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May 2008

# The Horn Call

The Horn Call

Journal of the  
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 International Horn Society

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# *The Horn Call*

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William Scharnberg, Editor

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*on the cover: tulips or two lips?*

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The International Horn Society recommends that HORN be recognized as the correct English label for our instrument.  
[From the Minutes of the First IHS General Meeting, June 15, 1971, Tallahassee, Florida, USA]

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# A Tribute to James Decker

by Paul Neuffer

James Decker has had a great adventure as one of America's premier horn players. For more than 50 years Jim was one of the top freelance musicians in Los Angeles, performing on countless movie soundtracks, TV shows, radio programs, and live concerts. He is also a master organizer, creating (with the help of some friends) several ensembles and founding music festivals which exist to this day. Wearing a charming smile to complement his friendly personality and his gift of gab (he loves telling a good story – and he has many), he possesses the tools he needed to negotiate his many ventures.

Whether he is organizing groups, performing with some of the world's great musicians, or creating an innovative teaching tool, Jim always brings the same passion, conviction, and professionalism to everything he does.

Jim was born on November 23, 1921 in Venice CA to Benjamin and Margaret Decker, the third of three children. Benjamin was a bowling alley manager and Jim worked for him as a pin-setter through school. Margaret was a singer who performed radio broadcasts with Inglewood Parks Concerts on Sunday nights, under the stage name Miss Maggie Soprano.

Before Jim's musical career had a chance to begin, an ominous situation occurred. "After a bout with measles, I had an infection in my [right] ear and had a radical mastoid operation when I was 9 years old. They had to take the entire inner ear out. It was a major operation – it was terrible. Of course I became deaf in that ear. Years later when I was at Columbia pictures [1950s], I heard about an operation that could restore the hearing in that ear. It turned out to be a nine-hour operation. The doctor was great. He attached the drum and stirrup to the bone. I developed about 35% hearing in that ear."

When Jim was in 11th grade, about 16 years old, the school orchestra director asked him to switch from cornet to horn, giving him an old Alexander that was sitting in the bin. Jim admits that he was "...mystified by the instrument. I would get to school at 7:00 AM and sit in the practice room for an hour trying to find middle c". To try to get some idea of how a horn should be played, he attended Long Beach Community Band concerts which at that time were led by Herbert L. Clarke. Jim recalls that Clarke would not face the band when conducting, but rather the audience, because the audience came to see him!

In 1939, Jim got his professional start as a member of Leopold Stokowski's National Youth Administration Orchestra, along with friends and future Los Angeles studio hornists, Richard Perissi and Gale Robinson – getting paid \$40 per week. He also gained valuable experience as a member of the Long Beach community orchestra and Peter Merembloom's youth orchestra.

Eventually Jim decided he needed a good teacher and went to the Hollywood Bowl to hear a Philharmonic concert. Afterward, he approached the Principal Hornist, the 26-year-old Jim



Stagliano. Lessons were given at Stagliano's home or at the Bowl after rehearsals for \$5 per lesson. "He was so relaxed at lessons that sometimes he would give lessons in his bathrobe – usually because he forgot he was supposed to be giving a lesson. He wouldn't yell at me but he would demonstrate and play along with me. I listened to every word he said and I tried to absorb everything. It was all mind-boggling to me how great he was – he really was a fantastic teacher."

Around this time Jim received a phone call from Gabriel Bartold, who had known him when they were both members of the Merembloom orchestra. Gabriel was first Trumpet in the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, DC and the orchestra had a horn vacancy. Jim hopped on a train to DC and, without an audition, signed a contract to play Assistant Principal Horn. After that season, as luck would have it, the second horn position in the Los Angeles Philharmonic opened and Principal Horn Al Brain asked Jim to fill the seat. Jim gladly accepted and again, without an audition, signed the contract. To be safe, newly appointed conductor Alfred Wallenstein asked Jim to "... play a few notes for me. So I did the [Mendelssohn] *Nocturne* or something, and that was it."

At around 1943, Al Brain became unhappy with conductor Wallenstein, so he returned to Fox studios at Alfred Newman's request and took Jim along with him as his second horn. Jim stayed there until, again, his friend Gabe Bartold called him, this time from Kansas City where he was Principal Trumpet. There was a Principal Horn vacancy and Gabe wanted Jim to come out to fill it. Jim needed permission to be released from



his contract at Fox, so he approached Alfred Newman and explained the situation. Newman in turn went to Fox studio head Darryl Zanuck who released Jim from his contract. So Jim and his wife Mary (now married 64 years) packed up and moved to Kansas City. They stayed there for only one season but Jim remembers it as being one of fine music-making. "One of the wonderful events – I can still see it now – Rubenstein doing the Rachmaninoff

Variations [*Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*]. When he got to [variation 18], I tell you, I just became mesmerized – I had chills running down my spine the way he played. I forgot to count measures and everything, it was so beautiful."

Returning to Los Angeles from Kansas City, Jim fell into another opportunity – Columbia studios was looking for a Principal Horn. He "auditioned" by recording a soundtrack for them and was offered the job. "They paid me over scale – Dave





Klein, who was Manny Klein's brother, was the big shot contractor in town at that time – he did all the radio shows and orchestra management things – knew what the other studios were paying their Principal Horn players. And every year I got another raise. I got to double scale within four years. He was a wonderful man – I never had to ask for it, he just gave it to me. I had some wonderful friends."

One of Jim's friends, former teacher Stagliano, gave him a very important job. "Otto Klemperer was going to conduct Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony, Stravinsky was going to conduct the *Firebird Suite*, and there would be a world premier of a cantata by Prokofiev – *Alexander Nevsky*. Stagliano didn't want to do it, so he asked me to play Principal Horn. So I went to rehearsal and Klemperer, who was a huge man – he was 6'6" you know, huge big arms – stood up to look around the orchestra, walked over to the contractor, Phil Kahgan, and said, 'Where's my Principal Horn?' Kahgan said, 'Oh, he couldn't make this concert. Give the boy a chance.' So he stood up to rehearse the Tchaikovsky 5th symphony and I gotta tell ya, I practically lost all my hair that week. I was absolutely scared to death. Shrine auditorium, big concert like this. Then Stravinsky came in to do the *Firebird Suite* – there are some moments in that thing ya know! I remember when he [Klemperer] stood up there to give me the upbeat [Jim makes a big swooping motion with his right arm] – picked me right up out of my chair! What can you do? You just play your heart out. But I remember at the beginning of that thing I said, 'I've worried enough, I'm not going to worry any more,' and I just relaxed the whole thing. I wasn't worried any more...phew, I can sense it now. From that point on I was Kahgan's main horn player. He hired me for all the Stravinsky and Bruno Walter dates."

Being a contracted studio musician, there were times of days or weeks without any work. To fill the free time, Jim, together with some friends, organized chamber groups and an orchestra to play through the standard repertoire. "Don Christlieb took care of the bassoons, Gleghorn took care of the flutes, Ralph Schafer took care of the fiddles, and I got an orchestra together...especially because I got Franz Waxman to conduct, and they all wanted to meet Franz Waxman, because he ran the jobs! Also, André Previn, John Green, Bernard Hermann, Stravinsky – in fact, we had the first reading of the Symphony for Winds." This orchestra eventually developed into the Glendale Symphony with the backing of Glendale Federal Savings and Loan owner, Joe Hoeft. Hoeft wanted to attract more attention to his small company and what better way to do so than by sponsoring a large symphony orchestra. Negotiations with Jim and Don Christlieb ensued and terms and conditions were, for the most part, agreed upon. The one sticking point was the conductor. Jim wanted to continue using Waxman, Hermann, and some of the other conductors that had led the orchestra in past events. Hoeft wanted a name that had more public recognition. An agreement was finally made and the Glendale Symphony opened its season at the Los Angeles Music Center under its leader, Carmen Dragon.

During this time, while contracted to a studio with the possibility of days or even weeks void of any work, several horn players expressed the desire to get together to read through horn music for their own enjoyment. "The L.A. Horn Club was

started through an idea from Wendell Hoss. We'd go up to his house to play quartets – he had a place in Glendale – Art Franz, Wendell, myself, and someone else. Art Franz said that we should have a regular thing set up so that a lot of the other guys could join in. So we started the Horn Club then – about 1951 or 1952. We started having meetings, an annual banquet, and Professor Schmutzig things – Wendell started that whole thing. We did a lot of concerts – Pomona College, Bakersfield, and Long Beach. At McNamara College, we were doing a concert for the nuns and Bob Myers, who was an A&R guy for Capitol Records, heard us and came backstage and said to us, 'We've had a lot of records sold for the French horn, and we wondered, if a record of one horn can sell that well, if a record of a group of horns would sell well too. Would you like to do a record for us?' We all said 'Yes!' and that's when we got in touch with Russ Garcia and David Raksin – Huntington Burdick made a lot of the other transcriptions we used, George Hyde wrote his *Color Contrasts*, so we put it together. "

The one dark spot on an otherwise fine career was the infamous strike during the mid 1950's. Then AFM president James Petrillo began battling with the larger unions, especially the Los Angeles local 47, as its members were particularly affected by his abuses of power. "Petrillo wanted to tax the studios that were making television shows. He wanted 5% of the gross cost of that picture to go into the trust fund. Not of the music budget, but of the whole budget. Everything started going overseas, so we had to go on strike. We thought that was gross negligence – he didn't ask us about it. So, Cecil Read started the Guild. Lloyd Ulyate, Vince [DeRosa], and Ted Nash were on the board – we started that Guild and 100 of us bolted from the union. And then they wanted to kick us all out. Fortunately, in the international trade, they could keep us from doing local things like concerts and things like that, but they couldn't keep us from doing things that were sold over state lines – radio stuff, records, and things like that. But the television stuff went overseas. Sinclair [Lott, longtime Los Angeles Philharmonic Principal Horn] was in the symphony, but he couldn't play in the symphony – the union board pulled him out. Bruno Walter was doing a concert and I got a call to play Principal Horn at the symphony and I said 'no way.' That strike lasted for nine months – and it taught all the movie producers to get their stuff done overseas." Many musicians were preparing for drastic career changes. "I took a technical writing course. Vince was planning to move to London. What else are you going to do? You couldn't work. "

After the strike ended, the studio contract days were also ending, and the freelance era began. After Jim's contract at Columbia expired, luck again pointed his way. "Bill Stinson, who was the head of Paramount Studios, called me to ask me to be first call for Paramount, paying me double scale. It would be a 'gentleman's agreement.' Any time they needed me to play a picture or TV show, I would guarantee that I would be available for them. Although it was a 'gentleman's agreement,' I could trust those guys."

While the work with Paramount supplied Jim with a steady income, the most rewarding work, that which Jim describes as "the highlight of my career" was still yet to come. RCA signed Erich Leinsdorf to do a set of recordings and Jim



was hired to sit 3rd in the section with Vince DeRosa 1st, Jack Cave 2nd, and Rich Perissi 4th. Leinsdorf loved the horn section and after completing the "Wagner highlights" recording session, offered Vince the job of Principal Horn of the Metropolitan opera. Then, Columbia records began a recording venture of historic proportions by signing Bruno Walter and Igor Stravinsky to recording contracts. Phil Kahgan was the contractor and hired Jim for most of these sessions, several of them as Principal Horn. Under Walter, Jim recorded all of the Beethoven symphonies (except No. 1) and was Principal Horn on Nos. 3 and 7. Also, Mahler No. 1 and 9 (Assistant); Bruckner No. 4 (second) No. 9 (Principal); Dvorak No. 9 (third); and Principal on several Mozart symphonies. "Bruno Walter was a very natural conductor. We did a Mozart symphony – I forgot which one – we finished the symphony and I was sitting in my chair thinking, 'Jeez, how could any piece be that beautiful?' It was just so beautiful. Then John McClure, the producer, said, 'Maestro' and Bruno Walter said, 'Yes?' McClure said, 'We can't fit that on the tape. We have to cut about a minute and half off of that. Can you do it a little faster?' I said jeez they're going to spoil the whole thing! Walter said 'OK.' And he did it and to this day I don't know where they got a minute and a half off of it because it was just the same, it was gorgeous again! Just as beautiful again! Some of those old timers like that are so genuine. He had so much respect for Bruckner. Bruckner was a very religious man. He had so much respect for him – but he never made speeches about it. You could tell the respect he had for him. After one of the Mahler dates – I think it was Mahler first – I was walking past him and he looked at me and he said, 'No conductor under the age of 60 should ever attempt Mahler.' You know why? Because it's so profound. After we recorded the 9th, we walked into the booth to listen to the playback – he was sitting in his chair – and all of a sudden he started crying. Bruno Walter started crying. John McClure chased us out and he said, 'Gentlemen, you have to be patient. This was at the point where the Nazis came into Vienna and were going to arrest him and put him in a prison camp. He had to escape out of the back, and he had to leave his family there.'"

For Stravinsky, Jim played Principal on *Firebird*, *Pulcinella*, *The Fairy's Kiss*, *Dumbarton Oaks*, Violin Concerto, Septet and the *Symphony in Three Movements*. "Stravinsky had a very natural beat. Most of the time he followed us. The last time we did the *Firebird Suite* [1967], at the end of the bassoon solo I was going to come in on the F#, he gave me the downbeat and I was looking for the second beat so I could play the third beat. He never gave the second beat and I was sitting on that F# and I was going to run out of breath so I moved and he followed me. That's the slowest *Adagio* you'll ever hear, but it isn't supposed to be that slow! I just about ran out of air to tell you the truth. And it's only that slow because he never gave me the second beat to put the third beat in there!! And [recording] the last movement of *The Fairy's Kiss*, we had 20 minutes to go in the session and John McClure, came out and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to be very quiet, we're going to record the rehearsal because we're running out of time.' So we recorded the rehearsal and he [McClure] came out and said, 'That's it folks. Go home.' I had never seen the piece before. At the end, the last note is a high E<sup>b</sup>. After we finished the thing, I looked

at Art [Briegleb] and said, 'I don't think I can do this again.' It took everything I had. Then he came out and said 'go home!' Phew!!" After Stravinsky died, Robert Craft, Stravinsky's long-time assistant, wrote a letter to bassoonist Don Christlieb, who had also performed with Jim on many of the Columbia recordings for Stravinsky. In it Craft wrote, "...do you realize that you, Jimmy, and Hugo [clarinetist, Hugo Raimondi] were the three most admired [by Stravinsky] musicians that Stravinsky ever worked with?"

After such significant work, whatever followed might be considered to be anticlimactic. But Jim did many commercial recordings with other famous and excellent musicians: Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Nelson Riddle, Henry Mancini – as well as touring Japan seven times with Percy Faith. He served as Principal Horn of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra under Sir Neville Marriner for many years. He performed the Brahms Trio with Jascha Heifetz and the Schubert Octet with Heifetz and Gregor Piatagorsky. Naturally, he performed on countless movie and television soundtracks. When pressed to recall some of the memorable scores that he recorded, Jim recounts *On the Waterfront* and *The Cowboy*. But beyond that, "...I get a list every year when we get the royalty checks and there are a couple thousand names of things, and I don't even remember half of the stuff." He also continued to teach at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara for many summers, as well as at the University of Southern California, where he had been on faculty since the early 1950s, finally retiring from there in the mid 1990s.

In the 1980s, Jim began a venture that continues to occupy his time to this day. "Gunther Sculler and I started IVASI as a means of making video tapes of the first [round] auditions for people to take orchestra auditions. We had engaged a lot of the orchestras to accept video tapes – a 25 minute video tape – of the first round so that people don't have to do all this traveling. The big orchestras accepted it – the Israel Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Saint Louis Symphony, L.A., and San Francisco. The little orchestras didn't want any part of it. So we had to abandon that." An attempt with audio tapes lead to another dead end. But it was the video technology that Jim knew would lead to some success, particularly with the advancement of DVDs. The latest version of IVASI that Jim and his son Doug have developed seems to have hit the mark. A conductor is filmed leading a recording of an orchestra in a performance of *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Don Juan*, *Ein Heldenleben* or one of many other standard orchestral works. Parts are supplied and the musician plays along with the DVD. The response has been excellent. "It's been very popular at the horn conventions. I had them waiting in line in Michigan. One group would play Mahler 1, then another group would come and another... You get a horn quartet together or a woodwind quintet and you'll always have a group to play with because once they try it, they love it." Even though the advertising has been mostly word of mouth, several universities and conservatories have purchased the DVD's for their student's to use as part of their training. Jim and Doug's future plans for IVASI are to add more repertoire as well as a less difficult version for younger students.

No article on Jim Decker would be complete without some of his great stories and memories of music and musicians. Here are just a few.



"I was at the Hollywood Bowl when my wife lost our first baby – he was stillborn – I was at rehearsal with Klemperer and I just had to get to the hospital to be with my wife. I told Klemperer and asked to be excused and he said, 'By all means son, by all means, you must go with her.' The concert was that night and when I got back, he asked me how everything was. He was very compassionate, very compassionate."

"Vince DeRosa has a concentration level better than anyone I've ever met, including concertmasters. He's got the greatest focus."

"I won a bet on circular breathing. Backstage in Washington DC, the guys were talking about some solo that couldn't be played in one breath. I said that I could play a tone more than a minute. They all said 'prove it,' and put in some money. I started playing and they didn't say anything about circular breathing that I learned from Mendez. After a minute and a half they all left. I tried it once in a Brahms symphony [#2], in concert, at the peak of the solo near the end of the first movement. Well, you can't do it when you're playing loud! I practically dropped an octave when I tried it!"

"In the Los Angeles Philharmonic, an Italian was the second trumpet player, he could hardly speak English and couldn't read English at all. We were doing a piece by William Grant Still that had a little solo for the second trumpet. So he looks at first Trumpet Vladimir Drucker and asks 'what does this say here?' Vlade says, 'oh, that you go to the front of the stage and play in the front of the stage.' Klemperer was conducting and the trumpet player walks to the front of the stage and starts playing this solo and Klemperer looks at him and says 'Vat is this?' The trumpet player tried to explain his part, but Klemperer said 'No, no, you go back!!'"

Jim often served as the welcoming committee for the horn sections of various touring orchestras including the Concertgebouw, Philadelphia, and New York orchestras. Perhaps the most memorable of these events was in 1960 when, in the middle of the cold war, the Moscow Symphony came to Los Angeles. With help from some friends, Jim was able to get permission for the members of the brass section to attend a party in their honor at his home. It was the only house in America that they were allowed to enter. At that time, Jim and his family lived in a 6,000 square foot castle-like house in the Hollywood Hills. "The whole horn section was there. I think they had seven horns and Polekh was the Principal Horn. And they brought Dokshizer [legendary Russian trumpet player Timofei Dokshizer] with them. He came up there and he stood up in the corner of that room – it was a big living room, 33 feet by 18 foot ceiling and 14 foot wide – he stood up in the corner of that room and played a number that Prokofiev had written especially for him. Manny Klein was there and he said, 'jeez, we have never heard that kind of playing!!' He just filled up that room with this absolutely superb playing. We weren't allowed to talk to any of the horn players except the Principal Horn player, in this case Polekh, who was a registered communist party member. Constantin Bakalnikov was a conductor at RKO studios and he was saving a case of Russian vodka just for this kind of occasion – had been saving it for years. There was a guy that was sitting in the trombone section that was an agent [KGB]. He wasn't a trombone player but he held a trombone.

He was the one that was organizing all the salutes and all that stuff. They didn't want to use regular shot glasses, they wanted to use eight-ounce water glasses for the vodka! And they started drinking that stuff and there was no tomorrow!! Then they wanted to dance with the girls. They thought the girls were hostesses for them. These were wives of L.A. horn players. They thought that this was a state-owned house too. We had to take them up to the top floor to show them the kids sleeping in their rooms to prove it was my home."

"Stagliano was a good friend of Thomas Beecham. Beecham opened the season at the Hollywood bowl one year. The next morning at the rehearsal, after the opening concert, all of a sudden there was a siren coming up the road. It got louder and louder and it came around the back and onto the stage – the stage hands were involved in the thing – so they opened the stage doors and this motor cycle cop with a red light comes right on the stage and parks right by Beecham, the siren blaring. Beecham looks around like 'what's all this' and stops conducting and asks 'What is it?!' The policeman said sternly, 'Your name Beecham?' Beecham asks worriedly, 'What is it, officer?' The policeman pulls out a ticket log and begins writing a citation, then says, 'Star Spangled Banner – too fast last night!' Beecham looked right over at Stagliano and laughed."

"He [Stagliano] pulled a gag on Jack Kirksmith who was playing an Alexander horn on which the high E<sup>b</sup> was a really dangerous note. Stagliano had the librarian put the *Queen Mab Scherzo* on his stand at the beginning of the season when they were passing out parts for the year. Jack saw this part and oh my God, started practicing it. It got worse and worse. The next day, practicing it again, worse and worse. About three weeks later he could hardly play it at all. So he went up to the conductor, Stokowski was the leader then, and asked, 'When are you scheduling the *Queen Mab Scherzo*?' Stokowski replied, 'Oh no, we're not doing that this season.' We were all busting up laughing."

"You couldn't do three dates in a row today like you could in those days. Somebody asked me one time, 'What's a session player's schedule like?' I said, well yesterday in the morning I did a Bruno Walter date at Columbia records. In the afternoon I did a five-hour *Bonanza* with David Rose. That night, Vince and I went to Newport and did *Back to the Rendezvous* with Stan Kenton. That's kind of a normal day to do three dates. You can hardly do two dates now with all the traffic. You can't get from one place to another, it just takes you too long to get anywhere. Those days are gone."

"Alan Civil took Art Briegleb and me to the Savage Club with Ian Harper and Jim Brown. This club in London is just for the entertainment industry, just for performers – musicians, actors etc. – he took us there for a drink – I was the oldest one of the bunch and I'm the only one left."



*Paul Neuffer is a freelance hornist in central California. He graduated from USC, where he studied with Vince DeRosa and attended weekly master classes with Jim Decker.*