

## IDRS 1999: Impressions of a Newbie

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Ever since I joined the IDRS in 1995, I have read glowing reports about IDRS conferences. With the passing years, I became more and more interested in participating. 1999 was to be the year, since the venue of the conference, Madison, Wisconsin, was situated a reasonable distance from the Montréal area, and was only slightly out of the way of our usual route to visit relatives and friends in Minnesota. My wife, who is a pianist, organist and piano teacher, was with me. She had registered for the conference, but did not intend at first to attend all the events. Evidently, living with an oboist is hard enough. Listening to them for five consecutive days was probably going to be too much for her. More on that later.

Before I go further, I must say that these impressions that I am sharing with you are just that, impressions. I was asked by some friends to write something about my IDRS conference experience. I did not take notes during the conference and, after a couple of months, many details from a busy five-day period have faded away. I also do not feel qualified to give a proper review of the performances that I heard. I just want to outline what impressed me most. Any omission about performers and their work is in no way a judgment of their performance.

We arrived at the conference shortly after noon on August 10. The business of registering for the conference and moving into Sellery Hall, our residence, made us miss the first session. Since I am an oboist and a chamber music enthusiast, I had determined that I would mostly choose sessions involving oboists and ensembles with oboes. This led to painful choices at times, but the evening concerts certainly contributed to broadening my horizons.

My first session featured the Essex Winds and the Icelandic Trio. For me, this session set the pattern for the whole conference: first, a very high standard of doublereed playing, and, more importantly, of musicianship; second, a repertoire that would be dominated by 20th century music. For an amateur oboist like me, much more familiar with Haydn, Mozart, the three B's and their contemporaries, this was going to be a learning experience. I got to hear an interesting wind quintet from my countryman

Jacques Héту, and the Madeline Dring Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano really appealed to me.

The first evening concert was quite impressive, and long! Coupled with the very busy schedule of the conference, it really gave me the impression that doublereeders at the IDRS conference are as crazy as physicists attending a conference, going from sun-up to late in the evening. After **Marc Fink's** musical welcome, we heard the *Concerto for Three Wind Choirs and Tympani* by Fasch, arranged by **Christopher Weait**. I thought that the trumpets and the tympani were a bit overpowering, but we managed to rectify the situation at the closing concert. I cannot comment too much on **William Winstead's** *Four Impromptus*, as I was still trying to get my ears accustomed to these 20th century styles, but his rendering of a Duetto by Paganini, and especially his Operatic Anthology, showed incredible virtuosity and music making for the fun of it that was really appreciated by the audience. After the intermission, the WIZARDS! gave us a varied and entertaining group of pieces, closing with *A Klezmer Wedding*, by **Michael Curtis**, which set a festive and joyous atmosphere leading into a reception in the courtyard next to the Humanities Building.

My next day started with an oboe masterclass with **Helén Jahren** and three talented young musicians. As always, it is interesting to watch a teacher trying to bring out more expression from these young people by making them reflect on what the music tries to tell them. I then heard the Aiolos Collective and went on to visit the exhibits in the Memorial Union. I could have spent most of the conference there, and most of my savings, too. I tried a couple of oboes, but I did not dare to experiment too much, since I cannot afford to change my 20-year-old Rigoutat at this time. I know where to go when I am ready to change, however: an IDRS conference.

I spent the first part of Wednesday afternoon listening to **William Wielgus** and his oboe d'amore, and then, to the bassoon of **Kenneth Moses**, with various groups of wind instruments. Here again, I got to hear unfamiliar but very interesting music. During that time, my wife, following her interests as an organist, went to hear **William Davis** in works for bassoon and

organ. The second part of the afternoon was devoted to chamber music, with the Terra Nova Trio and the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Wind Quintet. We even witnessed a special event: a Duo for flute and bassoon by Gernot Wolfgang performed by flutist Joanna Cowan White and the composer's wife (I am sorry but I do not remember her name) substituting at the very last minute for Joanna's regular partner who could not make the conference. It was very hard to tell that this piece was really put together that same day. To me, this illustrates the power of music as a communication medium between people who just met, but share similar ideals.

The evening concert was again a happening. The Frenchmen were there. It started with very well-played standard repertoire, **Michel Benet** with a C.P.E Bach Sonata and **Fabrice Mélinon** with the Saint-Saëns oboe sonata and the *Fantaisie Pastorale* by Bozza. Even I had heard this last one before. Then, both of them went into a musical tour-de-force, the *Pieces for Two Oboes* by Yun. Each movement, based on a musical effect, goes on using this sole device, be it trills, glissandi, accents and harmony. It was a fun piece to hear (once?). It must have been lots of fun to put together, but, judging from the expressions of the performers at times, and the comments of the audience around me, I wonder if it was a technical exercise, a musical joke, or still something else. *Pistache for Oboe, Oboe d'Amore and English horn* by **Jan Joris Nieuwenhuis** was a very interesting piece. I would like to hear it again, since all that I really remember of it is that I enjoyed it very much. As for the **Stefano Vicentini** recital, which followed, it gave me a glimpse into the bassoon repertoire, as played by a very smooth and very musical performer.

OK, I could go on going from morning to evening for the rest of the conference, but it would get rather boring. There is also the effect of getting into the routine of a conference, and, even if the proceedings are pleasant and interesting, everything gets a bit mixed up together. One gets to the "If it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium" syndrome of someone taking a two week tour covering ten countries in Europe. So, from now on, I will concentrate on what really impressed me, following roughly the schedule, but not trying to be systematic. The next session that I attended involved **Howard Niblock**, who gave a fine performance of a *Sonata for oboe* written by his father, James Niblock. This is one work that I would like to hear again (maybe I should order some cassettes!).

In complete contrast to what I had heard since the beginning of the conference, I was then plunged into the world of baroque instruments, with **Marc Vallon** and **Goefrey Burgess**. I was amazed at the virtuosity and the versatility of the baroque bassoon as played by Marc Vallon. I was not so impressed with the baroque oboe, especially with respect to the intonation level to which we are accustomed with modern instruments. It may also be due to my unfamiliarity with baroque temperaments. Strangely enough, the music played in this session sounded very predictable to me. Was I being "polluted" by all this 20th century music?

One fun part of the conference for me was the performance of **Richard Killmer** and his Eastman oboes, past and present. The music was great. However, what struck me was the energy and the enthusiasm of Richard Killmer in setting up his groups, jumping around to make sure that everything was right, and getting a tremendous response from his musicians. This is certainly the mark of an outstanding teacher. His students, past or present, expressed their appreciation by acting as a very noisy fan club at the closing concert, when he performed Handel's *Concerto in G Minor*.

We then had a session with a multi-media flavour, with **Barbara Herr Orland**. By then I guess that I was ready for a diversion, something different. In a way, I feel guilty that I cannot really comment on the music, but I was caught up in a world of undersea wonder that I will never experience myself, with musical accompaniment to these wonderful pictures. Then, I got to hear the Beethoven *Trio for two oboes and English horn* that I know quite well, having performed the first three movements of this piece. I realized why my friends and I never tackled the last movement on hearing a very good professional performance of this piece.

The only non-musical event that I attended at the conference was the presentation by **James Brody** on "Body Use Issues for Double Reed Players: Practical Solutions to Physical Problems". Even if the factual information content that I retain from this talk is rather slim, Mr. Brody's very picturesque presentation really led to a concrete analysis of posture problems, in particular. By acting out in a somewhat exaggerated way some common misconceptions about posture, he gave me some insight on figuring out what makes sense physically. I must admit that I am fighting some of the problems that he described, and his talk gave me some encouragement in trying to correct them.

On Thursday evening, I only took in the first part of the concert. **Gordon Hunt's** interpretation of the Mozart *Quintet in C Minor, K 406*, was very polished and very elegant. He actually played the first violin part in the transcription by Mozart himself of the *Serenade K 388* for winds, that would be presented later by the United Air Force Band of Mid-America Chamber Winds. In spite of the interesting solo oboe effect, I missed the transparency and tonal unity of the straight string quintet version that I discovered when I was a teenager. I must admit, however, that I prefer the setting for wind instruments.

The second part of the first half was devoted to Nordic music, brilliantly played by **Helén Jahren**. I remember the strong oboe tone, incredibly played high notes, but I do not remember much about the music. By that time, I was getting tired, and I was thinking about my early morning appointments with some fellow amateur musicians. **Carolee Bowen** had the idea of trying to set up some sight-reading sessions for amateurs, since we really have little to do with playing music at the conference. After contacting Marc Fink, it was agreed that a room would be made available to amateur musicians between 7:30 and 8:30 AM on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. I did not make it on the first day, but I joined the group on Thursday and Friday. I never thought that I could play the oboe so early in the morning, but I did. There are even a few pictures to prove it. We had fun and some of us are keeping in contact. We would like to make the participation of amateurs a bit more visible at the next conferences, and to provide occasions for them to meet more easily than just depending on chance meetings at concerts or at the dorm.

Friday was quite a spectacular day. I took in the first three contestants of the Oboe Gillet competition. The caliber of playing was excellent, and I got to pick the winner, **Alexandre Gattet**, even if my vote was not tabulated. He impressed me by his musicianship, his assurance, his incredible dynamic range and his vibrant and voicelike sound. Even if the other two contestants were good, he is the one that I chose. I missed the last two contestants because I wanted to hear **Michel Bettez**, a Montrealer like me. He played mostly what he described to me later as "bassoonist music", including a Bozza duet for he was joined by **Carl Rath**. I enjoyed Michel's virtuosity and effortless style, but for my wife and me, the best part of the recital was the Wolf-Ferrari Canzone

from the *Suite in F*, where Michel showed us his musicianship and his mastery of the bassoon as a melodic instrument.

The late afternoon events at the Madison Convention Center were a bit perturbed by one of the rare foul weather moments of the conference. This did not really disturb the musicians, however, and the jazz session got us going in a very different style. Since I know nothing about jazz, I cannot comment much on the music. I was really impressed, however, by the virtuosity of **Michael Rabinowitz** and **Paul Hanson** on the bassoon. It sounded to me as if they both were a whole saxophone section, going from the baritone to the alto sax on the same instrument at a pace that I found dazzling. I was less impressed by the possibilities of the oboe as a jazz instrument, but I really did not hear too much of what **Paul McCandless** had to present, since my wife and I had decided that we would eat out (not at the dorm) at least once during the conference, and it was our best chance, as the evening concert was due to start at 9 PM.

The evening concert was really a treat. First, we got to hear **François Leleux** in a masterful performance of baroque and modern music. He sang and danced with his oboe, with the mischievous charm of a "gamin de Paris". We were then offered a foretaste of next year's conference, with the Spanish and South American sounds of **Andrea Merenzon** and **Paquito D'Rivera**. I could almost talk of song and dance in this case, too. The virtuosity of Mr. D'Rivera, his infectious good humor and enthusiasm, all this coupled with the rhythmic support of Ms. Merenzon transformed the audience from a concert audience to participants in a musical happening. After this performance, one man staying on my floor at the dorm said something to the effect that Mr. D'Rivera and Ms. Merenzon had finally made this very serious crowd of IDRS people let down their guard and really swing.

After that, Saturday was something of an anti-climax, for me, at least. I went to listen to the United Air Force Band of Mid-America Chamber Winds, of course. I was looking forward to listening to the Mozart *Serenade*, and I also got a very interesting performance of Bozza's *Shepherds of Provence*, that is known to every oboist who owns a copy of the Vade Mecum. After that, I just went back to the exhibits, trying to resist the temptation to load my credit card with tremendous expenses. I succeeded only partially. At noon, I had a last sight-reading

session with my amateur friends in a meeting room in Sellery Hall. Somehow, it was not our best. I guess that our energy level was way down by then. Many people stopped by, some with a smile on their face. They probably thought about their students back home while listening to our playing.

The first part of the afternoon was spent listening to the composers: **Peter Schickele**, **Gilles Silvestrini** and **Arthur Weisberg**, who talked about their works that were to be performed in the evening, and who answered questions from the audience. Mr. Silvestrini spoke in French and his comments were very ably translated. Parts of them, however, were lost because of the length of each one. If a similar situation happens in the future, and it may very well happen next year with Spanish speaking participants, I would suggest that some care be taken to insure that speakers break up their comments in short sections.

After that was the first part of "my" active participation in the conference: the "massed band" of doublereed instruments. Everything went very smoothly, with the musical direction of **Chris Weait**, the stage management of **Ed Lacy**, and the overall supervision of **Marc Fink**. I chose an easy part in the third choir, and had fun preparing for the concert. Then I spent some moments with some people that I had met at the conference before being met by my wife to go to the fish boil. Even if I am not a great fish fan, I enjoyed myself and met some more people of all ages around the grounds and the dinner table.

The evening concert was sort of a blur for me, having heard so much music in the previous days. It started in a very nice fashion, featuring the conference host, Marc Fink, and one of his most devoted assistants, Carrie Smith. Many people benefited from her help, provided with a smile, during the conference, and she showed us at this concert that she is indeed a very promising oboe player. I had heard her in a master class at the beginning of the conference and was impressed at that time by her self

confidence and her playing. I will let others comment on the rest of the concert, except to mention again the tremendous performance of **Alexandre Gattet**, the Gillet oboe competition winner. As for the Fasch *Concerto*, I can just repeat that I had lots of fun joining about 110 other doublereeders in playing it. My wife, who has mainly me as a reference for oboe playing, said that it was better than she expected, whatever that means. I must mention that she ended up attending most of the sessions, which is a tribute to the quality of the music and of the performers.

The last events of the conference, and I cannot say that they were musical events even if sound was involved, were the two fire alarms that occurred in the early part of the night on Saturday. Twice, after walking down nine floors, I joined a crowd of people, many in their night clothes, who were nervously clutching their instrument cases. In a way, it was a great way to talk to people that I had seen but not really met at the conference, and I suggested to Marc Fink that a fire drill in the first days of the conference might not be a bad idea to implement in the future, minus a fire, of course.

One last comment that I have to make before closing is about the tremendous work of the staff accompanists who played at the conference: Donna Loewy, Esther Wang and Timothy Lovelace (I am sorry, I do not think that I heard the others). This is not to diminish the work of others who accompanied individual performers, but these people added to the musical quality of the conference in a tremendous way, and certainly had to adjust to all these performers in a very short time. They also had to replace a colleague who got injured shortly before the conference.

There is little chance that I will participate in the conference next year, but, I am looking forward to attending the 2001 conference. Then, I won't be a newbie anymore, but I am sure that being a veteran will be at least as much fun. ❖