

MUSIC

This Violinist Plays an Independent Tune

By STEPHEN E. RUBEN

GERALD TARACK is a violinist, but more important, and far more unusual, he is a freelance concertmaster—the Only one Currently pursuing the craft with consistency and success in New York. Mr. Tarack not only has the field to himself but, much in the manner of a soloist, he is often singled out, both by concertgoers and critics, for his abilities as a fiddler as well as a concertmaster. In the latter guise; he is the first violinist leader of the string section and, in essence, surrogate conductor. He also has at least one other guise, having recently founded what he calls the Tarack Chamber Ensemble which has been giving concerts at the Brooklyn academy of Music. This season, their two scheduled appearances, beginning with a performance on Nov. 1, are already sold out.

But for all his dazzling energy and virtuosity, Mr. Tarack is one of an interesting and fairly, common breed of musicians, for freelancers are not exactly an oddity in this city. New York, in fact, is renowned for its large corps of fine instrumentalists who are not members of performing musical groups but regularly farm themselves out to various orchestras—such as the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra and recording-studio pickup groups—which are created for specific purposes and then disbanded. But while freelancers are well known as a type, the individual performers remain anonymous, because it is the rare musician who can—despite ample job opportunities—make a name for himself as an independent orchestra player. Gerald Tarack is the rare exception.

"I could become a regular concertmaster," Mr. Tarack says, at ease in the flying room of his airy and uncluttered Manhattan brownstone. "I've even been offered jobs with the top five orchestras. But I'm not interested in them because they're totally restrictive. You play with the 'Fame people and basically the same conductors all the time. There's comparatively very little opportunity for self-expression and the repertoire is extremely limited."

Mr. Tarack continues: "I'm just not enthusiastic about the Big Band sound. I like to hear myself playing and to have a rapport with other musicians. Playing in a major symphony orchestra is almost like getting lost in the shuffle—even as concertmaster. Also, it would be a financial sacrifice. I make more money now as a freelancer than I would even with one of the big orchestras. It's not considerably more, but my income grows every year." ion Concerts, the Marlboro Trio and the Washington Square Chamber Music Concerts. He is always in demand for recording dates, whether as a classical musician, as part of the string backup for pop singers, or in commercials.

Mr. Tarack is also a teacher and an orchestral contractor. His academic activities take place at Queens College, where he tutors students in chamber music and the violin. The contracting is for about a half dozen dance companies such as the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and the Jose Limon Dance Company, which require pit bands and call upon Tarack—who knows most of the better freelance musicians in New York—to form groups of accompanists. He doesn't always play in these orchestras himself because, as he is quick to point out, "it can be a lucrative situation in that I have two jobs going at once. I can contract the orchestra and be playing someplace else myself."

Stephen E. Rubin has just written a book about the Metropolitan Opera Company which will be published next month.



Gerald Tarack is a freelance violinist, which is not unusual in New York. What makes him exceptional is his success as a freelance concertmaster, despite his lack of enthusiasm for what he calls "the Big Band sound."

Jack Mitchell

Despite the diversity of his career, Mr. Tarack always knows where he is and what he will be doing. The curly-haired, bespectacled and youthful-looking violinist has obviously made science out of being a freelancer. As opposed to freelance writers, who often don't know what they'll be doing until they're doing it, Mr. Tarack claims he usually has his schedule booked a year in advance—without the help of an agent or manager. "Sometimes it's hairy," he reports, "because conflicts are unavoidable. In these situations, have to give up jobs, but on occasion it is possible that a group will change its dates."

Again, unlike writers who are often at the mercy of quirky editors, Tarack does not allow himself to be pressured. "I'm not always available," he explains. "Of course, that was not the case in the beginning."

It never is. But, as freelance careers go, Tarack's didn't seem to have too many arid moments. Perhaps the relative ease with which he developed his fine reputation can be attributed to the fact that, as one critic has written, "Tarack belongs to an up-to-date and alert group of young musicians who shun the old-fashioned 19th-century virtuoso attitudes. Many of these musicians have considerable technical and musical gifts and know how to use them."

He was born 45 years ago in Detroit, and came to New York with his family at the age of five. His father was a butcher and the Taracks lived in relative comfort. When he was 8, his parents, of Russian-Jewish heritage, announced that it was time for him to begin studying the violin and "because I was a good boy, I did what I was told." He made rapid progress, and eventually landed at the Henry Street Settlement School on a scholarship. There, he came in contact with a teacher 'who, as he recalls, "was of the intense, old-European

The strain on the youngster, talented though he was, proved to be too much. One day, much to this teacher's astonishment, young Gerry abruptly quit. "I was a mess, terribly nervous," he remembers. Within a short period, the 14-year-old unwound enough to be taken on by another teacher, the now-famous Ivan Galamian, with whom Tarack studied for three years.

In 1947, the fledgling musician heard that the St. Louis Symphony was on the lookout for string players. He applied, got a job, and remained there for three years. During this happy period, he became the con-

certmaster of a chamber ensemble which was formed from the body of the symphony orchestra. It was his first taste of being a first violinist, and he liked it.

"But eventually I left and returned to New York because I wanted to become the concertmaster of a real orchestra, not just a chamber group," he says. "The opportunity didn't come along though. Now that I think of it, there was no chance, because I was so young and inexperienced." Young Tarack hung around New York and followed the normal route of giving recitals—neither in search of a soloist's career nor ruling it out, either.

By the third recital, the Tarack name was established enough for people to actually buy tickets—not always guaranteed situation. Most unknowns have to paper the house with friends, relatives and anyone else they can drag in off the street.

Although this gratified his ego, did not fulfill him enough to make him sit by the phone and just wait. "I began to present my own, programs, not just recitals," he explains. "I was always interested in programming, not doing the old warhorse type of thing, but the good music that isn't played very much, perhaps in combinations with other instruments. I suppose I'm saying that chamber music always held an appeal for me. So, I became an impresario of sorts and put on a series. It wasn't costly; I even made some money on it a few times and was able to split the profits among the players."

Mr. Tarack had to stop, playing impresario for a very practical reason: "I got much busier as a player and didn't have the time. It's hard to say how it happens, except that your name becomes known and the phone begins to ring. From one connection, another grew, and soon I found myself in demand as a freelance violinist. I simply fell into it—it happened."

It was not all coincidence, however. Psychologically, there was and is a vital ingredient lacking in Mr. Tarack's makeup that would be essential for his success either as a soloist or his initial goal—as concertmaster of a major orchestra. "I am not a limelight seeker," the violinist admits. "You have to really want a soloist's career to get one. But I wasn't at all frustrated, either. It was satisfying enough to start doing all these other things. I didn't ever have the time to brood or dwell on the lack of a solo career. Besides; played lots of solos in chamber music."

Soft-spoken and friendly, but obviously a bit shy, Mr. Tarack's personality is not that of the charismatic performer. But it is the perfect personality to coordinate with the kind of music he loves playing most. The whole idea of chamber music is to achieve a sublime and seamless rapport with one's peers, and not he a star.

Even as leader of the Tarack Chamber Ensemble, he is in any way seeking to stand out. "The idea of the group arose out of a certain frustration in playing music with conductor's and having their will and musical taste imposed on players when it wasn't really necessary to have a conductor for, some of the music. I'm the leader, but I don't wave a stick; my will is imposed much more subtly. Also, I have the instrumentalist's conditioning and not the conductor's, so there's no time wasted with a lot of mullarkey. It's direct, say, a little too loud, a little too soft, faster, slower."

He applies the same approach as concertmaster. "I'm the liaison between the conductor and the orchestra, and specifically the string section," he says, explaining his function. "I have a great respect for the musicians in these orchestras. Their situation is rough. They've had the same lessons I've had, and love been through a lot of the same things. They have more frustrations and certainly less income, but they're working very hard with greater and lesser degrees of talent."

"I look upon them as very accomplished in their own right, and I feel that my approach gives them possibly more self-respect than they might have with another concertmaster. It pays off. It's not all due to me, but I feel that the Mostly Mozart orchestra, for example, does have a responsiveness to it. I don't ever have to tell those players what to do."

That is, unless they have a conductor who just stands there and makes a lot of empty, theatrical gestures. Then, it is up to the concertmaster to suddenly become the real conductor. It has happened. Mr. Tarack tells of one occasion when the orchestra finished playing, a Mendelssohn symphony and the maestro continued conducting chords. Once, during a recording session with an internationally renowned glamour conductor, Mr. Tarack literally had to take over because the maestro simply didn't know the piece and eventually stopped even attempting to beat time.

That was a unique case, but there were times when conductors got fouled up for a stretch. "Those cases require more forceful leading on my part from the chair," Mr. Tarack explains. "It's a physical thing—the way move my arm and shoulders. Sometimes, after a concert, the guys joke and say to me, as if I were the conductor, Gerry, you did a terrific job on the entrance after the cadenza."

Have these incidents soured Mr. Tarack on conductors? "In many cases, if they had been accomplished on their instruments, they wouldn't be conductors," the violinist says without a trace of rancor. "To conduct properly, to be really fine, is great. But a lot of them are inadequate. They do not fulfill their role as capable, for example, as instrumentalists, to be successful, would be required to I really enjoy the Men who get up there and are not super technicians with a stick, but real music makers. They don't have the grand reputations and careers, but I have a rapport with them. Maybe that's another reason why I do the chamber music orchestra thing."