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# Frank Donaruma: Quintessential New York Freelancer

by Shelagh Abate

One of the many things that makes New York an amazing city is the depth of musicians who live there and make their living as freelancers. Everywhere you go it seems you are meeting new players – perhaps a newbie, newly hatched from conservatory somewhere nearby, or even a well-seasoned veteran whose gig path took some years to coincide with yours. Some players however, everyone knows, whether or not they've had the good fortune to perform with them. These players are pillars – living legends, even – long-standing members of the New York community of horn players who have upheld an enduring tradition of excellence, beautiful playing, and personal integrity. Without question, one of these players is Frank Donaruma. Everyone in New York knows who Frank is. And counts themselves as lucky when able to share the stage with him.

Francisco Donaruma was born in Utica, New York in 1941 into a vast community of Italian-Americans that brought many of their traditions here from Italy. Ironically, it would seem that some of his earliest playing experiences would train him in the long run to be able to handle some of the toughest freelance jobs in New York, and to handle them with elegance and style.

After picking up the horn at age nine (because no more trumpets were available to go around!), Frank began studying in earnest. His early teachers were good ones; Claude Hubley was a busy performer himself, a former member of the Sousa Band as well as the Cincinnati Symphony. It was while growing up and studying with Hubley that Frank became a member of the Banda Rosa of Utica. Religious feast days would entail more than 12 hours of playing; they would begin with a mass, followed by a five-hour procession around the town, a quick dinner break, then cap off the day with a performance of opera transcriptions written specifically for the band by its director. Little did Frank know at the time that he was setting himself up to handle 12-service weeks with the American Ballet Theatre a few years later!

Frank's first job in 1962 was playing second horn with the National Ballet of Canada, followed by Orquesta Sinfonica de Puerto Rico, the Bolshoi Ballet, and Royal Ballet. Throughout his career, Frank has continued to perform as a soloist, chamber musician, and recording artist. He has been principal horn of the Kansas City Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, Queens Symphony, associate principal of the Baltimore Symphony, and has performed with the Indianapolis Symphony. He has also been a member the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the New York Pops Orchestra, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.



Frank Donaruma

Frank presently continues as principal horn with both the Queens Symphony and the American Ballet Theatre, with which he has been associated since 1965. Among Frank's numerous live television appearances are several with American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet, the New York Philharmonic with Leonard Bernstein and Zubin Mehta, the New Jersey Symphony, and other TV staples such as *Rosie O'Donnell* and *David Letterman*. During his tenure with the Metropolitan Opera, he performed several live radio broadcasts for Texaco.

Frank's recording credits are also extensive: from the Baltimore Symphony and the Metropolitan Opera to the Charles Mingus Big Band, Peter Nero, Lee Konitz, and the New York Neophonic Orchestra. He has been a part of many film soundtracks, including *Reds*, *Garbo Talks*,

*Billy Bathgate*, *Cape Fear*, and *The Swamp Thing*. Frank has opened nine Broadway show productions.

What many people may not know about Frank, however, is that he is multi-skilled and accomplished in areas outside of music. Over many years, while serving as a member of numerous orchestra committees, Frank learned the value of skilled conflict resolution. He learned to value it so highly that he actively pursued it. Frank received his formal mediation training through the American Bar Association, the Civil Court of Bergen County, New Jersey, as well as other accredited institutions. He studied Economics and Business at New York University, and collaborated with economist Robert Lindsey on a particularly rewarding project, an economic survey of freelance musicians. He is trained to resolve civic, family, and appropriately, contract and labor disputes. This training has become invaluable to Frank, especially when applied to areas outside of music. He feels that his ability to resolve conflicts professionally has greatly enriched his life.

In order to explain another area of Frank's expertise, I should provide context. When presented with the opportunity to spend a day with Frank in order to interview him for this article, I was thrilled and honored, for multiple reasons. Most of them were noble reasons, but one was selfish. When we spoke on the phone, and made a plan to get together, he immediately said: "Come on over, we'll have lunch." Yessssss! I thought. Jackpot. I knew I had scored, because as we horn players in New York know,



Donaruma the chef



he can *cook*. I mean, seriously cook. Frank knows food. He has been as skilled in the kitchen for most of his life as he has been on the stage, in the pit, and while resolving conflicts.

Frank credits his culinary prowess to his grandmother, and has spent a tremendous amount of his time and energy perfecting the craft. His family had a restaurant, the Hotel Ohio outside of Utica that he was a part of growing up, and so his familiarity with good cooking runs deep. He and his wife, Atsuko Sato (bassoonist and original member of *The Phantom of the Opera* Broadway Orchestra), have catered formal events on many occasions. On the day we were together, Frank simultaneously prepared an amazing meal and told me about his life with complete ease and elegance. His generosity as a person shone as he hosted me and prepared a meal for us to share. It was truly a window into who he is. I felt so fortunate, and *wow*, did I eat well that day! We enjoyed a bona fide feast of homemade antipasto, pasta, seafood, dessert, and washed it all down with his homemade wine. Divine.

His horn playing and conduct on a gig are much the same: effortless, elegant, and collegial. I asked him about his process: *how* has he managed over the years to play continuous 12-service weeks as principal with the American Ballet Theater with no assistant and continue to sound beautiful? He claims that the secret to endurance is a good warm-up. A good warm-up is thorough and complete enough to rid your chops of any acid buildup that occurs as a result of extensive playing. He warms up for a solid 45 minutes before a long day. Frank also insists that a balance needs to be achieved that allows for rest. *Not* playing can be just as beneficial as playing, so when a player has the opportunity to stop and allow for healing, much good can come from this.

Over the years, Frank has continued to be motivated by the pursuit of beauty. Realizing the potential to sound beautiful is a worthy cause indeed. Happily, he feels that some of his best playing has happened recently, and has been long inspired by great vocalists – most notably Beniamino Gigli. This was something that I had not known about Frank, but once I learned this fact, it made perfect sense. His lyrical style and ability to spin his sound through a phrase is reminiscent of Gigli's gift. If you heard how he plays his favorite ballets, Prokofieff's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*, you would know what I mean.

Frank Donaruma is one of the most respected players of any instrument in the city of New York. He is loved by his fellow horn players. Frank describes himself as a "blue collar player" which makes me chuckle – I think I understand what he means by this: he comes by his abilities honestly, has worked hard all of his life to play beautifully, and is in no way pretentious. In my opinion, however, "blue collar" implies a roughness and describes someone or something that is unrefined. This could not be further from the truth of how we perceive Frank. Something that makes him truly special is his ability to simultaneously embody the wisdom of his past and regard his present and future with enthusiasm and openness. Isn't that what music is all about? It should be.

*Shelagh Abate is a freelance horn player who lives and works in New York City.*

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