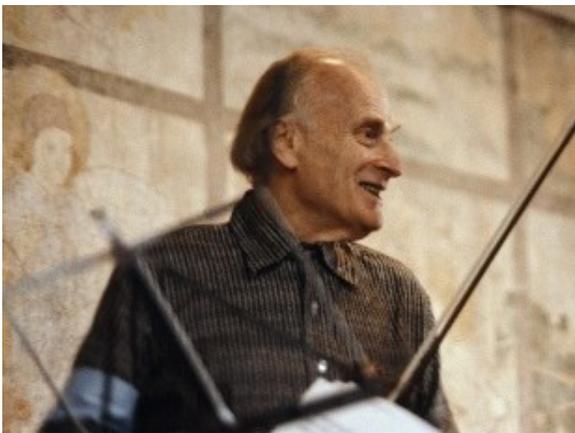


# Gary Karr, Making A Statement All His Own

*“Ce n’est pas possible!”* exclaimed an excited French woman sitting behind me as the enthusiastic applause finally subsided. “But it *is* possible; he has done the impossible!” she explained, by now leaning over the pew to convey to me her amazement. “The double bass is supposed to go ‘oom-pah,’ not to sing like *that!* **He made it sing!**”

Concert bassist Gary Karr had just carried away his audience with what some critics have referred to as “his incredible singing line” in a performance of a Beethoven sonata with his long-time recital partner Harmon Lewis at the piano. The audience was crowded into the centuries-old church in the picturesque surroundings of Saanen, Switzerland, for one of the many lovely concerts associated with the Menuhin Music Festival. Many in the audience had been drawn to the concert that evening precisely because they knew what to expect from the sensitive musicianship of these two incomparable artists.



Karr and Lewis have been violinist Yehudi Menuhin’s guests at this Gstaad international festival for three years now, giving no little indication of the esteem in which their musicianship is held by one of the world’s greatest masters. (The admiration is mutual; Karr says, “I admire Menuhin because he has done more for music and musicians than any other artist.”)



The well-springs of Karr’s musicianship run deep. Of Russian-Jewish stock, he represents the seventh generation in his family to play the double bass. His maternal grandfather, who left Russia during the Revolution and settled in the United States, first taught the nine-year-old Karr to play. “My grandfather spoke five languages and taught me to play with emotion because he was a philosopher and a poet,” Karr remembers.

But the boy’s own instincts were already inclined toward the lyricism which has become a hallmark of his playing. He explains: **“I have always sought to play poetically.”** By the age of eleven, the California-born prodigy had already become a professional musician.

However, it wasn’t until he met Jennie Tourel, the world-renowned mezzo-soprano, that his own special qualities were revealed to him in a new light. “I was a student at the Aspen Festival when Jennie Tourel heard me play. I was playing lyrically and she was attracted to what I was doing. She confirmed all my musical instincts which I had yet to fully and consciously recognize and affirm as right. For that reason, she was probably the strongest artistic influence on my life.” He was just nineteen.



It was Tourel who introduced the young artist to Leonard Bernstein who in turn launched him on his career with an appearance in the CBS “Young People’s Concerts” in 1962. Attending the Juilliard School by day and playing with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at

night, it was not long before Karr established himself as the fourth great contrabass soloist in history.

His distinguished predecessors were Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846), a friend of Haydn and Beethoven;

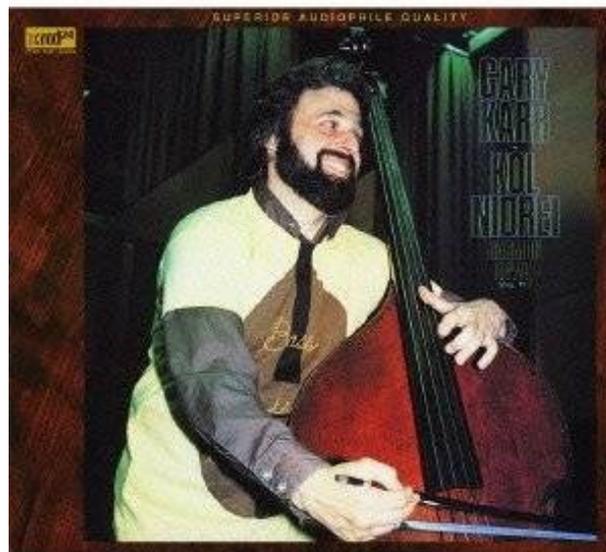
Giovanni Bottesini (1821-1889), composer and conductor;



Serge and Olga Koussevitzky



and Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951), composer and conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.



As if to confirm that line of succession, Mme. Olga Koussevitzky heard Karr, then 20, play his debut recital in New York and the next day informed him of her decision that the young virtuoso should fall heir to her late husband’s beautiful 1611 Amati. The priceless instrument which Karr affectionately calls “Koussy” has been his companion ever since.



For all his love for the double bass, Karr is first of all a great musician. As distinguished Washington critic Paul Hume noted, “Karr is a superb, interpretive artist who happens to make music through the medium of an instrument few have ever conquered to the point of achieving solo careers.” In explanation, Karr says, “I don’t look at the bass as anything unusual. I am not trying to promote the bass. I love the bass and it is my instrument. But its importance is in the fact that it is the means by which I convey the musical message. The music is of paramount importance.

One senses that Karr would be a concert artist no matter which instrument he played. He plays music because he has to. It is sacred to him. You can sense that when he plays or even when he speaks of his art. He doesn't play to please the critics; he plays to convey a musical message. **"Music communicates more intimately than pictures or words," he notes. "You can say things through music that you can't otherwise communicate."**

Audiences sense the authentic emotion behind this extremely sensitive musician's art. There is no room for arrogance or dishonesty in his approach to music. "I like to practice," he admits. "I enjoy it because it is always an adventure and carries with it a sense of discovery.



"I have been working on a new piece while here in Gstaad which I thought at first was impossible to play. But then I worked hard at it and this morning it just came together beautifully. I was exhilarated." He admits that the new discoveries to be made in old pieces also bring fresh joy and interest to the artist's patient labors.

In approaching any piece of music, Karr says he first seeks to know "what the composer wanted his music to sound like. I want to know what every line and dot means." To that understanding, he then carefully folds in his own response. In this process he agrees that perhaps as much creativity is demanded of the performer or interpreter as of the composer himself.

Karr believes that above all, **"A musician must be interested in and savor change."** He must always grow in his art. And this requires constant study and a willingness to explore.

**Harmon Lewis**, Karr's fellow artist and recital partner since 1971, laughingly remarks, "The only way we will ever get a vacation is for Gary to leave his bass at home. He is always practicing."



Karr met Lewis, who holds a doctorate in organ, while the latter was teaching at Indiana University. "I was looking for someone who knew something about Baroque ornamentation," Karr relates. He was directed to Lewis, whose keyboard versatility (organ, piano and harpsichord) and finely-wrought musicianship matched Karr's style as well as his sense of adventure and interest in performing duo recitals. Lewis prefers the recital form of music-making to the lonely life of a solo artist, which he describes simply as "boring."

Karr eventually drew Lewis to a new post at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he was teaching at the time, in order to begin working on a recital repertoire. They spent two years getting programs together before giving their first recital. "I am a slow worker," Karr diffidently explains.

Underlying that explanation is Karr's insistence on achieving the highest possible standards in his art. He believes that working with the same keyboard artist (rather than many different ones) over the years, he is better able to attain his musical ideal. The balance between the artistic duo is something at which they both have to keep working. "One can never assume," Karr explains. "I don't think one ever gets to know another person well enough. Human beings are too complex; the possibilities are endless. If you assume, it is, in a way, dishonest and **music can never be dishonest ---at least, I can never be dishonest with music.** That's why I must go through all the preparation."



Working together, the duo recitalists prepare a piece of music by working out every detail of phrasing, never letting anything slide, thinking that the audience won't notice. That would not be satisfactory to either artist, for neither one approaches his work with arrogance, but rather with the humility which marks a true artist. After a pause, Karr ventures, "It is like life; it requires give and take; it is a dialogue with room for give and take and spontaneity. I would hate Harmon if it were all his way and he would hate me if it were all my way."



The exhilaration comes in the concert hall after they have performed a piece well. **"It is in knowing that the audience is moved by the music. I can feel it."** Karr says there is always room for improvement but when they feel they have given a particularly good performance, "We feel we can't wait to play that piece again."

The early recital years of the Karr-Lewis Duo were a learning experience. They felt they owed a debt to Canada as a result of the grant which enabled them to work together, so they played many concerts in Canada as a gesture of appreciation for that country's support.

Mistakes were made along the way. They started out playing a repertoire comprised of pieces which "we thought audiences could accept rather than loading the concert with heavy classics. We played some transcriptions of heavy classics of course, but not as much as we do now," Karr explained. "Maybe that was a mistake."



But of course it was hard to know just how an audience would respond to a double bass recital in those days. Since Koussevitsky gave up his solo career in 1930, it was unprecedented and it was a major feat just getting the audience to the concert hall. Once there, Karr could win them with his incredible facility and the rich, powerful, singing tone he brings to bear on music which reveals the remarkable expressive range of the double bass. For his part, Lewis could easily captivate with his thoroughly sensitive musicianship and the beautiful tonal qualities which his master touch elicits from the keyboard. As one Washington critic discovered, **"Karr's playing is nothing less than phenomenal, and the lyricism of his phrasing is the envy of string players everywhere."**

Karr has become as well-known for the humor he sees in lighter music as for the emotional depth of his interpretations of such works as Bruch's *Kol Nidrei*. His infectious delight in the music he plays is a trait for which critics sometimes take him to task but one which endears him to his audiences. Yet critics as well as audiences have been known to succumb to the irresistible charm of his astonishing performance of such works as Reinshagen's transcription of Paganini's "Moses" Fantasy.

**“I am criticized for having fun with music but if the music is fun then it should be played with joy,”** Karr points out. It is the joy he finds in music which allows the humor to flow from the artist as honestly as the deeper human emotions which are stirred by it. “If I am moved by a piece of music, I play it as I am moved by it. I become emotionally involved in the music, whatever its temperament. That doesn’t mean that I take the music any less seriously because it is light. It is as seriously prepared as any other piece of music.”

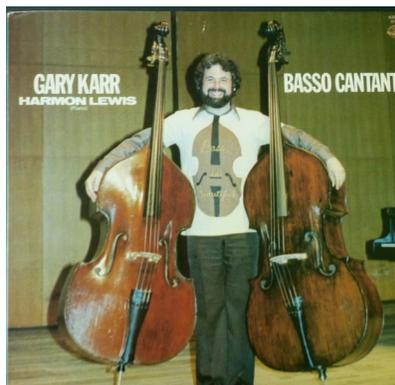
Through the everyday stress of a concert artist’s life, Karr observes, “My sense of humor keeps me sane.” Its importance to his life and his art is evident when he says, **“If I can’t keep my sense of humor and play with joy, I might as well not play.”**

Karr has been a pioneer in gaining public acceptance for the double bass as a concert instrument, for which a new generation of solo bassists is indebted to him. The lack and quality of repertoire have always been one of the greatest disadvantages facing the concert bassist. His illustrious predecessors had to compose music themselves for their own use. Both Dragonetti and Koussevitsky composed wonderfully lyrical concerti for their instrument. (Karr’s performance of the Koussevitsky concerto with the National Symphony Orchestra last season won a standing ovation.) Bottesini composed a good many pieces which display the artist’s dexterity and mastery over the complex technical demands of the instrument.

Karr does not compose but he has made numerous successful transcriptions, including a notable one of Aaron Copland’s violin sonata. When he worked on the transcribed sonata with the composer, Copland was amazed at how well it fit the double bass and mused that he must have had the double bass in mind all the time.

In addition to his transcriptions, Karr has commissioned works which have made a substantial contribution to the rather meagre bass repertoire. **“I commission the works because they are needed,”**

he says, “but it is hard because composers often don’t want to write for double bass. They fear the work won’t be played or become known as much as it might if they wrote for orchestra or a more common solo instrument.” Karr has commissioned works by Wilder, Henze, Schuller, Rorem, Schikele and Josephs, which are widely recognized as worthy additions to the contrabass repertoire.



As the most recorded double bass concert artist in history, Karr is able to offer composers the additional allure-ment of the exposure which recordings afford. His new recording with the Louisville Symphony

Orchestra features music by Paul Ramsier, a composer Karr considers to be as important to the bass as Rodrigo is to the guitar. The concerto by

Hans Werner Henze for double bass and orchestra was premiered by Karr with the Chicago Symphony in 1966 and recorded in London with the English Chamber Orchestra, the composer conducting, in

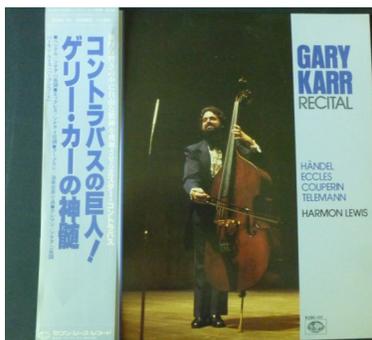
1967. Karr has also recorded all the music which Alec Wilder composed for him. For the Philips label, Karr recorded a concerto by Ketil Hvoslef who is regarded as one of Norway’s leading composers.

Karr’s artistry has even inspired fellow bassists to write for him. In his appearance with the National Symphony Orchestra last season, Karr gave the world premiere performance of a new arrangement of Bottesini’s “Tarantella.” Principal Contrabassist H. Stevens Brewster prepared the arrangement upon learning of Karr’s desire for a different performance version of this wonderful showpiece. Karr’s teacher Stuart Sankey wrote a concerto for him which Karr will premiere with conductor Gerard Schwarz this season.



Not least among Karr's contributions to the advancement of the double bass is his frequent appearance on the world's foremost concert platforms. Karr is known as solo bassist and recitalist *par excellence* throughout North America, Great Britain, Europe, Africa, Israel and Japan.

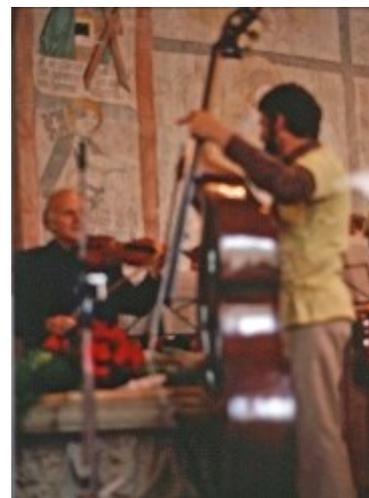
In Japan, his success with Lewis on their latest tour was so phenomenal that they only had one day free in six weeks of giving concerts and master classes, including an appearance before the Imperial family. The duo's recordings have been among the top classical best-sellers in that country.



Karr plays annually in London where the British Arts Council commissioned two works for him, a sonata and a concerto by Wilfred Josephs which were premiered in Leeds and Chester, respectively, the latter with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. This season, the Karr-Lewis Duo will be touring parts of Eastern Europe where they have not appeared previously. In Western Europe, the duo will be joined by flutist Eugenia Zukerman for a series of concerts.



Everywhere he goes, Karr becomes involved in music education. In fact, throughout his professional life, the distinguished bassist has been involved in sharing with others his joy in music and seeking to impart something of his unique artistry to young artists. In 1967, he founded the **International Institute for the String Bass** in an ambitious attempt to encourage bass players throughout the world in expanding their art. "We published quarterly magazines and had an international bass conference every year so our members could get to know each other and learn from each other." **The International Society of Bassists**, as it is now called, is headquartered at Northwestern University.



In Gstaad, during the Menuhin Music Festival, Karr gave a full week of workshops with fourteen double bassists from all over the world. At its conclusion, Karr joined the "Gstaad International Doublebass Orchestra" in an impressive recital, featuring individual students as well as Karr as soloists. One observer commented, "**They were all quite marvelous, but when Karr played, it was clear that he was still in a class by himself.**"

When the remark was repeated to Karr, instead of responding to the compliment as might be expected, he spoke with disappointment, "I did everything I could think of to show them how to achieve the singing line; Harmon and I even gave six recitals in addition to the work sessions to convey that understanding. I do not know what else to do."

He feels deeply about his students and speaks movingly of their struggles. As artist-in-residence at the University of Hartford, students come from all over the world to learn from Karr in the time he can afford them in the carefully scheduled intervals of an otherwise ruthless tour schedule.

Teaching, which once was so much of a pleasure to him, now has him discouraged, but not for the reasons one might suppose. The problem is that Karr feels personally responsible for his students' welfare and future and that can be a heavy burden in the current economic climate. Karr asks, "What can I offer a student who proposes to study with me and who pays \$7,000 per year for tuition plus living expenses and I cannot assure him or her of a job in the future?"



His sensitivity to his students' human qualities once made it difficult for him to teach master classes where he does not usually know the history of the student before him. He says,

**"It is hard for me to criticize someone's playing or interpretation when I know inherently that it took a lot of work to get to where they are. I don't want to discourage them. But I am more comfortable with master classes now. I always try to find a way to give constructive advice."**

Thanks in large part to Karr's pioneering efforts on the concert platform and his far-reaching teaching influence, a handful of bassists from a younger generation have been able to embark on careers as solo artists (including Mark Bernat, Jeff Bradetich, Richard Frederickson, Knut Guettler, Diana Mizelle, Van Demark, and Lawrence Wolf, who were students of Karr's.)

The thoughtful bassist feels no inhibitions when it comes to teaching music to children in the schools. For several years he taught general music in the public schools of Nova Scotia, in spite of his stature as an artist. The magnetic bassist easily reached the youngsters with his uniquely personal approach to music. Out of this experience, he evolved a successful format for concert presentations to youngsters.

Karr feels strongly about his work with children. They are the audience of the future, but perhaps even more importantly, he has learned a lot from their completely human and disarming response to music and the musician who brings it to them. Karr would encourage professional musicians, including artists of his stature, to teach for a time in the schools. Not only would it raise the level of music education but these musicians might be surprised to find how much such an experience can humanize their own art.



While in Gstaad, he gave a delightful 45-minute program for several hundred school children, happily involving the children in the music he played and calling attention to the roles of the piano and bass in making different kinds of music. To peek in on Karr as he weaves his spell with the children is to see a real Pied Piper at work.

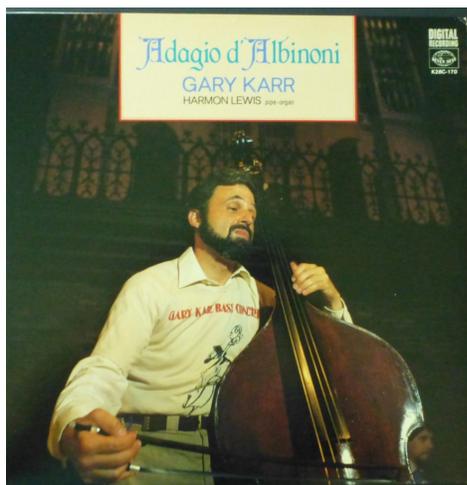
Karr perhaps gleans some of his greatest personal satisfaction from these sessions. He especially enjoys the freedom the bass affords him. He has no pre-determined mold to follow and the resulting freedom to do what he likes, and knows is right, gives him infinite pleasure. **“I wouldn’t want to play if I couldn’t be free,”** he says in a statement which applies to his entire concert life. “I have been fortunate with the bass because I have not been expected to copy someone. Therefore I can do more perhaps than a violinist or pianist with the children or, for that matter, *all* audiences.”



He can convey his own excitement about music, combining in his inimitable fashion, enlightenment with pleasure. And he can bring people of all ages to their realization of music as the language of the emotions to their infinite delight and benefit.

This view is simply one expression of this interesting artist’s concern that recitals are drawing largely from the older populace and not enticing younger people as well. Asked why he thinks that is, Karr responds thoughtfully, “Perhaps the older people remember what recitals were like before. Recitals were more personal then.”

In order to draw younger people to the concert along with their seniors, Karr suggests, “I would like to give short recitals, lasting 45 to 60 minutes, with no intermission and have the audience meet and talk with the artist before and after the concert.”



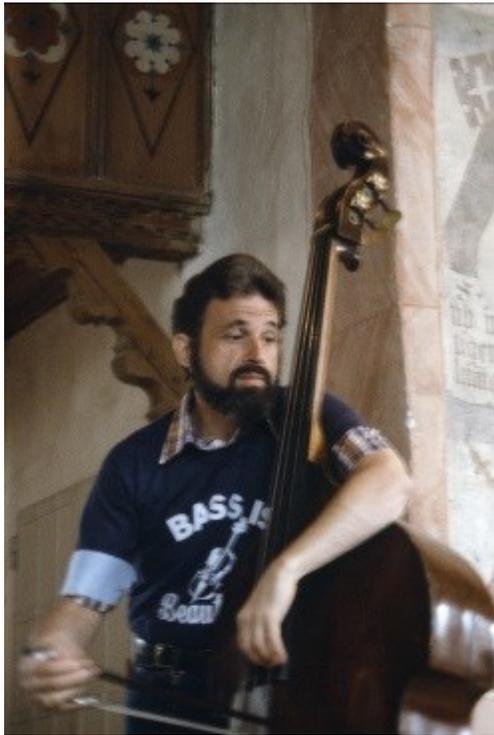
The suggestion is in keeping with this musician’s warm personality, for nothing pleases him more than when members of the audience greet him after a concert. It matters to him whether the audience is moved by the music he plays, and this is one way in which he keeps in touch with the inner humanity that characterizes his art.



With an instrument which others would find limiting, Gary Karr exhilarates in the freedom it affords him as a musician and as a human being. As he so enthusiastically points out, **“I can make a statement all my own.”**

And what a statement it has been so far! One can see that a deep-seated humanitarian impulse runs through this artist’s life with the same fidelity that music is transmitted through his beautiful Amati.

But at 42, this unique artist is not content. Although he has long established himself as a recitalist, he would like to give even more recitals in the United States and expand his involvement in giving master classes and programs for children in the schools.



As if that were not enough, he has just established the **Karr Doublebass Foundation** for the advancement of the double bass which promises to require all his seemingly limitless energy. Through this organization, many of Karr's ideas of ways to meet the specialized needs of the world's bass players will be institutionalized. The foundation plans to establish an instrument bank to purchase and make available to contrabass players instruments of high quality. Several bassists have already willed their instruments and bows to the foundation and Karr hopes others will do the same. **"Many of us do not wish to have price tags put on our cherished instrument and this is a way to ensure that they will be forever in the hands of worthy talents,"** he explains.

Luthiers would be commissioned to make new double bass instruments as well. In granting student scholarships and special stipends in addition, Karr hopes that the foundation eventually will be able to alleviate the financial burdens for as many bassists as possible. The foundation additionally will be authorized to commission new works for double bass from distinguished composers and will support a library of music for the double bass.

The indefatigable bassist has recently completed a series of books called *The Gary Karr School of Doublebass Playing* which he says "offers technical and musical ideas for players and teachers alike." The series is designed to help bass-playing and non-bass playing instructors teach bass to youngsters (starting at age nine). Karr, who is known for his unique approach to bass technique, feels that this new and different approach will be simpler and far more efficient than any previous teaching approach.

He has persuaded a Japanese company to build low-priced, tiny starter basses, six of which Karr is using to demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach set forth in his books.

In all, Gary Karr is creating a legacy that will serve generations yet to come. He is indeed making a statement all his own.

—Karen A. Shaffer,  
*Gstaad, 1983*

*Note:* Gary Karr has continued to live up to his ideal of the singing bass. Now retired, his

achievements have revolutionized double bass



playing and teaching. He has established a new standard for performance on his beloved instrument. For a more complete view of Gary Karr's life and work, read Mary Rannie's fine biography *Gary Karr, Life on the G String*, Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2017.

