

A Conversation with Kauko Kahila

by Douglas Yeo

Kauko (nicknamed "Ko-Ko") Emil Kahila was the bass trombonist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1952 to 1972. Before coming to Boston, he played bass trombone for a decade in the symphony orchestras of Houston and St. Louis. In August, 1986, while at Tanglewood to hear an all-brass concert featuring the Boston Symphony brass section, the Canadian Brass and the Empire Brass Quintet, Kahila offered some candid thoughts about his 30-year career.

Why don't we start with a little bit about your musical background?

I'm of Finnish descent, but was born in Norwood, Massachusetts, right outside Boston. My parents immigrated to the U.S. around the turn of the century. But back in Finland, my grandfather was the village clarinetist, and my father played violin with him. Since we have such a musical family stretching from Finland to the Boston Symphony, there's actually been quite a bit written about my grandfather. When my father came to the U.S., he started playing baritone horn in the village band in Norwood which at the time had a big Finnish community. That's where I got hooked on music. I picked up an old alto horn, but soon got tired of playing off-beats. I heard the trombones having fun so I said, "Hey, that's for me." My first trombone came from the Finnish band. Someone had notched the seven positions so when you played fast, it made a loud clicking sound! I finally gave up on that horn and got a good instrument.

When did you decide that playing trombone was something you wanted to do seriously?

Right there. I was about 16 at the time. When I started to practice, I was hooked. During my senior year in high school I played in the New England Conservatory Orchestra. I spent two days there and three in school in Norwood. The trombone players were real backstage artists. I thought, "Wow, listen to them." But when they got on stage, it just sounded like K&S*!! So it ended up that



Bill Moyer and Kauko Kahila.

I was playing first trombone in the college group.

When I was a kid my parents wanted me to stay and work in a factory. They thought music was a chancey career and that a factory job was steady and secure. The factory I worked for has already closed, but the orchestra is still here! When my father saw how determined I was to play trombone, he had a talk with my teacher and asked, "Is he wasting his time?" And he (Waldemar Lillebach) answered, "By no means." So my father was then on my side and helped me along. My mother still thought the factory was better, though. Mothers like to be on the safe side with their kids.

Actually, playing tenor trombone was my first real forte. I had a good range all over the horn. But my first professional job was on bass trombone, in Houston. The conductor, Ernst Hoffmann, said, "Can you play bass trombone?" I said, "Sure," but I'd never had one in my hand before then.

Before we get to Houston, with whom did you study at the Conservatory?

Well, I studied with (Hans) Waldemar (Durck) Lillebach who was the bass trombonist with the BSO. I think he was here only six or seven years (1934-1941). Then (John) Coffey came—they switched orchestras. Coffey came here from Cleveland and Lillebach replaced him there.

What was Lillebach like?

He was a tall Danish fellow. He was the kind of man who would tell you something only once. I remember one time when I was puffing my cheeks out and he said, "We don't puff our cheeks out." Fine. But when I slipped into it again he took one of his big fingers and—WHAP!—right in the kisser. Boy, I sucked in!

Did you ever do it again?

Nope! It was just the same with beating your foot. He said, "Imagine one hundred and four musicians on stage beating their feet." So I slipped into it again and he just came over and stepped on my toes. I'll tell you, I never did that again either.

What kind of player was he?

Well, he had this big silver Schmidt bass trombone which I later bought from him. He had a big sound, but some of that was the Schmidt talking. That horn was a beauty, with a big, rich sound. He was a great orchestral player and had excellent phrasing. But Lillebach didn't demonstrate too much in lessons. He felt, like I do, that if you can't teach the subject by words, then you're not really sure of it yourself. If you just play for a student, well, that's monkey see, monkey do, and that's not all there is to it. So, he was a tough teacher. I was always the last student of the day, so we had a standard thing that if it was a bad lesson, I paid for the coffee.

Did you end up buying very much coffee?

Nope. I wasn't going to let him get me into that one!

Whatever happened to him?

After he left Cleveland (1941-1948), he went back to Denmark for awhile, but all his old buddies were gone. I did see him once in New York after he came back here.

Around the time I studied with him, they started the Tanglewood school (The Tanglewood Music Center, then called the Berkshire Music Center, was opened in 1940) and for two years, I played first trombone here. (Leonard) Bernstein had a room right next to me in those days.

During my time there, (Jacob) Raichman (BSO principal trombonist, 1926-1955) would rehearse the trombones and tuba on the orchestral parts we were playing. He gave us many valuable pointers. One of his more memorable sayings at this time was, "We must charge our lips up," meaning to warm up and practice.

Then I auditioned and got the bass trombone job in Houston in 1941. Hoffmann, the conductor in Houston, told me, "You must play this German instrument I have." Well, I tried it and the slide was just awful. It was impossible. I just kept it at home and took my own horn out—I think it was a Conn—and he never knew the difference. Then the War came along, and I joined the Army Air Force Band and went to Florida in May, 1942. I played first trombone in the Army.

After the service, I went back to Houston for one more year. It was a good place to start a career, but then I auditioned for St. Louis which was a much better job. The conductor was Vladimir Goldschmann. I played eight seasons there on bass trombone. At the same time, in the summer, they had the Muni (Municipal) Opera, and I played first trombone for about five years there. Then there came an opening for Boston and I figured I'd throw my hat in the ring. I actually came to the BSO at the end of the (1951-52) season and finished up the season with Boston, and that spring we went on tour—the first American orchestra to go into Russia.

When you auditioned for the Boston Symphony, how did the audition work?

Well, you didn't have 200 candidates like you do now! Raichman or the other players in the orchestra would tell (Music Director Charles) Munch, "You ought to listen to this man." So they must have heard about me in St. Louis and Rosario Mazzeo, the personnel manager, called me to play an audition. I didn't have anything prepared—they just put music on my stand and I played it. Then Munch said, "You must play a scale." I played a couple of scales, two octaves; that was for intonation. He figured if you can play a scale in tune, you're in. Then he gave me *Till Eulenspiegel* to read. I played it and he said, "Oh, Bravo! Encore!" I played it a second time. And he said, "Bravo! Bravo! I must have encore!" I played it a third time. I didn't clam—it was one of those days when everything was right there.

And that was that. I did play the *Evening Star* or something, and a short time later they informed me that I had the position.

Sometime earlier you wrote some trombone studies that Robert King publishes.

manuscript and he said, "I'll write them out for you." Actually he made the first publication. We became good friends, but unfortunately he died shortly after that. Later I brought them to Bob King and he published them. But that's Jaap's manuscript in the King edition.



BSO Low Brass Section (1953)

Right. At the time I wrote them, I had gone through almost everything written for trombone, and it wasn't much. I was at the conservatory and decided to write some studies myself. I'd write a study and then bring it in and play it for Lillebach. He didn't want to give me a lesson on them, but he was interested in hearing them. They kind of lay dormant for awhile, until I met the bass trombone player in the Concertgebouw Orchestra, Jaap Klemann. He was very good with

Did you ever write anything else?

I wrote a French horn and trombone duet that's been performed (published by Edition Musicus); it's called *Andante and Allegro*. I also arranged it for two trombones. Then I wrote a piece called *The Brass Ride* for three trumpets, four horns, three trombones and tuba. When I was teaching at Boston University we played it, but that's about it. For a little while I wanted to be a composer, but then I got involved in the "slush pump" and that was that.

Tell us about the double valve instrument you developed.

The double valve came about when we were playing the Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra* which, as you know, was commissioned by Koussevitsky and premiered by the Boston Symphony (Author's note: The Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra* was first performed in 1944, with John Coffey being the first bass trombonist to negotiate the gliss from low B to F). I figured that there must be a way to get the low B, and if I added another length of tubing I could do it. I made the plans for it and submitted it to the Reynolds Company and they said, "Sure, we'll do it." So it worked. But you know the mechanics of the trombone; the air doesn't go as freely through the valves. But I didn't have too much trouble, I used to make the gliss pretty well with it. The secret is to hit it, and when you move the slide, you're already off the second valve. Anyway, Reynolds gave me one of the horns since I had the idea and then they commercially marketed it—Ostrander used one in the Philharmonic, too. I didn't use it too much, only when I had to because I liked my single valve Reynolds and the Schmidt better. But it was a good horn.



Kauko Kahila (1955)

What horns did the other players in the section use?

Well, here's a funny story. (Eugene) Ormandy was guest conducting here at Tanglewood and he liked the sound of the trombone section. We got a letter from

him where he said, "I'm sure you fellows play the same make instrument because you blend so well. What do you all use?" We wrote back and said, "We're sorry to inform you that Raichman plays a Bach, Bill Moyer (second trombone, 1952-1956) plays a Conn, and I play a Reynolds!" So much for the matched horn theory. Actually, it's the player, not the instrument, that makes the sound.

Speaking of conductors, Stokowski came to conduct once and we were doing the Schubert *Unfinished Symphony*. There's a little tricky place at the end of the second movement—well, I never had trouble with it. But he must have had a problem with some other players because he said, "Bass trombone, you must use a mute there." I said, "That's not correct, it doesn't call for a mute, and it's not right to use one." "You must use it," he said. All right. I played with a mute for the rehearsal but come the concert, I left the mute out and made it nice. He smiled—he didn't even know!

A funny thing happened here (at Tanglewood) with Bernstein conducting. I forget what we were playing, but the cymbal player hit the gong and the gut broke. The gong came down in steps off the stage and then it came in front of Bernstein and rolled around - wow...wow...wow - well, it brought down the house. Things just happen.

Sometimes we'd give it right back to the conductor. One of (Arthur) Fiedler's jokes was that at the end of *Bugler's Holiday*, he would give an extra downbeat that nobody would play since it wasn't in the music. You know, Bill Moyer (who is now personnel manager of the BSO) was in on this, too. The whole brass group decided one night that if he did it, we would give him that extra beat. So, sure enough, it did happen and we woofed that note out. And Fiedler never did *that* again!

With Charles Munch, the orchestra made many famous recordings including the Berlioz *Requiem*. What was recording like when you were in the BSO?

Well, in the beginning we recorded on stage, and it was a good sound. But then they wanted a new sound, a different dimension, so they put the orchestra on the main floor. They took the seats out and put us where the audience sits. The orchestra kept doing that even through (Erich) Leinsdorf. In fact, we recorded



1960 Far Eastern tour banquet in Manila.



"Lohengrin" recording session (1964)

Lohengrin with him in the middle of the summer in Symphony Hall. It was hot and before the hall had air conditioning. Then we had a big truck outside the hall hooked up to some portable air conditioning ducts set up inside so we could breathe! Leinsdorf conducted that whole thing from memory - he really had a great memory.

How about touring with the orchestra?

On the first tour I took with Boston, in 1952, I played the *Rite of Spring* with (Pierre) Monteux conducting. I had to sight-read that in Paris where it was first performed. Now that was quite a thing.

The 1960 Australia/Asia trip was a big one—eight weeks. We all started off friends and by the end, well... For some reason, the management fouled up the bookings back home so not everyone could fit on the plane. They drew lots to see who would get the first plane home. It made for a little friction as you can imagine. I flew on an Electra prop-jet on the way back and that was the one that was breaking up a lot then. I wasn't too happy about that. That was a pretty successful tour—Japan, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand. But the thing about a long trip is that you have a hard time practicing. Eight weeks was a long time

without being able to really get down to serious practicing.

On the 1956 tour we went to Finland which was nice since I spoke Finnish. I was really proud to represent our country. When we went to Russia, that's when I really felt like we were showing something. I played over my head, probably, just to impress them. The audiences there couldn't believe it. We were the first American orchestra to play there. They were applauding for a half an hour. After we had left the stage and changed our clothes, they were still applauding. They couldn't believe the sound they heard. So that was a thrill to represent the United States in that way. When we were in Finland, I went by myself to visit (composer Jean) Sibelius. **Why didn't you ask him to write a trombone concerto!**

He wasn't writing anymore by then. He asked me what language I wanted to speak. I guess he spoke four or five languages. I said, "I can speak Finnish." So we had a good talk. The surprising thing is that when you see a picture of Sibelius, you think he's a big man. In fact, he was rather short; but he holds himself well. He appears to be big—very proud and serious looking.

Could you give us some personal remembrances of some other colleagues? How about John Coffey?

I didn't know him that well because I was in St. Louis when he was in the Boston orchestra. I did frequent his music store and we became friends. Raichman was a wonderful player; he used to play with a knee vibrato, not in the orchestra, but when he'd play a solo or something. He'd put the slide on his knee and juggle it. I tried it, but my legs were too long and it's hard to get it going right. He had short legs so it was easier.

Did Raichman ever talk about Joannes Rochut? (Raichman and Rochut played together in the Boston Symphony from 1926-1930.)

Well, not much, but he talked a lot about Blazhevich.

Did he know Blazhevich in Russia?

Yes. He said Blazhevich was always off in some corner writing one of his studies. He talked about him a lot—said he was a big man.

What do you see as some of the big differences between the brass players today and those of, say, 30 to 40 years ago?

The old timers like Raichman couldn't really cut the American jazz type playing.

But when I was studying, I used to play dance jobs to make a couple of extra bucks. The American players can shift from classics to jazz types easier than the Europeans who first came over.

I can just imagine Raichman, the old school Russian, trying to swing!

It just didn't happen. To me this is a big change in the direction of serious players. As far as sound, the sound today really isn't that different from that big old German sound of the old days.

What about the trend of players, especially young ones, to use the biggest equipment possible?

Well, that's not always good. For instance, for Pops (Author's note: The Boston Pops Orchestra is made up of members of the Boston Symphony) I would never use the Schmidt because it's just too big and you need more speed and a quicker response so I would go to the American horn on that literature. Some of the students nowadays think that the instrument makes all the difference. But in most cases it doesn't. It's what you imagine the sound to be. It's the concept of the sound that's most important. I

would take a student's horn sometimes and make it sound totally different from the way he could. You need to imagine what you're going to create and you'll do it. Sometimes it's not just the mouthpiece either—that can become a crutch.

As a teacher for many years at Boston University, what kind of things did you stress to your students?

The basic thing is that you have to have good embouchure, to know where the pressure is, what's vibrating and so forth. A lot of students would choke. That was the hardest thing—to get them to breathe. They had to know the scales for me because the scales will teach you intonation. I'd have them go through the Rochut/Bordogni etudes, Kopprasch and Blazhevich as well as my studies. Dorothy Ziegler also made a record of the accompaniment of some of the Rochut pieces. The only problem with that is that the record keeps going and after you've played about five of them your lips are hanging!

What kind of advice would you give to today's aspiring players preparing for auditions?

Well, I'm sure you're aware of it, but it's the nerves. I had quite a discussion one time with Richard Burgin who was concertmaster and assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony for many years. On one tour we were talking and he said, "You know, we don't really sell our ability—we sell our nerves." Because by this time, the ability should already be second nature and if you can control your nerves, you can get everything else to work. If you get the "buck," you can almost guarantee you're going to miss that note. Taking some deep breaths usually helped me—just let your body relax. If you're sure of your instrument and your nerves are under control, things happen. I think that's the most important thing—the nerves. The instrument is secondary.

As far as actually preparing for the audition, knowing the excerpts is of course important. But you need to be at the point in your playing where you don't have to woodshed them anymore. At every audition I played I didn't know what was coming up. You have to have things totally automatic. I remember when I was auditioning for Golschmann in St. Louis that he was conducting in back of me. And he said, "You're not with the beat!" Well, I wasn't going to let that intimidate me. I took the stand, turned it around, faced him in the eye and I said, "I'm ready."

What was his reaction?

His reaction was, "That's not necessary." And I got the job. See, they try to work you over sometimes. And if you control yourself, they'll see that too. Knowing the orchestral parts is important. But also you should be enough of a reader that you can read anything that's put in front of you. You can't depend on having a super day. Your playing has to be at the point when on your worst day, it is already excellent playing.

Have faith in yourself, practice and listen to yourself. A lot of students—they're not listening. They think they're doing something, but they're not. Listen. And work hard. It's not going to come easy. But it's worth it. As my teacher told me, "You must play better than the conductor expects you to play." Then they can't ask for anything better because it's good already. As players, that's our job—to put the show over for the conductor.



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