THE BASSOON PEDAGOGY AND PUBLICATIONS OF SIMON KOVAR

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Musical Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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2007

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ABSTRACT

Simon Kovar was one of the principal bassoon pedagogues in the United States between 1923 and 1957. Born in 1890 in Vilna, Russia, he attended the St. Petersburg Conservatory to study violin with Leopold Auer. At Alexandre Glazunov’s suggestion, due to the Bolshevik Revolution and the onset of World War I, Kovar switched to bassoon. He emigrated to the United States in 1922, where he became a member of the New York Philharmonic from 1923 to 1949. Kovar then devoted his time to teaching at a number of prominent colleges and universities. In 1948 he began editing music for the International Music Company in order to make the music he taught more readily available and to avoid spending valuable lesson time changing the music. When Kovar retired from his teaching positions in 1957, he and his family moved to Encino, California, where he lived until his death in 1970.
I would like to thank the following people for their help with this project:

Bernard Garfield
Harrington E. Crissey, Jr.
Dr. David Frego
Alan Goodman
Katherine Borst Jones
Benjamin Kamins
Joshua Kovar
Leo Kovar
Margarita Mazo
Richard Meek
Ludmila Milchakova (St. Petersburg Conservatory)
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Simon Kovar was born in Vilna, Russia (presently Latvia), on May 22, 1890, and died in Encino, California on January 17, 1970. Although the details of his childhood are not clear, it is understood that his family faced a number of challenges. Both of his brothers were forced to enter the military. Kovar did not finish his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory because of an attempt to defect. When he did this he was captured and sent to Riga, Latvia to play bassoon in the People’s Opera Orchestra.

From there Kovar was able to come to the United States, although it is not known how he left Latvia. In the United States he joined the New York Philharmonic and worked at a number of prominent schools. He found his passion for teaching bassoon. In 1948 he began editing for the International Music Publishing Company in order to make many etudes and solos more readily available. Kovar developed a national reputation as a bassoon pedagogue who was willing to teach students of all ages and abilities. Unlike other teachers of his time he felt as though he should teach all bassoonists, including very young students and New York’s doublets.
These doublers were musicians who played multiple instruments for Broadway shows. Many teachers at the time did not feel as though Broadway musicians were as serious orchestral performers. From 1923 until 1957 he gained the reputation as one of the most prominent bassoon teachers in the United States.

As of today little research has been done, this document explores the life and teaching of Simon Kovar. Mr. Kovar’s teaching is at the foundation of bassoon pedagogy in the United States. A few of his students remain alive and active, thus the interviews reveal important information which would otherwise be lost.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Prior to this study there had been limited research done about Simon Kovar. To find the material about his teaching style former students were contacted and interviews were set up by phone, email, or letters. The information about his life was found through talking to family members, students, and through published biographies.

Before contacting former students, the project was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at The Ohio State University, and based on the material being obtained, they determined that an exemption was appropriate.¹

Once the exemption was approved, biographies and literature were reviewed in order to determine who Kovar’s students were and which ones were available for interviews. A letter was then sent out to nine of his students, requesting permission to contact them for an interview about Simon Kovar. Six of them responded, each of whom agreed to participate in an interview. The interview questions focused on Kovar’s teaching but many of the former students spoke of him as a friend and mentor that influenced their career (see Appendix G for a list of the interview questions).

Determining the history of his life presented many challenges, and much of the

¹ A category 2 exemption was received which states that the research would be done using educational materials, interviews, and survey procedures.
information was obtained through an interview with his nephew, Leo Kovar. An interview request was obtained from him but the questions asked focused around Kovar’s life instead of his teaching. Kovar’s daughter, Leah Herzberg was contacted for an interview but there was no response received from her, therefore additional material could not be obtained regarding his life in Russia. The St. Petersburg Conservatory and Kovar’s family verified the information received from his students and nephew regarding his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory (See Appendix E).
Simon Kovar was the youngest of three brothers and the first of his family to enter a college or university. He chose to attend the St. Petersburg Conservatory to study with violinist Leopold Auer, but in 1914 the start of World War I quickly changed his life. Alexandre Glazunov, who at the time was a professor at the conservatory, spoke with Kovar and Auer’s other violin students to inform them that if they continued to study violin they could be drafted and sent to the infantry. Glazunov encouraged them to switch to a wind instrument so that they could play with the military bands. For this reason, at the age of 24, Kovar took Glazunov’s advice and began studying bassoon at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. According to the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Kovar studied bassoon with Ernest Kotte, who taught German bassoon at the conservatory until 1927.\footnote{Ludmila Milchakova, St. Petersburg Conservatory, email corresponce with Harrington E. Crissey, Jr., 15 December 2006.} Kotte was a first level professor at the conservatory and in 1927 was awarded the name of the Honored Artist of the Soviet Union. Kovar would later tell students that Glazunov threatened to charge the teacher with treason if he did not agree to teach Auer’s
students.\(^3\) The St. Petersburg Conservatory has no remaining records of Kovar’s graduation or the instrument he studied.\(^4\) This may indicate that he did not complete his studies.

Kovar attempted to escape Russia because of the problems that his family had already faced with the military. His oldest brother had been living in the United States and went back to Russia to see his parents. When the brother did this, Russia refused to recognize his American citizenship and forced him to enter the military. The middle brother of the Kovar family, was also sent to the military but succeeded in escaping. After he escaped he went to look for Simon Kovar. When his brother located Kovar, he was playing bassoon in the People’s Opera Orchestra in Riga, Latvia. He helped his brother avoid the military police by allowing him to carry around an empty bassoon case. This allowed him to pretend he was in the orchestra and be with Simon.

In the People’s Opera Orchestra in Riga, Kovar met his wife Rose. During his time in the orchestra Kovar continued to develop his technique on the instrument. He also had his first student, the janitor of the opera house. Kovar would eventually lose his job because when that student began to master the instrument he told the music director that since he was Latvian that he should be the one playing in the orchestra.\(^5\)

The circumstances are not known, but it was probably that situation, which caused Simon to leave Latvia, and emigrate to the United States. In 1922 Kovar and his wife, Rose came to New York City where he worked with the New York Philharmonic from

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\(^4\) Ludmila Milchakova, St. Petersburg Conservatory, email correspondence with Harrington E. Crissey, Jr., 15 December 2006.

\(^5\) Leo Kovar, interview by author, 12 December 2006, phone interview.
1923 until 1949 and taught bassoon at a number of prominent schools (See Appendix F). According to the interviews one can assume that the positions were part-time, and based around the orchestra’s schedule. During his time in New York, Simon and his wife had two daughters, Eleanor and Leah. Eleanor became a New York freelance bassoonist and Leah married the late bassoonist Norman Herzberg, who was a student of her father. When Kovar retired from the orchestra and his teaching positions in 1957, he and his family moved to Encino, California, where he remained for the rest of his life.
CHAPTER 4

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

In 1921 the New York Philharmonic had merged with the National Symphony Orchestra causing fifty musicians to lose their jobs, and the woodwind section to have two principal players throughout the first year. When the merger was finalized, new players found themselves holding significant positions in the orchestra.

The new members included: Guidi as concertmaster, Van Vliet as solo cellist, Fishberg as first violinist, Fortier as solo contrabassist, and Kohon as principal bassoon. The merger of the orchestras opened up an opportunity that Kovar could take advantage of when he came from Latvia to New York.

While there should have been two second bassoonists available for the position in the new orchestra, neither was able to play. It could not, however be determined why this happened.⁶

The circumstances around Kovar coming to the United States are not known but by 1922 he was living in New York City. One year after the New York Philharmonic/National Symphony merger, Benjamin Kohon received the title of principal bassoonist. It was shortly after this situation occurred in the orchestra, that the music

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⁶ Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
director became in dire need of a second bassoonist. Kohon heard about Kovar from New York freelance contractors. An audition was set up for Kovar in 1923, and even though he was not able to demonstrate an advanced technical facility on the instrument, he was able to show that he had an intuitive understanding of the music. Kohon convinced music director Willem Mengelberg that he had no choice but to hire Kovar due to the Philharmonic’s extreme situation.  

Kohon and Mengelberg agreed that Kohon would meet with Kovar on a weekly basis to review the repertoire and to help him obtain an acceptable instrument and reeds. In addition to playing under Mengelberg, he later worked under music directors: Artur Rodzinski, John Barbirolli, Bruno Walter, Leopold Stokowski, and Arturo Toscanini. Kovar’s final year with the Philharmonic was 1949 (the premiers that Kovar performed during some his time with the orchestra can be viewed in Appendix I).

The merger that caused many musicians to lose their job and many others to find new ones financially benefited the orchestra. It stopped the competition between the two orchestras for audience members, thus allowing them to expand the concert season.

During the year that Kovar joined the orchestra the principal conductor was Willem Mengelberg, who shared the position with many other conductors. The sharing of the podium allowed the orchestra to stay fresh by playing a variety of music. During the 1922/23 season the orchestra began to play new American compositions, the project was titled the “Greater Americanization of the Philharmonie”. The project was lead by

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7 Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
8 Richard Wandel New York Philharmonic archivist, interview by author, 18 October 2006, interview through email.
Henry Hadley, who was appointed Associate Conductor. His job was to review compositions submitted by American composers and then work with the orchestra to perform them throughout the season.

During Hadley’s time, the orchestra also began to show interest in educational concerts. The educational project began during the 1922/23 season and resulted in the orchestra performing a series of five concerts in the Great Hall of City College, five concerts in Carnegie Hall, five at Cooper Union, four at the Commercial High School in Brooklyn and a series of single concerts at the colleges of Princeton, Yale, Vassar, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and The University of Connecticut. At these concerts the orchestra director would present a lecture about the music in order to educate the audience. In 1924 Ernest Schelling successfully expanded these educational concerts into the New York Philharmonic’s Young People’s Concerts, which had great success. The orchestra expanded this education project again in 1926 when they agreed to participate with Ginn & Company, the Boston publisher, in order to combine recordings with a Music Appreciation Course that could be used by elementary and junior high schools.9

In 1929, Mengelberg began to share the podium with Arturo Toscanini and the two began to compete for control over the orchestra. In 1930 Toscanini became the orchestra’s principal conductor when the board members turned over the first European tour to him. Toscanini, because of his reputation, brought an increase of financial security to the orchestra. With Toscanini, however, the orchestra played less new music and more of the standard pieces that he knew very well.

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In 1935 Toscanini left the New York Philharmonic. Wilhelm Furtwängler was supposed to receive the job in 1936 but the politics within the orchestra interfered. After he accepted the position the press announced that he was also going to be the music director of the Berlin State Opera. While this information was inaccurate the public was still concerned about Furtwängler’s commitments, so the board decided to appoint John Barbirolli, a less well-known conductor to the position.10

From 1937 until 1941 John Barbirolli held the position as the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. During this time the orchestra again began to work to encourage young American composers to write for the orchestra. A competition was established for the composition of new works. The winners of the first year were Gardner Read, Quincy Porter, and Philip James.

Even though the orchestra began to encourage new music and young American composers the board members cut the budget of the orchestra. They had concern that without Toscanini’s popularity the size of the audience would decrease. For this reason during Barbirolli’s first season the budget was decreased by $191,000. After Barbirolli successfully held the post for a number of years and proved himself both to the public and the board the budget was restored to the amount it was with Toscanini. Both conductors were significant to the orchestra’s financial situation. During this time the

country was in a financial depression that limited the amount of money board members and audiences had for entertainment. The orchestra needed individuals that would attract audiences and support.\footnote{Howard Shanet, \textit{Philharmonic: A History of New York’s Orchestra} (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1975) 287 - 88.}

Around 1940 Barbirolli began to be eased out of the position as music director and Artur Rodzinski took over in the 1941/42 season. During this time the orchestra was not expanding or sure of how they should proceed. There were a total of eight different conductors during this season. In 1942 the orchestra board attempted to negotiate with Sergei Koussevitzky to bring him in as the next orchestra director, but failed to come to any agreement. Therefore, Rodzinski stayed on as music director. In 1943 he fired 14 players including the concertmaster. Rodzinski believed that the orchestra lacked leadership after Barbirolli left.

Rodzinski, who served from 1943 to 1947, brought new ideas to the orchestra. He introduced a new summer concert series that would broadcast on radio stations from coast to coast. The standard orchestral pieces of the time were featured on these concerts because that is what the public wanted to hear. In 1947 this series reached a climax when Rodzinski was able to take the orchestra on a tour of 17 states. On May 1, 1947, in an effort to gain audiences and financial security, the orchestra recorded music for the film, \textit{57}\textsuperscript{th} Street Rhapsody\footnote{Howard Shanet, \textit{Philharmonic: A History of New York’s Orchestra}, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1975), 304.}. 


The final results of Rodzinski’s term were increased orchestral discipline, strengthened repertory, the encouragement of young American conductors, and more financial security. Therefore it was of great surprise when Rodzinski suddenly resigned from the orchestra during the 1946/47 season\textsuperscript{13}.

The orchestra board worked quickly to find an appropriate replacement. In 1949 they placed Bruno Walter in the position of music director for the New York Philharmonic.

CHAPTER 5

PATH TO TEACHING

Simon Kovar began teaching through his work in the New York Philharmonic and his relationship with Benjamin Kohon. Kohon wanted to teach students that came to bassoon after playing the piano, and would only accept one student at a time. For that reason when Kohon received requests from students he passed them along to Kovar. Kovar’s first student in the United States was Sol Schoenbach who worked with him when he was in high school. Schoenbach later received a scholarship to the Juilliard School but would not accept it until they hired Kovar.

Over the years, in addition to the Juilliard School, Kovar also taught at: The Curtis Institute, Philadelphia (1939 – 1942), Manhattan School of Music (1936 – 1952), Academy of the West, Santa Barbara, California (1957 and possibly later), Teachers College of Columbia University, New York, The Conservatoire de Music de Montreal, and the Henry Street Settlement School, New York.\(^\text{14}\) He served on the faculties of these institutions during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, teaching a number of prominent bassoonists in the United States. Kovar taught students of all ages and a number of prominent New York “doublers” in his Manhattan apartment.

In 1948 he began a relationship with International Music Publishing Company as an editor. It could not be determined if Kovar submitted material to International or was invited to edit, but his editions helped to make much of the bassoon repertoire more readily available in the United States. He worked with the company to publish a significant amount of music that was previously only available in Europe. European editions were both expensive and difficult to obtain. Appendix A is a list of the publication history of the works he edited and Appendix B is a timeline of these editions.
KOVAR’S APPROACH TO TEACHING

Kovar taught students from all over the northeast, generally on a weekly basis, or when the student was available. He based his teaching on the student’s immediate needs. He would periodically seek out his students to check on their progress during the middle of the week. For example, at Music Academy of the West he would find a student taking a break and stop him, saying, with his characteristic Russian accent, “Keed, go get your bassoon and let’s see how you’re doing.”15 The students of Simon Kovar included many prominent musicians, including: Mark Popkin, Alan Goodman, Bernard Garfield, Ray Pizzi, Stephen Maxym, Sol Schoenbach, Richard Plaster, Norman Herzberg, and Marvin Roth. They all reported that Kovar was a very important person in their lives and each had very fond memories to share. Kovar wanted his students to be the best players possible, so if necessary he spent extra time with them. He also assisted them in receiving scholarships for lessons.

15 Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
CHAPTER 7

THE STRUCTURE OF LESSONS

The length of lessons varied from one half hour to two hours. Some students did not have weekly lessons. His student Richard Plaster said that only those whose lessons were through a college curriculum would take regular weekly lessons. For example, he said, “When I [Richard Plaster] would show up he would say something like ‘your fall lesson?’ and afterwards ‘call when you’re ready.’ At the time during World War II, I was in the maritime service, training at Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn.”

Kovar understood that students’ preparation for their lessons might be uneven. Many were seeking non-music degrees, were doublers playing in New York City shows, or in the military. He knew that these students had additional responsibilities that would not always allow them to have a significant amount of practice time.

Kovar believed that it was important for students to hear each other, so he organized both private lessons and master classes. In the master class he would put the chairs in a circle and have one student sit in the middle to play. When he taught private lessons he would create a similar situation by scheduling the lessons so that each student

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16 Richard Plaster, interview by author, 4 November 2006, interview through email.
could hear the others. Having students listen to one another was productive because each person was learning the standard material and even if they did not know it at the time, they were learning how to teach.

The focus of each lesson was always based on an individual student’s needs. If a student was struggling with the execution of a specific interval, then the focus would be placed on a measure from the Kovar’s *24 Daily Studies*. He would spend as much time needed to help the student, not worrying about the rest of the assignment. He would change fingerings as needed and address the technical aspects of playing, but the focus always came back to the fundamentals of playing the instrument: intonation, tone quality, and musical line. Alan Goodman stated “no matter what level a player was, Kovar always brought him back to the basics, the fundamental aspects of playing that haunt a person when he wins an orchestral position.”

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\[17\] Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
CHAPTER 8

TEACHING CONCEPTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO LEOPOLD AUER

Kovar did not teach bassoon extensively until coming to the United States. While Kovar studied bassoon in Russia with Kotte, he had also studied the violin with Leopold Auer. It seems that many of the concepts that Kovar emphasized in his teaching were the same ones that were important to Auer. A number of similarities can be identified between Auer’s book *Violin Playing As I Teach It* and the lessons Kovar taught. These include his concept of long tones, the early study of difficult repertoire, and the importance of tone quality.

Kovar taught all levels of bassoonists and believed that anyone could play the instrument. He did not agree with a number of music educators about how music was being taught in the United States. It was the practice of American music educators to allow physical characteristics to prevent students from playing a particular instrument. Kovar did not agree. He felt strongly that teachers needed to refrain from informing potential students that due to physical characteristics they should not play the bassoon. In addition, he felt strongly that educators should be teaching students how to phrase the musical line and not to confuse this concept with the technique of vibrato. Kovar felt there was no such thing as an “incorrect” embouchure because he thought there was more
than one way to form the lips around the reed. He did not care how students formed their lips as long as they could keep them around the reed and produce a good sound.\textsuperscript{18} Kovar wanted his students to focus on the sound and musical phrasings, not vibrato. He did not play in lessons but instead he demonstrated the correct phrasing by singing the line with the appropriate musical expression.\textsuperscript{19} In his article, “Simplifying the Bassoon,” Kovar writes that students begin to think about using vibrato when they hear someone else play with it. Then they try to automatically incorporate it into their playing, forgetting how to make a beautiful sound.\textsuperscript{20} When Marvin Roth was curious about vibrato and asked Kovar, the response he received was “Never mind the vibrato! I want to hear a good clean attack, and a big, full, dark sound.”\textsuperscript{21} He firmly believed that many times students became too focused on the vibrato, and forgot how to play the instrument correctly. The beliefs that Kovar had regarding vibrato and sound production could have come from his studies with Leopold Auer. In Auer’s book \textit{Violin Playing As I Teach It} he stated, “the vibrato is primarily a means used to heighten effect, to embellish and beautify a singing passage or tone.”\textsuperscript{22}

Another significant aspect of his teaching was his expectation that young students would study orchestral excerpts. Kovar believed that the earlier a student worked on the orchestral repertoire the better off he would be later on in his career. After the first two

\textsuperscript{19} Marvin Roth, interview by author, 26 October 2006, phone interview.
\textsuperscript{21} Marvin Roth, interview by author, 26 October 2006, phone interview.
\textsuperscript{22} Leopold Auer, \textit{Violin Playing As I Teach It} (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1921), 59.
months of student instruction on the bassoon Kovar would start having the student work on orchestral passages because he knew that a bassoonist would not be a soloist and would be expected to play orchestral music with a conductor very early on in his career.  

Also like Auer, Kovar would require his students to learn the score of an orchestral piece in order to have a complete understanding of an individual’s role in the orchestra.

Auer believed that a young student was capable of playing a difficult piece if it was slow enough. Kovar shared this belief and required that his students play etudes at a very slow speed in order to master the fundamentals of playing. Many of his students now realize how slowly they were required to play the standard etudes. In addition to the orchestral repertoire and etudes, his students also studied much of the standard solo repertoire. Mark Popkin stated that he received a solid background on works such as the Weber concerto, both Mozart concertos, the Saint-Saëns sonata, and many others that remain important in today’s bassoon repertoire.

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24 John Shamlian, interview by author, 20 November 2006, interview through letters.
26 Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
CHAPTER 9

24 DAILY STUDIES

In 1951, Kovar self-published a book of exercises titled *24 Daily Studies* to aid in his teaching. Before it was published he required his students to memorize the exercises. His students convinced him to publish them.

According to former students, Kovar wanted all wind players to use this book. He transcribed it for clarinet but did not finish the transcription for flute. He believed that if every wind player practiced from this daily method they would be more effective musicians and develop the technique needed for the professional world. Kovar printed the following statement in every self-published book.

It has been my aim in publishing this series of exercises to make available a method which I have found effective in dealing with the problems of the bassoon, both as a performer and as a teacher. I have found that the same difficulties beset nearly all students, and over a period of years these exercises have evolved as a means of dealing with them. I have used this method of practice as a basic means of developing the essentials of proper playing – intonation, flexibility, tone, smooth legato, etc. It has been my experience that these exercises prepare the student to meet the difficulties of the bassoon literature and of the orchestral repertoire in the shortest possible time. At the suggestion of my students, who had difficulty memorizing it, I have undertaken to publish this method in permanent form.\(^{27}\)

Similarities can be found between the long tone exercises from Kovar’s daily studies with the exercises that Leopold Auer discussed in his book. Auer discussed the

importance of proper intonation and tone and how they can be mastered by playing specific long tone exercises. Auer’s long tone exercises are similar to the ones found in *24 Daily Studies for Bassoon*. Figures 9.1 through 9.3 example of the long tones Auer had his students play and two excerpts from Kovar’s studies. Both Kovar and Auer would require their students to play each exercise in different octaves.

Figure 9.1

Figure 9.2

Figure 9.3

Figures 9.4 through 9.27 are from Kovar’s *24 Daily Studies*. The examples demonstrate how thorough he was in prescribing exercises to solve problems that students may have had when playing the bassoon. As stated before, Kovar truly believed that all wind players needed to use these exercises, in order to even out their technique and to address the specific problems of their instruments.

The student was required to transpose each exercise into each register of the bassoon. For this reason these studies could be used with students of all ages and
abilities, and Kovar could pick and choose the exercise that he wanted his student to prepare in any given week. Some of the studies, such as octave leaps and individual scale patterns, could be avoided until the bassoonist was ready for more advanced material.

The handwriting seen in the excerpt is probably that of Simon Kovar because after publishing the book, annotations were added into each copy as reminders to students. Also note that Kovar separated concepts, such as major scales, minor scales, long tones, legato octaves, and staccato playing. The separation allowed for the student to concentrate on one technique at a time and not feel overwhelmed when playing.

Figure 9.4
Figure 9.7

Figure 9.8
Figure 9.9

Figure 9.10
Exercise on Chromatics

Exercise on 5 tones, Detached and Legato (D minor)
Figure 9.13

Exercise on Intervals (D minor) Harmonie

Figure 9.14

Major Scales in all Articulations (F major)
Figure 9.15

Figure 9.16
Figure 9.17

Figure 9.18
Figure 9.19

Figure 9.20

Figure 9.21
Alan Goodman, when he was just 14 years old studied with Kovar. He said that each lesson began with these long tones and other exercises from the *24 Daily Studies*. 
Kovar would assign two measures a week, initialing each measure with a “K” and it was expected that Goodman would practice them daily, initialing each time he worked on them. These studies were sometimes practiced in a different order than how they appear.

Goodman was required to play one note at a time very slowly in order to master every attack and release, being sure that each one was played with a good sound and in tune. Goodman took each sixteenth note and played it as though it were a sixteenth note with a sixteenth rest following it. During a musical rest, Kovar would tap Goodman’s hands and arms to emphasize the importance of relaxation. If Goodman was not relaxed, he would be instructed to repeat the exercise at a slower tempo. Goodman was a young student, but it is possible his older students, such as Richard Plaster and Bernard Garfield, were required to work on these exercises in a similar manner. Figures 9.28 and 9.29 are examples of how one measure would be written in the exercise next to how it would have been played by Goodman.

Figures 9.28 and 9.29

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28 Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
CHAPTER 10

REEDS

Kovar did not discuss reeds or how to make reeds with his students, even though his older students were always expected to have an acceptable reed to play. Kovar did not make reeds for himself either, but instead would receive a box from Germany that he could pick through to find the ones he liked, selling the rest to his younger students. Kovar’s older students however, would be sent to a reed maker in New York City and be expected to watch him in order to learn the process of reed making. Occasionally, when a student would make something that was better than what Kovar had, he would take it to play in the orchestra. “The older students would half-seriously warn the new ones to keep an eye on their reeds. A student like me [Richard Plaster] with tight finances would be offered a deal for making reeds for him to sell to other students.”29 Kovar believed that teachers should avoid discussing reeds with their students because each bassoonist requires a reed that is tailored to his/her individual needs.30

29 Richard Plaster, interview by author, 4 November 2006, interview through email.
CHAPTER 11

STUDENTS’ REFLECTION ABOUT THEIR LESSONS

Each one of Kovar’s students took something different away from the years of studying bassoon with him. Many still feel as though they owe their careers to him. He worked hard to help them receive scholarships for their lessons and also helped some of them get their first professional job. (See Appendix I for the complete interviews).

The concepts that were important to Kovar’s students remain at the foundation of how they were taught. Marvin Roth stated that he remembered that Kovar wanted a “dark German sound,” and expected him to keep the sound moving throughout a passage.\(^\text{31}\)

Alan Goodman discussed the amount of importance Kovar placed on playing slowly and being relaxed, and does not remember Kovar ever letting him play fast. Kovar gave Goodman a solid background in the fundamentals of playing the instrument.\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{31}\) Marvin Roth, interview by author, 26 October 2006, phone interview.
\(^{32}\) Alan Goodman, interview by author, 18 December 2006, phone interview.
Richard Plaster uses Kovar’s *24 Daily Exercises* in his own teaching, but he also remembers that “he [Kovar] wasn’t teaching teachers to teach, he was teaching bassoonists to play, and behave. He taught by example in the workplace. He would get a free-lance job in NYC, take a student, and have the student play first.”

Bernard Garfield continues to teach the aspects of playing that Kovar emphasized. In an interview he stated, “I still teach most of those musical elements that he stressed as basic to my own teaching style. He stressed an attractive sound, an even flow from note to note, accurate rhythms, expression to suit the phrase . . . Kovar understood clearly what were the demands on a bassoonist in an orchestra.” The most valuable information Garfield obtained from him was how to solve technical problems with his *24 Daily Studies* and how to play expressively.

Kovar taught John Shamlian to be honest with himself and admit if he could not play something, and the importance of reading the score to determine what the role of the bassoon is in a passage. Mark Popkin remembered the emphasis that Kovar placed on learning orchestral excerpts correctly. He was impressed with Kovar’s coaching of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* because he had known Korsakov from the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The interview responses about lessons show a similarity to

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33 Richard Plaster, interview by author, 4 November 2006, interview through email.
34 Bernard Garfield, interview by author, 13 November 2006, interview through email.
35 Bernard Garfield, interview by author, 13 November 2006, interview through email.
36 John Shamlian, interview by author, 20 November 2006, interview through letters.
37 Mark Popkin, interview by author, 9 December 2006, phone interview.
the way students are now being taught in the United States. This occurred because, even though Kovar’s students were planning to be professional bassoonists, they also learned how to teach the instrument. Each student gained this knowledge from watching Kovar address different problems that occurred.

Kovar had many ways of teaching different students and had multiple solutions to a single problem. He worked to teach his students how to play at their best and taught them to be performers and effective orchestral musicians. As a result many of Kovar’s students were in the top orchestras of the country, including: the orchestras of Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and of the NBC, CBS, and ABC broadcasting companies.
Kovar edited fifteen works for International Music Publishing Company. International opened in 1941 and Kovar edited his first piece for them in 1948. Prior to that, his students were purchasing their music from a variety of foreign and domestic publishers. According to Richard Plaster some of the music that Kovar required was difficult to obtain during the war, so students were pleased when they were able to find any edition that Kovar could work with. Kovar was the first person to edit a large quantity of today’s standard bassoon repertoire in the United States, and, due to his reputation as a teacher, his editions continue to be the most readily available in the United States.

Kovar began editing music in order to avoid wasting valuable lesson time changing the score. He kept his musical markings simple, focusing on phrasing and dynamics, and the changes would only be placed where the musical pattern changed. Figure 12.1 is an excerpt from Weissenborn *50 Advanced Studies*. This is an example of how he would change it, because the written phrase markings are in Kovar’s hand.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) This example was given to the author by Bernard Garfield, who studied the exercise with Simon Kovar.
The changes made in the 25 Studies in Scales and Chords are minimal with a small number of changes made to dynamics. The main reason Kovar edited these works was to make them available in the United States. Please note, Appendix C is a comparison of one edition of the 25 Studies in Scales and Chords that was found in the Weissenborn Method for Bassoon edited by Fred Bettony and the International Edition, edited by Simon Kovar.

It is important to realize that Kovar’s editing of etudes was quite different from solo works for bassoon and piano. In a comparison analysis of Reinhold Gliere’s Impromptu it can be seen that Kovar was very detailed in his work. He not only added dynamic markings to the score but also very specific tempo changes. Unfortunately these additions are only placed in the bassoon part, the piano score is the same as the original Russian edition. In the experience of the author, this causes rehearsal time to be wasted,
because the pianist and the bassoonist are not viewing the same tempo changes or
dynamics. Appendix D is a comparison of the original score with Kovar’s edition for
International Music Company.

Simon Kovar’s 24 Daily Studies were self-published in 1951. In addition, Kovar
edited etudes and solo literature including: Milde Concert Studies, Volume I and Volume
II, Gambaro 18 Daily Exercises, Ferdinand David Concertino, Gliere Humoresque and
Impromptu, Jancourt 26 Melodic Studies, op. 15, Kopprasch 60 Studies Volumes I and II,
Telemann Sonata in F Minor, Weber Andante e Rondo Ongarese, op. 35, Weber
Concerto in F, Weissenborn, Studien für Anfänger, Studien für Fortgeschrittene, 6
Vortragsstücke, and Romance in Eb Major. With the exception of the 24 Daily
Studies, which are currently out of print, each one of these works are still available today.

Below is an annotated bibliography of examples from a cross section of the works
that Kovar edited for bassoon (Figures 12.2 through 12.15). Listed is a variety of studies
that incorporate both early and advanced works.

39 Bodo Koenigsbeck, Bassoon Bibliography (Monteux, France: Musica Rara,
1994).

This piece is played by many high school students for state competitions. The patterns are scalar and slurred and do not require the student to have a rapid single tongue or be able to double tongue. The work requires some lyrical playing, allowing the student to develop their sound on the instrument as well as technique.

![Concertino in Bb Major, Op. 12](image)


These studies for bassoon require great attention to articulation and musical patterns. Kovar had most of his students learn these in order to assess fingering problems and articulation difficulties. These etudes are quite long and present great challenges for
breathing. This results in students becoming more comfortable with the use of ritardandos and accelerandos in order to make the music easier to play.


This solo work is short and ideal for a young bassoon student. The work presents many different types of articulations such as accents, staccatos, and slurs. This movement between different articulations teaches the student to change the air stream and tongue stroke very quickly. The work has a lyrical section but does not use the high register of the bassoon, so the student can continue to work on developing a nice sound in a comfortable range. The collaboration with the pianist would also be fairly easy for the
student because the piano part is fairly sparse. This allows the pianist to help the student with rhythm and intonation.

Figure 12.4


This work is a lyrical work, where the student will need to focus on pitch and tone quality. The work is ideal for a young student because it uses the low register and sparsely uses the high register. The 6/8 and 9/8 time signatures encourages rhythmic accuracy and subdivision.

These are one to two page etudes, where each study presents a technique for the student to master, such as legato, staccato, and ornamentation. Each etude is mostly scalar, teaching the student to read the pattern presented to them, rather than individual notes. The dynamics are fairly sparse, only used when the musical pattern is changed.
This two volume etude series is based on scales and arpeggios and is highly melodic. The work begins with C Major with a time signature that is 4/4 but quickly progresses into the more advanced keys and rhythms. These etudes allow students to develop their musicianship by following the dynamics that are presented in the score. The dynamics follow the musical rules of crescendo when playing ascending scales or patterns and decrescendo when playing descending scales or patterns. These etudes also teach a student to read musical patterns over octaves and clef changes. The teacher can also help the student to re-beam musical lines in order to shape them properly.

These etudes are each based on the scales and arpeggios of the major and related minor keys. The design of the studies, allow the student to play the scale etude and then the arpeggio etude in the same key. The etudes progress through many of the major scales and the last study is based on the chromatic scale.
These etudes are short studies based on scales and arpeggios. Each of the etudes presents an articulation pattern that is maintained throughout the piece. As the studies progress, however, each becomes significantly more difficult as they start to use wide leaps that are both articulated and slurred and present different ornamentations (such as mordents, trills, and turns) to the student.

This is the only duet that Kovar edited and it is similar to the Küffner 24 instructive *Duette in progressiver Folge für 2 Fagotte*. Each duet is very short and designed for a young student to learn musical independence, as the two parts do not always move in rhythmic unison. The keys used are either C major or one of the flat keys, never progressing past three flats. The range for bassoon one is D2 to B-flat4 and for bassoon two is B-flat2 to E-flat4, with the low register of the bassoon as the focus in order for the students to develop intonation and tone quality.

This work is the most difficult that Kovar edited. The piece is very operatic and requires the student to have had already developed their sense of phrasing and technical ability. The piece presents trills, mordents, and turns requiring that the student have an understanding of the purpose and use of ornamentations. The piece presents a lyrical section in the beginning and then switches to a staccato, more playful section in the middle. The end of the rondo requires that players have a very fast single tongue because
there is a demanding triplet sequence and scales and arpeggios with wide leaps. Kovar does insert some slurs for ease and suggests eliminating some notes in order to accommodate breaths. Shown in Figure 12.12.

Figure 12.11

This work is an excellent early bassoon piece that has a rhythmic accompaniment to help the beginning student. The piece contains tenor clef and uses the entire range of the bassoon from E-flat2 to C5, with an optional E-flat5 at the end.
ROMANCE

Edited by SIMON KOVAR

BASSOON

Andante sostenuto.  a tempo

JULIUS WEISSENBORN, Op. 3

Figure 12.13


The exercises found in Volume I give brief explanations of how the study is to be played. They are divided into categories such as “I. The most essential kinds of expression” and then subcategories. Other lessons include tenor clef, major scales, chords, chromatic scales, progressions of various intervals, and ornamentation.

![Study for Bassoon, Opus 8, Vol. 1](image)

*Figure 12.14*
Volume II is identical to the 50 Advanced Studies found in the other Weissenborn methods, except that musical phrase marks and dynamics have been added to each one by Kovar.

Figure 12.15
CHAPTER 13

SUMMARY

Simon Kovar, born on May 22, 1890, in Vilna, Russia, began as a violin student of Leopold Auer at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and later became one of the most famous bassoon pedagogues in the United States. While his switch to bassoon was almost forced upon him by the political situation in Russia, he embraced it, learning the instrument well enough in just nine years to win a position in the New York Philharmonic.

Kovar’s years in the Philharmonic allowed him the opportunity to begin teaching and working to change the path of bassoon pedagogy in the United States. He worked hard with his students to help them develop into the best possible players they were capable of becoming. He held positions in many of the top music schools in the US and Canada and taught many well-known players.

Kovar’s retirement from the Philharmonic in 1949 allowed him to expand his teaching career, working closely with International Publishing Company to edit material, making it more readily available to students in the United States. His editions included many of the standard pieces that remain in today’s repertoire.
Kovar’s approach to teaching and editing focused around the student’s needs. He would spend extra time with students as needed and worked with them to develop into excellent bassoonists. Kovar also believed in teaching all levels of students, this included those pursuing non-musical degrees, “doublers”, professional players, and very young students.

His ideas on vibrato, phrasing, and appropriate literature were similar to those advocated by his violin teacher at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Leopold Auer.

Kovar wanted his students to ignore what some were saying about the “correct” bassoon embouchure and reeds because each student’s needs were different. He felt that many teachers just complicated this matter and discouraged many students when discussing it with them.

Kovar published his 24 Daily Studies in 1951. Kovar felt that if all wind players worked from them they would become better players.

Simon Kovar’s students respected him as a teacher and a person, and today, still think highly of him. Many feel that they owe their careers to him, because while he expected them to work hard, he also believed in them and helped them to achieve the confidence needed for a musical career.
Further study could be completed on Simon Kovar by researching his background in Russia, his violin studies with Leopold Auer, and through deeper assessment of his editions from International Music Publishing Company. The questions that remain unanswered about his life in Russia are: Who did he study with prior to attending the St. Petersburg Conservatory and how was he able to leave Russia? In addition to these questions regarding his life, one could also determine a list of recordings he did with the New York Philharmonic and create a complete list of his students.
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Kovar, Leo. Interview by author, 12 December 2006. Phone Interview.


Milchakova, Ludmila, St. Petersburg Conservatory. E-mail correspondence with Harrington E. Crissey, Jr., 15 December 2006.


Plaster, Richard. Interview by author, 4 November 2006. Interview through email.

Popkin, Mark. Interview by author, 9 December 2006. Phone Interview.
Roth, Marvin. Interview by author, 26 October 2006. Phone Interview.


Wandel, Richard, New York Philharmonic Associate Archivist. Interview by author, 18 October 2006. Interview through email.


APPENDIX A

PUBLISHED EDITION OF WORKS ACCORDING TO KOENIGSBECK

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Bold print represents works that were available in 1993.

**Ferdinand David**  *Concertino in Bb Major, Op. 12* (1838)

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**Giovania-Baptiste Gambaro**  *18 Studies for Bassoon*

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**Reinhold Gliere**  *Humoresque, Op. 35 No. 8*

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C. Kopprash  
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Ludwig Milde  
*25 Studies In Scales and Chords*
J. Satzenhofer   **24 Studies**

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J. Satzenhofer   **24 Duets**

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**Telemann**   **Sonata in F Minor**   Hamburg 1728

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von Weber, Carl Maria   **Andante und Rondo Ongarese, Op. 35 (1813)**

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APPENDIX B

TIMELINE OF KOVAR’S EDITION
Reinhold Gliere  
*Humoresque, Op. 35 No. 8*  
1948

Reinhold Gliere  
*Impromptu, Op. 35 No. 9*  
1948

Ludwig Milde  
*50 Concert Studies, vol. I and II*  
1948

Telemann  
*Sonata in F Minor*  
1949

Ludwig Milde  
*25 Studies in Scales and Chords, Op. 24*  
1950

J. Satzenhofer  
*24 Studies*  
1950

J. Satzenhofer  
*24 Duets*  
1950

Giovania-Baptiste Gambaro  
*18 Studies for Bassoon*  
1951

Simon Kovar  
*24 Daily Studies*  
1951

Julius Weissenborn  
*Studies for Beginners*  
1952

Julius Weissenborn  
*Studies for Advanced Players*  
unknown

Ferdinand David  
*Concertino in Bb Major, Op. 12*  
1956

Eugene Jancourt  
*26 Melodic Studies, Op. 15*  
1956

C. Kopprasch  
*60 Studies, vol. I and II*  
1956

von Weber, Carl Maria  
*Andante und Rondo Ongarese, Op. 35*  
1956

Julius Weissenborn  
*Romance in Eb Major*  
1957
APPENDIX C

COMPARISON STUDY OF THE FRED BETTONEY EDITION AND THE SIMON KOVAR EDITION OF THE 25 STUDIES IN SCALES AND CHORDS BY LUDWIG MILDE
Fred Bettony

No. 1  no dynamics except for m. 1, 3, 5, 6

Simon Kovar

added descrescendo in m. 7,
piano and crescendo to m. 8,
forte and decrescendo to m.
9, piano and crescendo to m.
10, piano and crescendo to m.
13, piano to m. 19, forte and
piano to m. 23, crescendo in
m. 24, piano and crescendo in
m. 28

No. 2  dynamics in first 2 measures

added a piano and crescendo
in m. 23 where the musical
pattern changes

No. 3  crescendo in m. 1, 2, 3, and 30

added piano and crescendo in
m. 9, forte and crescendo in
43, mezzo forte and
decrescendo in m. 45, and
piano and crescendo in m. 47
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No. 9  no dynamics

No. 10 no dynamics
added a mezzo forte and
crescendo in m. 1,
decrescendo in m. 2

No. 11 no dynamics
added a forte and
decrescendo in m. 1 and a
decrescendo in m. 2

No. 12 no dynamics

No. 13 no dynamics
added a piano and crescendo
in m. 27

No. 14 no dynamics
added a mezzo forte and
crescendo in m. 1 and
decrescendo in m. 2

No. 15 no dynamics

No. 16 no dynamics

No. 17 no dynamics

No. 18 no dynamics
added crescendo and
decrescendo in m. 1,
crescendo in m. 3,
decrescendo in m. 4

No. 19 no dynamics

No. 20 no dynamics

No. 21 no dynamics

83
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. 22 no dynamics</th>
<th>no dynamics</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 24 no dynamics</td>
<td>no dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 25 no dynamics</td>
<td>added piano in m. 1, forte and decreasingo in m. 3, piano and crescendo in m. 21, forte in m. 50, decisendo in m. 51, forte and decreasingo in m. 68, decrecendo in m. 69, piano in m. 70, crescendo in m. 71</td>
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APPENDIX D

REINHOLD GLIERE’S IMPROMPTU, OPUS 35, NO. 9
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Original Edition</th>
<th>International Music Company</th>
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<tr>
<td>M. 2  forte</td>
<td>mezzo forte</td>
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<td>M. 3/4 no dynamic change</td>
<td>crescendo/decrescendo</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 5  no dynamic change</td>
<td>piano/crescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 10 no tempo change</td>
<td>ritardando</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 13 no dynamic change</td>
<td>crescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 14 no dynamic change</td>
<td>decrescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 15 no dynamic change</td>
<td>crescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 19 forte</td>
<td>forte and decrescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 20 no dynamic change</td>
<td>piano and crescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 22 pianissimo</td>
<td>piano</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 22 no tempo change</td>
<td>piu mosso</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 23 no dynamic change</td>
<td>crescendo/decrescendo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. 24 piano</td>
<td>mezzo forte</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 25 no dynamic change</td>
<td>crescendo/decrescendo</td>
</tr>
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<td>crescendo</td>
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<td>M. 30 no dynamic change</td>
<td>decrescendo</td>
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<td>M. 32 no dynamic change</td>
<td>crescendo/decrescendo</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 41 no tempo change</td>
<td>ritardando</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 43 no tempo change</td>
<td>a tempo</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 43 forte</td>
<td>mezzo forte/crescendo</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. 45 no dynamic change</td>
<td>decrescendo</td>
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M. 46  no dynamic change piano/crescendo
M. 46  no tempo change accelerando
M. 51  no tempo change ritardando
M. 60  forte forte/decrescendo
M. 61  no dynamic change piano/crescendo
APPENDIX E

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN HARRINGTON E. CRISSEY, JR. AND LUDMILA MILCHAKOVA OF THE ST. PETERSBURG CONSERVATORY
The researcher contacted Harrington E. Crissey, Jr. (Kit) who helped contact the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The following is the information received from Ludmila Milchakova of the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

December 15, 2006

Thanks a lot for the greetings with coming winter holidays – the same you and your family. Hope to see you in St. Petersburg next year.

I have looked through the librarian students – graduates catalogue and found only a girl with such family name. She was a graduate of the 1910 – 1911 and her name is Elena Moiseenha Kovarskaya. He probably didn’t finish his education or there is no folder with his documents. I’ll look in the annual reports but it will take time.

All the best,

Ludmila

December 22, 2006

Unfortunately there is no information about Semyon Kovarsky in the reports. Do you or your friend know when he could have studied with Auer, in which years? I looked through the reports of the 1904-05, 1910 – 11, 1911 – 12, 1905 – 06

Ludmila
January 3, 2007

For Ludmila Milchakova,

Hi, Luda! How are you? Happy New Year! Did a man named Ernest Kotte teach bassoon at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory sometime during the First World War (1914-1918)? If you can research this, I’ll be much obliged. It concerns Amy Bassett’s Ph.D dissertation on Simon Kovar under Christopher Weait’s supervision.

January 12, 2007

Dear Kit,

At last I can say “Yes”!

Ernest Kotte was professor of the first level from 1901 till 1918. He was also a soloist of the Mariinsky theatre orchestra and the orchestra of Symphony concerts. His folder is in the Spb historical archive with the number F 7441, folder 36, page 76. (St. Petersburg)

January 15, 2007

Dear Kit,

Ernest Kotte is mentioned in the catalogue as a bassoon professor. First level means, that in 1917 he was given this highest level for his service as a teacher and musician. He worked in the conservatory till 1927 and was awarded the name of the Honored Artist of the Soviet Union-the highest award for an artist at that time.

Ludmila
January 18, 2007

Dear Kit,

The first information about the date was taken from the catalogue and the list of Ernest Kotte’s private information was supplied by the conservatory teachers in that year – 1918. But later I went to our archive where they gave me some extra information which I passed on to you. The chief archivist is on holidays now and they asked me to wait with information about his nationality.

Ludmila

January 22, 2007

Dear Kit,

Ernest Kotte received Russian citizenship in 1893 and became Ernest Feodorovich Kotte. But nobody knows whether he changed his religious views or not. As he was born in Germany he had to be a German. But we do not have his folder here in the conservatory archive so we can’t see what is written in his documents about his nationality.

All the best,

Ludmilla
APPENDIX F

CORRESPONDENCE WITH RICHARD WANDEL, NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
ASSOCIATE ARCHIVIST
Dear Ms. Bassett,

Simon Kovar was a member of the orchestra from 1923-1949. He was originally hired when Mengelberg was music director and continued through the terms of Toscanini, Barbirolli, Rodzinski, Walter, and Stokowski.

We do not have any other information on Kovar.

Richard Wandel
Associate Archivist
New York Philharmonic Archives
10 Lincoln Center Plaza
New York, NY 10023
212-875-5932
APPENDIX G

QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDY OF SIMON KOVAR
How long and when did you study with Simon Kovar?

What books or materials did you use? Where were they obtained?

How long did the lesson last? How frequent were the lessons?

Did the material focus on your strengths or weaknesses? What was his rationale?

What was his teaching style? Flexible, strict?

What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?
APPENDIX H

INTERVIEWS
Interview with Marvin Roth

Marvin Roth was a New York “bassoon doubler” who performed in the pit orchestras of many Broadway shows. He began his studies with Robert Reinert at University of Miami, after his junior year he left school to enlist in an Airforce band. He moved to New York City when he was discharged and had experience on many of the woodwind instruments, which qualified him to perform in the musicals.

**AB:** How long did you study with Simon Kovar?

**MR:** I studied with Simon Kovar from 1950, until Kovar’s move to California in 1957. I am not sure how I will be at answering your questions because to me Kovar just taught, there was no method or approach that he taught from, and would say let me hear the sound. He never played in a lesson.

**AB:** What books or materials did you use? Where were they obtained from?

**MR:** No matter what level you were the lesson always began with the *24 Daily Studies* and the goal was to receive two slash marks at the end of the exercise, which meant is was improved. Kovar would jump around this book based on where your playing ability was. Deep in his heart he wanted all of the woodwinds to study the *24 Daily Studies*, it was as though he felt strongly that those exercises could really develop a player. I started with the Weissenborn method, and then went on to the three Milde books, published by International, and there were the orchestral studies from the Stadio book. I also played the Concerto – Weber and Mozart with Kovar sitting there.

**AB:** How long did the lesson last? How frequent were the lessons?
MR: My first encounter with Simon Kovar was on a New York City subway rumbling toward the northern tip of Manhattan where I live. I had just played an evening performance of the Broadway show, "Guys and Dolls" - the original show in 1950. They call what I do a "bassoon doubler", which means I could be called upon to also play saxophone, clarinet, bass clarinet, contrabass clarinet, flute and piccolo.

Since bassoon was my first instrument and therefore my first love, I carried it back and forth with me daily from the theatre to home. It was the one instrument I felt a need and desire to practice every day and of course making a decent reed was an ongoing affair - like brushing your teeth.

While sitting on that subway train, bassoon case between my knees, a diminutive, slightly built man approached and sat down next to me. He spoke to me in English flavored with what sounded like a Russian accent. He had to be a bassoon player because his first question to me was, "where do you play bassoon" (only another bassoon player would know what was in that case between my knees). He introduced himself, and when he saw no reaction from me, he added that he had retired from the New York Philharmonic and has been devoting his life solely to teaching the bassoon.

In those 20 minutes on the train together, he was able to extract from me the story of my life right up to those "A" train rumbling moments; that I was fairly new in town after growing up and schooling in Florida and serving four years in an Air Force Band before hitting the 'Big Apple' in 1946, joining the Boyd Raeburn jazz/dance band in 1947 and getting my first Broadway show in 1948.
Then, a funny thing happened. The train pulled into its last stop, 207th St. - and we both got off together - he lived three blocks from me - and in those last conversational moments, I got two more surprises: his daughter Elinore, was the bassoonist in the Broadway show South Pacific right next to where I was doing Guys and Dolls - AND - Elinore lived right next to me in an adjoining building.

Before we parted he said he would like to hear me play and why don't I take my bassoon some day, walk 3 blocks and ring his bell.

Well, I probably rang his bell 200 more times over the next three or four years, except for the times he would, unexpectedly, ring my bell and say, "Make me a glass of tea and take out your bassoon".

**AB:** Did the material focus on your strengths or weaknesses? What was his rationale?

**MR:** Kovar focused only on what was not right in my playing, he was always after the sound.

**AB:** What was his teaching style? Flexible, strict?

**MR:** If the assignment wasn’t right, then it was reassigned. Overall, his teaching was strict, he wanted to get across the SOUND that was needed. I learned a lot from Reinert (my other teacher) but Kovar dug a little deeper, he stressed the darkness of sound and the quality of sound. He always spoke of the dark German sound he wanted. To get a picture of him in your mind he was a man in a suit with stains on his tie and had a thick Russian accent. I don’t remember what I sounded like in 1939 but he always spoke of sound, never vibrato but instead just sound. I asked him about vibrato one day and he pulled out Tchaikovsky *Symphony No. 4* and told me not to worry about anything but the sound. Then he put his finger on my knee and vibrated it and said it dots the note and

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that was the end of it. To this day I do not know how to play with vibrato, I learned on flute but never on bassoon, yet my colleagues tell me they hear it. He also never spoke to me about double tonguing, he just expected to keep the sound going. He stressed the basics of teaching any instrument – tone, a good quality of sound, and intonation. He would never play but sing it in a thick Russian voice and then say, “das it.” Kovar’s basic idea of playing was dark, forget about vibrato, and play it like you mean it. He was not all that helpful with reeds, he would say, “go see so and so, he makes nothing but bassoon reeds and watch him to learn how to do it.” He always expected me to have a decent reed, and would once in awhile swipe one from me, but, I don’t know if he made them or not.

**AB:** What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

**MR:** I wouldn’t dream of playing bassoon with any other sound.

**AB:** What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?

**MR:** To keep the sound, the dark German sound.

**AB:** Is there anything else that you would like to add.

**MR:** He helped me find my bassoon. He called me one day, and said I have 2 bassoons coming from Heckel, they are going to cost you an extra $50 because they have come on a plane but I want you to choose one of them and I bought the 9496. I wrote some bassoon duets after Kovar had already past away, and maybe it’s selfish but, I would have given anything for him to hear my duets. I don’t know if he would have liked them or not, but if he could have heard them. I have been fortunate in music and I owe my career and life to both Simon Kovar and Bob Reinert.
Interview with Mark Popkin

Mark Popkin served as principal bassoonist with the New Jersey Symphony, the New York City Opera, and Music Aeterna. In addition to this he has published several books about reed making and has worked to design efficient reed equipment.

**AB:** How long did you study with Simon Kovar

**MP:** Kovar was good to me. I studied with him for seven years because he helped me receive a full scholarship to the Henry Street Settlement School, which had a wonderful small orchestra. At the school I was expecting the winds to be stronger but it was actually the strings. Igor Golningum came to this country and this school was the first job he was offered, and for that reason I really had to buckle down. I studied with Kovar in high school and then into college, since I was a Physics major.

**AB:** How long did the lessons last? What was the structure of the lessons?

**MP:** Around 1946 the lessons were a type of group lesson, where there was a large room with chairs in a circle and one chair in the middle. The studio was on 57th street and 7th street and then it moved a year or two later. This kind of lesson could be a trying experience for some students. A year or two later he switched to a studio on Broadway and 46th or 48th street where there was a private lesson room, this was probably a more gentle experience for most of the students. Kovar was always very pleasant and nice to me but he probably did become irrational with some. There was one occasion in which I had a lesson in his home and I witnessed Kovar’s wife’s treatment of him.
**AB:** What were his expectations of you in the lesson? What were the weekly assignments?

**MP:** I had to memorize the daily exercises in order to focus on intonation. These were eventually the *24 Daily Studies*, and they most likely came from violin etudes. I played from the standard etudes that Kovar had already edited and worked on orchestral excerpts. I remember him coaching me on Rimsky Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*, he had definite ideas about the solo since he knew Mr. Rimsky Korsakov from the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

**AB:** Did the material focus on your strengths or weaknesses? What was his rationale?

**MP:** The weekly assignments focused on the weaknesses. These were the focus of the lesson, because he did not know anything about reeds, and occasionally would take a students reed to play in the Philharmonic. I went to Harold Goltzer for reed help because I got frustrated with them. I went to him without asking Kovar because I did not want him to get upset. During the war it was hard to get a German bassoon reed. Kovar focused mainly on phrasing during the lesson. Since he edited the Milde *Concert Studies* I was always expected to follow the markings he put in. He used the *24 Daily Studies* to concentrate on technique because they were memorized, and spent time on the interpretation of excerpts. The excerpts that were not in the Stadio I had to write out by hand. He never taught double tonguing, and vibrato was never discussed. Kovar never played in a lesson either; he claimed that anyone who came to the US when he did with a bassoon could get a job in a decent orchestra.
I will say again that he was kind to me because he understood that I had tough exams, and was flexible when it came to exam weeks. Most likely he did not do that with his Juilliard students, but he always understood that my school was rigorous.

**AB:** What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

**MP:** I still use the Weissenborn and Milde, and remember his very specific comments about different pieces. I also require both Mozart Concertos and I had a very good foundation in the standard works.

**AB:** What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?

**MP:** I was always impressed that he knew Rimsky-Korsakov and the technical demands of his memorized studies really helped me.

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**Interview with Alan Goodman**

Alan Goodman received his bachelors degree from State University of New York, Potsdam, and his masters degree from University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He served as a bassoonist with the United States Army at West Point, principal bassoon of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and principal bassoon of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

**AB:** How long did you study with Simon Kovar?

**AG:** I studied with Simon Kovar for one year in New York and one summer in Santa Barbara at the Music Academy of the West

**AB:** What was the structure of the lessons?
AG: Most lessons were in his apartment. Every Saturday my Dad drove me into the city from Long Island. Most of the lessons were private, although in a couple of them there were other kids listening to it. Lessons varied from one to two hours and after the lesson my Dad always took Kovar down for coffee at a local delicatessen and listened to him tell stories of his childhood. It was also great because there Kovar was able to smoke the cigarettes that his wife would not let him smoke in the apartment. In the summer at camp lessons were more than once week, because he would grab you when he saw you walking around the camp. He called everyone “keed”, and would call you over so that you could get the bassoon out to play for him.

AB: What books or materials did you use?

AG: I always played from music that had his name on it. At my first lesson I had six books, three by him and three by other people, he took the three by other people and threw them across the room and said “no good.” I also used the 24 Daily Studies at the beginning of every lesson. Kovar had me use them in a way that no one else would know, unless he was seen in action. First of all, he would hop all over the place, and you would start with the long tones. To play the long tones he would have you make a very soft attack, crescendo it slowly, and then decrescendo slowly. Everyday he would want you to use a different note. After this he would have you play some of the other passages. I was instructed to take a four sixteenth note passage and play each note as an sixteenth note, release the breath and lift the fingers on the sixteenth rest and then attack the next beat. He would tap your hands on the eighth rest to be sure they were relaxed and loose. One measure would end up as an entire etude because the exercises were not to be taken literally. He always assigned two measures at a time and would put a “K” at
the end of them. Then I had to initial them every time I practiced. Everything was slow and I played throughout the whole range, having to transpose octaves. Sometimes in a lesson he would start on one that was not assigned, so I would not even get to the two measures that I had prepared.

**AB:** What was his teaching style? Flexible, strict?

**AG:** He was demanding but also kind and complimentary. I was always prepared and he made me feel like the greatest bassoon player in the world even though I was just a kid. Once, I saw him throw an older student out of a lesson and yell at him, so from then on I knew that I had to practice because I was afraid. Kovar never lost his temper with me, but I was just a beginner.

**AB:** What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

**AG:** The technique that I liked the most was that you would always practice breathing and relaxing in the etudes. He did not believe in playing that was built on tension. He would slow you down so that you could play everything and still be relaxed. He believed in introducing excerpts which were beyond your ability, having you play them slowly. I would also work on etudes that were too hard, and play them very slowly; tempo did not matter to him. He felt that the earlier a student begin playing difficult material the better he would be. His teaching was so effective because he taught his students the basics that come back to haunt you when you are sitting in the orchestra.

**AB:** What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?

**AG:** I started the right way which helped me greatly.

**AB:** Is there any other information that you would like to add?
AG: I talked a lot with Benjamin (Benny) Kohon who was principal bassoon in the New York Philharmonic when Kovar was hired and he told some hysterical stories about the orchestra’s situation. Benny Kohon told stories about how they were desperate for a bassoonist because theirs suddenly could no longer play, and they could not find anyone. They eventually found Kovar’s name and set up an audition for him with Kohon and the music director. Kovar showed up to the audition with a bassoon in a sack. The bassoon was so awful that Kohon could not determine if Kovar could play or not. What he did heard was Kovar’s ability to play a musical line. So, he was hired and Kohon worked with him weekly on the repertoire they were playing.

Everyone I have ever spoken with about studying with Kovar has fond memories of him.

Interview with John Shamlian

John Shamlian is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music and the Royal College of Music, London. He served as a bassoonist with the London Symphony Orchestra, the B.B.C. Orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic, and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

AB: How long did you study with Simon Kovar?
JS: Three years.

AB: What books or materials did you use? Where were they obtained from?
JS: Two Mildes, orchestral studies, and the exercises
AB: What were his expectations of you in the lesson? What were the weekly assignments?

JS: I was the inexperienced one of the class, Mr. Kovar wanted weekly improvement

AB: How long did the lesson last? How frequent were the lessons?

JS: Lessons were one hour weekly unless the New York Philharmonic was on tour.

AB: Did the material focus on your strengths and weaknesses? What was his rationale for choosing materials?

JS: Everything focused on weaknesses, which was a great challenge for me.

AB: What was his teaching style? Flexible, strict, etc?

JS: He expected results at each lesson. I would say he was strict.

AB: What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

JS: The ability to study a score to see what the bassoon was suppose to be doing

AB: What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?

JS: To be honest with yourself. If you could not do something he wanted to know why.

In a letter sent prior to the interview John Shamlian wrote:

“Dear Amy Bassett:
As for Mr. Kovar, it seems he came from the same town in Russia as Rachmaninoff. He used to hold great conversations during my lessons. I don’t think it mattered how I was playing.
When in Russia, Kovar was told that there were too many fiddle players in America, and not enough bassoons so he started learning the bassoon. I forget who was instrumental in getting him into the NY Philharmonic, but he got the job as second bassoon and there he stayed for years. His style of teaching was such that it could have been used on any instrument. He spoke of tone quality, rhythm and evenness, and, naturally, intonation.
I had a great deal of respect for him. I remember when I was discharged from the navy. I stopped off to see him and told him that I needed a job. He said go right away to Steinway Hall where Indianapolis was holding audition for second bassoon and to my surprise I got the job. I’m sure he put in a good word for me.”
Interview with Richard Plaster

Richard Plaster was contrabassoonist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra for many years. He also taught bassoon at Boston University and the New England Conservatory.

How long did you study with Simon Kovar?

What books or materials did you use? Where were they obtained from?

What were his expectations of you in the lesson? What were the weekly assignments?

How long did the lesson last? How frequent were the lessons?

Did the material focus on your strengths and weaknesses? What was his rationale for choosing materials?

What was his teaching style? Flexible, strict, etc?

What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?

The response received was:

The materials are listed below, but this also included whatever the students brought in. He encouraged us to prepare, but since our own money was involved we did our best, especially since we would need his recommendation and/or grade. There were recommendations more than assignments, and only those whose lessons were a course in one of the six or so colleges took weekly lessons. When I would show up he would say
something like “your fall lesson?”, and afterwards “Call when you’re ready.” (At that
time, during WWII, I was in the maritime service, training at Sheepshead Bay in
Brooklyn, at least an hour and a half away. Later I was stationed on Staten Island, on
salvage ships.) The lessons for me were one hour. A school could have had a 30 or 40
minute rate for its students. The same standard materials were used by all in the long run,
but the timing varied, and individuals brought in new/different materials according to
what was being composed, published, and performed. If one had weaknesses, more time
was spent on related material. The teaching style was like the conductor or section leader
style – what a coincidence – working more on what needed it. Strictness was not
applicable because his students were doing the best they could. His job was to tell or
show them how to do better.

He remains one of perhaps six most important influences in my playing and
career. All of his teaching was important and still applies. The most important saying
was “Know the repertoire, keed”.

There were exercises/calisthenics, etudes, orchestral repertoire, minimal opera
repertoire, and the standard solo repertoire which all bassoonists were expected to study.
There were usually other students listening to one’s lesson, because we came from
distances up to 100 miles sometimes hitch-hiking, making a need to back-up/over-book.
He was old enough to have memory trouble, and he was usually too busy to write
Russian? English?] The students’ time wasn’t wasted, since everybody was working on
the same things.
Assignments were general, usually depending on the needs, activities, and motivation of the individual students. Some came weekly if they were local, but others like me took hours to get there and hadn’t complete control of their schedules (my salvage ship could be called out to a job at any time.)

You asked about teaching materials – Weissenborn, Milde, Jancourt, Bitsch, and Stadio excerpts were used, but not exclusively, and not in any prescribed order. Mozart, Galliard, Telemann, and Hidemith were available and popular at the time. It was wartime and European publications were scarce. Paper shortage in the U. S. as well as other shortages made finding any particular item iffy. That had been the story of Kovar’s life, though. He would always start with bits of the warm-up type exercise, later put into the 24 Daily Exercises book in the late 1940s as a sort of legacy. I helped him put them on paper and a fellow member of New York’s First Moravian Church who was the froeman of the bindery department of a nearby midtown publishing company (Scribner?) where the book could be and was published. Joseph Marx, (Metropolitan Opera oboist and publisher [Galliard Sonatas, for instance]) helped Kovar and the students get their music.

You may wonder why I haven’t said anything about reeds. That is because Kovar didn’t make reeds. He was able to choose appropriate reeds and do the most rudimentary adjustments, though. The older student’s would half-seriously warn the new ones to keep an eye on their reeds. A student like me with tight finances would be offered a deal for making reeds for him to sell to other students.

Kovar’s approach to playing was pragmatic and varied, but the goal seemed to be accuracy of rhythm and intonation, appropriate interpretation, and a responsible attitude toward the orchestra and colleagues. His success spoke for itself. This is confirmed by
the frequent presence among the bassoon students of a clarinet or saxophone “jobber”
some of them among the top “studio” players, and not just “doublers”. Principal
bassoonists at NBC, CBS, ABC, and Philadelphia Orchestra, Pittsburgh, Detroit,
Washington, and other were included. Pedagogy as such was not what one noticed about
him. The only thing I remember him say as a pedagogue was “Know the repertoire,
keed”, and that could refer not to music but to a diplomatic situation involving a girl.

As to the aspects of teaching which I use. I use the exercises from the 24 Daily
Exercises. He wasn’t teaching teachers to teach, he was teaching bassoonists to play, and
behave. He taught by example. He would get a free-lance job in New York City, take a
student, and have the student play first.

Interview with Bernard Garfield

Bernard Garfield has degrees from New York University, Royal College of
Music, London, and Columbia University. He was principal bassoonist of the
Philadelphia Orchestra and organized and directed the New York Wind Quintet.

AB: How long did you study with Simon Kovar?

BG: I studied with Simon Kovar for three years, 1940, 1941, and 1942

AB: What books or materials did you use?

Where were they obtained from?

BG: We used Weissenborn, Volume I and II
Milde Scale and Arpeggio Studies

Milde Concert Studies, Volume I and II

Stadio Orchestral Excerpt book

I also played a variety of the important bassoon solo pieces, such as Mozart K. 191 Concerto, Weber Concerto, Hungarian Andante and Rondo, plus several contemporary pieces. Kovar hand notated all the phrasing and dynamics into my music which was readily obtained from music stores in New York City. There was Carl Fischer, Schirmer, and other stores, which carried different pieces from different publishers, some foreign and some domestic. The finger exercises were all verbally taught by him at my lessons.

AB: What were his expectations of you in the lesson? What were the weekly assignments?

BG: I was expected to bring the assignments well prepared and ready for his interpretive instruction.

AB: How long did the lesson last? How frequent were the lessons?

BG: Lessons were weekly during the school year, and lasted from 30 – 45 minutes.

AB: Did the material focus on your strengths and weaknesses? What was his rationale for choosing materials?

BG: Yes, he would determine what your deficiencies were, and would repair those weaknesses, plus teach an expressive concept that was always present in his instruction.

AB: What was his teaching style?

Flexible, strict, etc?
BG: He was very strict, and would allow no deviation from his concept of correct playing. He sat next to you and would pound the rhythm he was correcting on your right knee.

AB: What aspects of his teaching do you continue to use?

BG: I still teach most of those musical elements that he stressed as basic to my own teaching style. He stressed an attractive sound, an even flow from note to note, accurate rhythm, expression to suit the phrase, a style of playing that must have pleased Toscanini, for whom he played many years. Kovar understood clearly what the demands of a bassoonist in an orchestra were.

AB: What was the most valuable information that you obtained from him?

BG: The most valuable information that Kovar imparted to me was:

1. How to develop an attractive tone that was even throughout the wide range of the bassoon, through long tone development exercises.

2. How to be accurate in your rhythm.

3. How to solve technical fingering problems, through his special exercises.

4. How to play in an expressive style, the dominant part of his instruction.
APPENDIX I

A LIST OF PREMIERED WORKS DURING SIMON KOVAR’S LAST SEVEN SEASONS IN THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
1942-43 Season

Bach  *Prelude and Fugue in C Minor* (Transcribed for Orchestra by Llywelyn Gomer from *Six Suites for Solo Cello* by Bach)

Bate *Concertante for Piano and String Orchestra*

Bennett, Robert Russell “*Etudes*”

Cailliet *Fantasia and Fugue on “O Susanna”*

Carpenter *Symphony No. 2*

Corelli-Barbirolli *Concerto Grosso for String Orchestra in D Major*, freely transcribed by John Barbirolli from the Violin Sonatas of Arcangelo Corelli

Gershwin *Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture* Arranged for Orchestra by Robert Russell Bennett

Ireland, John *Epic March*

Iturbi *Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra*

Krenek *Variations on a North Carolina Folk Song, “I Wonder As I Wander”*

Liszt-Byrns *Grand Galop Chromatique*

McDonald *Symphonic Poem, Bataan*

Schuman, William *Prayer 1943*

Tansman *Polish Rhapsody*

Taylor-Deems “*Marco Takes a Walk*”: *Variations for Orchestra, Op. 25*
1943-44

Bartok *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*

Berezowsky *Soldier on the Town*

Carpenter *The Anxious Bugler*

Creston *Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra*

Dukelsky *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in G Minor*

Harris *March in Time of War*

Herrmann *For the Falle*

Hindemith *Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes of C. M. von Weber*

Martinu *Memorial to Lidice*

    *Symphony No. 2*

Milhaud *Cortége Funebre*

Rathaus *Polonaise Symphonique, Opus 52*

Schuman, William *William Billings Overture*

Shostakovich *Symphony No. 8, Opus 65*

Tansman *Symphony in D Minor*

1944-45

Creston *Symphony No. 2*

Moore *In Memoriam*

Piston *Fugue on a Victory Tune*

Schonberg *Ode to Napoleon, Opus 41-B*

Strauss, R. *Suite from Der Rosenkavalier*
1945-46

Fitelberg  *Nocturne for Orchestra*

Ibert  *Festival Overture*

Mennin, Peter  *Folk Overture*

Prokofieff  *Summer Day Children’s Suite for Little Symphony, Op. 65*

Rogers  *In Memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*

Schoenberg  *Theme and Variations for Orchestra in g minor*

1946-47

Barraud  *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*

Dello Joio  *Ricercari for Piano and Orchestra*

Honegger  *Symphony No. 3 for Large Orchestra, Liturgique*

Korngold  *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D Major*

Lully  *Noce Villageoise*

Mennin  *Symphony No. 3*

Messiaen  *Hymne pour grand Orchestre*

Milhaud  *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra*

Shostakovich  *Symphony No. 9, Op. 70*

Still  *Festive Overture*
1947 – 48

Honegger Jeanne d’Arc au Bûcher
Krenek Symphony No. 4
Mahler Symphony in A minor, No. 6
Siegmeister Symphony

1948 – 49

Baron Ode to Democracy
Cowell American Piper
Dello Joio Variations, Chaconne and Finale
Fitch Terra Nova
Gibbons-Kay Suite for Orchestra
Gould Philharmonic Waltzes
Hindemith Philharmonic Concerto
Menotti Concerto for Piano and Orchestra
Muradeli Georgian Symphonic Dance
Panufnik Tragic Overture
Perpessa Prelude and Fugue for Orchestra
Porrino Sinfonia per una Fiaba
Schnabel Rhapsody for Orchestra