Salvatore Rabbio:
The Detroit Symphony Years

BY ANDREW P. SIMCO

FOR NEARLY THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS, Salvatore Rabbio has been principal timpanist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. In the course of his career, he has developed into one of the most respected names in the percussion field, particularly in the USA. This interview took place between sessions of a three-day masterclass that Rabbio gave at the Norwegian State Music Academy in Oslo, Norway in April, 1996.

Andrew Simco: *I understand that you started out as a jazz drummer. Who was your first so-called "hero?"*

Salvatore Rabbio: My first hero was Buddy Rich—and he still is, in a sense, although unfortunately he is no longer with us. I admired his speed, technique and musicianship. Another great drummer along the same lines was Gene Krupa, who was a very close friend of my teacher, Charlie Smith in Boston. According to Charlie, one of Krupa's dreams, which he was never able to fulfill, was to play the percussion part to Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat*. I found this rather interesting as I didn't put him in this genre, and was not aware that he even knew the piece. That gave me a bit more respect for the man, although, goodness knows, I had quite a bit of respect for him already.

Another player I came to admire and respect was Joe Morello. He is a phenomenal musician and gets a great sound out of the drums. Buddy had the speed and the rhythmic drive, and in this he was unsurpassed by anybody, but I feel that drummers like Joe Morello and Steve Gadd—who are a bit more schooled and trained—are more concerned with sound production. The instruments come alive and speak when they play. It is the collaboration of both jazz and classical music that made me think the way I think today towards sound production.

Simco: *Who was your first drumset teacher?*

Rabbio: My first drumset teacher was the very first teacher I had in junior high school, when I started in music. His name was Bob Hayward. He was mainly a drumset player, and he was a fairly decent keyboard player, although he played no timpani at all. He was a "pit" drummer and played all types of shows. He was very versatile, knew the instruments and all the various types of playing. I started on a practice pad and eventually got onto a drumset. At that point I thought that there was nothing else in life, but I learned otherwise a bit later. One grows, and hopefully one's viewpoint grows as well. It was fun, though!

Simco: *I noticed that your drumset background has had a major influence on your timpani playing. For example, I have never seen anybody with such fluid wrist movement.*

Rabbio: That came naturally, and I really give a lot of credit to Bob Hayward. He felt from the very first day that it was essential to take all the tension out of my body and my hands.

Simco: *Your basic background came from Hayward on drums and Charlie Smith on mallets, percussion and some timpani. Did most of your timpani come from watching and analyzing people like Roman Szulc of the Boston Symphony and Fred Hinger in the Philadelphia Orchestra?*

Rabbio: Exactly. My family was poor. I couldn't afford to take private timpani lessons due to college expenses and what-have-you. I did take a lesson from Vic Firth and one from Cloyd Duff, but that came much later, when I had a job and some money. My degree from Boston University was in music education. I thought I would never use it, but ironically enough I used it the first year out of college before I got a full-time job as a musician. I am glad I got the degree because it taught me to be a better teacher and how to explain things to students. I still enjoy teaching.

Simco: *I noticed during the past session, as you worked with the various students, that you have an obvious love and concern for the art of music and for the fact that students should learn as much as they can from the teaching situation. I am grateful, of course, for what I learned from my teachers. They were excellent, and gave me a basis from which to build my own technique. However, it was more of a teacher-student relationship—the "do this my way, or else" approach.*

Rabbio: That kind of thinking was very much a part of the times. You did it only their way, and that was fine, because they were great teachers and great players. But in many respects that approach inhibits you, because it doesn't open up enough avenues and tends to go in one direction. It is a fine direction, but it tends to stifle a sense of individuality in a player. I stress to my students that we should *never* all sound the same. Once we all sound the same, it takes the pleasure and life out of music-making.

It is the creative process that each one of us has that we learn from! You watch what I do, you try to do what I do, because I think one needs to have some sort of schooling. But if you come in with an idea that is totally different from mine, and it makes sense and sounds good, great! This is what it is all about. I don't want everybody to sound exactly like me. When I listen to Dan Hinger, I know it's him. Likewise, when I hear Cloyd Duff, I know it is him. It is all the herbs that one uses that makes a good

minestrone. If you just put in beans and tomatoes, it is boring.

Simco: *I understand that you played with the Boston Pops. This apparently led to your going to the Detroit Symphony.*

Rabbio: Let me give you some background on that. Boston University often had a "University Night at the Pops," and they always tried to feature two senior students as soloists. I thought it would be nice to try out on timpani. There wasn't much music back then, but a faculty member who taught composition and played violin wrote a timpani concerto. I believe his name was Malloy Miller, and he wrote this piece for timpani based on Indian folklore from the southwest United States. I think it was called *Nagomo*. It was fun, but it was written sort of in the German style, with the big drum on the right. It was new, and a timpani concerto was virtually unheard of at the time; this was in 1956.

I was one of the soloists, along with a pianist. I think it was one of the first times that there was a timpani soloist at the Pops, and remember that this was a time when the Pops players were members of the Boston Symphony as well. They were curious, and thought that it was kind of cute having the timpani up front there next to the conductor. Arthur Fiedler was not conducting that night; the University Symphony conductor did the honors. However, Fiedler was in the audience or backstage and heard the piece. Apparently he was impressed by my playing, and he invited me that following year to go on a three-month tour. I took the tour, one thing led to another, and there was an opening for the Detroit Symphony. In those days, there were no audition processes as we know them today. If you were invited to audition, you were recommended by a conductor or another player.

Simco: *In your case, Arthur Fiedler recommended you.*

Rabbio: That's correct. The conductor of the Detroit Symphony was Paul Paray. Milton Harris, the previous player, was only there for about four or five seasons; he had to leave because of health reasons.

Simco: *I understand that you are only the third principal timpanist of the DSO since it was founded. Lawrence Manzer was the first, and he was there from the orchestra's founding until about 1952. He was pictured in one of the first advertisements for Ludwig Hydraulic Pedal Timpani when he was in the St. Paul Symphony. These were the drums that had those rubber hoses!*

Rabbio: He was a well-known player, and Ludwig made instruments to suit Larry. If those hoses dried out, they would explode with a bang! And of course, all of that water on the calf heads wasn't too good, either.

Simco: *What was your audition for Paul Paray like?*

Rabbio: It was one-on-one. The conductor sat right next to the timpani, and right next to him sat the personnel manager. He had to be there, because if the conductor liked you, he would offer you a contract. I had no idea of what we would be asked to play. There was no music, no screens. You were face to face. Of course, nowadays it is completely different. You get the music and tempo markings, you play behind the screen, and the conductor is the last one to hear you and give his opinion.

I don't remember everything I was asked, but I do remember the last six measures of the fourth movement of the Brahms' Third Symphony, the 16th-note low F-natural roll. I thought it was a bit strange at the time. I thought, "Maybe they had just played that, and he didn't like what he heard." From that point I just went on and played. I was there for about forty-five minutes. Nowadays, if you are on stage for ten or fifteen minutes, that is a long time. I figured, "The longer I stay, the more he must like me." I don't know how many people he heard before, or if there were any after me. I was offered the job.

Simco: *Tell us about your first instruments. You mentioned that you had a pair of original Walter Light drums.*

Rabbio: The symphony didn't own very much, and I certainly didn't have any

money to buy anything, so what I had to play on were two Walter Light drums made by Walter Light himself. These were the two middle drums, and we still have them. The largest outside drum was one of Larry Manzer's old drums, one of the old Ludwig cable timpani. The small drum was a little hand-tuned drum, 23½", not in the best condition. I remember that the tuning handles were all taped because they rattled quite badly! The drum was made by a company in St. Louis called Duplex. That is what I played on for many years. It was very good experience. All the pedals worked differently, and the top drum was hand-tuned.

Simco: *When you joined the orchestra, it was very much into its recording contract with Mercury Records. Where were these recordings made?*

Rabbio: When I first started recording, we played in Ford Auditorium. The orchestra had moved there a couple of years previously, and it was a nice, attractive place with plenty of room, but it sounded horrible, as it wasn't made for concerts. None of our recordings were made there because the acoustics were so bad! We used to go over to Orchestra Hall—our present home. Back then, Orchestra Hall had been neglected. It was an absolute disaster to look at: falling plaster, birds flying around inside, people from the street living in the building, that sort of thing. When we played *fortissimos*, pieces of plaster would fall on the orchestra and pigeons would fly about. But the acoustics were phenomenal, even with all of that. It has been totally restored and is beautiful now. We would also go to Cass High School to record. It was a typical high school auditorium, with a typical shoebox shape—very live, and very easy to record in. When I first started recording, it was in mono, with only one microphone. Then they went to stereo and three microphones.

Simco: *Those recordings were very good, and the drums sounded terrific.*

Rabbio: Those were excellent recordings. I used calf heads at the time. This is the end of my thirty-eighth season; I used calf exclusively for about twenty-five years.

Simco: *Those recordings for Mercury were made under the direction of Paul Paray. Tell us about him and some of the other conductors you have worked with.*

Rabbio: Paul Paray was a great teacher for me, as he was my first music director. He had a phenomenal sense of rhythmic drive. One of his ideas was that tightness of rhythm was the key to great music-making, because it created a pulse, and without the pulse there is no music. He was able to create great excitement. Particularly in the French repertoire, I remember getting goosebumps. We would go on tour and play something like the Franck D-minor Symphony. It is not exactly the most exciting timpani part in the world, if you look strictly at the notes. We would play that almost every night on tour, and it got better and better. It was great to start with, and it always came out sounding fresh and never tedious. That demands great skill from a conductor. Same with something like the Saint-Saëns "Organ" Symphony. He also loved to do the Dvorak "New World" Symphony. And for a French conductor, he did excellent Germanic music. He did excellent Wagner. There was some music he didn't like. He didn't do much contemporary music. The year before I came, he did *The Rite of Spring*—with cuts! He just didn't like the piece.

Simco: *How long did you work with him?*

Rabbio: He was there for five years after I took over. Then came Sixten Ehrling, who was music director for ten years. He knew his scores more thoroughly than almost any conductor I have worked with since. If something was left out, he immediately knew it. You could rely on his knowledge of the score. Up until that point, our orchestra had not done too much contemporary music. He was into contemporary music, and we did a lot of it with him. If you had some horrendous tuning changes, you would look up at Sixten and know *exactly* where you were. I had great admiration for him in that sense.

Of course, presently, Neemi Järvi is our music director. He is great to work with. He is not one for rehearsing too much, but the end result is exciting. He creates something for concerts that other conductors cannot do.

Simco: *How big was the orchestra when you joined in 1958?*

Rabbio: When I joined, the orchestra was contracted for ninety players. Sixten got us up to about one hundred one or two players. We are a little lower now than we were then. When we did contemporary music, we needed the extras, so he got them for us.

Simco: *Erhling's* piece de resistance *was the* Rite of Spring, *wasn't it?*

Rabbio: That's right. The first time I really played the *Rite of Spring* was with him. It was a great experience, because for one thing, you knew where you were at all times. Interestingly enough, Sixten actually added some notes, whereas Paul Paray made cuts! Sixten added some notes to the timpani part, and they make a lot of sense.

Simco: *You mentioned that he actually spoke to Stravinsky about it.*

Rabbio: Yes. Stravinsky told him that it was a great idea, and that he actually would have liked to add those notes to the later editions. Every time we play it, I use the edition with Sixten's added notes. We recorded it with the late Antal Dorati, but he did not want the extra notes, probably because he found out that Sixten used them. He preferred the original markings.

Simco: *After Sixten left, Aldo Ceccato was music director for several years. Then the orchestra came into another "golden era" for a few years with Antal Dorati, who had a difficult temperament, but brought the orchestra back to the recording studio for Decca.*

Rabbio: The Detroit orchestra has had four "golden periods." The first was with Ossip Gabrailowitsch when the orchestra was first organized, around 1917 or thereabouts, and that's when Larry Manzer was the timpanist. And then the period when Paul Paray was music director, and that is when I started. The next "golden period" was, of course, with Antal Dorati, with his recordings. Then there were some dull times, as every orchestra goes through. And now we have Neemi Järvi, who has brought back the touring and recording.

Simco: *Tell us a little about him.*

Rabbio: He started as music director in 1990. Before that he came to us as a guest conductor, and there was a fantastic chemistry between him and the

orchestra. He loved the orchestra, and the orchestra loved him. We had just begun using the refurbished Orchestra Hall as a base. It is a glorious hall, and I think that this is one of the main reasons that Neemi came in 1990, and not earlier. He probably did not want to have to deal with Ford Auditorium, as the acoustics were so bad.

Anyway, this is now his sixth season, and we still have this love for him. He is very sincere. If you play well, he lets you know—"Great! This is wonderful playing!" If he doesn't like something, he'll let you know, and this is all right. It is very honest. You know where you stand with him, and he acknowledges that you do a good job, and he appreciates it. The audiences love him, he has wonderful charisma, and at every concert, he does encores. That doesn't happen very often.

Simco: *Under Paray and Ehrling, you were using the older instruments. When did you make the change to your present instruments?*

Rabbio: I had to change because of the repertoire we played, and the instruments themselves were no longer up to the level that they should have been. I went through periods during Sixten's time of trying some Ludwig drums, some Ringer timpani, and there was another manufacturer whose name I cannot recall, but that did not work out. Of course, a man that I admired for many years, Fred Hinger, was making drums. He was playing on these new drums at the Metropolitan Opera. I heard him playing them, and I thought, "This is probably what I need to go after." This was about 1972 or 1973; I only bought one drum, to try it out.

Simco: *Which one did you buy?*

Rabbio: At the time, he made an honest twenty-three-inch drum! All the hardware was painted red. I still have that drum, and it's a great drum! I like having a twenty-three-inch drum on top, and the serial number on that drum is either four or five. I just loved his drums from that point on. I ordered two more—the middle pedal drums—one or two years later. I still had that old Ludwig cable drum that Manzer used, and it worked pretty well. It was a thirty-inch drum, but had a very deep, unusual bowl. It was quite satisfactory. It was a little awkward to take apart and move, but it worked. I figured, "Don't fool with success!"

However, when I got these high-quality Hinger drums, it became more noticeable that it wasn't matching quite as nicely as I thought it should. So I talked to Dan Hinger, and he said, "I have a great cable-tuned drum with the Anheier-type mechanism, and I think you'll love it." So I went to his shop, which was in Leonia, New Jersey at the time, and he was working on this particular drum. He played on it, and I said, "Oh my gosh, I have never heard anything like this in my life! This is incredible!" I was worried about the cable breaking, and he said, "Look, don't worry about it. It won't break." I have had that drum twenty-five years and, knock on wood, it hasn't broken yet. This is what I have been using ever since, and it is great!

Simco: *From the result we hear on your recordings, both on Decca/London and Chandos, it is a marvelous sound. It blends so well, and your technique, which owes much to the fluidity of your wrist motion and its relaxation, really aids and abets that sound.*

Rabbio: We always hear that one must be totally relaxed, and teachers tell you this all the time, but quite often, they don't say how one gets relaxed. I was very lucky because at the very first lesson, my teacher implanted this in my mind, and I think this helped me develop this fluid motion that I have. I try to instill that same principle in my students. I see so many players nowadays that have physical problems with their wrists. They can't play because they are not comfortable. The wrists were stiff from the beginning, and the problem only became more pronounced with age.

Something unusual happened about a year ago. I had a player call me up from some town in Indiana or Ohio. He wanted to take a few lessons with me. He said there was this doctor in Cleveland who treated injuries that musicians have suffered as a result of their occupation. This doctor, whom I have never met, said that he had previously lived in Detroit and used to come to concerts there. Evidently, he noticed how fluid my hand motions were, and he recommended this fellow to me for lessons.

Simco: *Do you have any final thoughts that you might like to impart to our readers, particularly the younger students?*

Rabbio: The most important thing is to get as much experience as you can in all kinds of music. Don't specialize! When you practice, practice in such a way that every minute is spent moving in the right direction. Some students practice for three hours, but actually only benefit from about ten minutes of that time, and that is just wasting time. Quality playing is, or should be, the end result of your practice.

Be sure that you love music. If you don't love the music, maybe you should be doing something else. Love it in the sense that when you hear it and see it, emotionally you are so moved. If you want to be a symphony timpanist, go to as many concerts and see and listen to as many different players as you can. If you want to be a keyboard player, see as many keyboard players as you can. Keep that interest up and always learn.

Don't ever think you know it all. You never know it all. I don't know it all. Constantly learning new ideas keeps us from being bored. I know so many musicians who have lost interest in making music. When it becomes just another job, then it is time to retire. PN