

The Baroque Performance Institute Experience Studying the Baroque Oboe at Oberlin: 1998

By Barbara Trautwein
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Want to expand your oboistic horizons?? Love playing Bach cantatas? Tired of dealing with all of those metal keys on your Lorée?

Why not consider the BAROQUE OBOE?

When you look to the possibilities of beginning the baroque oboe, investigate the Baroque Performance Institute held each summer at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, usually the last week in June through the first week in July. 1998 was the 27th gathering of the baroque clan in this college town southwest of Cleveland. Musicians of all levels— string players, harpsichordists, flute and recorder players, singers— amateur and professional, young and old have been coming to Oberlin for many years to work with an internationally known faculty in master classes, private lessons and small ensembles while attending lectures and concerts and eating pizza at Lorenzo's.

Since **James Caldwell**, an early pioneer of period-instrument baroque performance in the United States, is on the Oberlin regular music faculty and was the BPI's Artistic Director for many years, it is not surprising that instruction in baroque oboe is a mainstay at this workshop. While Jimmy has passed the teaching torch to his former students. . . in recent years, **Stephen Hammer** and currently, **Gonzalo X. Ruiz** . . . "Caldwell Sightings" are part of the baroque oboe students' pursuits during the two weeks of "camp."

In 1998, the thirteen member oboe class enrollment ranged from a college financial planning officer plus a chemist who works for Monsanto . . . to several young professionals who play modern oboe. . . to college students; graduate and undergraduate, music majors and students of liberal arts. Their homes were as far apart as Korea is from Turkey, heading east. Instructor Ruiz, while residing in Oakland, CA, is from Argentina.

While several of the class members have been playing baroque oboe for many years and own at least one, many of this year's group were new to this instrument. Gonzalo was able to round up some oboes for them to use in addition to those that belong to Oberlin College. In other words, it was not necessary to invest in the purchase of an oboe before getting acquainted with one. All of the

1998 beginners were experienced modern players and reed makers. The transition for most was quite positive and dramatic.

An hour was spent every morning on reed making with careful and generous attention from Gonzalo. "This is not rocket science" was an oft heard remark that helped build confidence in this area. The announcement that GXR would, of course, be hand-shaping cane brought a gasp or two. Gonzalo is sooo cool with this that almost everybody bought into it. (A very good Steve Hammer shaper awaited in the wings for those of faint heart.)

Following the reed-making hour came the daily master class. Those who graduated from music school sometime after 1953 seem quite comfortable with this format: playing a prepared solo in front of the class to be critiqued by Gonzalo and **James Bolyard**, the bassoon instructor. The focus on this activity is supposed to be artistic rather than technical. (Technical concepts are dealt with in great detail in the private lessons.) Almost everyone, however, needed reinforcement in certain universal playing principles so that technique AND musicality were addressed. (One must mention that not only is there a harpsichord in each of the master class rooms, but if you signed up according to instructions, you had an accompanist show up to play at the time you were scheduled. This very accomplished musician needed no rehearsal, no musical material beyond a bass line plus figures to come in and perform with you. Amazing!)

After lunch, a lecture or a short recital was offered to all. A thematic thread — this year: ornamentation — bound these various activities together.

From 3:00 to 4:30, the assigned ensembles rehearsed. The faculty choose pieces and form student groups to make the best use of the available instrumentation and levels of accomplishments. Their knowledge of repertoire and what will work with what players is formidable. Each ensemble is assigned a musical coach who spends about 45 minutes of the daily rehearsal time with the group. While the group is working on its own, it may be visited by Gonzalo, who checks in on all the oboe players with very useful advice and encouragement, and by one of the continuo

instructors attentive to the needs of the student harpsichord player.

The evening activities often include a reading chorus and/or orchestra, a continuo class for everyone. . . not just keyboard players, open faculty rehearsals for the Friday night concert, time to practice and . . . yes, to make reeds. Oberlin has two rooms dedicated to reed-making; one each for oboe and bassoon. The regular school-year students use small lockers in the oboe room for their reed making equipment. The room has tall stools gathered around a double-decker table. Lights are clamped to the upper table; the rods that divide the upper from the lower are used to tie on reeds. The decor of the room, reflecting the interests of generations of Oberlin oboe players, gives off a very clubby, gemütlich-type aura.

On Saturday afternoon, the students perform in their ensembles. This is an amazing concept to the oboists who played their instruments for the first time on the previous Monday. This is, however, the friendliest, most supportive audience you will ever have so everyone comes out alive.

The first Saturday evening is devoted to an auction to raise money for the high school scholarship fund. Both of the double reed instructors have become masters of not only stand-up comedy, but the ability to stimulate high bidding for flea-market items of questionable value.

Sunday is off and Monday begins the process all over again with everyone assigned to a new ensemble with a new piece.

The numbers being right and the spirits willing, Oboe Band which includes baroque bassoons, was once again in place. A pair of baroque oboes da caccia was found to play the tenor line in the four part arrangements. Sometimes taille d'oboe is used but it was too much of a climb in Professor Caldwell's studio to fetch them down. The da caccia worked fine. In addition to traditional music, Jim Bolyard, perhaps as a gesture to Gonzalo's recent return from Argentina loaded down with tango music, prepared a stimulating arrangement of *Hernando's Hideaway* which the Band played on the first student concert. The second concert landed on July 4 so the extra music, again arranged by Jim, included "Anacreon", the 6-4 drinking song upon which is based our American National Anthem and, of course, the *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Yes, the piccolo solo was played on a baroque piccolo. Nevermind what this has to do with baroque music. . . a light diversion is needed from time to time.

The oboe performance highlight of the session was Gonzalo's pyrotechnically dazzling rendition of the *Marcello Concerto*. The story is that at the

rehearsal, he, just for fun, peppered the last movement with some of his imaginative improvisations. The faculty in the accompaniment orchestra were so knocked out that they insisted that he do the same at the concert. Well! What can be said?? Caldwell threw money. . .

After the second Saturday's concert, the tradition is to meet at the Caldwells' Bonsai garden for a gala barbecue. (Mrs. Caldwell is Catharina Meints, the modern and baroque cello plus viola da gamba artist who is a member of the Oberlin Baroque Ensemble.) After viewing their superb gamba collection and meeting the two Caldwell ferrets, the group of new 'old' friends enjoyed the Town of Oberlin's Fourth of July fireworks.

Generally speaking, Gonzalo Ruiz and Jim Bolyard, as first year participant **Fatma Daglar** said:

"manage to make this workshop very educational AND entertaining at the same time. Where else can you find such camaraderie, a no-pressure environment, players from all levels, all ages? What a great place to socialize with people of the same interest. It's hard to imagine such an absence of competition in the modern music world."

And . . . don't forget Lorenzo's pizza!

Inquiries about the 1999 B P I should be directed to:

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Gonzalo X. Ruiz
(the famous embouchure)



*Gonzalo X. Ruiz
(applying the "not rocket science")*



*James Bolyard
(baroque bassoon instructor)*



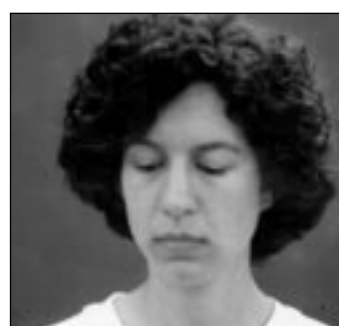
*Fatma Daglar
(Baltimore, MD & Istanbul, Turkey)*



*Stephen Bard
(Oberlin College student)*



*Katy Elkin
(Williamsport, PA)*



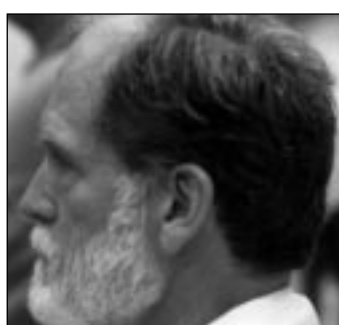
*Audrey Markowitz
(Beverly, MA)*



*Kenny Stillwell
(Baltimore, MD)*



*Haejoon Park
(Ypsilanti, MI & Seoul, Korea)*



*Stephen Butts - the college planner
(Appleton, WI)*



*Alex Schaffer - the Monsanto chemist
(St. Louis, MO)*



*Oboe Band: 1998
(Kulas Hall, Oberlin College Conservatory)*