Jon Deak: From Bernstein to Maazel, Four Decades with the New York Philharmonic

Jon on stage at Avery Fisher Hall (Photo by Michael DiVito)

By Erik Holmgren

Jon Deak joined the New York Philharmonic at the closing of Leonard Bernstein's tenure, and has remained with the orchestra for the past 40 years. Playing bass with the Philharmonic is only one facet of a remarkable career defined by individuality and creativity as a composer, performer, and teacher. His compositions, including a Pulitzer Prize nominated concerto for bass and orchestra, have been performed by major symphony orchestras throughout the world.

In addition to performing responsibilities, Jon also serves as Creative Education Associate with the Philharmonic. I first met Jon through the New York Philharmonic's *Very Young People's Concerts (VYPC)*, where he was teaching three and four year olds with remarkable enthusiasm and respect. He has also been a pioneer with another program that changes the equation of orchestral education. The *Very Young Composers (VYC)* brings the music of children to the Philharmonic instead of bringing the Philharmonic's music to children. In September, 2009, he retired from his position as associate principal bassist, but not from his work as an educator, composer, and inspiring musician. I sat down with him on the eve of his retirement to listen to his thoughts on the bass community, education, composition, and the creative energy that is a part of everything he does.

Erik Holmgren: As you are coming to the end of this stage of your career, what are some of your thoughts?

Jon Deak: Well…I'm scared to death as always. Like anybody I think a big transition can be frightening, but I think I've been in a transition my whole life. I've been blessed to have been a part of this orchestra for 40 years. That has kept me and my crazy travels, my peregrinations, and my flights of fancy grounded here at the Philharmonic. I've taken three unpaid sabbaticals to explore different things, but I've always been able to come back. That has meant a great deal to me.

EH: What are some of the experiences you've had with the Philharmonic that have kept you working and engaged over the years?

JD: Nothing could be sweeter than coming to a rehearsal of the Philharmonic in the morning. This has been a very emotional job for me all these years and I would say at least once a month I am profoundly moved to tears on stage. Even more than that I'm profoundly moved by a piece to go and study it. I think playing with the people I have, my section mates in particular, has always been terrific, and now more than ever I value the experience. It's very sentimental, in the profound sense of the word, not the soap opera sense. I think this last year I've enjoyed it more than ever, and really savored every moment. I'm 66 now; it used to be you had to retire then. When I joined the orchestra nobody played past 65. So it's a wonderful scary time right now, jumping off into something new.

EH: Where are you jumping off to? What's next?

JD: As I'm approaching the end of my tenure as a bassist I've intended, for the last decade or so, to devote myself more fully to children and composition. I started as a composer. When I was 5 or 6 my parents got me a clunky piano to play. At that time I was living out in the sand dunes of Indiana, which was sort of like the wilderness. I wasn't satisfied with etudes and chords and technique. Fortunately for me, my first teacher was very encouraging of my creativity and of composing. All I remember hearing was "sounds great, Jonny!" When I was 12 my family moved to the suburbs of Chicago. My second teacher was much more focused on traditional technique and didn't encourage creativity and composition. I think that's where the seeds were planted for my work with children.

EH: Is this retirement from the Philharmonic sort of an arrival for you, maybe a return to your creative roots?

JD: I'm hoping. I feel like I've always had three careers, one as a bassist, one as a composer and one as an educator, if you can call me that. Right now I'm working on a sequel to a piece I wrote about 20 years ago based on Sherlock Homes, which is published by Carl Fischer. Recently, Tod Leavitt of Georgia commissioned a sequel based on another Sherlock Holmes story. This is the wonder of bass players. Can you imagine other instrumentalists being a performer, narrator, foot-tapper, knockings on the door, sound effects and so on?

I've written 21 orchestra pieces, but haven't written one in about three years. It takes an immense amount of time and con-

Jon Deak at P.S. 165 in New York City (Photo by Michael DiVito)

centration to write, so I think I'm going to take the next couple of weeks without teaching or anything and do some good work. It helps to go to one of those art colonies I would think, you know?

Being a composer gives you an access and a fluidity to music that you can't get anywhere else. You tend to learn a little bit more of what's going on, and you have a respect for what the composer has gone through. There are two great thrills in composing. The first is at about 4 a.m. when you just can't get a piece together and then, finally, you discover what the piece is about. The other is when you give it to musicians and they work it out. They tell you that you can't write certain things and other things work well. You work together and bring something to the piece you haven't considered. This is all the same in performing and in being a teacher.

EH: How have you cultivated this kind of creativity in your own playing and career?

JD: I used to regard creativity as kind of foreign to the Philharmonic. My first few years here I would leave rehearsal and go down to SoHo where people were really free, and also up to Columbia and do the new music. They were light years apart, the downtown and uptown scene. And then people like Terry Riley and John Cage were mixing things up. Phillip Glass mixed things up because he was both downtown and uptown blurring those academic lines beautifully. But then I began to bring it back to the Philharmonic and advocate new music here. It's a continuum of following orders from a conductor and playing along with your partners or leading a section. It's a wonderful continuum of discipline, respect, and partnership. I really worked with the Philharmonic to get the audience involved and that culminated in the VYC (*Very Young Composers*).

EH: Can you talk a bit about the *Very Young Composers*?

JD: Some time ago Marin Alsop and I went into a public school in Brooklyn and we were going to, you know, show them how great are music is, or something. We looked at the walls of this struggling school in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, and all of this children's creative art and said, "Well, where is children's music?" After that experience with Marin I talked John Duffy, the founder of *Meet the Composer*, and said, "I think I have a way for kids to write for the symphony orchestra." I didn't know what children's music was then. Now I can give you 1,000 pieces, and these are crafted art, not cute mud pies. Some of them are depressing pieces, some are scary, some are jazz and hip-hop, some are contemplative. The *VYC* is sort of the culmination of 40 years of work and learning on my part.

EH: I've known your teaching to be both innovative and remarkably effective. How do you approach teaching music to children, and adults for that matter?

JD: I never taught kids to be creative, they are creative. My primary activity is to listen to them. There are two basic approaches to learning, and this isn't anything new, I've learned these things from many people. First, there is the empty vessel: I'm going to teach you 2+2=4, I'm going to teach you that Christopher Columbus discovered America, I'm going to teach you that this fingering gives you a D-flat and this one doesn't, I'm going to teach you that this kind of grip on the bow gives you a good sound and this one doesn't.

The other type of teaching, which is in the minority, is that the child is respected as being intelligent, receptive, and creative. Obviously that last one is the most impor-

tant to me. I'm not saying that learning to play the bass or the clarinet or the violin isn't creative. I'm talking about turning the equation on its ear. Instead of teaching technique first and creativity, insight and innovation last, I switch those.

EH: Just to play devil's advocate for a minute, what would you say if someone said to you that this kind of teaching is all well and good, but doesn't produce results? That teaching creativity is important but without technique a student will never get a job or never "make it?"

JD: I think a person who stops at the creative level is not going to get a job in the "real world." But a kid who has the confidence first and then reaches out to develop the technique of creativity is going to be much more qualified than the person who has the technique first and the innovation as a byproduct. There were players who I saw at Oberlin and Juilliard who were not the cream of the crop and I saw teachers who would discourage them. You have to be realistic, if you're not a virtuoso you're probably not going to get into the Cleveland Orchestra, but you have to think about it more. You have to ask, "What can I do with the bass that no one else has done?" The ways that bass players have carved out their realities on the bass are infinite. We've really made differences in music.

I think there is room for all though. A kid who takes inspiration first and technique second is probably going to have a little more trouble teaching at state university X, but I'm talking about making art, producing a work of art. I think there is room for the composer who graduated from Harvard with Ph.D, but if you only make it so that only these people have access to the orchestra you're going to stifle your art form. Of course many people have a different opinion about that, but many of us agree that the symphony orchestra is sort of "creaking" with age on that very subject. There are people who are falling asleep to contemporary music, and not just older people. There are young people at concerts who can't get interested in this music because it's from a system. I'm not making a stand against atonality. I think it's great when a kid takes atonality or mathematics into music, and I've seen them do it. It's just that when music comes from something authentic, instead of a system, it's a different music.

Sometime in the early to mid part of the last century, the orchestra stopped listening to children and stopped listening to people in the street. We had a rush with Scott Joplin and Dixieland, and Darius Milhaud and Les Six. Paul Hindemith used to go up to Harlem and listen to jazz when he would come to New York. Leonard Bernstein wrote *West Side Story* by listening to Puerto Rican kids in the street banging on instruments and air conditioning ducts and anything they could find. The orchestra seems to have, by and large, stopped listening to the street. The orchestra needs to listen to renew itself.

A New York Philharmonic Young People's Concert featured compositions by young composers, all under the age of 13, pictured here with Jon. (Photo by Michael DiVito)

EH: Based on what you've learned and what you've experienced what kind of advice would you give to young bass player?

I wouldn't dare to tell a bass player what to do or where the best place is to be! It's a wonderful thing about being a bass player. We don't have a vast authoritative repertoire upon which to draw. We have our Dragonettis and Bottesinis and they are wonderful. Bass players, by and large are blessed with the fact that there is more of a frontier on their instrument. I used to think geographically:

Violin = Paris

Viola = Kansas City

Cello =New York or Philadelphia

Bass = Inuvik, Alaska, the wilderness

I've found that bass players today are even more inclined to be adventurous. I go to the ISB conventions, I'm so sorry I missed this last one, and I see very few bass players that are about this or that interpretation or fingering system. Guys were really talking about innovation. They were doing everything from riding motorcycles to jumping out of planes to working lots of different jobs, and not just because they had to pay the rent, but because they had bigger horizons. Someone like Richard Hartshorne plays bass everywhere. Talk about a genius bass player. He's playing for children in Afghanistan right now and putting together string quartets with people from Israel, Lebanon, Egypt, and so on. Talk about important work. He plays for prisoners, children, he goes to war torn parts of the world. He doesn't need a symphony orchestra. That's what is great about being a bass player.

EH: Do you have that adventurous community in mind when you write for the bass?

JD: Absolutely. At the Bass Convention in Austin, TX in 1986, I believe, I was performing my then newly written *B.B. Wolf*. Also appearing on that recital-seminar was Hal Robinson. He seemed taken with the piece, and, as he had just become the principal bass of the National Symphony under Rostropovich, he commissioned me to write a bass concerto. This became the concerto for contrabass and orchestra, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, which he premiered in 1990. He actually played the work in Kennedy Center with the orchestra, completely unamplified. What a sound he has! And I never had so much fun working out the details of a concerto. Technically and musically, Hal could do anything. The concerto contained some of my "Speak-Playing" techniques, which allowed Hal to embody the main character, the bass section as his mother (!), the brass section as the giant, and the harp as, well, the magic harp. It was a gratifying success, with fine reviews, standing ovations, and a Pulitzer nomination. It's been performed all over by many fine bassists and orchestras.

EH: It sounds like being a bassist is almost a blessing to you?

JD: Absolutely! It's given me such freedom and possibility. We've got so much to bring to what we do by way of our interests and who we are. I wouldn't have it any other way.