

The Reedmaker

By Max Rosenblum
Dallas, Texas

To know an oboist you need never meet the man. All an oboist ever was, or ever is, resides in nineteen to twenty-one millimeters of cane, metal, string, and cork he calls his reed. In fact, the “oboist” would be more aptly called the “reedmaker” because this is where his time and focus are spent: searching for the perfect reed. A lifetime of wispy cane shavings accumulating around a reedmaker’s work bench testifies to his endless hours of solemn scraping. He begins with an awkward piece of tubular cane, no bigger around than a lady’s ring finger, and initiates his interrogation. This dry snip of yellow wood blemished by black sunstreaks holds the secrets of its three reeds within. Will this cane plead the melancholy strains of Tchaikovsky’s *Fourth Symphony*, or will it snap in ultimate defiance when asked to fold across the shaping tool?

The first action taken is separation. The reedmaker introduces the tri-bladed splitting tool into the mouth of the cane and divorces the three segments. After meticulous analysis of the fiber, contour, and overall integrity, the reedmaker selects the best segment to make into a reed. The next few steps (in which the cane is pared, planed, chopped, trimmed, and gouged) prove rather mechanical and tedious, resulting in a sleek, defleshed sliver of cane. The craftsman has removed the formalities of excess and crude fiber so that he can concentrate on a more delicate conversation with his reed. This conversation begins by asking the cane to fold in half. A reedmaker uses no tools in this process, only his hands to tactilely detect the inaudible splits and cracks with which the reed often answers.

After the cane is bound to the cork and metal staple, the craftsman begins the process of scraping. Over the centuries reedmakers have

charted the reed’s tiny surface like the vast landscape of a distant moon with the “window region”, “heart”, “tip head”, “lay”, “rails”, and “spine” all contained in twenty-one millimeters of cane. With his finely honed blade, the reedmaker deftly slips into the minute grooves and niches discovering the quick of the cane — such swift and clever strokes considering how sorely a heavy hand can mar the delicate integrity of a reed. He scrapes until he believes the cane has something to say. Introduced to his lips it falls easily into his embouchure. The reed crows: too sharp, too flat, too bright, too dark, too tinny, too much resistance. So, spurned but not discouraged, the reedmaker returns to his scraping.

Hours later this disjointed banter of scrape and crow ceases; the cane surrenders and reveals its coveted voice, its true voice. The reed now becomes the channel, the bridge, the key. It is sunk into the well at the tip of the instrument and placed in the oboist’s mouth. This tiny bit of wood siphons the music, the passion, out of the vessel called the oboist and sings to whomever might listen. The reed takes all that is caged within the musician and sends it soaring. The reedmaker is finished ... for today, because a reed is made of natural flesh and soon decays and becomes useless. Tomorrow he will start again. So the reedmaker is forever scraping, forever searching, and forever finding his perfect reed. ❖

About the Author ...

Max Rosenblum attends Jesuit College Prep. in Dallas, Texas. He is an oboist who has been studying with Rogene Russell, principal English horn of the Fort Worth Symphony.