

Interview with Lawrence Tarlow, Principal Librarian New York Philharmonic Orchestra

Introduction

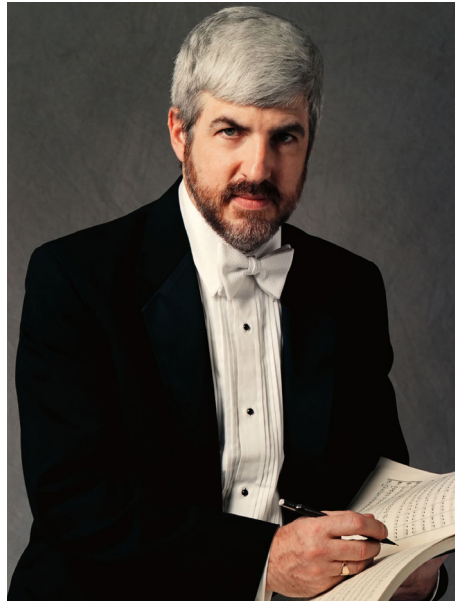
Founded by American conductor Ureli Corelli Hill in 1842, the New York Philharmonic (NYP) is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States. The NYP is one of the Big Five American orchestras and has attracted some of the world's most legendary conductors to serve as its music directors, including Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, Bruno Walter and Leonard Bernstein.

In addition to serving as the current Principal Librarian of the NYP, Lawrence Tarlow is also a former three-term President of MOLA: An Association of Music Performance Librarians. In the following interview, Tarlow summarizes his decades of experience at the NYP...

Patrick Lo (PL): Please introduce yourself.

Lawrence Tarlow (LT): My name is Lawrence Tarlow. I was born in Great Neck, New York, and grew up in Roslyn. I have been serving as the Principal Librarian of the New York Philharmonic (NYP) since August 1985. In terms of my formal training in music, I went to a local public school until the age of seventeen, but was also attending the programs of Pre-College Division of The Juilliard School¹ from age fifteen to seventeen, majoring in tuba. At Juilliard, I was a student of Joseph Novotny, former Principal Tuba of the NYP. After graduating from high school, I went to the Curtis Institute of Music² in Philadelphia from 1970 to 1974 to further my music education as a tuba major.

With regard to professional training, there is no course of study for an aspiring orchestra or ensemble librarian. We are, for the most part, autodidacts - self-taught - who learn on the job. Conservatory studies of music theory, counterpoint, and



Lawrence Tarlow

Lawrence Tarlow was interviewed by Dr. Patrick Lo from the Faculty of Library, Information & Media Science, University of Tsukuba. This article was co-authored with: Chia-Hua Lin, Ziqing Xie, Xuehang Zhou, Zerong Xie and Dr. Dickson Chiu – all from the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong.

solfege were helpful, but score-reading is something I had to learn on my own. Music copying (I started long before computer engraving programs) was something I'd been doing since age fifteen - making arrangements of existing works to play with friends - and that was again self-taught.

PL: What is your earliest musical memory?

LT: At age six, I put a tambourine between my knees in music class and played it like a bongo drum. The first piece of music I fell in love with was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. My parents had a recording, and to this day when I hear the work, I expect the music to skip just where that recording did.

PL: How did you get into orchestral librarian work as a teenager?

LT: I was probably fifteen years old then, but I made an orchestra in my bedroom by hanging from the ceiling the names of different music instruments - imagining where they would be sitting in the orchestra. I would be sitting in the middle of my bedroom, listening to a recording conducting my own my imaginary orchestra.

Basically, I taught myself to read a score and understand the structure of a full orchestra by starting with music of the classical era... [This] is usually not so complicated because the first violins play most of the melodic line. The woodwind instruments toss the melody around or play harmony. The horns are playing with the woodwinds and the trumpets and timpani are playing only certain notes for emphasis. The top line of the score is the flutes, followed by the oboes and at the bottom of the score is the double bass. With a piano score, you don't always know what instruments are playing, but the full score shows every line of music of every instrument.

In terms of how I discovered my passion towards the work of an orchestra librarian, when I was still in high school I was already handling the band and the orchestral music materials as a librarian. During that time, I realized that the band director had to spend a lot of time putting folders on music stands at the beginning of each rehearsal - something I found to be most inefficient. So, I proposed myself to the band director and said, "I don't have a class before the band rehearsal. How about I come to the band rehearsal earlier and put all the folders out and pick them up afterwards," and his reply was, "Okay, that would be nice." Basically, I streamlined the system for handing out music at all the rehearsals. During my time at Curtis, I also served as their student orchestra librarian. It was basically how my training in orchestral librarianship began. At Tanglewood, I started to learn how to work as a proper orchestra librarian.

Even at this stage of my career, I am still learning. I think the job nature of orchestral librarianship fits my personality very well - and I absolutely love the process, esoterica, and trivia, etc.

PL: Could you describe your career path to becoming an orchestra librarian at the NYP?

LT: I served as librarian of the Berkshire (now Tanglewood) Music Center Orchestra during the summers of 1973–78, worked for the music publishers C. F. Peters Corporation and G. Schirmer, Inc., and became the Oklahoma Symphony's first full-time librarian in 1977. During my 1979–85 tenure as librarian of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra,³ I also played the occasional second tuba part, including a recording of the Berlioz Requiem. I am an active member and former three-term president of MOLA: An Association of Music Performance Librarians.⁴

The two seasons spent in music publishing gave me a great insight into the other end of the pipeline, so to speak. At C. F. Peters, I was processing both sales and rental orders, picking the music to be shipped, and making packing slips and invoices for the rental orders. At G. Schirmer, I processed rental orders and public inquiries, working with church organists, high school and university conductors, and librarians for all sizes of orchestras and bands.

My final audition for Principal Librarian of the NYP took place in April 1985, and Zubin Mehta asked me in his most intimidating Music Director's voice, "Why do you want to work for the New York Philharmonic?" I replied, "Because I'm from New York and I want my children to know their grandparents."

And I won the job.

PL: As the Principal Librarian of the NYP, could you describe your job and areas of responsibilities?

LT: As the Principal Librarian, I am responsible for overseeing the operations of the NYP Library, from renting music or acquiring new editions, through music preparation for performance, to post-performance record keeping. There are three librarians in the section: the Principal Librarian and two Assistant Principal Librarians. We are all responsible for the accuracy, clarity, organization, and distribution of the music the orchestra performs. Indeed, we are musical sleuths who must:

- figure out which publisher to contact for any piece of music
- possess knowledge of instrumental ranges, transpositions, and arcane notational conventions
- be highly organized multi-taskers with an encyclopedic knowledge of the repertoire and an eye for detail
- ... and have very neat handwriting!

In my opinion, the most important thing we orchestra librarians do is to keep track of the entire collection, and to put the right piece of paper in front of the right person at the

right time. Every piece of paper onstage passes through the NYP Library. We acquire and rent music, prepare bow markings as indicated by string section leaders, correct printing errors, and fix unworkable page turns. We also put out and pick up the players' parts and the conductors' scores, and occasionally the conductor's baton. We keep performance records, and administer the database of artists, repertoire, and performances. We also disseminate instrumentation details for each work to the operations, artistic, and orchestra personnel departments; fix damaged music; offer estimated timings and durations of the pieces... and are fluent in score reading. I am proud to say that we are the second-best score readers in the building after the conductor.

When the orchestra goes on an overseas tour, the most difficult aspect of the job for us is preparing music... We must have all the music for the tour, in addition to as much music as we can carry for programs coming after, because the players need to prepare for that as well. There are four library trunks that travel together with the orchestra: the heaviest trunks... contain all the parts, some of the Music Director's scores, music for the weeks following tour, manuscript paper, and office supplies. Usually, two librarians go on tour and one remains in NYC to help in an emergency via fax or e-mail, in addition to keeping up with the workload.



*Lawrence Tarlow following the score in the Hanoi Opera House while the New York Philharmonic rehearses *Ti e n Quâ n Ca*, the national anthem of Vietnam*

As orchestra librarians, all three of us are official members of the NYP, and our names appear on the 106-member roster. Each librarian was hired by the Music Director. I was hired by Zubin Mehta, and Sara Griffin was hired by Alan Gilbert following an audition before an orchestra committee. That involved extensive oral and written examinations covering repertoire and industry knowledge, publisher information, music copying, written bowings and cuts, all orchestral instruments and their transpositions, and copyright law.

PL: When you were working as an orchestra librarian trainee, did you have a mentor, and what kind of guidance did you seek from your mentor?

LT: My mentor was Victor Alpert... Principal Librarian of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.⁵ He was the one who trained me in many different ways, and was always there to answer my questions. The telephone wires between Boston and Oklahoma City had a lot of use when I started my career!

PL: How have working relationships between the orchestra librarians and the orchestra players (including conductors) evolved over the past four decades?

LT: For the NYP players, they all come to the Library for their music, so we certainly get to know all of them, including their personal idiosyncrasies. For musicians who have poor eyesight, they want to have their music enlarged. Certain musicians only want to see the same parts they have been using in the past - no new editions.

Some would come on Saturday nights to get the music for the Tuesday rehearsals. On the other hand, there are early acquirers who want their music six or eight weeks before the performance. In other words, different musicians learn in different styles and at different paces. Nowadays, we sometimes provide music in PDF for players who use devices when practicing. For stage use, though, all music is printed, not electronic.

PL: Some orchestras have full-time librarians on staff, while some do not. How does the work of an orchestra librarian help improve the quality of a performance?

LT: The work of an orchestra librarian directly contributes to the quality of performance by removing doubt in a performer's mind... The level of concentration required to perform at the highest level is upset when the performer wonders about the printed part. A librarian ensures that the bowings are correct, fixes errors, and can adjust page turns in a way that a performer without specialist skills cannot. When a player says he or she has made a correction in an idiosyncratic way... the question a librarian asks is, "That's fine for you, but if you're sick the day after tomorrow, will your substitute be able to read what you've done?"

There are also emergencies - a player might leave a part at home and a non-playing

librarian is able to track down a replacement part, whether from another orchestra, the Internet, or the rental library of a music publisher.

PL: Could you give our readers a brief introduction to the NYP, including the Orchestra Library?

LT: There can be no brief history of the Orchestra, since the NYP performed its very first concert in December 1842. The NYP is one of the leading American orchestras, popularly referred to as the “Big Five.”

The NYP is indeed a very large orchestra. However, I think the biggest department of the NYP is the fundraising department... usually called the development department because all American orchestras depend on private philanthropy and civic support to fuel concert programs that serve community needs. In the United States, there is very little governmental support for arts and culture. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult for orchestras, art museums, ballet companies, and theater companies to raise enough money to survive. Hence, almost every large orchestra and opera company in the United States has a very, very large development (fundraising) department, and there is no exception for the NYP.

In terms of staffing, the NYP has about 106 musicians; that is including three librarians and 103 instrumentalists. On the administration side, before COVID-19, the NYP had about seventy-five people on staff, but that’s been reduced. With reference to the staffing structure of the NYP Library, we have altogether three orchestra librarians working full-time.

PL: What have been the most challenging projects at the NYP?

LT: It would have to be our staged versions of Broadway shows. They are not written for a symphony orchestra and we have to make them work.

PL: Where do the majority of the NYP musicians come from?

LT: The NYP players come from all over the world and have since 1842.

PL: From 2009-2017 Maestro Alan Gilbert served as Music Director of the NYP. Could you describe his working style?

LT: Maestro Alan Gilbert treated everyone with tremendous respect, and a great deal of humor. The NYP Library is next door to the Music Director’s suite. I would often go there and ask the Music Director’s assistant, “Does Maestro Gilbert have a moment? I only have a simple question for him.” The answer would often be, “Yes, he does.” For a

librarian, this sort of easy communication with the Music Director is a wonderful thing.

I will tell you a funny story. When I am sitting at my desk inside the Orchestra Library, my back is to the entrance door. For a 10:00 a.m. rehearsal, I would often come in at 7:45 a.m. - for the reason that I could get more work done when the office telephone doesn't ring. As I was sitting at my desk one morning, I heard a voice from behind me, and that was Alan Gilbert. I hadn't heard him come in. I looked down and realized that Maestro Gilbert was wearing sneakers or rubber-soled shoes. So, I jokingly said to him, "We librarians prefer that music directors wear hard-soled shoes." The next morning, he came in with no shoes at all, just wearing socks! It was indicative of the relationship that he felt he could make a joke. However, that was something that you would not expect from the older generation of orchestra conductors.



Lawrence Tarlow receiving instructions during the flight to Pyongyang from Music Director Lorin Maazel regarding an arrangement of Arirang to be performed as an encore to the Philharmonic's concert in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Lorin Maazel would often want to talk about the repertoire, or even make jokes about something that had no relevance to music. The performances were always on his mind, though. He would sometimes say, "Did you hear that place [in the music] last night? Listen to it again tonight. It's going to be different." Different conductors have different personalities - that is why the same piece of music could sound differently when conducted by different conductors, even with the same orchestra.

PL: What would be the worst nightmare that could ever happen to an orchestra librarian?

LT: Everything stops in the middle of an orchestra rehearsal and you hear the dreaded announcement, "We need a librarian on the stage." We have all experienced that once or twice in our career... and it is a terrible feeling. If it is a live concert and you see the conductor walking towards the stage door after turning the first few pages, because you have put the wrong score out - these could be our worst nightmares.

PL: Were there any emergency situations in the past when you had to make use of your professional skills and experiences to resolve them in order to keep the show running?

LT: The NYP was doing a complete performance of the opera *Béatrice et Bénédict* by Hector Berlioz. The first oboist came to me and said, "I left my music for the entire opera at home!" I said, "Oh, that is very bad indeed," because it would take him forty minutes to drive home, and it was just twenty minutes before the call to the stage. I asked, "Is there someone at home who can bring the music, so you will at least have it for Act II?" Unfortunately, he said, there was nobody home. The librarian I called at the Metropolitan Opera couldn't locate their music for this opera, so, I sat on the stage between the first flute and first oboe turning pages in a full score from which the oboist had to read. I also was pointing to the oboe line in the score so the player could play without having to first find his line. Another reason score-reading is a necessary skill for us librarians!

PL: As the Principal Librarian of the NYP, could you describe your management and leadership style?

LT: I treat my colleagues with respect - respect for their abilities as librarians, and respect for ideas they propose. My way to address a project is not always the best way, and if a colleague proposes what is clearly a better way, that's the way we do it. If a colleague wants to handle a project from start to finish, once we've discussed the methods, I stay out of the way unless asked to weigh in. The NYP Library works at the highest professional level and I try to set an example by making certain my work is at that level. A friend said to me, "When you say something is 'good enough,' you know it isn't."

I make every effort to provide the library with the tools - software and analog - and the information we need to do our job. If an administrative department needs to be pressed

for information, I keep asking (politely) until we have the information we need. Sometimes the information is not forthcoming from the administrative side... when possible I try to get that information directly from the Music Director.

I also make certain there are not unrealistic expectations for what the library can do. When necessary, I explain the scope of a project to the relevant people in order that they understand what can and cannot be done, and how long said project will take. The library does not over-promise and by being honest and realistic, our scope of work and expected completion dates are accepted.

The library is respected because of this realistic approach, and because of the professional quality of the work we do for conductors, soloists, orchestra musicians, and administrative staff. Without this respect, we can't be as useful to the orchestra and administration as we would like to be.

PL: I understand you are an active member and former three-term president of MOLA: An Association of Music Performance Librarians. Is there any reason why a majority of the MOLA members come from North America and Western Europe, while only very few come from Asia, Russia, or Eastern Europe?

LT: First of all, librarians are not members of MOLA. Rather, musical organizations are members and their librarians benefit from the institutional membership. Some non-North American organizations are not typically joiners of groups such as MOLA. I don't know the reason for that. However, as librarians move from a MOLA organization to a non-MOLA, sometimes they convince their new orchestra to join. The Berlin Philharmonic and Vienna State Opera are examples of this. We have tremendous participation from Nordic organizations and UK-based organizations. We have member organizations in Asia, as well. Organizations from two Baltic countries are represented in our membership. Why are some regions not represented? I don't know. You'll have to ask them.

PL: Throughout your career as an orchestra librarian, did you ever have any second thoughts or regrets?

LT: Well, every one of us in our own lives has things we wish we had done differently. But in terms of my choice of career, I would say, "No!" I love being an orchestra librarian. Orchestral librarianship is about the process of music preparation, and this is something that I am most interested in. I like to find out how everything works behind the scene, and the orchestra library is where the details of music preparation come together. So, I have no regrets at all. I get to hear great music performed by great artists and I get to work closely with them also.

PL: Can you describe what it is like to be working and collaborating in such close



*Lawrence Tarlow conferring with composer Peter Eötvös at Kölner Philharmonie during a rehearsal for the world premiere of *Senza sangue**

proximity with some of the greatest talents in western classical music - maestros from Leonard Bernstein to Lorin Maazel, and also with hundreds of other singers and musicians of star caliber across the globe?

LT: Knowing how to handle the different personalities of the orchestra players and conductors is absolutely important. In fact, every conductor is charismatic, and many of them are definitely dynamic figures on the podium. They simply cannot be conductors without being charismatic. An important part of my job as an orchestra librarian is to deal with those personalities... You have to learn what to say when dealing with certain personalities, and also to avoid talking and to stay out of their way because they might think you are menial and therefore don't want to give you any time. Without being a psychologist, understanding the different personalities is vital to be successful as an orchestra librarian.

PL: What would you be if not an orchestra librarian?

LT: Probably, not the tuba player at the NYP, but that was my dream as a student!

PL: Could you describe your most memorable moment with the NYP?

LT: I have had many memorable moments, but hearing European rhythmic applause for the first time, on the 1988 European tour, was spine-tingling.

PL: Who is your favorite composer?

LT: Prokofiev - great use of the tuba.

The impact of COVID-19

PL: COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. How have the New York Philharmonic and you yourself been coping with COVID-19?

LT: Following the general rehearsal on Thursday, March 12, 2020, word was received that the concert that evening and the following performances of that program - Friday, Saturday, and Tuesday - were cancelled.

Immediately, I gathered the music that was on the stage level, picked up the music that had been left at the stage door for extra and substitute musicians to collect, and returned everything to the library. E-mails were sent to publishers notifying them of the cancelled performances and most publishers waived their usual cancellation fees. An e-mail auto-signature about the cancellation was made active. After that, I went home to await further developments.

It was announced on March 23 that there would be no concerts in what remained of the 2019–20 season.

Needless to say, the further developments were terrible. Eventually, New York City became a locus of the pandemic. By May 1, there were more than 10,000 deaths in New York City alone attributed to COVID-19. Certainly, this city, and the world, had been turned upside down. David Geffen Hall was closed, all of Lincoln Center's buildings were closed, and no one was to come to any of the buildings without permission.

Finally, permission was received to come to David Geffen Hall on May 11. While there was not music to prepare for concerts, there was music to be processed: the music from the cancelled concerts needed to be removed from the stage folders and sorted again by composer and title, as did music that had been prepared and put into folders for following concerts. A list of all the music out with players had to be made, and players contacted to ask that music be returned. Rented music had to be returned, once the sets were complete, and there were invoices for shipping charges to be processed.

With no concerts, there was no music to prepare. On June 10, an announcement was made that concerts through January 5, 2021, were cancelled. Given this cancellation, it was decided that long-deferred maintenance of David Geffen Hall could be undertaken and it was necessary to empty the entire building: for the Philharmonic, this meant instruments, offices, dressing rooms, and the library. The librarians packed more than 150 boxes of music shelved in our in-building storage area plus the entire working library, including music, scores, reference materials, and accoutrements. Everything was moved to a temporary library space.

It was interesting for us librarians to have our hands on nearly every piece of music the Philharmonic had in its collection, going back to our founding in 1842. The most interesting find is a score and set of parts of an orchestration by Franz Liszt of the Andante cantabile movement of Beethoven's Archduke Trio, which was performed in the 1870s. [Note: the score of this movement can be seen [here](#).]⁶

Finally, the members of orchestra began to make videos of chamber music performances to be streamed on the Philharmonic's website, and the library has had some involvement with this. We scanned parts to be sent digitally to the players for practice and provided physical parts for the recording sessions.

PL: Why do we turn to music in times of crisis?

LT: The use of music to comfort in times of crisis is a long-established practice, and is perhaps as old as humanity itself. It's the documentation of such use that is comparatively recent, not the actual use. This is a question for sociologists and philosophers, not an orchestra librarian!

PL: How would you summarize your decades of experience and contributions to the profession of performance music librarianship?

LT: Well, nothing deeply philosophical comes to mind at this point, but I must highlight that it is not an easy job being an orchestra librarian. In order to become a successful orchestra librarian, one must get used to dealing with constant pressures, as well as with different personalities.

As an orchestra player, you don't want to miss a single note in a big oboe solo, otherwise people would start to take notice right away. It is equally embarrassing for us orchestra librarians to make any mistakes even though we are not the ones actually performing onstage. I tell people that it is not a mistake until it leaves the room - meaning that we have to look at the music that we are preparing very carefully before we put it on the stage. But if you are not able to deal with that sort of pressure and anxiety, you will probably be very unhappy. Luckily, I can deal with the pressure and anxiety in a



Lawrence Tarlow moderating a post-concert panel discussion with members of the New York Philharmonic

way acceptable to myself. If the job nature of an orchestra librarian happens to fit your personality, it could be great fun, and you could derive a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from it.

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