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The Horn Call

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# The Horn Call



# *The Horn Call*

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William Scharnberg, Editor

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*On the cover: The composer of a new Horn Concerto (see pp. 83-87) – Elliott Carter (born December 11, 1908)*

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[From the Minutes of the First IHS General Meeting, June 15, 1971, Tallahassee, Florida, USA]

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# An Interview with Richard Perissi

by Paul Neuffer

**O**f the many great Los Angeles freelance horn players of years past, Richard Perissi may not be the most well known, but he is certainly one of the most heard. In a career spanning more than 50 years, Rich has performed on countless movie, television, and commercial recordings with many of the best composers in Hollywood as well as with several of the world's great musicians. He was also very popular as a concert artist, performing on many live radio broadcasts as well as with several chamber and orchestral groups. Rich played with a huge sound, the envy of all who heard it, full of depth and warmth, much like himself. In fact, he had such a huge sound that there was a saying among Los Angeles horn players: if you were doing a job with him, sitting to his right, then you wouldn't hear yourself all day. Having an adventurous spirit, Rich enjoyed hunting, fishing, golfing (which he enjoyed on an almost daily basis), and, as a young man, racing. He is admired by his friends and colleagues for his easy going, friendly, jovial nature (he is always ready for a good laugh) as well as his kindness and sensitivity.

In the early 1900s, Odolindo Perissi immigrated to the United States from Orvieto, Italy, a little town outside of Rome. While playing horn in a pit orchestra in Indianapolis, he met and fell in love with Alice Doll. She was performing the leading soprano role in an opera they were working in. After marrying, they moved to Los Angeles where Odo took a job as fourth horn in the Philharmonic, a position he would hold until his death at 75. Rich was born July 2, 1921, the third of four children. He grew up in a huge 25 room house with his mother and father, maternal grandmother, two maternal uncles, three siblings and the occasional renter. In a house filled with Alice's family, Odo would at times feel a bit outnumbered, particularly if there were an argument brewing. At those times, says Rich, "I would take my dad's side. He was always outnumbered and needed someone to back him up."

As a little boy, around six or seven years old, Rich would "...go up to a horn that was sitting on a chair or sofa, put my lips on it and try to play it. Dad would say 'pucker and spit.'" More formal



training would begin later with his father. "Dad started teaching me when I was about 11 or 12. But he didn't want me to play horn because I didn't take it seriously. He taught me until I was about 14." Then Rich became acquainted with a teacher who seemed to know how to get him to sit down and practice. "William Pierce was a local music teacher who rented a room on the third floor of our house. When I would get home from school, I just wanted to throw my books on the floor and go outside and play. Well, Pierce would quietly be waiting for me. I'd get home and just as I was about ready to take off, he'd say, 'Richie, before you go out, would you mind playing this for me?' (usually something out of the Arban book) I'd just like to hear you do it. So, I'd sit down and get my horn out and play whatever it was. Then I'd play more and more until I actually got in a good day's practice. I credit him for keeping me on track and for much

of my early, young development."

After a couple of good years with Pierce, Odo felt that Rich was ready for lessons with the Los Angeles Philharmonic principal horn, Jim Stagliano. "Stagliano was amazing – he could play anything. He could pick up the horn, cold, and play even the most difficult things easily. I couldn't figure out how he could do what he did. I'd ask him, 'How do you do that?' He'd say, 'Rich, it's a lot easier than you think. It's all in your mental approach.' He played with this puckered embouchure that made it look like he was never using any pressure. He could whisper in on entrances, like the opening of *Oberon*."

Rich studied with Stagliano for about two years. Later, he would take some lessons with the other top horn player in Los Angeles at that time: "I'd go to Al Brain's house to go with him to Fox for a studio job. He'd be out back, pushing a plow on his property. He was a very strong man. Then he would come in from the field and clean up before going to work. I'd play for him while he was getting ready and he would just say, 'That's fine laddie' – everyone was always laddie to him – 'If you play that way laddie, you'll be fine.' He was a very strong player. He never wanted, or needed, an assistant. Sometimes he would even tell the section to lay back if necessary, and he would carry the load. He had a sound that could really carry and sitting out in the audience, listening to him – every note was a pearl. He always had very clear entrances, even when playing soft."

Practicing had now become a more serious endeavor for Rich, and he would even get together with some friends to practice. "I'd go over to Vince DeRosa's house – because I had a car – and we would practice for a couple of hours, then eat some lunch that Vince's mom had made. Then we would practice for a couple more hours. We were always trying to get as







deep a sound as we could. We liked that Anton Horner school, the sound that Jim Chambers and Mason Jones were getting. We didn't like that 'surface' type of sound; guys getting just the surface of the notes. We wanted a deep, full, beautiful sound, and we were always pushing ourselves to achieve that."

It wasn't always all work and no play for the two boyhood friends. "On Friday or Saturday nights, we would drive out to the San Fernando Valley, which was nothing at that time – just pastures, fields, orchards. Several of us would meet for what we called 'Hare and Hound' races. A car with about 20 to 30 sacks of flour would lead off. He would get about a minute head start, then the rest of us would take off. When we would get to the flour sack, we wouldn't know whether to turn left or right, we just had to guess. The next sack would be about 100 yards away and we would keep racing until we got to the lead car. On one of these races, Vince was with me, sitting in the passenger seat. We were going down White Oak when there were these dips and hills, then a raised railroad track. We were going so fast that when we went over the railroad tracks, the car became airborne. I glanced over at Vince real quick, to see if he was OK, and he was laying on the floor, scared to death!!"

Now in his late teens, Rich's professional career was well under way. He was working in several different orchestras and chamber groups and was doing many recording sessions for both movies and commercial records. When WWII broke out, Rich voluntarily enlisted in the Air Force. He was given the rank of Sergeant and his goal was to become a pilot. Rich had been an asthmatic since he was a young boy, a malady that would nag him his whole life. During his Air Force service, his asthma became very serious, so serious in fact, that his attacks started to take a toll on his health, and the Air Force discharged him.

Upon returning to Los Angeles and civilian life, Al Brain contacted Rich. Al wanted him to fill the third horn vacancy in the Philharmonic. His asthma was much better, but Rich had not played horn for a year and a half and expressed his apprehension to Brain. "Al just said, 'You'll be fine laddie' I didn't even audition. I just signed a contract."

Rich was now sitting next to his father, in a situation he surprisingly describes as tough. Odo was highly respected by his friends and colleagues as being a very learned musician, knowing scores and parts as well as, if not better, than some conductors. He took great pride in knowing his own part thoroughly and executing it to the best of his abilities. In short, he took his job seriously and hated making mistakes. Rich recalls an incident between Odo and a very famous Eastern European conductor, known for his ruthless treatment of members of the orchestra: "The conductor had brought his own parts which he had copied and edited himself. At one point in Odo's part, he played a note that had a sharp written before it, which did not fit in with the chord being played. Odo tried to question the conductor in his heavily Italian-accented English. The conductor responded in his heavily Eastern European accented English. Unfortunately, neither one of them could understand the other. Since the two were unable to communicate from a distance, Odo took matters into his own hands. Dad got up and with his horn in one hand and music in the other, walked through the orchestra and right up to the conductor.

'Ees thees-a your-a part-a?' he asked. The conductor replied 'I write thees part.' Pointing to the music, dad said, 'You no-a need-a thees-a sharp. We play-a thees-a note-a sharp.' (The part was in E horn). The conductor said, 'I write out theese part. I puut een theese sharp.' Dad was getting mad. He said again, 'We no-a need-a thees-a sharp. We play-a eet-a sharp-a.' The conductor declared firmly, 'I write theese part. You play theese part.' Dad spun around to walk back to his chair, but before he did, he said, loudly, 'Stupid-o!'"

Rich did not have the serious nature to the same degree as his father. "I had a bit lighter attitude and gravitated toward the guys in the orchestra who had similar attitudes. Vladimir Drucker [principal trumpet], Scamparino [second trumpet] and a couple of the trombone players. Still, working and sitting next to each other for the next two years gave the pair much enjoyment as well as some fond memories. We were doing a symphony that had a very long rest. I lost count, so I leaned over to dad and asked him what the count was. Dad always counted in Italian, so he had to translate the count to English for me. By the time he figured out what the translation was, he had lost count too, and we were both lost!"

In 1948, Paramount studios hired Rich as its principal horn, a position he would keep until 1954. A couple of his favorite movies that he worked on are, *Shane* and *A Place in the Sun*.

"We had good writers and every so often we'd get a score that we would really have our work cut out. But nothing like what Vince had to do at MGM. They were always writing hard stuff for him, all the time. I don't think he ever had an easy day." Rich has done so many soundtracks in his career, that he has lost memory of most of them. "I got a residual check last week and they listed all of the movies on these sheets of paper with the check. There were pages and pages of names of things. There must have been at least six hundred names. I had no idea." [Some of the more well known soundtracks Rich has worked on are: *Magnificent Seven*, *How the West was Won*, *E.T.*, *Star Trek*, *Star Trek II*, *Rocky*, and *Silverado*.]

A question many people ask is why the Conn 8D was so popular in Los Angeles. "Vince started the interest in the 8D. After we heard some of the big time East coast guys playing on them, Vince got hold of one. It was such a good horn. The evenness of tones, intonation, no missing notes or bad notes. And it had that beautiful sound that we liked and wanted. So Vince started showing it around to guys. They liked it and word just spread. My favorite was the H series. The one I played on *Silverado* was the best horn I ever played in my life. Before that, at Paramount, I played on a Horner model Kruspe. It was a great horn – I liked it a lot. But the 8D was more even throughout the horn."

When Rich's contract with Paramount neared expiring, his negotiations with them for a renewal ended unhappily. "I wanted a raise. Not a lot, but what I thought I deserved. They wouldn't budge, wouldn't pay me a dime more. So, I told them I was going to freelance. They thought I was making a big mistake, told me I wouldn't make any money, and that I'd be back in a year asking for my old job back. Well, I showed them. I made almost ten thousand dollars more that year than what they were going to pay me!"



Meanwhile, a serious problem had developed with Odo – he had cancer. Fighting the disease was taking its toll on him and he asked Rich for help. “I’d fill in [at the Philharmonic] for dad whenever he wasn’t feeling well or needed some rest.” As Odo’s condition worsened, Rich filled in for him more and more, until Odo passed away. “After dad died, the Philharmonic sent me a nice letter, thanking me for all of the time I put in subbing for dad and helping them out.”

As influential as Odo had been in Rich’s life, Alice made important contributions, in her way. “I never gave her enough credit, didn’t realize how great a singer she was until I heard her sing in church one Sunday. I was about 17 and we were all sitting [in the pews] and she had a solo. She had this absolutely beautiful tone and sang so beautifully. I thought, ‘What have I been missing all this time?’ I was so dumb. That really opened up my eyes. She was just as good as anyone in the [music] business. She could have had a brilliant career, but she gave it all up for us.”

For the next 30 years, Rich would be one of the busiest and most requested horn players in Los Angeles. The list of conductors, musicians, and composers he worked with reads like a musicians’ who’s who encyclopedia: Bruno Walter, Leopold Stokowski, Otto Klemperer, Arturo Toscanini, Erich Leinsdorf, Zubin Mehta, Franz Waxman, Alfred Newman, Victor Young, Dimitri Tiomkin, Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams, Bill Conti, David Raksin, Bernard Herrmann, Henry Mancini, David Rose, Nathan Scott, Nelson Riddle, Bruce Broughton, James Horner, Stan Kenton, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis, Mel Tormé, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Zappa, Tower of Power, to name only a few. He was one of the original members of the Los Angeles Horn Club, performing on both of their albums. For many years he was a member of the Academy Awards orchestra.

Having done so much work for so many years has given Rich some memorable stories. Doing a session with composer Bill Conti, Rich recalls, “When I was doing *Rocky*, we had finished a cue and everyone got up and started leaving to go on break. I was thinking, ‘Hey, where’s everybody going?’ I was still sitting in my chair because I still had another piece on my stand to play. I decided to get up and go on break too and Conti said, ‘No, not you Rich.’ I had to stay and record this cue for solo horn all by myself.” Working for some composers though, such as John Williams, could make for a long day. Williams has a reputation for writing very difficult and demanding parts and doing many complete takes of each cue. Recalling what it was like to do a Williams session, “... you knew it was going to be a bloodbath. But Vince actually looked forward to it. He saw it as a challenge. And when running around trying to get to all of his jobs: One time Sinc [Sinclair Lott] and I were on our way to Santa Monica to play the *Fidelio* Overture for a live radio broadcast and we were late. We arrived just as the conductor was walking on stage. We ran on stage and got in our chairs just in time to play the duet.”

In 1985, as Rich was nearing retirement, he worked on a soundtrack that would become one of the hallmarks of his career. “When we did *Silverado*, Bruce Broughton called us the day before just to let us know that he had written some big parts for us and that we had our work cut out for ourselves.

When we got to the session the next day, Henry [Sigismonti] was supposed to play first and I was supposed to be on second. Henry wasn’t feeling well and didn’t know if he should stay for the session. I told him that we had worked before not feeling well and that he should give it a try, but Henry was really not feeling well. So he went up to Broughton and excused himself from the session. We had to figure out what to do, and fast. So Dave Duke, who was going to sit third, and I, went up and talked to Bruce and decided that I would sit first. The rest is movie history. The film was a box-office hit and Broughton’s soundtrack was nominated for an Academy Award. After the sessions were completed, the orchestra showed its appreciation to Broughton by giving him a standing ovation, a very rare occurrence in the Hollywood studios.”

Since retiring, Rich has enjoyed his free time with his wife Anita (“my little butterfly”) as well as watching his children succeed in their lives. But what really gets Rich up and out of bed every day is his real love – golf. “I get up and hit a bucket of balls, play 18 holes – if I can’t get 18 in then I try for 9. I can’t wait to get out on the course.” Which is convenient, since Rich and Anita’s house is right next to his country club.

Drawing from his own past experiences, Rich has some words of wisdom for young horn players about adversity and perseverance: “I failed a lot in my career. I once did a live radio broadcast of the Bach *B Minor Mass* with the Roger Wagner chorale. During my solo [*Quoniam*] I got lost. I managed to get back on, but when I got home, dad was waiting for me at the door, wanting to know what happened. Another time...I got fired off of a job at Fox. Al Brain was a real cut-up. He knew all these naughty limericks and lyrics to sing along with the standard repertoire, stuff they would do in England. Well, there were two rows of horns and I was sitting first in the second row, right behind Brain. He turned around and told a joke to the section and we all busted up, laughing. Alfred Newman was the leader that day and he was a serious person. He saw and heard us laughing and didn’t like it and yelled, ‘This is not a circus!’ The next day, all four of us in the back row were fired.” Finally, “We’ve all had times when we lay on our beds, staring at the ceiling, wondering what we’re doing. But the next day comes and you pull yourself together and try again.”

When asked by aspiring young hornists how to be a studio horn player: “Be prepared for the worst day of your life on the horn. The demands are so high and you never know what they’re going to throw at you. If it isn’t, then you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

*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. He would like to thank the many who gave their time and encouragement with this article, including Nathan Campbell, Ilene Chanon, Mark Kobayashi, Brian Smith, Diane Honda, Bill Trimble, the horn sections of the Modesto and Stockton Symphonies, the Perissi family, and the Neuffer family.*

