

# English horn virtuoso, 84, dies

Thomas Stacy,Arkansas native, performed worldwide

NEIL GENZLINGER

Thomas Stacy sometimes told the story of how, when he was a boy growing up in Arkansas, an Italian who had been dead for about 80 years changed his life.

He had been studying piano with his mother, but when he heard a piece of music by the composer Gioachino Antonio Rossini, his focus shifted to a different instrument, and he determined to make a career of it.

“I was fascinated by the sound of the oboe on a record we had of the overture to Rossini’s opera ‘The Silken Ladder,’” Stacy recalled in a 1996 interview with The Associated Press. “I knew then that I wanted to be a musician.”

If the oboe was a somewhat unusual selection for a young musician, Stacy soon made the even more unconventional choice to specialize in the English horn, a confusingly named instrument that is not in fact a horn but rather a double-reed instrument, an alto member of the oboe family.

In the ensuing decades he became one of the finest English horn

virtuosos in the United States; he played with the New York Philharmonic for almost 40 years, appeared as a guest soloist all over the country and beyond and contributed to countless recordings. Numerous composers wrote works specifically for him, and he became something of an ambassador for his uncommon instrument — performing all-English-horn programs, leading an annual summer seminar and encouraging an expansion of the repertory.

Stacy died on April 30 in hospice care in Southampton, N.Y. He was 84. His son Barton Stacy said the cause was heart failure. Stacy had been living in Hampton Bays, N.Y., just outside Southhampton, N.Y.

Stacy was also an expert on the oboe d’amore, a Baroque-era instrument with a mezzo-soprano range. At some recitals he would switch among English horn, oboe d’amore and traditional oboe. Whatever he was playing, critics praised his tone and his dexterity.

“Mellifluous melancholy is the English horn’s main orchestral

stock in trade,” John Henken wrote in The Los Angeles Times in 1988, reviewing a recital at Trinity Lutheran Church in Reseda, Calif., where Stacy played the other two instruments as well, “but Stacy demonstrated a much wider range of expression and sound. He could make the horn sing with almost human suavity, or stutter with martial brilliance, all supported by the booming acoustic of the Trinity sanctuary.”

As for why he chose the English horn as his main instrument, Stacy had a simple answer.

“It is most like the human voice,” he said in the 1996 interview, “and has the most expressive potential in a more expressive range than other instruments.”

Thomas Jefferson Stacy was born on Aug. 15, 1938, in Little Rock. His father, also named Thomas, was a farmer and cotton broker, and his mother, Nora Lee Conditt Stacy, was a homemaker and church organist.

He grew up in Augusta, the county seat of Woodruff County, and started his musical training

on the piano, violin and clarinet before settling on the oboe and then zeroing in on the English horn. When he was 14, he sold his motorcycle in order to buy one.

“It wasn’t a Harley or anything,” he told The New York Times in 1999, “just a small, lightweight motorcycle.”

He largely taught himself to play the oboe and English horn using...book that showed the fingerings. He was 17 and still a junior in high school when the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., gave him a full scholarship.

“I started out on oboe at Eastman,” he said, “but I also played English horn in some of the performing groups. It was already my preference. It fits my musical persona like a glove.”

While at Eastman he met a fellow student, Marie Elizabeth Mann. They married in 1960, the same year both graduated and Stacy joined the New Orleans Philharmonic. He later played with the San Antonio Symphony and the Minnesota Orchestra before joining the New York Philharmonic in 1972.

He appeared as a soloist with the Philharmonic more than 70 times before leaving in the fall of 2010. By then a number of works had been written specifically with him in mind, including Ned

Rorem’s Concerto for English Horn and Orchestra, which had its world premiere at Avery Fisher Hall in Manhattan in 1994. Alex Ross, reviewing the performance in The Times, found parts of the work “curiously fragmentary and unfocused.” But, he added, “Stacy tied these disparate impressions together with a rich tone and dazzling technique.”

In the 1996 interview, Stacy talked about how a musician of his caliber stayed sharp.

“The better you are, the harder it is to improve,” he said, “and that’s what I think about most, how to improve. It’s like chipping golf balls to the green with an 8-iron. You must practice the starting and stopping of notes so they sound good.”

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