

## Paris-Var 1998

### Remembrance of oboists in France, May, 1998

By Philip West  
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The weather in Paris was clear and beautiful, and in the Var in the south it was even better, except for the day we went to the cane fields, when we were almost soaked along with the cane. We were nineteen oboists, young and old, who joined the Boston Records Oboe Festival in the last two weeks of May for a trip to Paris to visit oboe makers, and to the south of France to meet the cane dealers, who gather, process and sell the precious *Arundo donax* we need to make reeds; and to play, and talk endlessly together about our chosen labor of love, the oboe.

Our trip was organized, as these excursions have been for the last half dozen years, by Wayne Rapier, recently retired oboist of the Boston Symphony, and President of Boston Records. Our leader in discussions, and classes about playing, reeds, style, and the development of playing and teaching was John de Lancie, retired principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and former director of the Curtis Institute. And in our group were Earnest Harrison, formerly of the National Symphony and Louisiana State University, Laila Storch, of the Soni Ventorum Quintet, and historian of Marcel Tabuteau and Georges Gillet. Also along were Hiroshi Yoshimizu, a leading Japanese oboist, David Weber, master reed maker, this writer, and twelve other American oboists: professional players, teachers and students.

These days provided a unique opportunity to discuss the development of oboe playing from the teaching of Georges Gillet, through the teaching and playing of Marcel Tabuteau and his students, to today's varied but distinctive American oboe style. These discussions went in many directions: recordings of Gillet students (even a 1906 snippet of Gillet himself!), vibrato, the apparent alteration of French style during and after World War II, and the influence of Leon Goossens. Laila Storch was kind enough to play for us a number of truly fascinating recordings she has accumulated over the years. These early recordings of Georges Longy, Fernand Gillet, Louis Bleuzet, Roland Lamorlette, Myrtille Morel, and Marcel Tabuteau were eye openers and sparked hours of discussion about the development of oboe playing and especially tone quality in the twentieth century. Is today's French or American style more representative of Gillet's legacy?

We also had the great pleasure of meeting Etienne Baudo, professor 1960-1973, at 95 still a strong source

of wisdom about playing, music in Paris for the past 70 years, and our oboe history.

In Paris we were housed at CISP, a small convention center in the 12th Arrondissement, and in La Londe we were at Centre Odel-Var, a state-owned center for beautiful flowers abounding and an excellent kitchen.

Our days in Paris began with a class led by John de Lancie. There were classes in reeds with David Weber, and Wayne Rapier worked on excerpts and audition techniques.

On Sunday, May 17, the birthday of Georges Gillet, we went to the Cimetiere Monmartre, where many famous Frenchmen are buried. There are the graves of notable musicians such as Berlioz, Offenbach, Adolphe Sax, and sisters Boulanger, and the final resting place we were particularly interested in: that of Georges Gillet. We decided to clean it up and get a pot of flowers to brighten the spot, and to leave as our own remembrance there. The years have left the inscription quite worn away, and there is a small marble plaque, placed there, we were told by John de Lancie, many years ago by Mr. Tabuteau, who revered his teacher very greatly. This plaque, which sits on two tiny "feet" reads simply: "Au grand maitre Georges Gillet 1854-1920, ses admirateurs"

Another memorable visit was to the Musee de la Musique in the Parc de la Villette. Also located here is the Conservatoire National de Musique. The entire Parc is a brilliant design and use of space which formerly was the meat market and slaughterhouse of Paris. The Cite de la Musique is the project of Christian de Portzamparc and the Musee de la Musique was designed by Frank Hammoutene. The museum is simply extraordinary. The vast collection of the Conservatoire is displayed in a grand space of 3000 square meters (10,000 square feet) and includes instruments from the Renaissance to the present day. A unique feature is an Audio-Guide in English, as well as in French. The displays are easy to see and understand, and the performances on the Audio-Guide are stylish and always on instruments of the period of the display. Many old wind instruments are in the display and seem to be in excellent condition. The Museum is described as the first example of a national museum dedicated entirely to music and musical instruments.

We also paid a call on the old Conservatoire building, completed in 1811. In it is the theater where so many famous concerts took place: Berlioz leading

the first performance of the *Symphonie Fantastique*; Habeneck playing first performance in Paris of all the Beethoven symphonies. Also in this hall, we were told, were held all the concours for prizes from the opening of this building until the early 1960's, a hundred fifty years! The hall is small, intimate you might say, with three tiers of boxes and narrow rows of seats in the orchestra. The decor looks as though it has not been changed in almost two hundred years, still graceful in red and gold Empire design. Before we entered the theater we were taken to the Green room behind the Royal Box, where many famous leaders including Napoleon III were received. This room is also where decisions were made as to who would win his or her Prize in a particular year. A very distinguished building, it is now the Conservatoire des Arts Dramatiques.

While in Paris we visited our old friends Anne and Alain de Gourdon at F. Lorée, and were given a lovely dinner at Au Vieux Molin, near where we stayed at CISP. Our visit to their shop on Rue du Vert-Bois, was nostalgic for many of us, and we played some wonderful Lorée oboes including one in ivory with gold keys. The de Gourdon's were, as usual, very hospitable.

Another day of great interest had a trip to the Buffet Crampon factory in Mantes-la-Ville. Buffet oboes have improved markedly, and their Green Line oboes, made of a pressed composite material containing black wood powder and carbon fiber, are very consistent. The factory itself was fascinating, with many machines carrying out nearly every step of the manufacturing process.

After lunch, we had the pleasure of visiting the house and garden of the great Claude Monet in Giverny, close at hand to the west of Paris, where the painter lived for the last half of his long life; and where he created his magnificent paintings of Nymphaeas. The ponds of water lilies with the beautiful arched bridge remain as a living reminder of the simple beauty, artfully contrived, which was the inspiration for those matchless paintings from the end of his life. The day was clear and the country farmhouse, filled with Japanese prints, and the garden, rife with flowers, was a delight to the eye and the spirit.

The next day we took the speedy and comfortable TGV (Very Fast Train) to Toulon, and from there to La Londe and the Odel-Var where we spent the rest of our time.

Our first days in the south were devoted to classes and to companionable conversation. The day began with a class led by John de Lancie in which many of us played. Each performance, whether an etude, concerto movement, salon piece, or whatever, sparked discussion of phrasing, articulation, breath,

embouchure, style, anything you may imagine, with all sides of the question on view. Mr. de Lancie has a splendid fund of aphorisms to spice his classes. Let me share a few with you:

Metre is to music as gravity is to existence: a stable constant

Rhythm exists in friction with metre

Rhythm and metre are not the same!

Phrasing is the art of defining, while playing, the grammatical structure of music

The propensity for procrastination grows exponentially with age.

After lunch we were treated to cane and reed work with David Weber. David's experience and his searching analysis of reed styles, and of the development of the American way of scraping the reed-what the French call "grattage"-are enlightening to reed makers young and old. His generosity and his quiet low-key manner made these sessions valuable to all. Later in the afternoon and in the evening there were excerpt and audition classes with Wayne Rapier. These hours, which led to a mock audition on our last day in La Londe, listened to by some of us "old timers", were a bracing dose of reality for our younger colleagues, showing how tough and unforgiving the audition process can be.

Mealtimes and evening hours were times to continue discussions of the oboe in general and style and history in particular. A topic running through the entire two weeks was the contrasting differences of the two strains of oboe playing descending from the teaching of Gillet students: Tabuteau and his pupils in the United States, and Bleuzet and his successors in France. Did the greatest change take place with the advent of Pierre Pierlot as Professor in Paris? What influence did the success of Leon Goossens, with his lyrical, richly vibratoed and singing solo tone have on his neighbors across the Channel? What were the results of World War II and the shortage of good cane? What role did the growing use of vibrato among wind players in general - Barrere, Moyse, Kincaid, Kell, as well as Goossens - have? These and many other issues were raised and discussed along with the renewal of old friendships and the establishment of new ones. And there was that fine cuisine at Odel-Var!

Our trips to the cane fields were a lot of fun, and filled with information. We heard that wild cane gathered in the old fashioned way is best: it must struggle to survive and thus is stronger and more tensile. On the other side we heard that cultivated cane can be fertilized and grown in the best of conditions, and consequently perfected. So we had to say: what do you think? One thing for sure: we saw some good cane!

Our most fascinating personal encounter was with

Etienne Baudo, who celebrated his 95th birthday on February 28, 1998. He was professor at the Paris Conservatoire from 1960 to 1973, English horn at l'Opera for many years, and is a remarkable reservoir of historical lore. John de Lancie first met him at the time of the Liberation of Paris in 1944, at which time M. Baudo gave him tickets for the first concert given in Paris after the departure of the Germans, presented by the Concerts Colonne. Laila Storch also knew him in her early years in Europe, and played Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* with him in Barcelona in 1958. We spent a rewarding morning and had lunch with M. Baudo in La Londe, and he promised to see the group again next year.

M. Baudo entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1921, the first year of Louis Bleuzet's professorship, Georges Gillet having died the previous year. At the Conservatoire in those days there were two lessons and three four-hour classes per week, attendance at two classes required. In this class were twelve students including Pierre Bajoux, later professor, and Jean de Vergie who was a member of the Boston Symphony for many years; along with a few foreign and private students. They studied scales, Barret, Ferling and Gillet. The Gillet was most difficult (as it remains). They always played etudes in class. The daughter of M. Bleuzet played piano in the class.

Orchestra met once a week, there was little opportunity to play chamber music, and few concerts. The "season" was from October to May and summer occupation was plentiful with orchestras in many spas and "watering holes" from the English Channel to the Cote d'Azur. Professor Bleuzet was very charming, we were told, with a beautiful tone and a big technique. M. Baudo told us that he died young, though he lived to the age of 67 (1874-1941), perhaps a young death only to a man who is 95! Georges Gillet, on the other hand was described as "mechant" - (mean), and his students were required to play his reeds and the instrument he suggested!

M. Baudo told us that his models as a young student were his teacher Bleuzet, Fernand Gillet, the nephew of Georges, and the principal in Boston until 1947; Gaudard at the Garde Republicaine Band; Pointer, second at the Opera Comique. All he said, had great sounds. Apropos of changes in playing over the years, M. Baudo told us that he had always been more interested in quality of tone and musicianship, and that now it seems that it's "all technique". He has always felt that "sound must be part of music". Vibrato came in with Pierre Pierlot. M. Baudo also told us that he had encountered Tabuteau at a shop in Paris in the 1950's, when both were trying oboes, and that Tabuteau had said "how is it that you don't sound like the others?" M. Baudo told us also that all the students now have profile machines. His reeds

had a slightly longer scrape than the traditional French one, with lots of wood off the corners. He has kept two reeds as souvenirs, the reed from his audition at l'Opera, and the one from his first time of the famous solo from *Tristan*.

The conductors M. Baudo admired included Paul Paray, Charles Munch, Phillippe Gaubert, and Gustave Bret, whose Bach Society gave four concerts a year. The concertmaster at the Concerts Colonne, where he played for many years was Jacques Thibaud.

The time we spent with M. Baudo was memorable. He is a totally charming man who looks at least twenty years younger than his age, and whose memories and sense of history are vivid links to our past.

A perfect holiday for an oboe player!

#### **About the Author ...**

*Philip West is a versatile musician whose activities include appearances as oboist and English horn player; teacher; and music arranger. He is professor emeritus of chamber music at the Eastman School of Music where he was director of the Eastman InterMusica Ensemble. He has prepared many editions of solo and chamber music, including those for the final recording of his late wife, Jan DeGaetani, featuring songs of Mahler and Berlioz. As a recitalist Mr. West has appeared throughout the United States and in Britain, performing the standard literature for oboe, as well as premieres of solo and chamber works for oboe by such composers as Amy, Britten, Castiglione, Harbison, Hodgkinson, Benson and Wernick. Earlier in his career he was a leading free-lance performer in New York City, and a member of the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, the Boehm Quintet, the Festival Winds, and the New York Pro Musica under Noah Greenberg, where he played the treble and alto shawm. He was also a founder of the Bloomingdale Concert Series. He has performed often with the New York Philharmonic, Symphony of the Air, the Mostly Mozart Festival, and Orchestras of the New York City Ballet and Opera. Mr. West's editions and arrangements have been published by such houses as Theodore Presser and International Music Company, and he is author of the article on the oboe in "Colliers Encyclopedia."*

*Mr. West has recorded for RCA Victor, Columbia, Nonesuch, Vanguard, CRI, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and others. He has been a member of the Artist/Faculty at the Aspen Music Festival and School since 1972.*

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