

Book Review: Lou Skinner's Bassoon Reed Manual

Edwin V. Lacy
Evansville, Illinois

The Bassoon Reed Manual: Lou Skinner's Theories and Techniques by James R. McKay, with contributing authors Russell Hinkle and William Woodward Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000

When this writer began playing the bassoon in the mid-1950s, written instructions on how to make reeds for the instrument were almost non-existent, or at least very rare. One generally learned to make reeds through instruction from his or her bassoon teacher, if the skill was learned at all. Bassoonist **Don Christlieb** describes a time prior to World War II when there was essentially no one on the west coast of the United States who knew how to make reeds, with the exception of **Frederick Moritz** of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and possibly one other bassoonist. As preeminent an authority as the great **Leonard Sharrow** has related that the legendary pedagogue, **Simon Kovar**, did not make reeds for himself, and that he did not teach reed making to his students.

In comparison, today there is almost an "embarrassment of riches" in the field of how-to-do-it reed making manuals. Perhaps the problem of no available instructions has been replaced by one of having to decide which author's methods will be adopted.

A notable exception to this dearth of instruction was the famous reed maker and teacher **Louis Skinner**. For many years, his reed making methods tended to be regarded by bassoonists with a combination of respect, awe, and mystery. Those who had studied reed making with him seemed to be members of an exclusive club, and most of them tended to consider the information they had received from Skinner to be sacrosanct and to be held in strictest privacy. Yet, the impact of Lou Skinner on bassoon reed makers in North America will continue to be felt for many years after his death, as his former students now pass along the knowledge they gleaned from his teaching. In "The Bassoon Reed Manual" the authors present some of Skinner's theoretical concepts, and in addition, they present rather detailed methods of making two of the fundamental types of reeds that he advocated. To each of these two basic types of reeds, several variations or alternative methods are included. It is the intention of this writer to offer some commentary on the book itself, rather than to undertake a review of the reed making techniques advocated in it.

The authors deserve credit for the excellent orga-

nization of the material. For the most part, the book is straightforward and the instructions are clear. The layout is attractive and logical, and high-quality illustrations are included. The book would probably be of most use to bassoonists with some reed making experience. It seems that it would be rather a daunting task for a beginner to try to learn reed making solely from following the steps in this book, clear as they may appear to advanced makers.

I do have some quibbles with the book, and almost all of them relate to choices of terminology. The authors chose to employ descriptions which Skinner himself had used, and often invented himself. The result sometimes makes the syntax of the book intimidating to the reader, particularly the uninitiated one. In some cases, Skinner's terminology employs descriptions for techniques or parts of the reed that might be more familiar to a majority of bassoonists by other names. For example, the two primary types of reeds described here are the "straight taper" and the "tip taper." These two methods of scraping the blades, or some variation of them, have been used by bassoonists for many years, and might be more recognizable to them as the "wedge" and the "chisel" configurations. In other cases, the terminology becomes unnecessarily arcane through the usage of impenetrable descriptions: "the Windsor mill process," "the 2001 space oddity reed," "reverse corona," "dip tip variation," and many others. Also noted are the repeated uses of the verb "dampen" and its gerund "dampening," when the context seems to indicate that "damp" and "damping" might have been a more accurate choice.

Finally, there are the terms which may seem at first glance to be words in no language at all: "fillier," somewhat related to the French "filière," although the term as used seems not to be exactly related to its meaning in French; and "capo d'astro," perhaps a variation of the Italian "capo di tasto." However, this raises an interesting linguistic question. According to an Italian-born expert on early music performance practice, in the Renaissance and early Baroque periods, the term "capo d'astro" was sometimes used interchangeably with "capo tasto" to indicate the nut or "zero fret" on the fingerboard of the guitar or lute. Could Skinner have known that rather obscure fact? Perhaps he did, or perhaps someone well versed in the Italian language of some three centuries ago suggested the name to him. Nevertheless, if the intention of

the authors is to more widely disseminate Skinner's knowledge and techniques, the book might have been made more readily accessible to more bassoonists if his colorful terminology had been translated into more conventional language. (To Skinner, the "capo d'astro" is the first wire, which he regarded as a tuning wire. "Tuning wire" would seem to have been a clearer and more straightforward choice.)

Despite what some might regard as this shortcoming, "The Bassoon Reed Manual" should be welcomed as a valuable resource for bassoon reed makers. The authors deserve the gratitude of all bassoonists

for making available additional information about Skinner's methods to those of us who never had the opportunity to study with him.

Dr. Edwin Lacy is Eades Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of Evansville, and principal bassoonist of the Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra. He has been a member of IDRS since the inception of the Society, and hosted two of its conferences, in Evansville in 1977 and at Indiana University in 1994. He holds advanced degrees from Indiana University, where he was a student of **Leonard Sharrow**.

Letter to the Editors

Libby Van Cleve
New Haven, Connecticut

February 3, 2002

Dear Editors,

This letter is a response to Steven Ritter's mean-spirited review of Matthias Arter's CD, "Oboe Plus," which is found in the most recent issue of *The Double Reed* (Vol. 24, No. 4). The review originally appeared in *The American Record Guide*, and was reprinted in our journal. Why does a critic who has very limited knowledge of and no sympathy for oboe extended techniques and European modernist composition feel qualified to write a review of such a recording? What possible value does his close-minded tirade hold, and, most germane to this letter, why would it be found suitable to be reprinted in the journal of the International Double Reed Society?

Basically, Mr. Ritter does not like the sound of extended techniques, a point he makes repeatedly in ever more hostile and condescending terms. He characterized one piece as "anything but real music," and wondered whether Arter was capable of "real oboe playing." Real music? From Monteverdi to Beethoven, Stravinsky, and beyond, history is replete with examples of compositions that are first rejected by narrow-minded listeners only to be celebrated later as masterpieces. And what is real oboe playing? Could that be the performance of any of the small number of recognized classic oboe pieces written mainly by dead German males (with a few dead Frenchmen for

balance) by an oboist who plays a Lorée and studied with someone in the Philadelphia school? Obviously, this last point is ludicrous; however, it demonstrates the foolishness and unhealthiness of overly narrow thinking.

Perhaps most offensive is that after lambasting the compositions of Luciano Berio, Nicolaus Huber, and others, Mr. Ritter adds: "And these idiot composers wonder why they don't get performed more often!" Not only is name calling of this sort rude and entirely inappropriate for any sort of civilized discourse, but it strikingly illuminates Mr. Ritter's ignorance. Luciano Berio is not hurting for performances.

Contemporary music, like any music, can benefit from intelligent and constructive criticism, something Mr. Ritter's review completely failed to provide. Perhaps the IDRS should be more selective and should decline to publish articles that offer so little worthwhile content.

Sincerely,

Libby Van Cleve

Libby Van Cleve is the author of the forthcoming Oboe Unbound: Contemporary Techniques, to be published by University of California Press.