The Conductor Wants me to do WHAT?

By Sal Rabbio with Michael Rosen

Mike Rosen: You played in the Detroit Symphony for 40 years (1958–98). I imagine that during that time conductors asked you to play in unorthodox ways. I know that you will go into great detail at your PASIC session, but could you tell me about a few of the demands conductors made, just to give us a taste of what we can expect?

Sal Rabbio: It is important to keep in mind that when most conductors want you to do something out of the standard timpani technique or style, they are relating it to the area they usually know best: string playing. I remember the German conductor Josef Krips, who came to Detroit to guest conduct. He used to be in the Buffalo Philharmonic. He asked me to play the opening solo, actually a soli with two players, of the "March to the Gallows" from "Symphony Fantastic." He used the language of the violin and expected me to interpret for the timpani. After we played the solo the first time he asked us to play more spiccato, more detaché, with alternate bowing. At first I had no idea what he was talking about, but then had an idea of what he wanted, so I played the part more or less as written and lifted the sticks very high on the flams, switching sticking and really making a show of it. He liked it, so we did it that way at the concert.

MR: I'm sure that looked great!

SR: Then there was the time I played the Shostakovich "First Symphony" with Shostakovich's son conducting. There is a wonderfully dramatic solo in the first movement. It repeats three times, the first time at *forte*, then *piano*, and then *pianissimo*. I have always played it with the C on the 28 and then peddled the D to the E-flat on the 25-inch drum. On the last repetition, I make a slight *portamento* between the D and the E-flat. It sounds more like what the cellos do.

Shostakovich mentioned that the solo cello plays this passage on one string and asked if I could play it on one drum. Very interesting! I played the entire passage on the 25-inch drum and was very satisfied with the sound. The conductor was pleased, so I did it for all the concerts that week. However, I did go back to playing it my way when I played it the next time.

MR: I know that Stokowski was a very particular conductor and always was looking for an interesting sound. Did you work with him?

SR: Yes, several times. I remember once when we did Brahms' "First Symphony" he asked me to play the opening C's on the 25-inch drum and then tune the 31-inch drum down to a low C. "Just touch the low drum," he said, "so we feel it more than hear it." What a fabulous effect this is! Now the low timpani doubles the low C that the bass players are playing when they have an extension on their low strings. It brings a whole new dimension to the passage.



MR: Is there any general rule about following a conductor or doing what he wants in the orchestra?

SR: It is the responsibility of the musician to find a way to please the conductor. He is the one in charge. Quite often the conductor's baton dictates if you play a given passage behind, on, or in front of the beat. The very first entrance in the first movement of the Shostakovich "Fifth Symphony" is this way. Watch the conductor carefully; do what the baton tells you to do.

One time a conductor said to me, "Mr. Rabbio, please play the opening measures of the last movement of the Mahler 'Seventh Symphony' as fast as you can." What kind of request is this? I did what I could and satisfied the conductor.

Salvatore Rabbio Symphonic Clinic Thursday 3:00 P.M.

A musician often has to interpret what the conductor wants because often they can't tell you exactly what they want. They know what they want to hear, but sometimes they don't know how to tell you how to get it. It's up to us to find a way to do what they want and to get the sound they want.

MR: Sal, don't give away all your secrets. Save them for the session, but give me an idea of what else you will be telling us in Indianapolis.
SR: I will talk about Antal Dorati, Gunter Herbig, Neville Mariner, and Sir John Barbirolli, to mention a few. You won't believe the effects conductors have asked me to do in the "Enigma Variations" on the motorboat passage in No.13—from coins on the drum to brushes! See you at PASIC.

Salvatore Rabbio studied at the Boston University School of Music with Charles Smith of the Boston Symphony. As a student, Rabbio performed in the American premiere of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress," conducted by the composer. He was also a member of the Boston Percussion Ensemble conducted by its founder, Harold Farberman. After winning the Boston University Concerto Competition, he was chosen as Principal Timpanist with the Boston Pops Orchestra. He later toured with that orchestra under the direction of Arthur Fiedler. In 1958, Rabbio was appointed Principal Timpanist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, a position he held until his retirement in 1998. During his 40-year tenure he performed under many of the world's greatest conductors. Additionally, Rabbio served as a professor at the University of Michigan from 1968–98.