure, I'll get you a dozen or so.

FH OK. I'll pass them around here to our residents. Some of them, I'm sure, will want to go.

RMB How do you like the logo?

FH I like it very much.

RMB I think it's very colorful.

FH Yes, it is.

RMB I think a fairly young person designed that. I'm not quite sure.

FH Well, the major form is an old one. It's the added color that's new.

RMB You mean with the treble clef sign?

FH Yes. And that's the one. This was in 1988. (FH may have been showing RMB an old program at this point)

RMB I think that the logo is an official part of the orchestra, isn't it?

FH Yes.

RMB It's not quite the name, but it's got a similar status.

FH Yes.

RMB That logo's official.

FH I think some local person, maybe a member, actually made the original one. And it was intended to sort of spell out the name of the orchestra. I know the fingers and the opposing thumb and first finger and the little finger were supposed to be involved in the spelling

RMB Really?

FH of Manchester. These three fingers and the little one, and it's, it's an "o". And this is the "s". And this is, I forget where the "y" was, in "symphony". And that was an "m". And I don't know what the . . . was. Anyway, that was what the thought was originally. And then somebody later on wrote in this name, the printing and made it more complete. And then it stuck. Everybody liked that.

RMB Oh yeah. I didn't realize that the treble clef wasn't part of it originally.

FH No, it wasn't.

RMB It's a very different logo. It's drawn in a different way than most.

FH It's unique, and I think it's very attractive.

You can have this if that helps you at all. (FH gives RMB a picture.)

RMB I'll make a copy of this.

FH I don't need it back. You can keep it or put it in your files. I don't need it.

RMB I know those three are horn players.

FH Oh, did you know Cheryl Stott?

RMB Yes.

FH And Ray Eurto too?

RMB I've played with him in the Connecticut Valley Chamber Orchestra.

FH Oh, you did.

RMB And Chris Light I've played with in Farmington.

FH Good. And that's way back. That's in 19. I put the date in there somewhere.

RMB 88

FH Yeah. OK.

RMB Yeah. Chris and Ray are still playing around in the area.

FH Bruce Stott was a very good trombone player, and he played many years with us. He and Cheryl moved to the Cape.

RMB Yeah, he was the librarian for a while too, wasn't he?

FH Yee. Yeah.

RMB Yeah, they retired a couple years ago. I remember Bruce was into making home-brew beer.

FH Oh really?

RMB Yeah, he was always talking about that.

FH Now, maybe you have other questions.

RMB Let me see if I have anything else written down. I'm kind of new at this.

FH John Eddy certainly would be good to interview, if you could reach him. He'd be in the phone book, I think.

RMB OK.

FH And I'd be curious to know whether Vivian Ferguson would have any memory of those early days. She was, as I said, the publisher's wife. And the paper had such a big promotional role at first that she naturally got involved with us. But she was very helpful in giving us advice and helping us with tickets and program things of that sort.

RMB OK, I'll try to find her.

What is your hope for the future of the Manchester Symphony?

FH Oh boy. I hope it will go on forever.

RMB Forever.

FH Yup. And I would love to see it expand, that I think it's a wonderful place for a young musician to gain experience. And I hope it remains a community orchestra which will welcome young musicians who want more experience under a professional conductor. And we did make a list of people one time who used to play in the orchestra and went on to an advanced role in music, professional or educational or one thing or another. I think I wrote that up in an article. If I can find it, I'll, maybe it will be interesting to you.

RMB Yeah, if you know where that list is, I'd be real interested in who has that.

FH I'll look for it.

RMB I used to write an article for the *Manchester Extra* on art, and I would include, I think I included something about that one time.

RMB Oh yeah. That would be great.

FH I'll see if I can find it.

RMB That'd be real interesting to know.

That kind of tradition, of course, is still alive. I know we have a bunch of high school kids I think in the violin section. We picked up two high school students in the bass section last year.

FH Oh.

RMB Bass viol, in the orchestra. And of course our conductor used to have the Coast Guard Band for I think 29 years.

FH The what?

RMB Lew Buckley, our conductor, conducted the Coast Guard Band for I think almost 30 years, and he's very much a professional. So that combination is still there.

FH I think the connection with the classical music is a wonderful one. It'll do just what I'm talking about, giving young people an experience that helps them advance their careers.

RMB We try. I think we have. I know this year we have a young person playing viola for one of our concerts as a soloist. I think that we do that every year. I haven't been there long enough to know for sure, but that's kind of nice too.

Do you have any advice for us?

FH (chuckles) No, I don't think so. Keep doing what you're doing.

RMB You just trust us to keep on doing it, huh?

FH Yup.

RMB Well, thank you for your time.

FH Well, you're very welcome. I wish I could do more, and if I get some bright ideas I'll give you a call.

RMB OK.

(some shuffling around -- noise of brushing against the microphone?)

FH Another big thing that we did, and you can call this a highlight, was the concert with Kurt Nicoden (sp?). Does that name mean anything to you?

RMB Not off hand.

FH He's a professional violinist. He lives in New York City, and he plays all over the world. He played his first symphony concert here in Manchester.

RMB This was the first orchestra he soloed with, you mean?

FH Yes.

RMB Wow. So that's kind of an interesting kind of first. Usually you think about first performances of music.

FH That's right. I have an, I read an article about that too. If that would interest you I'll send you a copy of that.

RMB Sure. That'd be great. Yeah. We find out as we go back over the years that the orchestra's had an important role in the community, not just hung in there and played concerts. Things like that are very much supporting music in the community, besides from just making some. Cool.