

Oboe Blow-out, Las Vegas

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Have you ever played Vegas? Dr. Stephen Caplan, professor of oboe at UNLV, and Nora Post, oboe importer and repair woman extraordinaire, invited three important names in the oboe world to “play Vegas”: **Ray Still, Nancy Ambrose King, and Martin Schuring.** *They joined Francois Kloc, Michael Britton, and Philippe Rigoutat (representing Buffet, Howarth and Rigoutat) for “Oboe Blow-out, Las Vegas!” on October 19 and 20, 2002.*

Saturday morning started off at 9 a.m. with registration of attendees from as far away as Oregon and Oklahoma. After a gracious welcome to the new Beam Music Center by the Chair of UNLV’s Department of Music, Dr. Isabelle Emerson, and an invitation to walk through the wonderful desert garden on the UNLV campus, we began a day and a half of incredible sounds and teaching.

Ray Still led off the master classes with “Orchestral Excerpts: The Secret is in the Breath.” He encouraged all the players to tell the story of the music when working on excerpts. We went through a lot of the “big” ones: *Sheherazade*, Brahms’ *Violin Concerto*, Liszt’s *Les Preludes*, *Polovetsian Dances*, *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and Brahms’ *2nd Symphony*. Still tried to relax the players with lighthearted thoughts about playing for a “bunch of oboists with knives in their bags”. He encouraged us to practice on

the reed alone – to learn how to produce a great tone on just the reed, to play dramatically on the reed alone, to be flexible with the jaw and lips, but not with the breath, and to make vowel changes without changing the pitch. He encouraged us to be familiar with books, such as “*The Inner Game of Tennis*” and “*Zen and the Art of Archery*”. He also suggested that all playing be put in context (taken from some portion of the oboe’s literature), so every note is played as part of a musical experience. Think of all the long tones that are in the literature – that is how to practice long tones – and scales should be from the literature. He challenged a student to improve her endurance by playing all of the *Polovetsian Dances* solo in one breath.

After looking at the exhibitor’s instruments, we returned to hear more orchestra excerpts, but this time it was **Martin Schuring** and “Great Moments in the *Orchestral English Horn Repertoire*.” Once again it was a romp through many of the big English horn moments: *Masked Ball*, *William Tell*, *Roman Carnival*, Ravel’s *Piano Concerto*, and Bach. Schuring encouraged us to play “oboe stuff” on the English horn, but to remember that it is a different instrument and it has its own voice. Because the English horn takes more breath than the oboe we returned to the breath – planning the breath, knowing where to breathe, what type of breath to take (inhale or exhale), and “breathe for the phrase that is to come, not as a reaction to the phrase that has just happened”. Discussion of “parts”



L to R: Martin Schuring, Nancy Ambrose King, Stephen Caplan, Ray Still

versus “excerpts” led to the statement that excerpt books are handy, but to be really serious about the music one must have the real part. The use of a metronome in practice is our rhythm and tempo policeman. He discussed special fingerings and bocals. He even offered good advice on keeping the instrument warm.

All of us who have played an English horn part in the orchestra know there are long periods of rest, then suddenly we must enter “cold”. However, we can stay ready by 1) keeping the instrument warm; 2) keeping the reed opening correct; and 3) finding somewhere in the preceding section to play. From the reactions of Martin’s students, such remarks as “We don’t need loud, we need big – purity, focus, efficiency, quality” when playing the English horn and “without good air speed the English horn plays us, with good air speed we can play the English horn” must be mantras. I loved his comments on Baroque fast movements – knowing which notes belong to which other notes; always keeping the long line in mind with all the small and large shapes, and finally relating a fast movement to a lecture or speech – think of the notes as making up the words, phrases, sentences, and chapters – have a plan, but make room for spontaneity.

After standing for a quick stretch we had a wonderful talk on “The Future of Oboe Manufacture” led by Nora Post, with Michael Britton (Howarth), Francois Kloc (Boosey & Hawkes – Buffet), and Philippe Rigoutat (Rigoutat). After each gentleman gave a brief talk about his firm, the discussion turned to materials used in the manufacture of oboes. As most of us know the woods used to make oboes are endangered woods and they require long periods of aging. Whether grenadilla, rosewood, cocobola, or violet wood, the wood comes from Africa (Tanzania) and goes to Germany where it is stored/aged. For those not familiar with the greenline instruments a brief history of the process was given describing the grinding of the wood, adding epoxy and carbon fibers, baking,



L to R: Michael Britton, Phillippe Rigoutat, Francois Kloc

and putting it under 80 tons of pressure, putting purple dye in to make the material black and creating and using different drills. Evidently PVC and plastics were first devised for student instruments that were sold to Scandinavian and former Russian areas. Later Delrin, a type of plastic, was developed for top joints. The possibility of making keys out of titanium was mentioned – they would be lighter and would last forever. Acoustical research has advanced to such a degree that these different materials are very difficult to distinguish by sound alone, so the major concern now is the comfort of the musician – how the instrument feels when it is played. Being very practical, the three makers all agreed that the oboe (or English horn) is only a tool – it takes the musician to make it work. World economics entered the discussion as a major challenge to the makers of oboes – there are some countries that have not purchased a new oboe in 30 years. The horrific thought to those present that the cost of a new oboe may reach \$10,000 U.S. due to currency in the world, woke anyone who was dosing off. On the other hand it is possible that China with a 20 cents per hour work force may be able to make an oboe for a lot less; but to date the manufacture of oboes is still predominately a European tradition.



Ray Still

Our next foray into the literature for the oboe was **Nancy Ambrose King’s** class on “Sonatas and Concertos for Oboe” - we heard Vivaldi, Saint-Saens, Mozart, and Bozza. King brought us back to the breath, to the tongue (various articulations), circular breathing (which she says is very liberating), ornamentation, cadenzas, our palette of expressive possibilities (vibrato, dynamics, rubato, etc.), and our ever present nemesis – pitch and intonation. Her words of wisdom were to be our own “worst critic and best supporter”.

After dinner we heard a wonderful recital entitled New Directions – absolutely wonderful playing by Caplan, King, and Schuring. Nancy King started off the program with Maurice Ravel’s *Sonatine*. John

Steinmetz' *Suite from an Imaginary Opera* was played on English horn by Martin Schuring; *Four Winged Words of Odysseus for Oboe Solo* by Helmut Schmidinger was given its American premiere by King. **Stephen Caplan** was joined by a string quartet for two pieces: *Quintet for Oboe and Strings* by Daron Aric Hagen and *Oblivion* by Astor Piazzolla; and to wrap up the evening's performance we heard Pierre Max Dubois' *Lou Cascarelet, Danses Provencales* by all three on oboe and joined by a drum. The sensitive and very musical accompanying of Barbara Riske was heard not only in the recital but throughout the Oboe Blow-out, Las Vegas.

A Sunday morning session entitled "Reedmaking with the Experts" gave generalized comments on tying and scraping reeds. Some very helpful thoughts ranged from "do not try to play the reed without a first crow", "make reeds while watching TV or a video", "try to finish the reed by looks", and finally, the discouraging words: "it takes 20 years to learn to make a reed". Various shaper tips (Brannen, Pfeiffer, Mack), gougers (Graf, Gilbert, Ross); density testers, sharpening stones (Diamond stones; hard Arkansas) and knives (Langwell, RDG, Swiss, Japanese blades) were discussed. This session left most of us realizing that we need another 20 years to learn how to make that cadenza reed we all yearn to make every time.

Our final Master Class was with Stephen Caplan and was entitled "The 21st Century Oboist: Performing with Frogs and Coyotes." For those unfamiliar with Caplan's work with composer Phillip Bimstein, the title probably seems very strange. They have created some exciting new pieces for the oboe incorporating the idea of *musique concrete* with wonderful recordings of natural sounds found in Utah and Nevada with

notated oboe lines. However, the participants who performed did not have prerecorded sounds to their pieces; they played the Lukas Foss *Concerto*; Britten's *Bacchus*; Strauss *Concerto*; and Hindemith *Sonata*. Like other Master Class teachers, Caplan emphasized knowing what we want to do with a piece of music, planning, and executing. He equates music with the visual arts – we are making a sound description of something. Our view should be personal, a unique perspective so that the music reflects the composer's personality – we should be stretched musically and technically. Even though most of us play from the printed page, we were encouraged to memorize enough to be able to walk around and free our playing so we get the ebb and flow of the line, to work on different types of sounds/color/range of articulations/and the joy of playing – don't get stuck in all the notes. This reminded me of a quote I have in my studio "Share the joy of making music" by **Richard Killmer**. Perhaps the most important encouragement – make certain the audience hears what the composer indicated and what we intend to project. While working on the Strauss *Concerto* we digressed into circular breathing again – we always need to have a freed up breath. Small nuances lead to larger exaggerations; and once again, the breath – get rid of old air – how many times have we heard that! Never enough.

I didn't get to any casinos, but I did have a wonderful time in Las Vegas just being in a classroom and a recital hall, thanks to four enthusiastic and exciting oboists and four dynamic representatives of some of the world's finest oboes. The level of playing of the students who performed gives us assurance that the future of oboe and English horn playing is continuing to rise, even in the desert.

Obituary: Ralph L. Burge

The sad news has been received that longtime IDRS member **Ralph L. Burge**, 92, a retired Army Band bassoonist [with the U.S. Army Band at Fort Myer, VA for 30 years], and a Washington area woodwind/bassoon teacher, died April 14 at the U.S. Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington. He was provided full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery on May 1, 2003 following a service at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD at 11:00 a.m. May 1, 2003.

Ralph often attended the Conferences of the IDRS and maintained a keen interest in the bassoon his entire life. From a dear friend of Ralph's, Ginny T., comes the following fond remembrance:

"Ralph was a modest and friendly man, always wanting to share music and life with people. Back in the days when we were all younger, there were impromptu chamber music readings at his house, or outside around some cabin that we had all hiked to on the Appalachian Trail. Musical sessions, complete with much laughter over wrong notes, were always followed by fancy desserts (usually connected to ice cream) fixed by his wife, Adetha. We will miss Ralph around here."

The IDRS will miss Ralph as well. As Christopher Wait said recently: "It was a joy to know him."