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Mark McFarland

James Thatcher began his professional career at the age of 16 in Mexico City and has since played with a variety of orchestras, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Utah Symphony, Phoenix Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Los Angeles Music Center Opera, and Pacific Symphony. He is currently principal horn with the Pasadena and New West Symphonies in southern California. He is best known for his work in the Hollywood studios, where he is the first-call horn player and a recipient of the "Most Valuable Player" award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS). Mr. Thatcher has worked with many of the current Hollywood composers and has played principal horn in a number of the Star Trek movies as well as in Forrest Gump, Independence Day, Dances with Wolves, Schindler's List, Jurassic Park, Hook, Field of Dreams, Titanic, and Toy Story I & II, to name but a few; he has even received on-screen credit for his playing in both Sleepers and Amistad. Mr. Thatcher took time recently to talk with one of his former students--currently Assistant Professor of horn at Southeastern Louisiana University--about topics ranging from the Hollywood horn sound to his recent solo recording Now Playing.

Mark McFarland: Do you come from a musical family?

James Thatcher: In fact, I do. My father taught choral music, my mother played the organ, my uncle Gerald Thatcher was a professional horn player and my first teacher. My aunt sang with the Seattle Opera, my brother is a professional bass trombonist, my brother-in-law builds classical organs and gives recitals, and my two sisters are singers.

MM: How did you begin your career as a horn player?

JT: My uncle Gerald was the principal hornist for the UNAM Orchestra in Mexico as well as the assistant conductor to Eduardo Mata. I began to play professionally in 1968 with this symphony, and after moving back to the United States I played with the symphonies in Salt Lake City, Phoenix, and Los Angeles, as well as a number of opera orchestras. I continued to study with a number of different teachers, including Vince De Rosa, Jim Decker, Fred Fox, Wendell Hoss, Tom Greer, and Don Peterson. I also played in a masterclass for Hermann Baumann in the early 1970s that was influential in my development as a player.

MM: When did you first begin to play studio horn?

JT: When I started working in Los Angeles I began to take lessons with Vince De Rosa, one of the top studio players at that time. He took notice of my playing and recommended me for jobs in the studio.

This was in the late 1970s, which was an unusual time in the studios since the demand for players exceeded the supply in the area. So I made the leap of faith from the steady paycheck of a full-time orchestra player to the uncertainty of a studio paycheck.

MM: What are some of the differences between orchestral and studio playing?

JT: Studio players tend to project their sound a little more quickly to a closely-placed microphone, while orchestral players use a tighter sound in order to project within a large auditorium. Studio players also have to play solos perfectly many times over. This is largely due to the director constantly changing the music for the film while it is being recording. I once had to play a horn solo over 20 times and the non-musical personnel--directors, producers, etc.--take a dim view of imperfection.

Studio players get the opportunity to play jazz, television, and, of course, great movie scores. I have been fortunate to work with artists as varied as Barbara Streisand, Frank Sinatra, and Arturo Sandoval, among others. On the other hand, studio players do not get the opportunity to play the classics all the time, which is why I do about 22 weeks of live orchestra work on top of my recording schedule.

MM: It sounds as though your schedule must be very full. Could you describe a typical work week?

JT: Sure. I'll use a "busy" week as an example to show all the different types of playing I am regularly asked to do. Monday through Friday: record a movie from 10 am until 6 pm. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday nights: orchestra rehearsal. Friday and Saturday nights: concerts. Certain weeks when I'm not doing movies every day, I might do a television show or else a "jingle" (advertisement for cars, pizza, insurance...whatever) or else a record date for someone (Sting, Yo Yo Ma, etc.). Movie calls frequently go on Saturdays and sometimes even Sundays, so my weekends are often full. I also get calls on Sunday nights from people all over the world for private lessons the following week, when they are in town. I usually take a week off from my regular routine, once a year, and do the Academy Awards show. There are also sometimes unusual concert weeks; this year's was with the singer Bjork.

MM: What composers are you most proud to have worked with in the studios?

JT: This is a loaded question since I have played in over 900 movies, and I'm bound to leave someone out I shouldn't. So, off the top of my head, I immediately think of the work I've done with John Williams, James Homer, Jerry Goldsmith, James Newton Howard, Alan Silvestri, Mark Isham, John Barry, David and Randy Newman, and Dave Grusin. The motion pictures and performances with Bill Conti for the Academy Awards Ceremony over the years also come to mind.

MM: It is well-known that Hollywood studio players prefer the 8D. Why is this?

JT: The 8D is the preferred, although not the exclusive, instrument in the studios. For example, in my section there are instruments by Paxman, Lawson, and Kruspe, as well as Conn. The 8D story centers around Vince De Rosa in the 1950s.

Vince and Jack Cave (principal horn at the MGM studios for over 40 years) were the top horn players in the studios. Jack played a silver B-flat Alexander given to him by his relative, Bruno Jaenicke, former

principal horn of the New York Symphony. Vince originally played a Schmidt horn and switched over to the 8D with the blessing of his teacher (Al Brain). Jack and Vince recorded extremely well together, and even though Jack played for the rest of his career on the Alex, Vince's playing on his 8D led others to adopt this instrument.

MM: Having heard you perform both woodwind quintets as well as the first part of the *Konzertstück* on your 8D, it seems that it is your instrument of choice regardless of the type of playing called for. Why do you prefer this model over all other horns?

JT: Well, back when you heard me playing these concerts almost twenty years ago, part of the reason involved finances! I have recently played the Brahms Horn Trio on a Kruspe and I play the Mozart concerti and Bach's B minor Mass on my single B-flat Alexander. I also own a 12D and a rose-brass 8D. However, my main instrument is an Elkhart 8D. I prefer the 8D since every instrument is designed to produce a certain sound, and when the 8D is played correctly, it matches my concept of the instrument's tone: a big, dark sound with plenty of overtones that reach the microphone quickly. In addition, I can get a concert hall-like sound on an 8D in very difficult circumstances. For example, when we were recording the main title to the television show *Dallas*, I was placed two feet away from a cotton baffle! This was obviously not an ideal situation, and the baffling would have likely swallowed the sound of other horns, but I was able to make my 8D heard that day.

I don't feel that everyone who plays an 8D plays it correctly: some try to make it sound bigger than it needs to be. Conversely, there are small-bore horn players who, in my estimation, over-emphasize the tightness of their sound. When an instrument is played correctly, when the player can reach the center of the sound--regardless of the instrument--the results are always superior. An obvious example is Dennis Brain, who played on a very small horn but had a free and open sound. I also admire the playing of Roland Pandolfi, former principal hornist of the St. Louis Symphony, whom I hear does not use a large instrument but who produces a wonderful, singing sound.

MM: You just mentioned the ideas of "playing correctly" and "reaching the center of the sound." I remember from our lessons that your basic philosophy of playing centers around the player's use of air. Where did you learn this philosophy?

JT: Vince De Rosa taught me that the embouchure should be thought of as a device to hold a column of air. This emphasis on the air column rather than the lips helps to avoid over-tightening the facial muscles. Instead of thinking about what to do with the embouchure, we should think about the proper use of air, which will assist in the proper use of the embouchure. This approach is also very helpful under pressure situations, when taking a few deep breaths can also help to calm the nerves.

MM: On your recording *Now Playing* you include the Bach Partita in B-flat for keyboard, something that Vince De Rosa recorded in the 1960s with Laurindo Almeida. Yet while Vince recorded it at concert pitch, you record it at written pitch.

JT: Yes, I included the Partita in homage to Mr. De Rosa. His recording featured his middle and low registers, and he did a fabulous job playing this work. For me, however, recording this work at written pitch gave me an opportunity to explore the upper register of the horn a bit more.

MM: How did you choose the other selections that appear on *Now Playing*?

JT: This recording came about through an invitation from Nicholas Smith at Wichita State University,

who wrote me and said I should make a recording before it was too late! I knew I wanted to record the Bach, but hadn't really decided on anything else. When I got to Wichita, I happened to have a few Verne Reynolds etudes handy, and that is how they made it onto the recording. I also recorded some of the Brahms works that Mr. Reynolds had arranged for two horns and piano in order to further honor him. The very capable Amy Jo Rhine, who was horn professor at Wichita State at the time, plays with me on these works. I was also very impressed with Wichita State composer Walter Mays' *Dialogues for Horn and Piano*, which uses extended techniques like quarter tones in a very musical way. I included this work both to feature Walter Mays and to thank Wichita State University for their support with the recording of *Now Playing*.

MM: I have listened to *Now Playing* countless times and

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haven't heard as much as a chipped note, which is typical of your playing. Could you describe its recording process?

JT: Listen more carefully and you'll hear things I wish I could have done better! I played through every repeated section about three times, and we were generally able to use one of those takes for the master recording.

MM: Can we expect more solo recordings from you in the future?

JT: I plan to record both of the Strauss concertos with an orchestra of studio players. I am also planning a recording featuring works by composers with whom I am friends. This would include Hollywood composers and a new piece by Mr. Reynolds, as well as new works by composers I met in England while playing as an invited guest at the 2000 British Horn Festival. While I was in England, I also became friends with Tim Jones, co-principal horn of the London Symphony and co-owner of Paxman Musical Instruments. The Paxman shop recently sent me a prototype of their "West Coast" model horn, which will be built to my specifications. It will use some of the new technology that Paxman has introduced, such as the titanium valve, although it will have a weightier sound.

MM: To end this interview, I would like to ask how you got your nickname "Thatchmo?"

JT: Oh, you know about that! This was given to me by Gary Lux, one of the sound engineers in Hollywood who--like our president--likes to give everyone a nickname. He started calling me Thatchmo--referring to Louis Armstrong, also known as Satchmo--whenever we worked together. The other studio musicians started using the name as well, and I've been stuck with it ever since.

Mark McFarland is Assistant Professor of Horn and Music Theory at Southeastern Louisiana University. He received his BA from Chapman University and his MA and PhD in Music Theory from the University of California at Santa Barbara. He also studied at the Université François-Rabelais de Tours. As a horn player, Dr. McFarland studied with Jim Thatcher and his performance credits include the Pacific Symphony and the Baton Rouge Symphony as well as numerous civic and university ensembles. He can also be heard on the upcoming Centaur compact disc of chamber works by Robert Muczynski. Dr. McFarland has presented papers across the country and in Europe, and has published articles and reviews in The International Journal of Musicology, Cahiers Debussy, Theoria, and the

International Trumpet Guild Journal. *Prior to his arrival at SLU in 1999, Dr. McFarland taught at the University of North Texas, the University of Texas at El Paso, California State University at Long Beach, and the University of California at Santa Barbara.*

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