

An Interview with Cloyd Duff

By Andrew Simco



ON FRIDAY MORNING, MARCH 27, 1992, there began a series of lecture/master classes given by the renowned solo timpanist (retired) of the Cleveland Orchestra, Cloyd Duff. The lecture/master classes lasted four days, ending on Monday afternoon, March 30, 1992. The locale was The Norwegian State Music Academy, and the nearly 30 professional and student musicians who attended each of the four sessions came away full of new ideas and techniques concerning timpani performance, practice, maintenance, and history. It truly was an incredible learning experience.

On Monday evening, March 30, I had the opportunity to meet with Cloyd in his room at the Hotel Munch, and while relaxing over bottles of Farris and Eplemost, I conducted an interview with him that lasted over an hour. Emphasis was on his early career, from college to full-time orchestra positions, although we did cover in some detail his years in the Cleveland Orchestra under the music directorships of both George Szell, and Lorin Maazel.

Most of us who are professionals are familiar with his work during those years, particularly on recordings issued by CBS/Sony and DECCA Records. Both of us thought that it might be useful to

concentrate a bit on those early years to show our readers what it was like to build a career in those days—the period covering 1921, when he first began drum lessons, through 1942, when he was appointed solo timpanist of the Cleveland Orchestra.

The following is a sort of transcript of that interview, plus some material from several conversations we held over lunch. So...without further editorializing from the author, here is what he had to say:

SIMCO: *Where did it all begin—where were you born, and when?*

DUFF: I was born in Marietta, Ohio, in September of 1915, and when I was about four years old, my parents made the decision to move to a town called East Liverpool, Ohio, and of course, having not much of a choice in the matter, I “decided” to follow them there. It is a town right on the border line between Ohio and Pennsylvania on old Route 30, about 30 miles from Pittsburgh. My grade school and high school education came from there.

SIMCO: *How did you get into music?*

DUFF: I think I was in music before I really thought anything about it. When I was about four years old, I delighted in pulling my mother’s pots and pans out from the storage area under the stove and hitting on them, you know. When I was about six, my parents bought me a drum set, and before I knew it, I was taking lessons from an old-style professional, whose name escapes me now, in East Liverpool, Ohio; he played drums in the “vaudeville” orchestras that played in the pit of the local theater. He taught in the school as well—brass instruments as well as percussion. He also conducted the high school band. So, I started studying snare drum with him.

SIMCO: *He started you off with a pair of sticks and a printed tutor?*

DUFF: Well, yes. A pair of sticks, plus a drum pad, a block for the bass drum; I also studied xylophone and mallets with him later on. When I began to

play timpani, which happened in my third year of high school, I studied with another “pit” drummer at the old State Theater...a man by the name of Larkins Porter. From there, I went on to a couple of performances with State contests, and I won the Ohio State Championship on snare drum. And that set me up to go to a band camp up at Cedar Point, Ohio, which was run by Peter F. McCormick. It was called the Ohio Band camp. I received a scholarship to that camp, and became a camp counselor. I met some of the faculty members who taught there; they were from the Cleveland Orchestra, and they asked me “What do you want to do? Where do you want to go to college?” Now, of course I wanted to go to college, but this was at the height of the Great Depression...there was no money. I had hoped to win a scholarship to the Ohio State University, and I told them this. I was very much attracted to Ohio State University at the time because I was fascinated by the marching band...it had great appeal to youngsters at the time. The faculty members replied “If you want to go to a scholarship school, why not try to win a scholarship for the Curtis Institute of Music?” I had never heard of the Curtis Institute of Music...I was a young kid then, “green behind the ears”, as they said at the time, totally inexperienced and unaware of the finer things in life in that regard.

SIMCO: *Had you gone to any symphony concerts up to this point?*

DUFF: Yes, I had gone to Pittsburgh, and heard the Detroit Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Ossip Gabrilowitsch, and I thought that was rather fancy. I watched the timpani player, and I said to myself “Hey, that’s awfully good! I like that!! I’m gonna be a timpanist!” Getting back to the Ohio Band camp, where these faculty members from the Cleveland orchestra had suggested that I try out at the Curtis Institute, I asked

An Interview with Cloyd Duff

"Where is the Curtis Institute?" So they answered "In Philadelphia". So I said that it sounded like a great idea, and called them to see if there was an opening. The people at Curtis replied that there would be an opening in three weeks. So, I had three weeks to prepare for the audition.

SIMCO: *So you were grounded in snare drum and xylophone. Did you have any piano lessons as well at this time?*

DUFF: No, not at that time. That came later. I took piano as a secondary instrument at Curtis. No, my background was as a rudimental drummer.

SIMCO: *Did you ever play "double drums" as in the old days before the drum pedal was invented?*

DUFF: No. When I was growing up, the drum pedal had already been invented, so we had a drum set—bass drum, snare drum, tom tom, cymbal, wood block.

SIMCO: *So you never ran into a situation where you had to play in the old "overhand" way, where you hit the bass drum with one hand on the down beat, playing the afterbeats on the snare drum?*

DUFF: No. We had the bass drum pedal by then, although there was a cymbal on the bass drum!

SIMCO: *Getting back to the audition, you had three weeks to prepare for it, and you auditioned for Oscar Schwar. (author's note: Oscar Schwar, who became Cloyd's teacher at Curtis, was for forty years solo timpanist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, from 1903 to his death in 1943. He was a legend in his own time, being one of the very few musicians praised by the great conductor Leopold Stokowski on more than one occasion.)*

DUFF: Yes. I was pretty ignorant in those days, but my accomplishments up to that time (competing in State Music Competitions) stood me in good stead for the audition. I won it and received a scholarship and this set me up for

the symphonic world.

SIMCO: *It was a completely different world from what you were used to...*

DUFF: Yes indeed! I came from a small town background, and here I was going into "Main Line USA"—a big city, with one of the greatest orchestras in the world. Don't forget there was Oscar Schwar, who was a great player and teacher.

SIMCO: *You had not heard the Philadelphia Orchestra up until that time. That must have made quite a first impression!*

DUFF: Oh Yes! My goodness! I had never heard anything like it before! I had heard the Detroit Symphony and other orchestras, but to hear Leopold Stokowski conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra, with Oscar Schwar playing timpani! Not to mention all the other great musicians in the Orchestra; there was Marcel Tabuteau on oboe, William Kincaid on flute, Anton Horner on horn, as well as a very young Arthur Berv as solo horn, plus Benny Podemski as principal percussionist.

SIMCO: *Was Podemski with the orchestra for a long period?*

DUFF: Oh yes...As long as I can remember. Podemski was superb; also in the section was James Valerio, and the assistant to Schwar (assistant timpanist) was Emil Cressy.

SIMCO: *Now, not very many people know about Oscar Schwar, who lived and played in what is now a bygone era. You know, and Dan Hinger knows, just what an unbelievably talented player he was. Can you tell us a little of what he was like as a player, teacher, and person?*

DUFF: He was the most highly regarded player of his time. Even Saul Goodman studied with him. Well, he did not so much study with him as he "hung around" Schwar, so as to pick up certain valuable "tips" and ideas relating to timpani playing. When I was growing up, Saul was a very young timpani player. I heard him

many times over the radio, as the New York Philharmonic broadcast on Sundays, and I'd listen to those. He'd take the things he'd learn from Schwar and use them in his own playing. He was smart enough to learn from Schwar.

SIMCO: *Getting back to Schwar...What was he like as a person and player?*

DUFF: First of all, he was a short, rotund Dutchman. By Dutchman, I mean German. He had a shiny face with a white mustache. He spoke very good English! He'd been in the States for quite a while—he must have been in his 36th year with the Orchestra while I was at Curtis. I was one of his last pupils...Let's see...I was at Curtis between the fall of 1935 and 1939, and I went to the Indianapolis Symphony in the fall of 1939. During the time I was at Curtis, and into my years at Indianapolis, I played the Philadelphia Orchestra summer season, which was then held at a place called "Robin Hood Dell".

SIMCO: *Schwar played timpani there as well?*

DUFF: At first he did, but then he took the summers off, and went to Germany, so Emil Cressy would move up to play timpani, and I would substitute for Cressy on percussion. Later on Cressy would also take the time off, so Benny Podemski would move up to play timpani, and I'd fill in as principal percussionist for Benny. Then Emil Cressy left the scene, and I'd play timpani when Schwar took the time off.

SIMCO: *What was Schwar like as a teacher, and what special insight did he awaken in you?*

DUFF: I might say...First of all, he scared the daylight out of me! He was a charming gentleman, but also a good tough teacher. At that time I did not have a symphonic background, but I gradually grew into his demands! I knew what he wanted, and he was always conscious of **tone and balance!!!** (author's note: Tone and balance...these are hallmarks of Cloyd's playing to this day!) The way

Curtis worked when I was a student was that the student had to do two years on percussion. As Schwar taught mainly timpani you had to know your percussion. Having been a rudimental drummer was very good for me, as he was very much concerned with precision, as were most musicians of a German background.

SIMCO: *You must have watched Podemski play percussion, and picked up some "tips" from him...*

DUFF: Oh yes. Sure. His book is still one of the finest out. (author's note: *The Podemski Snare Drum Method*.) As a matter of fact, if you look in the back

of the book, you can see a set of Anheier cable-tuned drums are basically a kettle drum set on a tripod, and the head is tuned by means of a cable and sprocket mechanism running around the rim of the drum. The mechanism was designed by Anheier and Sons of Bonn, Germany. Many examples of this type of drum still exist.

Speaking of drums, Schwar advised me when I got the timpanist's job in Indianapolis to own my drums. In those days, you could buy a set of two Ludwig drums...they cost about three-hundred and fifty dollars, but he advised me to go all out-and buy

the best! I purchased a set from Dresden—Dresdener Apparatebau—which was then run by Jenka and Obruvka. I purchased the fifth set in the United States! Now, this was at the time I was assuming the position of timpanist with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra—the beginning of World War II in Europe. I was lucky, as my drums were in route on the high seas just as the war began in Europe! After that, you could not get anything out of Germany! I remember they came in crates which were filled with roofing material which Jenka and Obruvka used as packing material. This material still had some of the gravel on it and it got into the drums. I had to tear them down, rebuild them, just to clean the gravel out of the works. That taught me to maintain the instruments! I remember the crude timpani heads on them; Some of the hair from the animal was still on them!! They were awful! I really had to clean them up. But, boy, when I did, they were magnificent!

Speaking of Robin Hood Dell, coming from the Indianapolis Symphony...we had no summer season at that time. If your season was 20 weeks a year that was considered good! In the ISO we did 10 pairs of programmes plus some pops concerts and run-outs—that was about all the repertory we got through in a season. As for the summer seasons, well, we had to support ourselves as best we could.

SIMCO: *I remember Sam Denov (retired percussionist with the Chicago Symphony) saying something to the effect that he spent his summers working as a house painter or messenger...*

DUFF: That's right! There were no 52 week seasons in the orchestra like you have now. Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia—all had 27 week seasons! The musicians generally had to support themselves during the summers. One loved his art so much that he would gladly live in this manner in order to come back to music in the



Cloyd Duff

An Interview with Cloyd Duff



Oscar Schwar (1878?-1943), Cloyd Duff's teacher at the Curtis Institute of Music

fall. This was **really** supporting the arts! I myself worked as a furnace cleaner salesman

SIMCO: *Dan Hinger worked in a wire factory!*

DUFF: That's right! You'd support the Arts that way, work 20 or so weeks a year, scramble about during the summer, living almost unemployed, and come back to the orchestra in the fall.

SIMCO: *Almost like coming home!*

DUFF: The thrilling part of that was, that you had both an end of season, and in the fall, a beginning. There is nothing more thrilling than a good ending, and a good beginning! When the season ended, you'd of course go around looking for summer employment, but as the beginning of the season approached, one would really look forward to that, renewing acquaintances, and above all, to be back in music! Today, what with 52 week seasons in the USA, you miss this "delicious occasion" twice, as the season goes on and on, without beginning or end, so to speak. However, the summers in which I had no musical employment did not last too long, as I soon joined the Philadelphia Orchestra for its

summer seasons at Robin Hood Dell. (author's note: The Philadelphia Orchestra today has its summer season at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Saratoga, N.Y.) There, we played 8 weeks, 7 nights a week. Monday and Tuesday were opera nights; Wednesday was symphonic; Thursday was pops; Friday was another symphonic night, Saturday and Sunday were kept open for use as rain dates. Being in Philadelphia, where the summer was usually wet, we almost always used those rain dates. In these 8 weeks, I played 5 concerts a week, and half the time they didn't even rehearse each program. There was a different conductor every night, and I had a whole year's worth of program; 40 different programs to prepare in those 8 weeks! I learned how to prepare, and I learned **fast!!!**

SIMCO: *Who conducted those summer seasons? Did Stokowski do any of those?*

DUFF: No. Ormandy! (author's note: Cloyd is referring to Eugene Ormandy, music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1938 to his retirement in 1980.) He'd had his prob-

lems with the Board of Directors. For example, he had wanted to take the orchestra on a European tour, but the Board turned a deaf ear to that, and that limited him. He had expansive plans, great plans, but the board stymied him. They didn't think big enough! So, Ormandy was in charge then, and he was quite good, although for many years he was the second conductor of the orchestra, especially when Stokowski was around. The orchestra played very well, it still sounded like Stokowski's orchestra. I didn't get to play much in the regular season, though one season when Schwar was ill, I did a three week period on snare drum, Cressy played timpani, Podemski and Valerio moved up, and I played third man. It was glorious!!

SIMCO: *What kind of timpani did Schwar use?*

DUFF: Ludwigs. That was the style then. The old Universals, with the apple shaped kettle; a good kettle! He had a set of four, and a set of Anheiers for auxiliary instruments. He had, as I said, a set of four—with a 33 inch or 34" bottom drum—regular sizes all up the line. And of course, the Anheiers for extra drums. You know that the Anheier is a cable-tuned timpano. These were the originals, the cable drum uses a cable with a wheel. Very easy to work. The chain-tuned drum came later. Saul Goodman used the Anheiers first, but lost them when an acoustical shell collapsed on them. He rebuilt them as a chain-tuned instrument. That is how the chain-tuned instrument came about!

SIMCO: *Did Schwar ever use the Anheiers exclusively?*

DUFF: Not often. He'd use the Ludwigs at most of the concerts. If he needed extra instruments, he would bring out the Anheiers, although he was content to use them exclusively from time to time. As a matter of fact, he recommended them to me when I moved to Indianapolis. Remember, I had purchased a set of Dresden-style pedal timpani, the two inner drums, and he

recommended that I add a 24 inch and 32 inch Anheier on the outside.

SIMCO: *Schwar died in 1943. Was he on tour with the Philadelphia at the time?*

DUFF: I don't know if he was on tour at the time, but I do know that it happened during my first season with the Cleveland Orchestra; he came to see me during the first season, so it had to be sometime in 1943.

SIMCO: *What was the Indianapolis Symphony like at the time you joined it? How did it feel, this being your first job?*

DUFF: Delightful! My first big job! There hadn't been a timpani player out of the Curtis Institute in the first ten years of its existence to have been placed in an orchestra! I was the first one. It felt great! I think there was one other fellow who played timpani with the Navy band, but that was about it! I had my drums on order; the Jenka and Obruvka pedal drums arrived in October. I started the season in November. The Anheiers arrived later. Schwar loaned me a 30 inch Anheier for the bottom and a little hand-screw drum for the top. My Anheiers arrived after Christmas.

SIMCO: *Who was the conductor at the time?*

DUFF: Fabian Sevitsky. He was a former bass player with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the nephew of Serge Koussevitsky (author's note: Serge Koussevitsky was music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 until his retirement in 1949). He changed his name to Sevitsky to differentiate himself from his famous uncle, and as Fabian Sevitsky—sometimes called "Fah-bi-an"—he became a conductor. I thought he was very good! And so was his orchestra! There must have been at least six or eight of us to develop there and go right to the Cleveland Orchestra. That really grieved him, here he was trying to build up the ISO, and doing very well and then off we'd go, on to other more prestigious jobs. At the same period, I had the opportunity to work under

Stokowski with the All-American Youth Orchestra which he founded and conducted.

SIMCO: *That must have been an experience; tell us how it came about!*

DUFF: I played with the All-American in 1940 and 1941; these were summer tours so I had to get a leave of absence from Robin Hood Dell.

SIMCO: *I understand from an earlier conversation that this happened rather fast!*

DUFF: Yes. Stokowski needed me in a hurry. It was arranged without me even knowing it! Within three days of my being informed, I was on my way to South America with the All American Youth Orchestra! I got the call, from Saul Caston, who was formerly the principal trumpet with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and was acting as Stokowski's personnel manager. This was a Wednesday afternoon. He called and said, "Cloyd, how would you like to go to South America?" I said "Fine. Wonderful. But I can't go! I'm under contract to Robin Hood Dell." And he said "Oh. That's all right. It's been arranged. Mr. Stokowski needs you, and he needs you fast!" (Stokowski still had close ties with the Philadelphia Orchestra which did the summer season and the Dell, so whatever he wanted, he got!) So I said "Is it all right?" And Caston said "Yeah, it's all right. Your job at the Dell will be held for you when you come back." So I replied "O.K. When do you need me?" He said "Tomorrow morning"! So in three days I was on my way to South America. What had happened was that three of us (myself included) were instant replacements for three musicians who did not quite work out. Stokowski could be quite brutal in that regard. If you did your job well, fine, if not...! As it turned out, I joined the orchestra the following summer as well.

SIMCO: *You eventually wound up playing timpani although you started out as percussionist...*

DUFF: I went on percussion that first year and I wanted to play timpani the sec-

ond year; however Stokowski liked my percussion playing and he asked me to play percussion. So, I started the tour playing percussion, but as the timpanist that was hired didn't work out, I very shortly moved over to the timpanist's spot. As this has some bearing on how I got into the Cleveland Orchestra, I'll elaborate a bit on the situation. This timpanist that they hired for the tour, was a small boy, very talented, a good showman, looked good, but all this was built unfortunately on a foundation of sand. He did not like to work; he liked to play...to play around on the beaches and take life easy! Now, he was scheduled to become the new timpanist of the Cleveland Orchestra the following season so I cautioned him. I said "Look, you are going to the Cleveland Orchestra next season. That is a job that most of us would give our eyetooth for, and you are fooling around like this?? You got moved out of the timpani spot here because you wouldn't work and now they've moved you to third percussion! How is this going to prepare you for Cleveland?" (Artur Rodzinski was the music director there, and he had a reputation of firing his timpanist every two years.) I encouraged him to use the intervening months to go to either New York or Philadelphia and take lessons, three a week with either Saul Goodman or Oscar Schwar, and to "live" music and study scores in order to prepare. Well, you can guess what happened! He spent the intervening months playing around the beaches of southern California, and when he assumed the job in Cleveland, he failed miserably! Rodzinski fired him, and I got called in January 1942 to take over the job as of the following fall.

SIMCO: *How did you get the call?*

DUFF: I had an inkling that this fellow would fail. It was interesting watching the situation develop as I said. They called me in January of 1942. I finished the ISO season, and joined the Orchestra in the fall of 1942.

SIMCO: *How did you feel?*

An Interview with Cloyd Duff

DUFF: A bit scared. Remember, Rodzinski had a terrible reputation for firing a timpanist every two years or so; so I said to myself "I'll give it a try, and see what I can do." Well, I certainly broke that jinx, I stayed on the job almost forty years!

SIMCO: *What was your impression of the Cleveland Orchestra at the time you joined? Was the "bloom off the rose" so to speak, especially after your experiences with the Philadelphia Orchestra?*

DUFF: No! It was a great orchestra...at the top of the second rank of orchestras. This was because it had a slightly shorter season than the top orchestras, and the pay scale was lower, but it was a great orchestra, and Rodzinski was fabulous! Not to take anything from Seivitsky! He was excellent...especially in music by Richard Strauss and Tchaikovsky, but he was hobbled by a much shorter season and smaller orchestra. Indianapolis had only about 10 pairs of concerts. In Cleveland, we had twenty-seven weeks; scale was about sixty-five dollars a week.

SIMCO: *Then Rodzinski left, and Erich Leinsdorf was appointed...*

DUFF: Don't forget that when a conductor left an orchestra, there was usually a two or three year interim filled with guest conductors, as the incoming conductor was usually booked for that long in advance before he could take over. Rudolf Ringwall was the assistant conductor, responsible for pops concerts, and children's concerts. We had to rely on him quite often...he did several subscription concerts but we had a lot of guest conductors after Rodzinski left.

SIMCO: *Especially after Leinsdorf, who was appointed to succeed*

Rodzinski as conductor in Cleveland, was drafted into the US Army. Did George Szell guest conduct the orchestra at this point?

DUFF: That was later. Leinsdorf (author's note: Erich Leinsdorf, born in 1912, later served as conductor at the Metropolitan Opera for many years, and was Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1962 through 1969.) was appointed, conducted for a couple of seasons, and was drafted into the Army. So therefore, we had guest conductors yet again. When he came back, things had changed, and he accepted an offer from the Metropolitan Opera, where he took charge of the Wagnerian repertory. **SIMCO:** *Where George Szell was...and they in effect exchanged places. (author's note: George Szell (1897-1970) served as Music Director of the Cleveland Orchestra from 1946 until his death in 1970. This period is still*

considered a golden age in the history of music, not just the Cleveland Orchestra, as his many recordings attest.)

DUFF: That's right.

SIMCO: *Was there any apprehension in the orchestra when Szell came?*

DUFF: There is always a bit of apprehension when a new conductor comes in...they start to change personnel a bit, and if they don't like you, you move on... So you worry a bit about how much stability you have. However, with Szell—he happened to like me—he had guest conducted at Robin Hood Dell and remembered me from there and liked my percussion playing.

SIMCO: *He liked your percussion playing?*

DUFF: That's right. He made me head of the percussion department as well as

timpanist...that was his way. He liked his solo players to be in charge of their section. For example, if you were Maurice Sharp (solo flautist with the orchestra) you headed the flute section, and were responsible for assignments. Likewise in our section. I headed that for years; when I joined, the section consisted of Harry Miller, and the Sholle brothers—Emil was one of the brothers. When Bob Matson joined the orchestra, he helped out in making playing assignments, until it got to the point where we needed a full-time principal percussionist. This was about the mid 1960's...when Dick Weiner came; he was good enough that I was able to persuade Szell to let him take over as principal percussion.

SIMCO: *Cloyd, we are nearly out of time, and there is yet much to talk about...enough for two or three such interviews; in short, what was it like to work for Szell?*

DUFF: That is a tall order, but suffice to say that Szell was thorough in his preparations. His rehearsals were thorough...we knew what he wanted, and we gave it to him. Like all conductors, he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it! And if you delivered the goods you were O.K.! But if not...well, you moved on. Clarity of execution, precision...he worked hard to get it, and the result was really magnificent!

SIMCO: *Do you have any advice for our readers?*

DUFF: Just this. Remember the story of the young fellow who went to Cleveland ahead of me and failed...he did not prepare. He wasted his time on pleasure, and as a result, he didn't get anywhere! If you are serious about music, be prepared to work hard, and prepare yourself. It is not easy, especially today with all the competition out there. **Success comes to those who prepare themselves and are prepared to work for it!!!!!!** I cannot stress that point enough!

SIMCO: *Cloyd, it was a pleasure to talk with you. Thanks very much!*

DUFF: Thanks, Andy, it was my pleasure! **PN**

If you are serious about music, be prepared to work hard, and prepare yourself.