

## You Play What???

By Jennifer Paul  
Switzerland

I remember so well the first time I was really aware that I was listening to an oboe. I grew up in Liverpool in the North of England, a place in which you didn't need a sharpened reed knife to cut the regional accent. My parents sent me to a private school hoping that I would sound a little less provincial.

We used to have a sort of physical education programme indoors to the good old BBC Radio. Each week, there would be a different instrument being played "live" with the piano, and we had to exercise with the music. I still remember that the programme was called "Music and Movement". It was an utter bore and (aged eight) I loathed it. Then, one day, it was the turn of the oboe and piano to play together. I was totally riveted and knew without a shadow of doubt that what I wanted to do in life, was play it. That wish was going to take me eight long years to fulfill, but at least my attending that starchy school hadn't been totally in vain.

I had been playing the piano for a few years, and dashed home full of the news that I wanted to play the oboe. My joyful tidings fell upon a most marked absence of enthusiasm. Neither of my parents really knew what the oboe was, but they did know that nice young ladies could continue playing the piano and concentrate on their elocution.

Looking back on this now, I realise that that moment was the start of my call to arms. I seem to have been fighting a campaign ever since. Subtle hints got me nowhere and when, three years later, I went to a performance of "The Messiah", I knew that my battle strategy was going to have to be stepped up by a few notches. I tried everything to get an oboe. My parents were not going to buy one, my school didn't possess one and the many ways and means of today did not exist in the post war Britain of the fifties. My utter frustration and sadness at the prospect of wasted years stretching before me were put down to my "being difficult".

What on earth could I do? I decided that I would swallow my pride, write to my aunt in Switzerland, and simply beg.

"Darling Aunt, I am sure you will be delighted to know that I have decided to become a professional oboist. There is only one small problem I don't seem to be able to overcome. I do

not have an oboe. Please, can you help?"

Let's face it, the chances of success were more than slim. However, it worked! My wonderful aunt, who had no children of her own, simply telephoned the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra and asked for the principal oboist. **André**

**Raoult** not only knew what to do, but helped me in many ways and remained a lifelong friend.

My aunt managed to acquire a good second hand Heckel oboe with André's help, and I received it in April 1961. Just over three years later, I won the post graduate Grade Five Prize at the Royal College of Music. I was determined to catch up on what I thought of then as "the lost years". I realise now that they had sharpened my determination which was to stand me in good stead in so many ways in the future.

At Christmas, just 8 months after receiving my instrument, I played in my first professional concert in Chester Cathedral; Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. That was the first time I had actually seen the words "oboe d'amore" written, and I was enthralled. There wasn't one, of course. I was playing a transposition (shudder) of the oboe d'amore part. However, in London a year later, there I was listening to the *B Minor Mass* with an oboe d'amore in the flesh, as it were, and there was to be no going back for me after that intoxicating moment. My determination or obstinacy had found its real mast, and I was stuck fast!

The next day glowing with the enthusiasm of new love, I went to the RCM for my weekly oboe lesson with **Terence MacDonagh**. "You don't want to play that bloody thing. It's always out of tune, has a mind of its own and no bloody repertoire", or colourful enthusiasm-dampers to



PHOTO BY NANCY FOWLER

that effect. I had not the slightest intention whatsoever of taking any notice of Terry!

I must admit, he was right. At that time, the manufacture of oboes d'amore was a compromise between trial and error. Even the best of them were very much hit and miss. Sadly there remain some which are not much better today, although there are now wonderful instruments to be found.

Where to start? Obviously, I had to get an oboe d'amore somehow. The "how" is another complex tale, but I got there to my delight and the dismay of my family who really thought I had gone completely round the bend this time. Selling everything you have in the world including cashing in the little bit carefully put aside for survival, to buy an oboe d'amore, is not the usual problem put before parents by their wilful daughters. I realised then, the full impact of going it alone. Without moral support or understanding, it was going to be hard. My pioneering and passion for my chosen instrument were not appreciated on the home front. I settled in London, undaunted, or trying to be.

I kept British Railways in business single-handed as I went from Cantata to Passion, Passion to Cantata, not to mention the odd Bolero, all over Britain. However, forced by the London musical profession of the 1960's which was a bastion of male chauvinism, into being a free-lance, I inevitably spent far too much time playing other oboes of a more habitual variety, or sitting on public transport. Women were not allowed to play in those Y-chromosomed London wind sections of yesteryear, with two notable exceptions, the BBC, and the English Chamber Orchestra.

This was the time of the reign of Pierre Boulez and I was delighted to discover just how much contemporary music called for the oboe d'amore. With the ECO, I took part in the recording of the ornamented version of *The Messiah* which was to change my vision of baroque performance for ever. How lucky I was to have experienced that!

I had to do something to obtain original music. I think I pestered every composer I knew personally, and a good few I didn't. I worked as an agent for several, and then became the Promotion Manager for Novello in an all out attempt at reaching as many composers as I could. That was a really heady moment. Suddenly, there were 56 composers I could contact. I won't say they all wrote for me, but several did and amongst those who did, figured John McCabe.

John is a remarkable pianist and we gave concerts together. He wrote me a piece for oboe d'amore and piano and a lovely Concerto with chamber orchestra. He also included what could

be called an obligato for oboe d'amore in his 2nd Violin Concerto. Since then, two more concertos have been written for me in America. But, more important than the concerto or chamber music to me, was the oboe d'amore's introduction and acceptance into the standard orchestration palette of my composer friends. I didn't want this d'amore breakthrough for me personally, but for the instrument itself.

I travelled a great deal at home and abroad for Novello and subsequently, when I opened the London office for a Dutch impresario, I followed my artists to concerts and festivals in many countries. I had the honour of working closely with figures such as Bruno Maderna and Cathy Berberian. I learned far more about music than I had ever known existed during those wonderful years, and I continued nevertheless to give recitals and work as a soloist.

I'm as much a pioneer today as I have ever been, and thoroughly enjoy my work. New music seems to fly through my email and letter box at least once a week now. I no longer care about being considered marginal. Had I been conformist, I wouldn't have fought this campaign which, although very satisfying 36 years on, has not been without loneliness and considerable personal difficulty. It is easy to be a target for those who do not ever wish to change their optic and feel duty-bound to criticise or shun another for having so done.

Acquiring and performing works for oboe d'amore was my initial step. The second became the desire to do the same thing for all five oboes - from musette to bass. The colours of the oboes together are magical, almost like a mediaeval pipe organ, and I started instigating works for the oboe family together in the late eighties.

The next logical progression for me was to try bring this music, which I had spent a lifetime amassing, to others, so that nobody could ever again say "it's got no bloody repertoire". That is exactly what I have done. I formed my own publishing company with this in mind. I delight in editing baroque sonatas and suites as much as I adore instigating and collecting contemporary compositions.

The oboe d'amore may not have been the easiest or the most comfortable of specialities for which to opt, but it has certainly been a great adventure in which I feel privileged to have taken part. ❖