

Marcel Tabuteau of Philadelphia Orchestra Summarizes Training

By Marcel Tabuteau
As Told to Robert Sabin

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I once received a letter from a young man in the Middle West telling me that he had heard me play in the Philadelphia Orchestra on tour and had fallen in love with the oboe, so much so that he wanted to learn to play it and to make it his career. His friends, however, had objected very strongly, and all of them had assured him that if he played the oboe he would go mad! What did I think about it? Should he go ahead with his plans? I thanked him for his letter, and I said that I hoped that I was not a victim of the oboe, as it was described by his friends. The oboe, I assured him, does not drive you crazy, but at times I think one must be crazy to study it!

Of all the orchestral instruments the oboe is nearest to the human voice in expressive powers. It has an enormous range of emotional suggestion and nuance. It can be witty, melancholy, subtly humorous, appealing, sparkling, all within the space of a few measures of music. A fine oboist can produce as many as fifty different tone colors on one note, just as a singer can vary the colorings of the voice in an infinite number of ways. Therefore the oboist must think vocally. A beautiful tone emission is supremely important to him, and he must phrase with the subtlest sort of artistry. The oboist has no shield. His instrument has no coloratura, no purely technical bravura with which to dazzle the listener. Its penetrating tone and intensity of effect leave the player completely exposed. He must have the asset of musicality, for his role in the orchestra always calls for the utmost in sensitivity and command of mood.

Preliminary Training Needed

A thorough preliminary training in music is especially important to the young oboist. He should study solfège, piano, theory and voice in his early years. When he has reached the age of 13 or 14 he is ready to begin with the oboe itself. To obtain the best results, the same teacher should control his development from the very first. If he is correctly and consistently guided, he will be spared many hardships. Of great

importance to an oboist are smooth and regular teeth, for he needs them to form a good embouchure. And he must master the art of phrasing from the beginning. To the student who has already acquired a sound sense of rhythm and musical structure, the purely technical problems of the oboe will be infinitely easier.

Too much care cannot be exercised about tone emission in fundamental training. My pupils often have a whole year of such training before they go on to other elements of technique. Just as the singer must develop breath control, the oboist must acquire absolute control over his artificial vocal organism. The quality and intensity of oboe tone is determined by the pressure of the wind, and it is the gradation of this pressure which the student must develop to the highest degree. The speed of the wind and the position of the lips make all the difference between a tight, "tooth-ache," tone and a sensitive, free coloring.

A real oboe vibrato is produced by the intensity of the speed of the player's wind. But as you increase the speed, you should release the embouchure. Perhaps I can make this clear by comparing the process to the starting of a train. In the station, the locomotive grips the rails tightly as it slowly begins to move, but as it gains momentum it moves along more lightly and the grip slackens. This does not mean a loss of control, but simply that control is more lightly exercised at high speed. If the player does not loosen his lips as the speed of vibrations increases, he will produce that thin, acid tone, with its pinched quality, which is the mark of a bad oboist.

Each Student is Individual Problem

Each student must be treated as an individual problem. How often have I had the experience, in teaching a class of three or four, of correcting one student with a certain observation, and finding myself called upon to say the exact opposite to the next one. A good musician always develops his own studies and improves his own technique through observing his special weaknesses and musical needs. There is no patented process to produce good oboists.

The student should learn how to make his

own reeds, for they play an important part in tone production. He should also make himself completely at home with the technique of the English horn. Although in American orchestras there has been a tendency to specialization on this instrument, it has been the custom of European orchestras for the first oboist to double on the English horn and to play the important solos in the repertoire.

The sooner the student begins to play in chamber music groups and training orchestras the better, but he must be thoroughly ready. Here we come upon a point of enormous significance in the orchestral player's career. If he begins playing in ensembles before he is technically prepared, he will be under constant strain and will force his way through the music in a haphazard way which will cause severe psychological damage. I know from my own experience that one can be haunted throughout one's career by passages which tripped one up in one's youth, even though they are child's play at a later stage of development. A feeling of security must be built up while one is beginning.

Player Should Know Whole Score

The greatest problem for an orchestral player is not to perform his own part, but to adjust himself to the others. He must know the score and sense his own position in the music as a whole. This knowledge does not spring, as some naive observers seem to think, only from the "magical baton" of the conductor, but from years of hard work and a sensitive artistic conscience on the part of the orchestral musician. The solo which seems to be beckoned forth by an easy gesture, may have cost the player months of intense practice. The flawless ensemble which seems almost a matter of course means that every man in the orchestra has been painstakingly trained from his school years to respond to the maestro's wishes.

Formerly, when a conductor wanted a woodwind player, he took a trip to Europe. Today, the men occupying first chairs in most of our great orchestras have grown up in our own schools. We have transplanted the traditions of European orchestral training. After twenty years at the Curtis Institute of Music as head of the oboe department and of the woodwind ensemble class, I can take real pride in the number of fine American orchestral musicians from these classes who have been able to step into key positions with no loss of quality in performance or style.

The oboe is used more often as a solo

instrument than it used to be, and the orchestral player should be thoroughly schooled in the concert repertoire. But the instrument is at its best in the orchestra. One might compare it to a bright spot of color in an impressionistic painting. By itself it loses emphasis and balance, for it needs the surrounding hues to set it off. The solo repertoire is of greatest value in giving the student a sense of style and phrasing. It contains music by some of the greatest composers from Handel to Hindemith.

Musical Intelligence Vital

I always tell my students that if they think beautifully they will play beautifully. For it is what you have to say in music which determines the quality of your performance. The instrument is like the artist's pencil — merely a means of expression and not an end in itself. In a sense, the oboe is the most abstract of orchestral instruments. Its finger technique offers no special problems, so that the emphasis falls all the more heavily upon the expressive side of the performance. The production of a single tone involves the subtlest sense of proportion.

To illustrate this, one might make a diagram symbolizing the course of one tone, in the form of an arc. Out of silence, the most perfect state of music in which everything is implicit, the tone begins. It grows in intensity, the vibrations of the reed increase, until it reaches its highest point. Then it recedes according to the same scale of intensity until it dies away in silence. If it is perfectly produced by the player, the listener will sense its symmetry even though he may not be conscious of how the effect has been produced.

Unlike some of the other wind instruments, the oboe does not lend itself to mechanical adjustments in order to change its pitch. The flutist, for instance, can lengthen or shorten the column of wind without impairing the quality of his tone production, but if the oboist pulls out the staple which holds the reed the whole instrument is thrown out of kilter. Consequently he must be sure that his instrument is warmed up and at proper pitch before the performance begins. But the very fact that he cannot interfere with the mechanism of the oboe develops in him a firm sense of control. Life is not easy for the oboist, but he has at his command one of the most sensitive instruments in the orchestra. There are literally no limits to the variety of emotions and moods which he can create, if his musicianship and understanding are fully developed. ❖