

The new American-born musicians: tired of playing second fiddle

The view from the second horn

By Helen Epstein

On the mornings he does not have an early call, Edward Birdwell, who plays second horn in the New York City Ballet orchestra, takes out his instrument at home and gets in an hour of practice before commuter traffic spills off the West Side Highway and disturbs the silence. If he has had a midnight rehearsal with the American Brass Quintet, which is frequently the case, he takes whatever music he needs with him and practices when he can—in an empty room at the New York State Theater; at home, if there is a long enough break between jobs; and at the Aspen Festival office near Lincoln Center, where he works as assistant dean. Birdwell has several jobs—as do most New York musicians, aside from the 92 members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the 106 players of the New York Philharmonic, who enjoy a guaranteed 52 weeks' pay.

Free-lancers like Birdwell (he calls himself this despite his 21-week stint at the Ballet this season) have no such guarantee, and a large proportion of their time is spent lining up jobs, practicing music they will play for one or two performances only, and developing extraordinary skill as sight readers. Successful free-lancers are, of necessity, crack musicians who nonetheless lack the security their colleagues in regular orchestras have grown used to.

"With the cost of living the way it is and my expenses being what they are, I'd be living in abject poverty if I made any less than \$10,000 a year," says Birdwell, in his dry Texas drawl. "I run up about \$600 worth of taxi fares traveling inside the city alone; I have to take care of two sets of tails, three tuxedos, a couple of good-looking dark suits for winter and a white jacket for summer; one of my horns cost \$1,000 and the other was \$1,500—they have to be maintained and insured, even though they depreciate in value every year; I pay out about \$2,000 in substitute fees when I can't be at a concert; and like all free-lancers I have to take good care of my health—especially my teeth—or else I'd be in terrible trouble. I don't see how I could live comfortably for less than \$20,000. Besides, why should it be a bad thing for a musician to make money? Why do people think a musician should subsidize his own art?"

Last year, Birdwell earned \$30,000. One-third of this figure came from the New York City Ballet and the rest was evenly divided among his earnings as member of the American Brass Quintet, his salary at Aspen and his free-lancer's fees. There are

some musicians who make more money than he does, and many who earn far less. When asked whether it is talent, push or politics that is responsible for his success, the horn player shrugs. "The guys who aren't working say it's politics and the guys who are working attribute it to their ability. The music business is like any other business. There are cliques. There are always people whom it's good to know."

As one might imagine, Ed Birdwell is an activist, a prototype of the young, unionized, American-born-and-trained musician who has supplanted the European-born majority in the nation's orchestras and is wreaking considerable havoc upon American musical life in the process. His approach to his profession seems very different from that of, say, Hugo Burghauser, a 77-year-old bassoonist who came to New York in 1941. "For me, music was a hobby for which I had the good fortune to be paid," says Burghauser, who played with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra before he retired. Like many refugees, he lives with mementos of the past: Rosenthal china, Biedermeier furniture, old volumes of Goethe and Tolstoy, photographs signed by Toscanini, Richard Strauss and Lotte Lehmann. He feels that most contemporary conductors are no better than plumbers on the podium, and that union musicians are untowardly materialistic. Although he recently taped a broadcast of Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" (1912), he did so out of duty rather than enthusiasm: He finds modern music abrasive to the ear.

Birdwell not only likes to play and listen to new music, but also, as a member of the American Brass Quintet, he frequently commissions it. His collection of over 1,500 records includes music by John Cage, Elliott Carter, Jacob Druckman, Michael Colgrass and Charles Wuorinen. He and his wife, Nancy (who teaches business at LaGuardia Community College), live in a breezy upper West Side co-op filled with efficiency appliances, modern prints, new books, magazines and the other accoutrements of sophisticated city life. "Musicians finally got tired of eating in the kitchen the way they did in Haydn's time," says Birdwell, who is 37. "I don't see why a musician can't make as good a living as a sanitation worker. If he can't, I'd rather go home and drill for oil."

That fanciful alternative crossed his mind more than once this season as musicians at the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet, the New York City Opera and Radio City Music Hall all found themselves at odds with management. As a member of the five-man Ballet orchestra committee, Birdwell had been involved in negotiations since Labor Day, when the contract between the Ballet orchestra and the City Center ran out. The Ballet orchestra committee announced that the musicians were willing to negotiate while working, but

refused to guarantee that they would not strike the Ballet during its lucrative "Nutcracker" weeks.

On Nov. 9, the Friday before the Ballet was to open, Birdwell and his colleagues met with the dancers of the Ballet backstage at the New York State Theater. About 50 dancers were stretching and moving restively in the room, generally unenthusiastic about the meeting. Finally, one dancer asked what demands the musicians were making. "We're asking for 40 weeks' guaranteed employment [two more than the old contract provided]," answered Tom Kornacker, a violinist. "We are asking for a \$60 across-the-board increase to \$350 a week; a one-year contract; Blue Cross coverage; instrument insurance; disability insurance and a five-show week."

There were hoots of laughter and a few catcalls. "Why does this sound so far out to you?" Kornacker demanded. "Why is there laughter? There's nothing we're asking for that's not the norm for musicians elsewhere. We're trying to bargain the way everyone bargains."

A few dancers walked out. "They aren't really interested in the details," Birdwell told me later. "Their whole life is dancing and they're afraid we'll strike the 'Nutcracker.' The trouble is, they're kids. What 16-year-old is going to think about striking? They think we should all be happy for the privilege of playing at Lincoln Center!" It was as much a surprise to Birdwell as to the public when the dancers announced their own strike the following Monday.

He was even more surprised when the dancers blamed the necessity for a strike on the musicians. "The dancers are misinformed," said Birdwell. "They only know what they're told by the company. They work for nothing because they're poorly advised. The whole paternalistic structure of the ballet has made them accept being exploited, and then they take their frustration out on us because we don't allow it. They're unbelievably naive in terms of power."

Exactly three weeks after their meeting with the dancers, the members of the Ballet orchestra committee agreed to a new contract which provided for a basic salary increase of \$40 over three years, a 1 per cent increase in vacation pay and an instrument insurance plan. They received no clear guarantee that 12 weeks' work they had lost with the Joffrey Ballet would be restored, no pension and no shorter work week. It will be some time before the Ballet musicians (like the Philharmonic players) make up in salary what they lost by not working, but Birdwell maintains that the principle is what counts. The musician, bound by the niceties of tradition for so long, has finally adopted 20th-century

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Second horn

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collective-bargaining tactics.

The revolution in the music world began in the early sixties, when Birdwell was beginning his career as a horn player. In 1960, musicians earned an average \$4,757 yearly, while the median for all professionals was \$6,778 and that of all experienced male labor \$4,750. Disgruntled with their union, the American Federation of Musicians, symphony players formed committees and, by 1961, had united in a loose confederation called ICSOM, the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians. Since then, their salaries have doubled, their working seasons have been extended and they enjoy fringe benefits that were nonexistent before Birdwell was an ICSOM activist in Houston, where he helped organize the Houston Symphony's first orchestra committee, and his sympathies are the same today. "Why should the musician subsidize his own art?" he asks. "Maurice Stans had no trouble getting together corporation money, and New York City is getting ready to spend millions on rebuilding Yankee Stadium for the Yankees, a profit-making organization. Lincoln Center did more for the West Side than Shea Stadium did for Queens. Why is it there's no money for the arts?"

Birdwell is a man of medium height whose blond hair and drowsy eyes make him look like a side-kick of James Dean even when he's dressed for a formal concert. His easy-going manner and softly inflected speech are deceptive; since his arrival in New York 10 years ago, Birdwell has become a tough, busy and successful freelance musician, in a rapidly shrinking market. Ten years ago, at least 15 Broadway shows would be employing musicians, in addition to the networks and special shows like the Firestone Hour and the Bell Telephone Hour. Now, this work is gone. In addition, more foreign orchestras are touring the United States than ever before, and their effect has been felt most drastically in the recording industry. Only three United States orchestras currently have recording contracts: the Boston Symphony,

the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. At the same time, the nation's schools and conservatories graduate thousands of young musicians each year, and the musicians' union in New York reports 200 new members each month.

Given this environment, Birdwell's amalgam of jobs puts him in a very good position. Aside from his association with the Ballet, the American Brass Quintet and the Aspen Music School, he plays horn for part-time orchestras like the American Symphony (where he is on the board of directors), the Musica Aeterna, the Clarion and the Brooklyn Philharmonia; and, when he gets a call, he records a jingle or sound track. The schedule is tiring and tension-filled, often requiring him to practice late at night, after concerts, or early in the morning, before rehearsals. It involves careful juggling of commitments and even more careful bookkeeping. "My daddy hasn't understood how I make my living since I played in the Pasadena High School Band," grins Birdwell. "And the I.R.S. is so doubtful, they've audited me the last five years running."

Like many brass players, Birdwell comes from the Southwest, where music is integral to the public-school curriculum. "The reason for that," he says, "is they're committed to football, and good bands are a necessity. They play football in Texas; they don't fool around. It's a multimillion dollar business, and some of those bands would knock your eyes out." The Pasadena High School Band had 140 players, or 34 more than the New York Philharmonic. The repertoire included Sousa marches and transcriptions of symphonic works by Tchaikovsky, Wagner and Liszt. Once a year, they would compete in a statewide contest, and if the band director did not return with a Class I rating, he was fired.

At first, Birdwell was interested in agriculture. His family lived on a 30-acre piece of land outside Houston, where he raised a small herd of sheep and grew patches of clover and alfalfa. "But my parents weren't ignorant, black-dirt people like New

Yorkers think Texans have to be," he says, with a touch of weariness. "They were urban people. My father was an investment banker. My mother made me take piano lessons."

Even as he was active in the 4-H Club and the Future Farmers of America, Birdwell had always wanted to play trumpet, which is the melody instrument in the band. The band director already had a surplus of trumpeters, however, and Birdwell agreed to learn French horn, since to be in the band was second only to being on the football team. "We had great uniforms," he recalls, "and all the girls the football team didn't get. About the only class I attended those last two years was band. I thought I'd go to college, get my degree and become a high-school band director in Muleshoe, Tex."

He majored in music at the University of Houston and was working on a master's at the University of Texas when he was abruptly drafted into the Army. His friends advised him to audition for the West Point Band, a move which proved to be the most significant in his professional life. During his three years at West Point, he found that his musical proficiency compared favorably with that of conservatory students from the East, and that he could compete for professional jobs in New York. Oddly enough, while he was in Tanglewood studying at the Berkshire Music Center, the summer after leaving West Point, there was an opening at the Houston Symphony. Although he was not anxious to return to Texas, he won the job, moved back to Houston and promptly became embroiled in musical politics. ICSOM had yet to make an impact on wages: Houston Symphony musicians played eight "services" (concerts and rehearsals) each week for 25 weeks, were paid \$100 and had to fend for themselves the rest of the year. (Now, they are paid \$260 a week for a guaranteed 52 weeks). This worked well for the older members of the orchestra, who had staked their claim to all the good teaching jobs within 100 miles of Houston. It did not work for Birdwell and the younger contingent. They formed an orchestra committee, precipitated a crisis and brought down on themselves the wrath of union and management alike.

"There was no way to stay alive down there," Birdwell says now, the anger not entirely gone from his voice. "I

had to work as a salesman in a clothing store. I had to work in a gas station. Hell—all the young guys did it. Who can live on \$2,500 a year? I did it for two years. Finally I decided that if I was going to stay in the business I had to go where the business was."

For two years, he watched for openings in Eastern orchestras, but there were none. Openings occur in cycles, starting at the top. When a player at the Philharmonic or the Boston Symphony retires, musicians across the country audition for the job and everyone moves up a notch. Then, things are quiet again until another chair falls vacant. With the situation static, Birdwell began to consider alternatives to a regular orchestra position. He reasoned that he did not really like playing with the same people night after night, and that his own musical interests were broader than those of Houston audiences. While his colleagues in the wind and brass sections were not as status-conscious as the string musicians (the recent Philharmonic contract provides for string players to rotate the seating hierarchy periodically in the manner of a volleyball team), Birdwell was tired of the petty quarrels that arise when 100 people work together intensively over long stretches of time. He knew that a freelancer's life in New York would be risky, but took a chance and arrived here in 1963 with no job and no prospects.

On arrival, he began to call contractors, the men who are the vital links between a musician and a job. The contractor serves as a kind of bordello madam for anyone who wants to stage a concert: He maintains lists of available musicians and is able to assemble a complete symphony orchestra in a matter of hours. Since Birdwell was on no one's list, he was obliged to call every contractor in town, introduce himself and offer his services. By chance, he reached Morris Stonzek (David Merrick's contractor) minutes after the horn player at "Stop the World, I Want to Get Off" quit. "It was sheer luck," he says. "I could've fainted. Two weeks in New York, barely unpacked, and there I was with a job. I was delighted to be out of Houston and all that hassle, and I thought Broadway was a wonderful place. I practiced all day. Worked evenings. I even got into a wood-

wind quintet with some friends."

When "Stop the World" closed, Birdwell began to branch out into what union officials call "the long-hair business." He replaced the horn player in the American Brass Quintet during a tour, played with the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the American Symphony, was an extra at the Metropolitan Opera, appeared at the Jones Beach Summer Theater and the World's Fair Texas Pavilion, and recorded advertising jingles for Eastern Airlines, Canada Dry Ginger Ale, Timex watches and Metropolitan Life Insurance. He met hundreds of other freelance musicians.

"The horn players in this town are a very close-knit group," he explains. "There are 350 listed by the union but only about 70 could be regarded as competitors. There was a time there was a bar here in town called the Spotlight. All the commercial guys went there. The symphony guys went to the old Carnegie Tavern. The tavern has lost its appeal to musicians now, mainly because instead of 40 cents for a beer they get a dollar and a quarter. But then it was like a club."

He was at the Carnegie Tavern one night in 1964 when he heard that a City Ballet orchestra horn player had taken a teaching job in Illinois. At the time, Birdwell considered the Ballet as strictly "another show," but he auditioned for conductor Robert Irving anyway and got the job. The Ballet had just moved to Lincoln Center and his work there provided the first steady income he'd had since coming to New York; from that point on, jobs accrued like barnacles. The horn player at the American Brass Quintet joined the Pittsburgh Symphony, and Birdwell was invited to replace him; the Quintet was granted a residency at Aspen and, while there, Dean Gordon Hardy (who is also dean at Juilliard) asked Birdwell to be his assistant. "Aspen and the Ballet give me my basic nut of an income," he says. "The orchestra has an interesting repertoire and a good conductor and our situation there is better, musically, than in many symphony orchestras. But the Quintet remains my artistic outlet. I think every musician wants at some point to play chamber music even if it's only for his own pleasure."

Chamber music is particu-

loding, food, manager's fees, proper attire and instrument insurance. Because two Quintet musicians hold pilot's licenses, the group members often fly in a private plane to their destination, but the energy crisis may soon put an end to that.

Early one recent morning, I joined the Quintet on a mini-tour, sponsored by the Young Audience Concerts. Horn case in hand, Ed Birdwell was braving the wind on Riverside Drive when a 1968 Ambassador pulled up to the curb a few minutes after 8. The driver was Bob Biddlecome, the oldest member of the Quintet, who was muttering about Nixon and the prospect of higher tolls on the George Washington Bridge. Biddlecome works in the same capacities as Birdwell (he plays trombone in the Ballet orchestra) and draws about the same salary but, with six children and a mortgage to pay off, his life is considerably more difficult. He moved from Long Island to Teaneck so he could be within 20 minutes of Lincoln Center, but his worries persist. "Many musicians like myself are family men," he told me. "And they have the problems of anyone else raising a family. When your kids are home, you aren't. You aren't there to attend P.T.A. meetings. Your wife begins to think she'll never see you again. She has to deal with all of the family problems alone. If you get sick, you're out of luck. A freelance musician has none of the benefits that an auto worker has: no pension, no sick leave, no vacation, no health coverage."

He stopped the car again to pick up trombonist Herb Rankin, who had abandoned all those benefits for the life of a freelancer. Rankin, who is 35, had been comfortably ensconced in Kansas City, where he played first trombone at the Philharmonic, and taught at the University of Missouri and the University of Kansas.

After 10 years, "I got bored," he says. "I went to flying school, got my commercial license and was one week away from working for the Federal Aviation Agency. But then I realized that while I was flying, I was thinking more about music than I ever had before. People who quit the music business for something more lucrative are satisfied monetarily but not emotionally." Waiting with him

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larly attractive to the orchestra musician because it affords an opportunity for individual expression, for close, sustained work with other musicians, and an absence of authoritarianism. "We choose our own programs in the Quintet and we vote on everything," says Birdwell emphatically. "It's a complete democracy and that's important, because there's no orchestra in the world where the conductor's not boss. He steps on the podium and all questions of right and wrong stop. In the Quintet, we argue about the way we play each and every phrase."

Brass quintets date back to the 14th century, before the development of the violin, flute and oboe all but eclipsed chamber music for brass instruments. As a result, the Quintet's repertoire neatly avoids the stuff of which symphony concerts are made, focusing on prebaroque composers like Gabrieli, Heinrich Isaac and Thomas Stoltzer or contemporary composers like Ingolf Dahl, Ulysses Kay and Charles Whittenberg.

In December, the Quintet received a \$10,000 grant from the New York State Arts Council to commission a piece from Pulitzer Prize-winner Jacob Druckman. They have, in the past, commissioned work by Elliott Carter, Virgil Thomson, Larry Austin, David Reck and Nicholas Nabokov (Vladimir's first cousin). In the fall, they plan to play a premiere performance of the Carter piece in Berlin.

By commissioning and performing new works throughout the country, Birdwell and his colleagues are acting directly in the troubadour tradition. The centers of patronage have remained the same: the metropolis and the university town. Getting to them often entails spending most of musicians' earnings on travel,

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was Ray Mace, the youngest member of the Quintet. At 22, Mace is still in a post-graduate daze about the music business. "This is a whole different thing," he said, as the others checked their watches. "At school, all we had to do was take out our instruments and play. Now I have to be concerned about the way I look, whether I offend people by the way I talk, whether I'm punctual. I had hair halfway down my back when I was a student. It took me a long time to grow it and since I didn't want to jeopardize the Quintet in any way, I decided to cut it. As long as I'm going to do this, I thought, I'll play along completely. I try to be mellow."

Being mellow has involved such things lately as fielding the questions of a young woman who came up to Mace after a concert to ask whether she should go ahead and marry the trumpeter she is engaged to; making polite conversation with socialites in Dallas and Beverly Hills, and accommodating to the volatile temperaments of the other members of the Quintet. Mace has no trouble living on the \$10,000 he expects to earn this year. His reservations about work as a freelance in New York are musical: "In school, we'd play a piece of music till it sounded right and until the group was tight," he says. "Here, you get a call for a freelance job, you have two rehearsals and then the concert. All the musician has to do is sit quietly and play the right notes at the right time. I think 75 per cent of the people are content to do just that, and the other 25 per cent are frustrated. The economics of it are impossible, and the whole thing is run by business people."

At 8:25, Louis Ranger appeared at the door of the Ambassador, setting off a chorus of complaint. He had played a heavy schedule the day before and his eyes were tired behind dark glasses. After some heckling from Birdwell ("Ah did'n' know a big man like you'd turn out sensitive as a dandy-lion") and a few threats from Ranger, the trumpeter put his instrument in the trunk and got into the crowded car. "It's a very personal setup," he said later. "When we go on tour we sometimes spend literally every hour of the day together—in buses and trains, in hotel rooms. If you play music with someone for a while, you get to know him real well without even having

The hazards of the horn

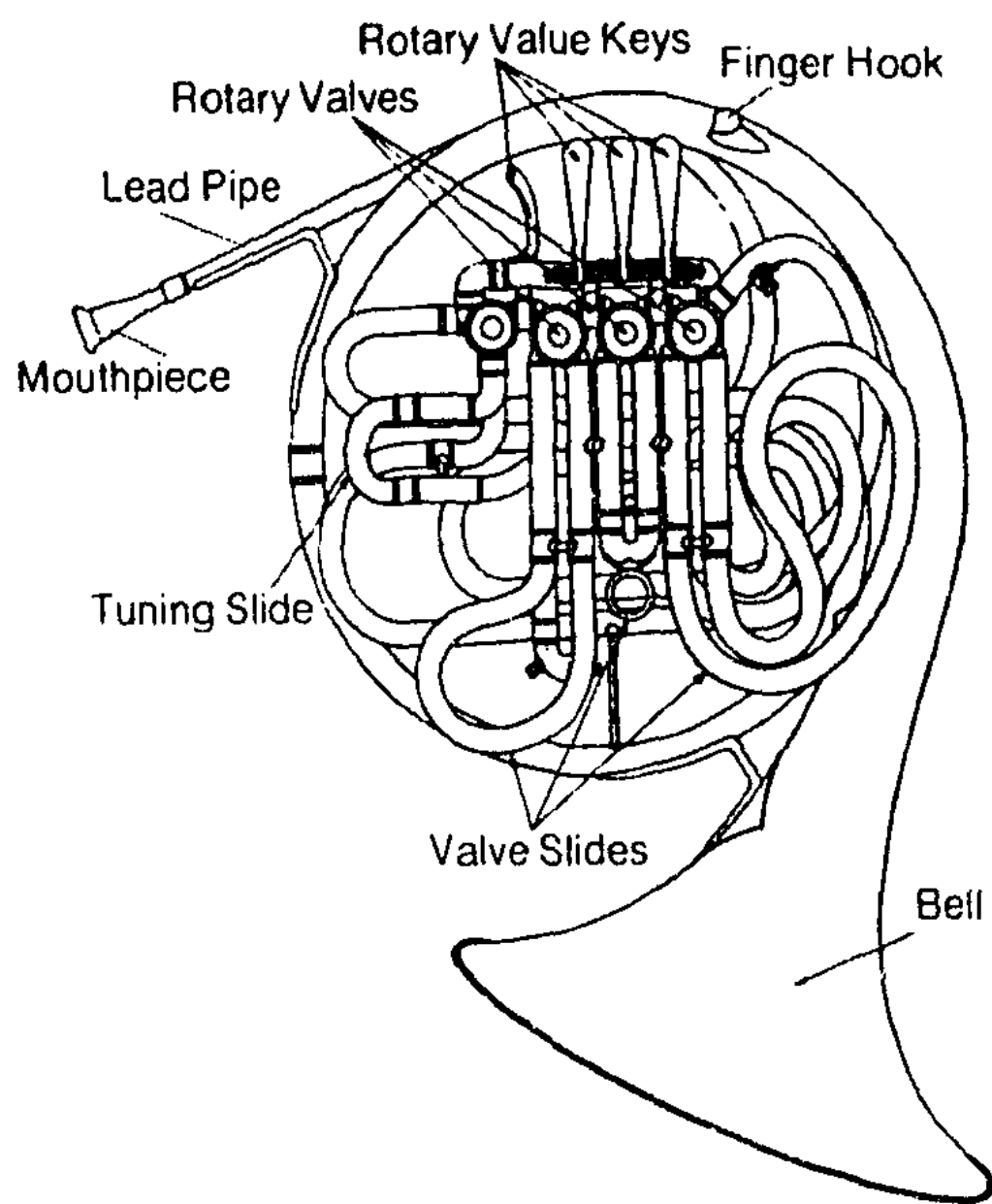
The French horn is one of the most treacherous instruments in the orchestra. Its veiled, mellow tone can abruptly destroy a melodic line by cracking or, as musicians say, "making a clam." The reason for this tendency is that the French horn is a musical mutant, which covers high and low registers. Most instruments played in the higher registers are short (like the piccolo), while those played in the lower registers are long (like the bassoon). High instruments generally have a small mouthpiece, while lower instruments have a large one. The French horn, pictured below, which straddles four octaves, combines long length (14 feet, uncoiled) with a small mouthpiece, making it difficult for the player to form and differentiate pitches, especially in the higher registers.

Apart from its technical difficulties, the horn has long lost the glamour of its hunting days. Audiences seem to find it funny. "Once in Houston," Birdwell says, "when the horn player emptied the water [from saliva and condensation] out of his horn

during a Mozart concerto, there were titters and snickers!" Because the famous tone of the French horn derives from proper lip vibration, the player is also beset by a variety of myths and jokes about lips. "In Mozart's time," says Birdwell, "there was a horn player, who, when his prowess failed, decided his lips must be getting too thick. He proceeded to shave them down with a straight razor and, needless to say, did not play the horn after that."

There is little recompense to offset the horn's hazards. Dennis Brain, the most famous horn player of this century, is certainly no household word. There are no more than a handful of professional horn soloists in the world and Barry Tuckwell, the Englishman who is the best, does not command nearly the number of concerts, recording dates and fees that say, an Itzhak Perlman or Jacqueline de Pré can. Orchestra horn players, on the other hand, are frequently members of the highest-paid section, despite the fact that they are in overabundance at the moment. When the New York Philharmonic held auditions for a first horn recently, 50 musicians showed up. Orchestras find string players scarcer at present because so many choose solo or chamber work.

Actual wages have little to do with the logistics of supply and demand. If a conductor wants a good section, he will accede to the musicians' wishes. Although there is a minimum wage for musicians called "scale," each member of the orchestra is free to negotiate a salary above it. (Scale is \$330 at the New York Philharmonic; \$360 at the Metropolitan Opera; \$315 at Radio City; \$310 at the City Opera; \$292 at the Ballet, and \$280 for Broadway shows.) The highest-paid member of an orchestra is its concertmaster, followed by whichever principal player has managed to convince the conductor and management of his indispensability.—H. E.



to talk anything through. We have a good time. A lot of laughs." Ranger is a 24-year-old graduate of Juilliard who teaches privately and at the University of Connecticut in addition to playing orchestra jobs around town.

"There's no security in this kind of life whatsoever," he says ruefully. "I don't have a family like Bob, but I find myself at a point in life where I have to take stock of things and it's a little bit disconcerting not to know my income. When I sign a two-year lease I have to think hard. I have to put money in the bank. And it affects personal relationships too. Every time I go home, my family asks me when I'm going to get married. How can you make a commitment to another person if you may get a gig in Toronto next week?"

A little after 9:00, the chil-

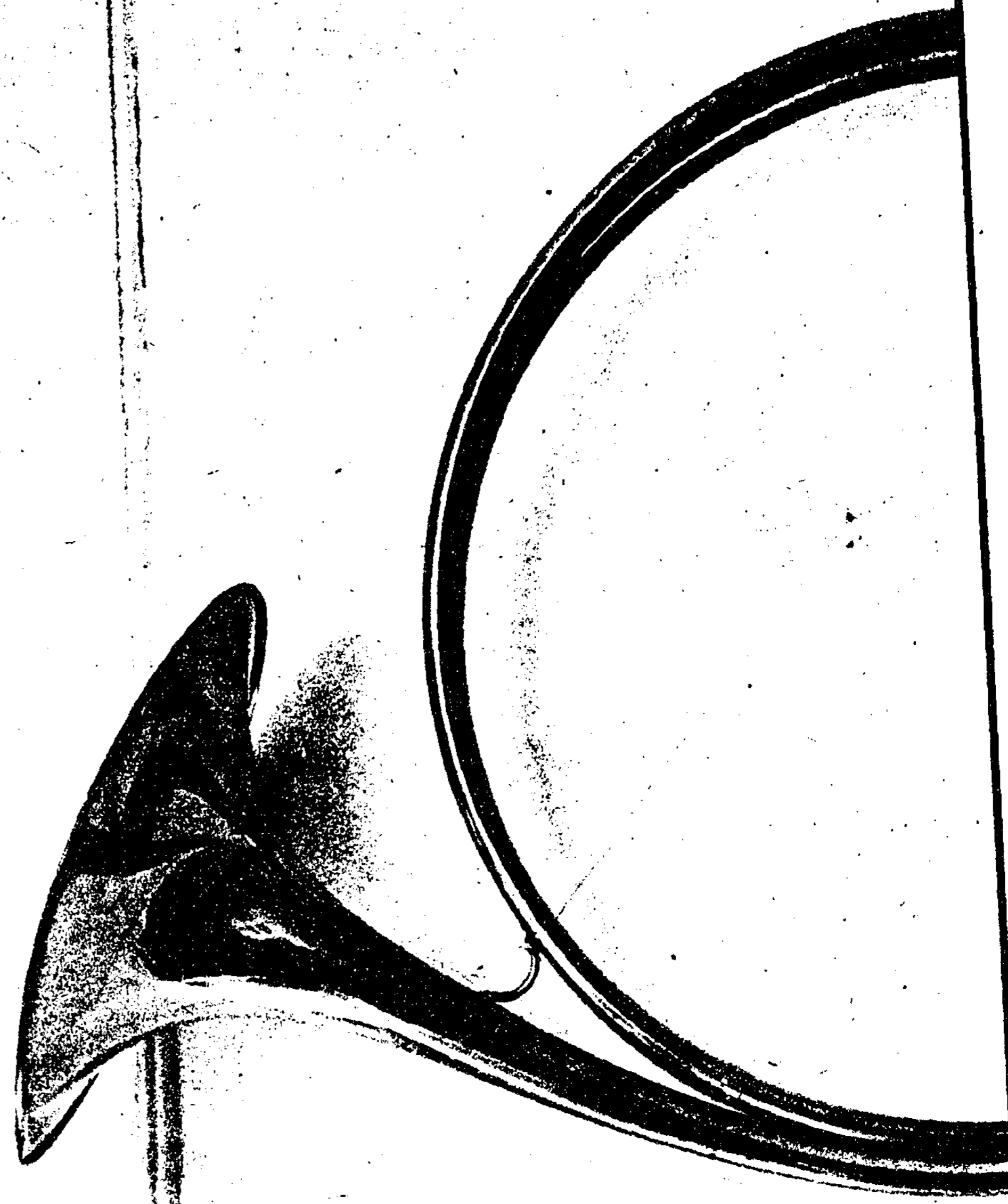
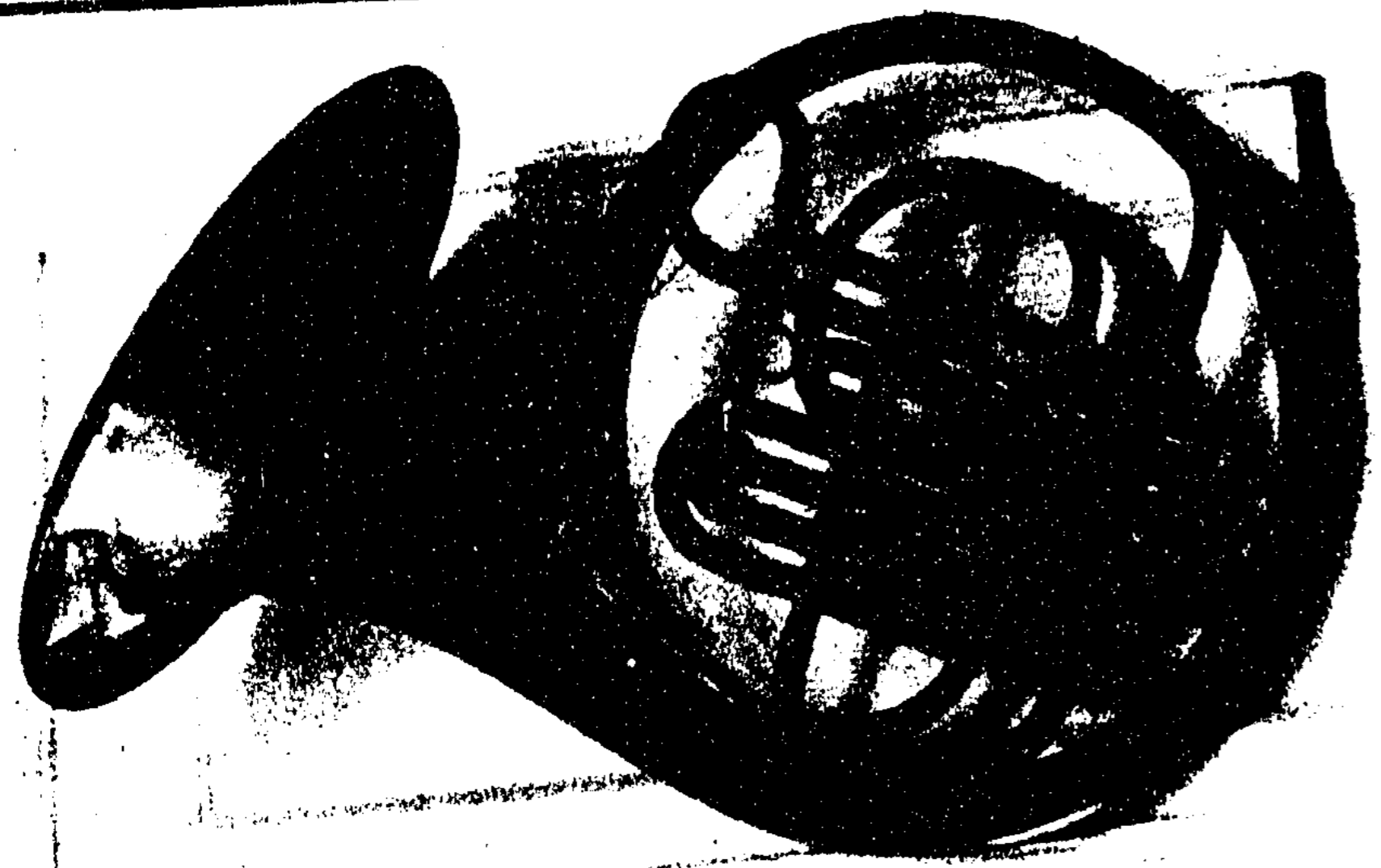
dren of P.S. 187 in Queens trooped into their green auditorium. When they were settled, their principal announced: "Boys and girls, we are very fortunate to have with us today . . . the American Brass Quintet!" Instruments agleam under the stage lights, the Quintet played an English fanfare while the children bounced up and down copying the trombonists or simply stared, wide-eyed, as the resonance filled the room. One by one, the Quintet members explained their instruments and introduced each selection with a brief talk. "This one was written by a friend of ours who lives in Paris," Birdwell said at one point. "There's not going to be any tune or rhythm, so why don't you just listen hard and tell me when we're done what the music made you think of."

"A monster!" shouted one girl as the music ended.

"A man from another planet running after somebody!"

"A lot of cars," said a little boy, with disgust.

The Quintet, relaxed and smiling now, went on to play a selection by "Mr. Bach." After 45 minutes, they packed their instruments and music, got back into the Ambassador and repeated the whole thing at another elementary school. By noon, they were back in Manhattan: Biddlecome and Birdwell at the Aspen office; Mace, Ranger and Rankin at various professional engagements. They planned to meet late in the afternoon, catch a private plane for Albany where they had to play a college concert and, with luck, be back in New York by midnight. ■



*Ed Birdwell,
"freelance" French horn player.
His principal job is with the
New York City Ballet orchestra.*



Birdwell at West Point, 1958.

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