

Fernand Gillet was made an Honorary Member of the Society. While his name is familiar to many through his twenty-one years as solo oboe of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and as composer of several technical methods, his contributions to the world of oboe playing are perhaps too little known to the younger players of today.

When a man has had three careers, it is difficult to know just where to begin recounting the many professional highlights, not to mention the personal qualities, that make up the picture of this legendary musician.

Here is his brief autobiography, written in 1973, which contains the charming flavor of his French/English syntax.

FERNAND GILLET BORN OCTOBER 15, 1882

I was born in Paris, my parents were French and when I was six years old they took me with them to live in London where I stayed six years. After having been in a boy's school for about 4 years I studied the piano for 18 months.



Fernand Gillet

Then my parents took me back to Paris with the idea that I could become a pianist. Once there, my father asked his brother (my Uncle) Georges Gillet to introduce me to the best piano teacher in Paris. My uncle answered right away: Why don't you give him to me! And that is how I became an oboe player! After 18 months of study with my uncle I joined his class at the Conservatory (like everybody else) and at the end of the scholar year I got a second prize at the competition. I was then 14 years old! The next year at 15 I got the first prize and was asked by the Director to play at the commencement. This was in 1898 and the next year I got a first medal of solfege. In 1901 there was a vacancy in the oboe section of the Lamoreux orchestra, I competed and was taken as first oboe. In 1902 there was another opening at the Paris Grand Opera I competed again but against 9 other first prizes of the Conservatory, and won. I never made any personal records - I hated it, but I often concertized as soloist.

In 1908 I founded a chamber music group which we named "Le Decem" because we were ten: string quintet and wind quintet. All of this without interfering with my obligations with the Opera and Lamoreux Orchestras.

Then came the 1914 war. When I was 20 I had been dispensed of military service so I enlisted in August 1914 as Motorcyclist and became attached to the "Royal Naval Air Service" (as I spoke English). In 1916 I asked to be a flyer. Out of flying school I was sent to a night bombardment squadron. After awhile

I got the "Croix deguerre" and later on I crashed on the ground with my plane on top of me. Result three months in a hospital. After recovering I was back flying up to the armistice when I was sent to Morocco in a flying squadron at Fez. Six months later I was discharged and went back to my music occupations as before the war. This was guaranteed by law. Around 1922 Koussevitsky formed an orchestra in Paris and gave a series of three concerts in the fall and in the spring. This orchestra was made up of musicians selected from several orchestras in Paris. I was one of them. At a rehearsal Koussevitsky told me that he was planning to conduct an orchestra in America and if he succeeded would I come with him. I said yes and that is how in 1925 I joined the B.S.O. To recapitulate I had been 25 years with the Lamoreux Orchestra at the same time 24 years at the Paris Opera. Then in Boston 21 years with the B.S.O. during that time I was on the Faculty of the New England Conservatory where in 1969 I was awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Music. I was also on the Boston University Faculty. After I retired from the Boston Symphony in 1946 I taught for seven years, twice a month a Master Class at the Montreal Conservatory. In 1973 I was awarded an Honorary Doctor's Degree from the Eastman School of Music. So far I have been teaching 74 years. I like teaching. I am still teaching at the N.E.C. and at home.

Fernand Gillet's "professional debut" was an inauspicious beginning to the brilliant career that followed. Shortly after joining his uncle's class at the Paris Conservatory at age 14, he was asked to fill in the second oboe chair at the Opera Comique for one night because his roommate, the regular player, had accepted a better paying job. F. Gillet arrived at the opera house in due time to be briefed about tempi, cuts, etc., and the performance of Carmen began. About halfway through the Overture, the principal oboist turned to Fernand and said quietly, "Just turn your chair around and watch the rest of the performance."

Evidently the next year was a profitable one as M. Gillet won the coveted First Medal in Oboe at the Conservatory annual Competition. In those days (1898) the competitions were attended by the music critics and reviews appeared in the Paris papers. From *Le Journal*: "The very remarkable oboe class of Mr. [Georges] Gillet benefited for their competition piece as well as sight reading of two absolutely charming pieces written by Mr. Paladilhe.

Mr. Gillet, the nephew of the professor, unanimately obtained a brilliant 1st prize. His quality of tone is exquisite, his playing is, at one and the same time, filled with "brio" and elegance. He is a real thoroughbred."

Alfred Bruneau, a critic and opera composer, wrote in *Le Figaro*, "The most remarkable student of the day, and perhaps of the year, is Mr. Gillet, the nephew of the oboe professor Georges Gillet, a little boy who possesses a surprising authority, a prestigious mechanism, a very personal charm, the temperament of an exquisite artist, and who sight read with stupefying perfection. Messieurs Theodore Dubois, Paladilhe, Gabriel Fauré, Widor, Pierné, Wettge, Turban, Hennebains, and Jonas unanimously awarded him a 1st prize."

The chamber music group "Le Decem" gave many European performances and a picture of the members shows Fernand Gillet to be considerably younger than his companions, but the critics speak only of his artistry. After a concert in Liege, Belgium on January 12, 1910, the reviewer for the *Gazette de Liege* wrote, "The Mozart Quartet in F Major was ravishingly interpreted. Mr. Gillet gave his audience a veritable enchantment." In *L'Express* the review read, "The Quartet in F Major took on a special interest because of the quality of tone of Mr. Gillet—so mellow, so delicate, so well balanced with the strings. A model for all times and places, a tone which knew how to sing, how to be light, sentimental and imposing according to the requirements."

Mr. Gillet has spoken warmly of Koussevitsky's successes with the Paris Opera Orchestra and of the conductor's ability to create the perfect nationalistic mood of the Russian works he chose to present. With the Lamoureux Orchestra he was even able to win French approval of the previously rather unpopular works of the German Romantic composers, such as Brahms. Mr. Gillet's expression was, "he took the sauerkraut out of it."

The Gillets have a fascinating collection of photos which were taken during World War I when he was a night bomber pilot. The pictures are somewhat brown around the edges now, but still show quite a bit of detail of the open cockpit planes and the flyer's uniforms complete with breeches, leggings, and leather helmet with goggles. A great part of the book, *Exercices sur Les Gammes, Le Staccato et Les Intervalles* was written during the tour of duty in Fez, Morocco, where the flyer/oboist also served as bartender for the squadron. They knew he could be trusted not to deplete the stock!

In 1925 Fernand Gillet followed Georges Longy as principal oboist of the Boston Symphony. During his 21 years with this orchestra, Mr. Gillet did little playing outside his symphony position. He has made reference to some chamber music performances which received high praise from Igor Stravinsky and

Serge Koussevitsky. He was also very successful at the bridge table and in outwitting the stock market.

Ray Toubman was in Boston during the height of Mr. Gillet's symphony years and shares these thoughts on his playing.

"I was always impressed by the mirror-like smoothness of his tone, a highly-polished surface with no edge and innumerable gradations of tone color from dark to bright depending on the music. Listening to him from the second balcony at Symphony Hall, I heard this endless variety in shading and I was especially impressed by the way his sound encased the strings (usually the violins) and added a circle of tone around the violins coloring their sound but in no way covering them. Unfortunately all this tonal magic was not caught on recordings because either his kind of tone with its diaphanous qualities does not record well or the state of the recording art at that time was not well-developed. Then of course there was his subtlety and exquisiteness of interpretation, highly refined and always musical. You don't hear the floating *detaché* any more of his many gradations of tonguing, 'happenings' after a note is tongued and before it is dropped. His preparations of intervals with a higher note growing from a lower but never obscenely popping out, his expertness with articulations, playing unevenly to produce an even result — all of these, his pupils would recognize and contrast with the machine-like playing often heard today."

Rosario Mazzeo was the bass clarinetist and personnel manager of the Boston Symphony during many of the years of Gillet's tenure. Mazzeo writes,

"Few performers of any woodwind instrument possessed such elegant taste in phrasing and such subtlety of tone control. Fashions in tone quality have changed very much in the last half century in America. This is not the place to debate the virtues of any school of tone production. Fernand was the peer of them all in his ability to produce the tones he really wanted. In an era which included a number of great oboists, including the justly celebrated Tabuteau, Gillet was the most meticulous of them all.

He lived a very well ordered life—never did much playing away from his post as 1st oboist with the Boston Symphony, and consequently was never as well known nationally as the more flamboyant players."

I remember well the first time I attended a B.S.O. concert in January, 1945. I had gone to Boston to study with Mr. Gillet at the New England Conservatory and, a day or so after my arrival, was given a ticket to sit in the second balcony for the Saturday night concert. At intermission, while chatting with a gentle Boston lady in the adjacent

seat, I expressed my excitement and purpose at being in Boston and attending my first B.S.O. concert. She said sympathetically, "What a shame Koussevitsky isn't conducting tonight." Then I realized that I had not even been aware of any conductor. I hadn't taken my eyes, or ears, off the aristocratic looking, impeccably groomed, performance perfection of the man with whom I was to study.

Being a somewhat naive Mid-westerner, and accustomed to the warmth and informality of my previous teacher, Pierre Mathieu, I arrived at the Gillets' home for my first lesson in an unprepared state of mind to be met at the door by a very proper and austere gentlemen who said, "How do you do. Put your coat here. Follow me." Upstairs in the studio, I was asked to play a scale which I managed to begin although I was not sure that this man of such Old World polish was really human. After a few notes he said, "Stop!" and then began what was to become thorough and absorbing study, and the developing of the friendship that has lasted over thirty years. We have often had a good laugh over my terrified introduction.

Robert Freeman recalls, 'I have not forgotten being greeted at the Gillets' lovely home in Brookline with a direction up the gracious staircase and down the winding halls which led to his studio on the second floor. 'You know the way,' he would say. In a larger sense, that was his intention as a master teacher—to show the students the way - not to imitate in the performance of a single work but to learn how to study music and improve as performing musicians on their own.'

It has been my pleasure to have studied with Mr. Gillet on and off, for over thirty years. During that time I never knew him to become angry, sarcastic, or in any way indicate that a possibility might exist that I would be unable to play a certain passage. No technical or musical problem was ever too small to analyze, take apart, practice correctly, then reassemble into the context of the musical phrase. The desired end result was always a beautifully thought-out musical interpretation with the technique readily at hand, predeveloped, to achieve this end.

Robert Freeman wrote, "Fernand Gillet was without question the most analytic and diagnostic teacher of music performance with whom I ever studied. I have known many a musician who taught through demonstration of special effects in individual works. Gillet was unique in my experience in his effort to develop general principles which applied not only to the work under study but by extension to whole repertoires of works. His approach was always to use the piece at hand as the

basis for generalizations about other works. Gillet's first concern was always with musical matters. But when he turned to technical questions it was never solely to point out what he thought had gone wrong. Rather he concerned himself with the reason for a student's mistakes and with exercises designed to correct weaknesses."

Jack Holmes, who was Gillet's immediate successor in the Boston Symphony, said, "As you know I was never a formal student of Mr. Gillet, except as a part of the section of the Berkshire Music Center orchestra which he coached in the music being performed each week—and also in a quintet which he coached. Even in these relatively brief sessions I think I learned more about how to practice than I'd discovered in all the rest of my study."

Rodney Pierce's thoughts were, "His strong teaching attribute was, in my opinion, his uncanny ability to analyze the problem whether it be technical or musical. Then isolate it and devise the most efficient way to correct it and then return it to the total context. To the student who could grasp this, it gave a musical and technical freedom which was almost boundless. His ability to concentrate on a single problem with awesome intensity was impressive."

Allan Vogel has written perhaps the most detailed analysis of Mr. Gillet's teaching methods and the content is far too long to include here, however a few quotes might help catch the essence of the teaching style.

"It is the application of analytical intelligence which characterizes Gillet's way of working. Thus, when a technical difficulty arises, one doesn't immediately 'practice;' one asks 'why?' and analyzes the problem into its various components devise a little exercise for each part of the problem it is the ingenuity and specificity of these exercises which make Monsieur Gillet's method so unique. For example, many instrumental teachers would advise practicing passages in different rhythms in order to develop evenness, but Monsieur Gillet wanted his students to discover just those particular rhythms which would specifically help the afflicted place. The method of 'asking why,' separating the problem into its parts, devising the best exercise to remedy the situation, doing the exercises slowly, rhythmically and intensively for a short period of time, and then 'letting it cook' were the essentials of Monsieur Gillet's practicing system. He never once practiced anything fast at home. No, the passage, once practiced slowly and intensively had to be allowed 'to cook' for two or three days. The real learning was this cooking, whereas the practicing itself was just putting the ingredients into the pot.

If you were to play the passage fast, and should there be some imperfection, this would be

tantamount to throwing something rotten into the pot just before allowing it to simmer for a few days.”

Mr. Gillet’s rule of slow practice is substantiated by Mrs. Gillet who declares that never did she hear him practice anything fast. Now in his mid-nineties, Mr. Gillet is just as unrelenting as ever in his pursuit of perfection. All Gillet pupils will recognize these axioms:

“Let your playing do the talking. Intensity make the air work all the way down the bore, don’t just blow through the instrument. Practice slowly, but move your fingers quickly. You have been playing, not practicing. You play with the wind and only adjust with the embouchure. The wind is like the bow of a violin. Place the note on the wind, not the wind on the note. Ah, the trouble is you are nervous on the fourth finger think well on the third finger for the 16th preceding. You can destroy in thirty seconds what you have done in thirty minutes. RHYTHM!!

It is better not to play at all than to play with poor rhythm. I am here, not to teach you how to play, but how to practice. A musician may say whatever he wishes about himself, but when he plays, his true personality is revealed.”

Rodney Pierce wrote this reminder, “His teaching career for all practical purposes didn’t blossom fully until quite late. It wasn’t until the early 1940’s I believe that he joined the faculty at New England Conservatory. Up to then Clement Lenom was the professor of oboe. I remember asking him why, as principal oboist of the B.S.O., he wasn’t placed on the faculty sooner. To which he replied that had he pushed he could probably have done so but it would be in his opinion unethical to do so.”

Rodney began his studies with Mr. Gillet six years after his B.S.O. retirement

“What strikes me as so remarkable is that for a person whose playing career was behind him there was so little reference to it in the lessons. Instead my personal impressions from my studies with him were that I was his only pupil and that his sole purpose here on earth at that time was to make me a better oboe player. He never compared me to any of his other pupils, in fact he did not even discuss his other students in my lesson. It was an intensity toward me as a pupil that was not lost on my awareness. It is a quality that is rare today.”

Dick Blair writes this tribute, “I do not believe that I have ever known a man possessed with such patience. He never grew weary or gave the impression of losing interest in one’s problems and his attempt to solve them. I remember him as a man of superior intelligence, a man of quality and taste, a man of generosity of his time and thought willing to reveal anything within his knowledge that would

answer your questions or assist you in understanding. His influence has without question been the strongest motive of my professional and academic career. The incentive that he endowed me with has made me a better teacher, a better performer, and a better human being than I could ever have become if my path had not crossed his. I am very grateful to him for this.”

Rosario Mazzeo’s initial response to my letter asking for “Gilletiana” was a hearty enthusiasm, “Since I found him one of the most inspiring teachers I ever had, since I believe he knows more about the technique of controlling a wind instrument than any man living or dead, etc., etc. . . . Fernand Gillet. Unassuming. Aristocratic, both in his personal demeanor and in his playing. Utterly, UTTERLY reliable. Charming. Surprisingly witty. Clever aviator. Car buff to predate most car buffs. But above all the woodwind performer with the greatest control of his instrument. Certainly digitally he was the greatest of them all—not only in the control of his own performance, but in his abilities to articulate principles and to solve complex problems.”

Often the subject of reed making arises when Mr. Gillet is discussed. He did not make his own reeds, but bought 50 concert quality reeds a season from Arthur Bridet. These reeds were made with the short French scrape. Allan Vogel says Gillet told him, “Once I tried to make a reed, but didn’t enjoy it and since one cannot do well what one doesn’t enjoy, never tried again.”

During the B.S.O. years, Jean DeVergie would make an occasional adjustment if necessary. Many reeds used for special solo occasions are boxed, labeled and “on file” in the studio today.

Mr. Gillet had tested oboes for Loree when in Paris and was generous of his know-how in helping students. He also lent encouragement, advice and support to Al Laubin during the early years of his oboe production.

Fernand Gillet is dedicated to all good music and its media, with one exception. His deep love for the piano is balanced by an equally deep dislike for the harpsichord. Says he, “The only thing good about the harpsichord is that you can’t hear it!” What is his favorite instrument?

Many years ago in a book of personality sketches of B.S.O. members, he was asked this question. His reply, “A great artist.”

Mr. Gillet and his wonderfully special wife, Marie, live in a beautiful home in Brookline, Massachusetts. In a neighborhood that has changed radically in the past 40 years, 60 High Street remains an oasis of Old World stateliness, and, at the same time, welcoming warmth. Friends and former students have experienced

the generous hospitality when the Gillets' guest room and kitchen were welcome rest breaks between marathon lessons over several days of "overhaul and rejuvenation." Many of us remember the gracious dinners with the candlelight reflected in the sparkling crystal of the formal dining room while relishing the ambrosian flavor of Mrs. Gillet's Coquille St. Jacques and chicken in wine sauce. We also remember the more informal fun of the basement party room with our host and hostess presiding behind the small bar. Robert Freeman noted that in Mr. Gillet's response to his honorary Doctorate at the Eastman School of Music, "He spoke from his heart in gratitude for the personal and musical happiness he and Mme. Gillet have found together in the United States."

Jack Holmes relates the story of the Gillets' visit to Tanglewood in the summer of 1975. As Mr. Gillet was talking with George Humphrey, he said, "You know Humphrey, I will soon be 93." George replied, "Well, the calendar says you have to be, but how do you do it!?" The typical Gillet answer was, "By waiting." Jack added, "From a listener's point of view, what always impressed me most about Gillet's performance was the enormous vitality. This is the most notable thing about his personality even now at 93!"

A few years ago on an icy winter morning in Brookline, as Mr. Gillet was hurrying down the driveway to reach the trash can, he slipped, fell and injured his right shoulder. This injury subsequently prevented him from holding his oboe in proper playing position, however in his true spirit, he called out to the collectors. "Hey there, don't take me out with the garbage!"

A couple of summers ago Ray and Olivia Toubman picked up the Gillets at an inn in Rockport where they had been vacationing. Ray mentioned to the innkeeper Mr. Gillet's fame in music. The innkeeper, after seeing him for two weeks said, "I don't know about the music, but I do know that he is a real gentleman, a great and good man." Ray added, "You always feel depth of culture in him even at times when he has been playfully sarcastic; there is always good will."

Rosario Mazzeo concludes, "To study with him was an exquisite pleasure and privilege. Gillet added new dimensions, subtleties, and sophistication to my musical life. It would be difficult to find an artist, and a man deserving of a more profound respect than he. I bow to him."

I would like to express my gratitude to the following persons who so willingly communicated their thoughts and experiences:

* Richard Blair — Professor of Oboe, The University of Texas at Austin.

* Robert Freeman — Director, Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York.

* Jack Holmes — Recently retired after 30 years with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

* Rosario Mazzeo — Internationally known clarinetist, scholar, retired Personnel Manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

* Rodney Pierce — Solo Oboist, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra.

* Raymond Toubman — Free lance artist in the Boston area, Boston Philharmonic, formerly with the Atlanta and Oklahoma City Symphonies.

* Allan Vogel — Professor of Oboe, California Institute of the Arts, School of Music, Valencia, California,

* AND most of all to Mme. Marie Gillet, who supplied materials and encouragement.

The reader is also referred to the obituary for Gillet, which appeared on page 22 of *The Journal of the IDRS*, No. 8, 1980, also written by Jean Northrup.

The third Honorary Membership of the Society was bestowed on the Viennese bassoonist and teacher **Karl Öhlberger** (b. 1912), at the Fifth Conference in Toronto, Canada, on August 18, 1976. In his report on the Conference in the Vol. 4, No. 2 issue of *To the World's Oboists*, President Clemens noted that, after sending the congratulatory telegram to Karl Öhlberger in August 23, 1976..."I have received a letter from Karl. To quote in part: '...I am only too aware of the honor you have conferred upon me and hope I am worthy of it. The fact that this membership was given me by colleagues makes me appreciate it that much more...my heart felt thanks and warmest regards to you and the gentlemen of the Committee.'

Since his election to Honorary Membership, Karl Öhlberger has remained a close friend and contributor to the IDRS. He wrote a nice report of the IDRS Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1980, which is reprinted in the chapter on the Conferences, and, as noted in the Vol. 1, No. 1, issue of *The Double Reed*, he has contributed a number of rare bassoon works to the IDRS Library/Archives.

At IDRS Conference # 6 in Evansville, Indiana, in August, 1977, the Society elected Honorary Members number four and five. These were **Benjamin Kohon** (1890-1984) and **Robert deGourdon** (1912-1993). In his report on the Conference, editor Gerald Corey wrote (*TTWB*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 3):

"Two Honorary IDRS Members were nominated