

Journeys with Philippe Tondre

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Philippe Tondre was born in Mulhouse, Alsace (France) in 1989 and received his first music lessons at the age of six. As is customary in France, his musical education began with a year of *solfège*—the “initiation à la musique,” at music school. Only after that does one choose an instrument—in his case, the oboe. “I chose the oboe—and yes, here I am now,” he says with a smile. Tondre first studied with Yves Cautrès in his hometown and then, at the age of 15, with David Walter at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in Paris. His international orchestral career began while he was still a student. At 18 years old, he became principal oboist of the SWR Symphony Orchestra in Stuttgart. This was followed by invitations to join leading orchestras such as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam, the Budapest Festival Orchestra, and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. In 2010, Seiji Ozawa selected him as Principal Oboe of the Saito Kinen Festival Orchestra (now the Seiji Ozawa Festival Orchestra). Tondre attracted attention in 2011 at the ARD International Music Competition in

Munich. That same year, he received the Beethoven Ring from the Beethovenfest Bonn, joining a list of award recipients that includes Julia Fischer, Lisa Batiashvili, and Gustavo Dudamel.

These awards paved the way for a solo career that has brought him together with renowned orchestras and conductors around the world. He made his debut at the Berlin Philharmonie in 2013 with Bohuslav Martinů's Oboe Concerto. In 2016, he became principal oboist of the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, and in 2020, he assumed the position of Principal Oboe in the Philadelphia Orchestra under Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

In addition to his work as an orchestral musician, Tondre is deeply committed to chamber music. He is principal oboist of the Mito Chamber Orchestra in Japan, and in 2020, he was appointed Principal Oboe of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. He made his international debut as a soloist in 2022 at Carnegie Hall in New York with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and in the same year, he was appointed professor at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

“The prizes are nice, but the most important thing is the journey”

When asked about his competition successes, Tondre first puts the significance of the prizes themselves into perspective. For him, the journey itself was what mattered most: “The prizes are nice, but the most important thing is the journey—how you prepare and how you develop as a musician through it.” The second prize at the 2011 ARD International Music Competition (no first prize was awarded that year) along with the Audience Award and the Special Prize, nevertheless marked an important step in his career. At the competition, Tondre performed a wide-ranging repertoire, including Richard Strauss's Oboe Concerto and

Mozart's Concerto, as well as works by François Couperin and Antal Doráti. He particularly remembers the contemporary commissioned composition *Gyfu* by the Sino-Australian composer Liza Lim, a solo piece for oboe that he still enjoys performing in concerts today. The Audience Award was of particular significance to him: “That is perhaps the most important one to me, because I play for the audience.” He feels similarly about the Beethoven Ring, which is presented by the Bürger für Beethoven, and honors artists who make particularly compelling impressions at the festival. For his concert, Tondre put together a program that included works by Robert Schumann, Johann Wenzel Kalliwoda, French repertoire by Francis Poulenc and Camille Saint-Saëns, and since Beethoven himself left behind hardly any chamber music for oboe, Tondre made a special arrangement of the *Gassenhauer* Trio op. 11 for oboe, bassoon, and piano.

Chamber music plays a central role in Tondre's musical life. His CD *Eastern Enchantment*, released in March 2026, builds on two earlier programs: *Contrasts*, featuring works by Robert Schumann, and *French Fragrances*, which was dedicated to French composers. With his new recording, Tondre now turns his attention to Eastern Europe—to works by Pavel Haas, Antal Doráti, Klement Slavický, and Bohuslav Martinů. He has personal reasons for choosing this repertoire, as he first encountered this music during his participation in the Prague Competition in 2008. “The culture and the music we played there really moved me,” he recalls. Since then, he has developed a close relationship with this repertoire.

“This music speaks of resistance and oppression”

This relationship was also shaped by his long-standing collaboration with the Budapest Festival Orchestra under



Iván Fischer. Over several years, Tondre became deeply familiar with the region's musical traditions. "With Iván, I was able to learn a great deal about this music—about what it means and the perspective from which it must be viewed." For Tondre, this music differs significantly from other stylistic traditions. It demands a different tonal approach and a specific playing technique: "It's really something completely different—you have to play it in a completely different way." At the same time, he recognizes a historical and political dimension to these works. Many compositions were written during times of political uncertainty and personal threat to the composers. "This music speaks of resistance and oppression. Many of the composers lived through difficult times, and I believe that this music has a great deal to say, especially now." His focus on 20th-century Eastern European music is thus both a tribute and a warning.

Four very different works shape the program of this CD, each of which Tondre brings to life with his own unique sonic and interpretive perspective. The program opens with the *Duo Concertante*, composed by Antal Doráti in 1983. Doráti, known primarily as a conductor, wrote a

number of works for oboists—including Heinz Holliger.

"You can push the oboe to its limits"

For Tondre, Doráti's piece opens up great interpretive freedom. The score works with unusually direct expressive instructions such as *rustico*, *ruvido*, and even *lustig*. "These are really rough, almost primitive expressions," he explains. It is precisely this that creates a special scope for sonic experimentation: "You can do a great deal with the sound and, at times, really push the oboe to its extremes." The suite by Klement Slavický reaches entirely different dimensions. This large-scale work demands an enormous range of musical expression from the instrument. For Tondre, the nearly ten-minute-long third movement forms the emotional center of the composition. "It borders on the mystical," he says. The extreme dynamics and the sweeping arcs of tension placed enormous demands on the interpretation and recording: "It's a huge challenge for the oboe to bring that out in a truly convincing way." The suite by Pavel Haas plays a key role. Originally conceived for voice and piano, the composer later

transcribed the work for the oboe. For Tondre, its vocal origin is immediately apparent: "It's written in a very recitational style—you can almost sense the words beneath the notes." Accordingly, here the oboe must "speak" in a special way, shaping each phrase almost like sung speech. It is precisely this combination of vocal quality and rhythmic energy that fascinates him: "I think this is one of the best works ever written for the oboe. Very extraordinary."

At the same time, Tondre recalls the tragic life story of the composer, who was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. In this music, one hears a voice that continues to resonate to this day: "These voices warned us back then. We must listen to them—they still speak to us today." Tondre performs all the other works on the CD together with pianist Danae Dörken, but the poignant finale is Bohuslav Martinů's *Quartet for Oboe, Violin, Cello, and Piano*, H. 315, composed in 1947. While Martinů is best known for his oboe concerto, Tondre considers this chamber music work a "little gem" that is performed far too rarely. Formally, he says, it resembles a divertimento, yet possesses its own poetic sound world. He particularly highlights the role of the cello: "The cello part is incredibly well written."

Chamber Music as Enrichment

Oboists are usually active in orchestral contexts, and that makes it all the more important for them to cultivate other forms of music-making. "Orchestra alone wouldn't be enough for me—I think something would be missing," Tondre says. Chamber music, in particular, offers the opportunity to experience new musical situations time and again: "You meet up with friends, each time under different conditions. It's a new adventure every time." Routine, he feels, is more of a hindrance; he sees the diversity of different musical encounters as a driving force for his own development.

He views his pedagogical work in a similar light. He teaches at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and serves as a visiting professor at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. His lessons focus initially on the fundamental technical aspects of oboe playing—from reed making to breathing technique—but he believes something

else is crucial: “The most important thing is that everyone finds their own voice.” He therefore does not see himself as a teacher with a fixed method or a single sound ideal. Rather, he tries to recognize individual talents and foster them in a targeted manner: “When I see a student’s potential, I try to develop that direction as far as possible.” At the same time, the training remains heavily influenced by traditional exams and recital requirements. In auditions and exams, students repeatedly encounter the same standard works: the Strauss concerto, and the standard orchestral excerpts from *Eroica*, *La Mer*, or *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. While Tondre finds this understandable, it leaves little room for other repertoire. “I would like to see works by Jennifer Higdon, Liza Lim, or even Doráti more often,” he says. Still, in many situations there is no “escape route” from the Mozart concerto—Mozart remains mandatory.

Yet the oboe boasts a particularly broad historical repertoire. In addition to Classical and modern literature, there is a rich Baroque tradition featuring works by Handel, Couperin, and Telemann, among others. Tondre emphasizes, “The Baroque oboe has a completely different blowing technique.” Fortunately, some conservatories offer the opportunity to become familiar with historical instruments. Nevertheless, he regrets that in today’s educational system, there is often too little time to truly explore this diversity.

Finding One’s Own Voice

In a discussion about music education systems, Tondre compares his experiences in France, Germany, and the United States. He finds the French model, in particular, to be highly structured. There, young musicians follow a clearly tiered educational path, progressing from local music schools through regional conservatories to major institutions such as the Paris Conservatoire. “These levels help to systematically nurture children from a very young age.” In the U.S., however, he encounters a completely different situation. Due to the size of the country and the highly individualized nature of the system, he has the impression that many American students bring a solid foundation with them from their training.

This also raises the question of the next generation of musicians. While instruments like the clarinet or saxophone are particularly common in school ensembles, the oboe is rare in many places. Tondre takes a nuanced view of the situation. On the one hand, he has the impression that more people worldwide are taking up the oboe now than in the past. On the other hand, the first encounter with the instrument—for example, in American school orchestras—often happens by chance: “Everyone wants to play the flute, clarinet, or saxophone. Then the band needs an oboe—and someone gives it a try. In other regions, such as China, however, he has noticed a remarkable popularity of the instrument. At the same time, the instrument industry is also feeling the effects of current economic and political developments. “Since COVID, many instrument makers have had difficulty selling their instruments,” he says, pointing to trade tensions in the U.S. Overall, the musical landscape is currently in a phase of transition: “We are living in changing times.”

Time to Reflect

At the end of our conversation, Tondre looked back on the creation of his CD trilogy: “The recordings were made during the COVID-19 pandemic and are therefore unusually strongly influenced

by something that has become rare in today’s music industry: Time,” he says. He worked on the programs over a period of two years, and thus had the opportunity to engage intensively with the works. “That period of calm was particularly valuable. These days, we don’t have time—everything has to happen quickly.” He also sees this experience in connection with a trend he observes among young musicians: “There’s such a rush that they hardly have time to reflect.” For him, this very phase of engagement is an essential part of musical work—much like reading a book, for which one simply has to take the time.

The intensive engagement with the cultural background of the music also played an important role in the recording. Using the Antal Doráti as an example, Tondre describes how strongly musical rhythm can be linked to linguistic structures. In the Hungarian language, for instance, the first syllable is stressed—an accent that is also found in Doráti’s music. “You really have to understand that, otherwise you’ll play the rhythms wrong,” he explains. For him, this meant grappling with these linguistic peculiarities and translating them sonically into his playing. During his preparation, he also listened to historical recordings, such as those by the Czech Philharmonic from earlier decades. In doing so, he noticed a



sonic ideal that differs significantly from today's understanding of sound. "The instrument immediately stands out and strikes straight to the heart," he says. This sonic aesthetic fascinated him—yet at the same time, it was important to him not simply to imitate that style, but to blend it with his own tone.

For Tondre, the oboe's particular fascination lies precisely in its sonic diversity. The instrument can sound round and lyrical, but it can also be sharp and expressive. "I'm interested in the singing tone of the oboe and, most of all, in the extremes," he says. Shaping the music between these poles and constantly discovering new timbres is, for him, an essential part of musical expression.

Pavel Haas:

Suite for Oboe and Piano, op. 17

(Prague: Bärenreiter, 2026). BA11576.

With this work, Pavel Haas responds to the threatening political situation surrounding him. The Czech composer of Jewish origins sends a clear statement by quoting the St. Wenceslas Chorale and an excerpt from the Hussite hymn "Ktož jsú Boží bojovníci (Ye Who are Warriors of God), thereby referencing earlier Czech reformist and revolutionary movements. In this 15-minute suite, the full mastery of the mature composer unfolds. Haas was one of Leoš Janáček's most gifted pupils. The new Bärenreiter edition presents the suite for the first time in its original form.

Geoffrey Burgess (GB): *You're just about to play the last concerts in the 2025–2026 season with the Philadelphia Orchestra. It's been six years since you came, but in that time you've also done an immense amount all around the globe. Teaching in the U.K., masterclasses in Asia, plus solo performances, chamber music, and recording sessions... then just last week I saw that you were playing the New York Philharmonic.*

Philippe Tondre (PT): The Philadelphia Orchestra had a vacation and as I love working, I spent it playing with the New York Phil.

GB: *With all your independent activities on top of the orchestral work, do you have management to help with logistics?*

PT: Most of the things I do myself, but there's also some management involved putting things together, helping me with PR, and with things that

technically I can't do alone. For example, they helped get representation in the press for the newest CD that came out, added to my media presence, contacted radio shows, that sort of thing.

GB: *There has been a long-standing expectation that the musicians in the Philadelphia Orchestra come from the Curtis Institute, and oboists in particular train in the Philadelphia school. Some have even said that you do not belong here.*

PT: When I came, I was aware of what I was stepping into. I was expecting some comments, and questions, but some of the reactions were stronger than I had anticipated. It was a big challenge for me, so I took the attitude, "Okay, this is the response I'm getting for this nomination. I need to show that I can adapt and can still be myself, stay authentic, and try to be accepted by focusing on the music." There are probably still people out there who think that I play like crap or whatever—that I don't have "the Philadelphia sound."

GB: *Do you think some responses have been based more on the fact that you're not from here, rather than what you bring musically?*

PT: I think of myself as an open person, and I am ready to discuss anything. There's not just one way of playing the oboe. There are so many ways. That's what is so fabulous about our instrument, and I think we should embrace this richness and use it to be able to push it further and see what the next milestone might be—for whatever school—and where it brings us all.

I just hope that I haven't upset things. I believe the orchestra has kept its values: their history, their culture of playing, and their tradition. But by opening up to something new, something a bit different, maybe I could help the orchestra to expand further in different directions.

GB: *There also seems to be a lot of misunderstanding about schools of playing and styles and how musicians can work together. You are French, but more specifically Alsatian, and as a player you represent a hybrid of French and German approaches.*

PT: I think I'm quite lucky to have experienced over the years different aesthetics and cultures of playing. I'm not a typical Paris-school player. There's a lot of German influence in there. My mother is British; I also have a British passport,

so there's a lot of that in there too, and I think all of this has enriched the way I have figured out sound and projection and singing and articulation and interpretation—how I approach different styles of music from different periods.

GB: *What were highlights for you playing with the Philadelphians?*

PT: The first European tour I did with the orchestra in 2022. We played a great program including Florence Price's First Symphony, and music by two other female composers: Valerie Coleman and Gabriela Lena Frank, plus Beethoven and Dvořák. It was very special because it brought a very important facet of American music to Europe. And then the second European tour, the following year, was also great. It was a Rachmaninoff celebration. I have good memories from those two tours. Last year's performance of *Tristan* was also a really, really big highlight, for sure; maybe Mahler's Second Symphony this year as well.

GB: *It's interesting that you put the tours at the top of the list.*

PT: Tours are opportunities for an ensemble to become more integrated. They are not only about the music, they are also about the players being able to get to know each other on a personal basis. Socializing is fundamental to the symbiosis of an orchestra. The tours offered the possibility to explore and have fun adventures with my colleagues outside the concert hall.

GB: *Touring can be also very challenging: every concert in a new venue, traveling as a group between cities, and managing all the practical things at the same time as preparing the music.*

PT: A tour is a way for any orchestra to test itself. We are all on show and have to play at our best. You get to see how responsive an orchestra is and how flexible it can be. Your qualities—and also maybe your weaknesses—are put to the test on tour. Sometimes you might be very surprised by how good the concerts can be; they might be even better on tour than at home, because of a special rapport with the audience.

GB: *Could you talk about the differences working with Philadelphia Orchestra and other experiences you've had in Europe? Do you have different expectations of how you work with your colleagues in different parts of the world?*

PT: Currently I play with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra Europe, but it's difficult to compare them because the Chamber Orchestra is much smaller and, being a tour orchestra, it doesn't have a home base. We approach each program differently. Every tour is a new experience.

In general, I would say the biggest difference is the balance between rehearsing and concerts. In Europe we have more rehearsal time and fewer concerts for each program. In America it is the reverse. That means that here, conductors have less time to focus on details. They need to bring a bigger vision of the program, and have everything in place ahead of time. They have to be able to show what they want without talking too much. It can be challenging, but with the way the concert seasons are organized, it's hard to escape. The difference between Europe and America is greater for conductors than for the musicians. For the musicians, it's a question of adaptability, but it's not a major, huge difference.

GB: *What oboe are you playing now?*

PT: [laughs] There will be an announcement in a couple of weeks. I... How can I put this? The last two years since I was working intensively with Buffet, I went back to play my 20-year-old Marigaux, and since then, I have been playing all sorts of brands. I was still playing the Buffet prototypes, and also Lorée. I have a Josef oboe, and Laubin oboes. For me it is important to play different brands to be flexible, to be able to jump from one to another, and also to help my students. Some of them play different brands, and so it is vital for me to understand what they have to do for the tuning, and to get to know the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument.

Learning to navigate through the characteristics of different brands is one way to build flexibility. It makes you a better player, for sure. You also need to know different models in order to understand the one you are playing. If you are only playing one oboe, you have no basis of comparison.

So, to answer your question, I've been played many oboes. But, in about

a month I'm going to join my former teammates at Lorée. I'm interested in the functionality and development of the instrument. That's why I signed a research and development contract with Buffet. I wanted to learn, contribute, and participate in making the instruments better. After four years, however, some serious internal issues within the team made the working relationship increasingly difficult and I felt that the working environment was no longer the right one for me. I therefore decided to step away and give myself some freedom for a couple of years. Recently, I also started playing Laubin oboes. I have two: one in grenadilla and one in cocobolo.

GB: *What interaction have you had with the company?*

PT: Last year when I was playing with the New York Phil, I met Sherry Sytar. She plays Laubin, and let me try her oboe. It's really a fantastic oboe, and so I wrote it to Laubin saying that I would be very interested to try their oboes, and they sent me two. I also went three times to see them in Upstate New York. They're very friendly people, very professional, and passionate and about what they do, and a good team to work with. They are very open; they are aware of what they do well, and what they can do even better. They're making some changes, trying some new materials for certain aspects of the mechanism. They have new reamers, and some new machines. I think that what's good about them is that they are willing to listen and learn. I asked for some little adjustments. I thought that some of the tone holes could be a bit bigger, or one note more open, the second octave a bit more resonant...things like that.

GB: *Regarding your CD Eastern Enchantment, you have spoken about adapting your technique to the music. Can you be more specific about that?*

PT: I found that I had to use air in a different way so the sound could be more focused. It's not like French music where you have to play very airy and have a lot of flexibility; or in Italian opera where you would play with lots of charm and elegance, and you would let the sound

ring. That's not what this is about. Here I found that I had to play with more force, or perseverance in my air. It's like grabbing something and not letting go. I needed to create tension in my technique, and to have some sort of—how can I say?—obstinance in order to make the point. So I played with more air but condensed and with resistance.

GB: *Which instrument did you use for the recording?*

PT: I was working with Buffet at the time, so I had two different Buffets to use: a wooden prototype in the Martinů quartet, and the Haas suite, and I used a hybrid—top joint in the composite material, the rest in wood—for Slavický and for Doráti.

GB: *If you had the choice of instrument now, what would you choose?*

PT: I think Laubin could be a good fit because it has a very compact, dark sound. That would work well with Czech and Hungarian music.

GB: *What plans do you have for the future? Next season you start with the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich. How will that impact your work here in Philadelphia?*

PT: While I'm with the Tonhalle, I will still play some concerts with the Philadelphia Orchestra and teach at Curtis a couple of weeks. I will also continue teaching in Manchester, and I will have a guest professorship at the Royal College in London. Like Manchester, that will be four two-day residencies a year.

GB: *There have been some interesting works for oboe written in recent years. Do you have some ideas for commissioning new works?*

PT: We have some wonderful pieces by Richard Dubignon and Thierry Escaich; and *Les belles heures* is a really nice concerto that Guillaume Connesson wrote for Dwight Parry and the Cincinnati orchestra. As for commissions of my own, I always have ideas. I think we deserve an oboe concerto from Esa-Pekka Salonen. It would be kind of a dream for him to write something for oboe, but that's thinking forward.

GB: Thank you, Philippe, for your time, and best wishes for all the future holds for you.