

# William Vacchiano

by Dorothy Chansky

In a way, it's a little perverse.

To land a job in a major symphony orchestra, you have to spend your life preparing and then play better than anyone else at the audition. If you win the symphony chair, a teaching job at a top conservatory may come along almost as a perk; you need not necessarily ever have considered - or prepared for - a teaching career. As a result, students sometimes get a raw deal.

But William Vacchiano's pupils have all drawn winning hands.

Not that Vacchiano needed a reputation as a teacher to merit a place in this century's musical annals. Principal Trumpet with the New York Philharmonic for 31 of his 38 years as a member of the orchestra, he once played so many outside jobs that, as he tells it, "I used to have a police escort from Liederkrnaz Hall to Carnegie Hall on Sunday afternoons to be up at Carnegie by three for the national broadcast. I had to be in so many places that I had people who made their living just getting my instruments from one hall to the next and having cabs ready for me."



The soft-spoken native of Portland, Maine left the Philharmonic in 1973, but it wasn't to rest on his laurels. It was to devote himself completely to the teaching career that began at Juilliard before he was 25. The 1987-88 school year begins Vacchiano's second half-century as a teacher. His former students include fifteen current first-chair players in major American symphony orchestras, jazz stars Wynton Marsalis, Miles Davis and Jonah Jones, and dozens of top teachers, second and third-chair players in major orchestras, and numerous Broadway regulars.

Not surprisingly, Vacchiano regards teaching as an artistic venture all its own. "It's a source of great satisfaction to know that you

can create something the same way a painter does. He sees a subject and from it he creates a great piece of art. My students come in, more or less, raw and green. But from them I can reproduce myself, you might say, and create great artists."

If this sounds as if Vacchiano is out to generate clones of himself, he is quick to qualify. He feels that his own sound is the result of the influence of his teacher. Max Schlossberg, and making it his business to listen to every great trumpet player he could.

When he was a boy, this required special effort - both recordings and travel were far more exotic than they are now. He remem-

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bers, as a child, listening to a recording of Harry Glantz every morning before starting to practice- “just to get the sound in my ear.” Choosing a sound to emulate required a certain winnowing process. In the twenties, trumpet players from different parts of the world had widely disparate sounds. Not all were good role models for an American who wanted to succeed in an American orchestra.

Today, the sound that all symphony bound players aspire to and that is taught in schools across the nation is one that Vacchiano simply describes as “healthy.” For him, this means a controlled vibrato, clarity and a pleasing tone. “The attack is good. The intonation is good. Everything is working right.”

According to Vacchiano, most students arrive at Juilliard believing that they’re already doing everything right. One of the most important parts of their training is getting the right sound on their ears. “It’s all in the ears,” Vacchiano explains. “The students have to hear what they’re doing, if the attack is too hard, they’ve got to hear it. They can’t feel it. The ear will tell the mouth what to do. We actually don’t mention the word ‘mouth’ because that has nothing to do with it. Everything is the ear.”

He describes matter-of-factly the three phases of a Vac-

chiano students training. Musicianship comes first, which means extensive work in sight-reading and transposition. (Vacchiano himself studied solfeggio for a year when he was eight before he was even allowed to pick up an instrument.)

The second phase involves solving technical problems on the instrument. All of Vacchiano’s students bring four different trumpets to their lessons. The instrument has evolved so much that an important part of a player’s training is learning which trumpet to use for what music. Vacchiano notes, for example, that with the now-common availability of the piccolo trumpet, “Any high school kid can play the part in the Bach B Minor Mass that I used to specialize in, using a D trumpet.” He also points out that there is so much more repertoire for a student to contend with now that alternating among instruments is an necessary skill, not an oddity.

The third phase is learning repertoire. Vacchiano’s standard texts for all students are Arban’s *Grand Method* for technique, St. Jacomb’s *Complete Method* for reading and, for transposition, *One Hundred Studies* by Ernest Sachse. Vacchiano also mentions ten volumes of excerpts, adding with a smile, “We didn’t have them when I was a boy. You had to locate an excerpt in the library and then copy it out by hand.”

What qualities must a student show in his or her Juilliard audition to qualify to study what sounds like the basics? According to Vacchiano, “First, we look for a correct embouchure. Then we look for range,

attack, intonation, vibrato, rhythm.”

In other words, students have to be able to play, and play pretty well, just to be admitted. Which makes it seem as if teaching these students must be about as difficult as shooting fish in a barrel.

Vacchiano chuckles. “Oh, there are plenty of duds. Maybe out of every ten students, you have one with real talent. Then, of course, there’s not much you have to do. It’s like having a diamond ring. You just polish it a little bit. One of my great pupils at Juilliard was



Wynton Marsalis. He has a wonderful brain. He’s very fast. No matter what you tell him, he gets it. You don’t have to repeat. If you could show him a little thing he was doing wrong, he’d correct it immediately. And Phil Smith (Principal trumpet with the New York Philharmonic) has a great talent. He’s one of the greatest players in the country today. All I had to do was show him the literature.”

But what about the “duds”? Vacchiano says that a student whose acceptance at Juilliard was really a mistake will not be asked to return after the second year. But Vacchiano sticks with anyone who lasts, whether or not the student is destined for a major career. And he says emphatically that teaching without the 90% non-star students, would be no challenge and no fun.

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“Everyone has a ceiling, but you don’t tell them that. You never get rid of students. They’ll just go to someone else. So you help them out as much as you can.”

Two themes emerge as Vacchiano discusses helping each student fulfill his own unique potential. One is mouthpieces; the other is overall well-being.

About the first, Vacchiano has definite ideas. He feels that many technical difficulties that plague trumpet players can be almost instantly corrected by a change of mouthpiece. He explains that in order to play properly, a trumpet

player needs the right amount of muscle. A thick-lipped player has the muscle in his mouth and may be advised to switch to a thinner-rimmed mouthpiece to improve resonance and flexibility. A thin-lipped player might need a mouthpiece with a thicker rim for added support.

He points out that most students don’t realize they can switch mouthpieces and that it can be done inexpensively. Theoretically, students could go into a music store and buy a different size mouthpiece for a better fit, the same way they would purchase better fitting shoes if their toes were being pinched. Vacchiano cautions against doing this without guidance, though, because there’s more to choosing a mouthpiece than its feel. When he first starts working with a student, as many as ten lessons may be devoted to experimenting with equipment.

Vacchiano first adjusted a mouthpiece for himself in



1940, at the suggestion of Albert Stagliano, first horn with the NBC Symphony. Because Vacchiano’s face is large, Stagliano suggested a larger mouthpiece. The two went to a hardware store, bought some tools, and cut

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Vacchiano’s mouthpiece in half. “Overnight,” he says, “I became a great player.”

Now Vacchiano has a collection of more than two hundred mouthpieces. Fifteen once belonged to famous players. The others he makes available for students to try out before they make purchases.

He has also designed a line of trumpet mouthpieces that are made by **John Stork** in New York City and sold around the world. For advanced players with very specific needs, Vacchiano might suggest a custom mouthpiece, which Stork also makes. Vacchiano points out that he never tries to sell a student anything, but that an awareness of options is crucial to



thing, but an awareness of options is crucial to healthy playing.

Health and well-being keep coming up as Vacchiano talks. (So does luck, which is the simple way he explains his own talent.) Vacchiano urges all his students to get as many degrees as they can. It isn't that he is trying to turn them into teachers. But when the odds are often as much as 200 to 1 (the numbers at the Boston Symphony's recent second-trumpet audition) that they'll get the job they want, he's interested in helping them keep music in their lives. "On a college campus there's nearly always a quintet in which they can play, and if any shows that need musicians come to town, they'll get to do this extra work." He is careful to work with students on

how to practice. Some want to do too much and, in his view, the physical demands of playing the trumpet make practicing counter productive after a certain point." Basically, what I want to do is show them the healthiest way to live."

He enjoys teaching students who are professionals in other fields than music. His cardiologist, Dr. Philip Varriale, is a favorite student. Vacchiano says Varriale could easily have had a major musical career, but that with all the risks involved, he's probably managed to have the best of both worlds- material comfort and excellent musical opportunities.

Once in awhile, a Juilliard student who could have pursued a major symphonic career opts for something

else. **Phyllis Stork**, who, in Vacchiano's estimation, could have played in the New York Philharmonic if there had been an opening, was tired of freelancing and late-night subway rides. She decided to go into a music related business with her husband. In Vacchiano's opinion, "She's got it. She's got a terrific husband, a great livelihood and a beautiful son. She's successful as far as I'm concerned. She can pick up that horn anytime she wants to and play. She doesn't have to depend upon playing for the public." He adds emphatically, "This is the way life should be. This, to me. Is happiness. When I feel bad I go down to the studio in my house, I pick up my horn and I'm in seventh heaven. That's what music should be like."

