

OBOE REEDS

(TOOLS OF THE TRADE)

By Jerry Lazar

Playing the oboe requires two mutually independent sets of skills: 1) playing the oboe, and 2) making oboe reeds. Some will say that it's a tossup as to which is more difficult to master, but all the pros agree that you can't do the first without doing the second. Legend has it that oboists are notoriously loony because of all the pressure that builds up in the brain from having to emit a long, slow, forceful stream of air through the minuscule aperture of the double reed. A more likely culprit for their supposed lunacy would have to be the meticulous, delicate process of customizing reeds to one's own unique embouchure and oral cavity -- reeds whose agonizingly fluctuating quality is at the mercy of dozens of mercurial variables.

At about 70 millimeters in length (47mm of cork-enveloped nickel/silver tube, and 23mm of protruding cane), an oboe reed is no bigger than a pinkie finger, but it causes headaches the size of concert halls. Armed with an array of tools that appropriately resemble arcane torture devices, oboists will fuss over a reed for a half hour or for a week, knowing all along that, in the unlikely event that it is even concert-worthy, it will probably last no longer than a single performance, if that. Because steady hands and eyes, and microscopic precision, is required at every juncture -- one false move or nick can ruin everything -- oboe reedmaking is one of the few vocations that arguably does rank right up there with brain surgery.

Anyone who's seen an orchestra has heard an oboe. Because oboists are traditionally seated in the center, and because (not unrelatedly) its tone quality is a blend of horns and strings, it's the instrument that tunes all the others. At the start of a concert, you'll hear the principal oboist play a steady A (at 440 to 444 vibrations per second, often stipulated in the contract), and then the other instruments join in. During the rest of the concert, you may recognize the oboe's distinctive voice -- not nearly as nasal and ducklike as lore would have us believe, but actually sweet and rich and fluid -- and you can also rest assured that the oboists themselves are fretting over whether their fragile reeds will carry them through the evening

Here is an oversimplified description (without getting into mandrels, files, plaques, billots, or leather strops) of how to make an oboe reed:

Soak high quality French cane (\$90/pound, or about 300 reeds) in water. Split the cane lengthwise into three 100 mm sections (cane splitter: \$55). Discerningly examine each piece. Place only an unflawed, unwarped segment into a gouger (\$1045), a sophisticated planing device that gouges accurately to within 1/100th mm. Fold the cane onto a shaper handle (\$70-100). Using an extraordinarily precise metal "shaper tip" (\$80 to \$180) and a razor, contour the reed to within 1/100 mm precision. Using colored nylon thread (EE or FF gauge, \$4/200 yards) wrap and tie the cane to the cork-encased metal "staple" (\$3).

Start scraping, with a high-quality Swedish steel blade (\$67.50), until the tip is as thin as cigarette paper. Slice off the very end. If all went correctly, the reed should now “crow” (or nakedly squawk) at C pitch. Otherwise, scrape a little more, or, more likely, start over.

The need to make one’s own reeds is such an ironclad precept of professional oboe playing that the few exceptions to the rule are the stuff of oboe lore. (When their trusted reedmakers passed away, the oboists’ careers inevitably went into a tailspin.) Georges Gillet, an acknowledged oboe genius who played with the Paris Conservatory from 1881 to 1918, had two brilliant students who were fierce rivals: his nephew Fernand Gillet, who bragged that he attempted only one reed in his life and failed, but nevertheless enjoyed a long and celebrated tenure with the Boston Philharmonic; and Marcel Tabuteau, who played with the Philadelphia Orchestra 39 years until his retirement in 1953, and who was so fanatical about perfecting his art that he single-handedly revolutionized modern American reedmaking.

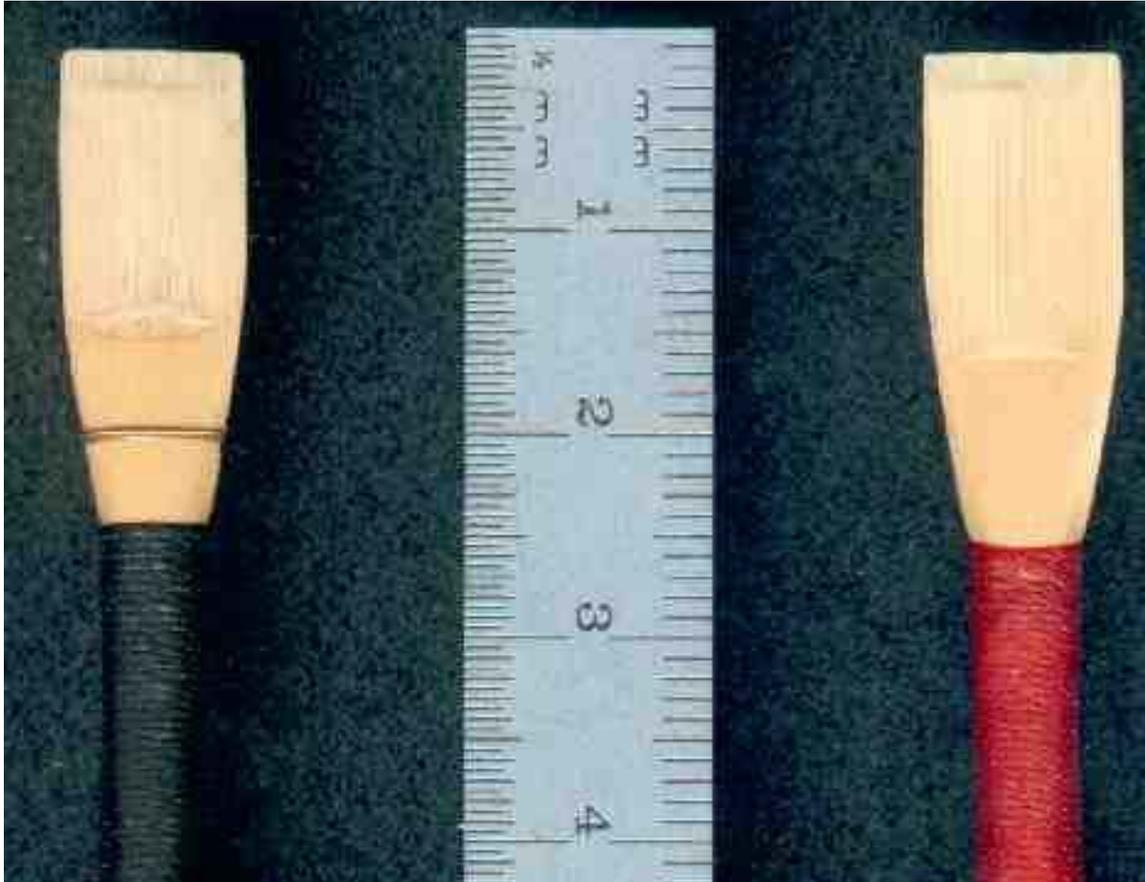
Traditionally, the reed had been considered the vibrator, and the oboe the resonator, and so the short-scraped French reed that vibrated most was highly valued. It was incumbent entirely upon the player to translate that nasal, ducklike vibration into sweet sonority. Tabuteau was the first to conceive of the reed as an instrument unto itself, with only the 3 millimeter tip vibrating, thus enabling maximum intonation. His students, and his students’ students, went on to become the principal oboists in most of the major American symphony orchestras, and so his influence has branched out like a genealogical tree.

His most prominent protégé has to be John Mack, who is in his 31st season with the Cleveland Symphony, and whose \$180 “M+” shaper tips are an industry standard. “It was his brains and my brawn,” he recalls of his partnership with the maestro, which began when Mack was a teenager, building his own gouges and shaper tips in his father’s toolshop. “Tabuteau’s knowledge was hard-won, and he didn’t give up much easily,” he says, a tradition that resonates today among secret-hoarding oboists.

Like his confreres, at any given time, Mack will always carry “blanks” (unshaved reeds) in his pocket, and have a few pieces of cane soaking in water. But, he insists, like his mentor, he is not “fetishistic” or “teutonic” about reedmaking. “I try to work very fast. I don’t scrape for an hour; life is flying by.” Like most oboists, Mack may re-work a reed over a period of time, but it’s all in service of the performance. “While playing, Tabuteau wanted to spend the least amount of time with the reed,” he notes, “and the most on the music. Reedmaking was not an end unto itself.”

Mack dismisses the notion of the perfect reed. “If it works when I need it,” he says, “I’m profoundly grateful.” He prefers fresh reeds (“more guts, more corpuscles in the bloodstream”), but also recalls the higher quality of pre-World War II reeds, on which he could coax a dozen performances out of a single one. Nowadays, an oboist is lucky to get a single evening’s use out of a reed. Even after performing gorgeous warm-up scales and arpeggios, he says, a stellar reed can quickly “lose its charm.” Though Mack typically keeps 20 reeds in his reedbox, there’s no guarantee that any will work. “If the reed doesn’t change,” he

notes, “then the humidity or the barometer will.” And, of course, an oboist on tour encounters new variables in every auditorium. Once, in the midst of Beethoven’s Seventh, Mack was forced to whip up a fresh reed during intermission. It performed brilliantly, but didn’t work at all the next day, a fact of life he has learned to accept: “You can’t eat yesterday’s dinner again,” he philosophizes.



Joseph Robinson, principal oboist with the New York Philharmonic for the past 17 years, had the good fortune to have studied with both Mack and Tabuteau. “The allure of reedmaking,” he says, “is the potential to create a human-like voice that says, ‘aaaaahh’ instead of ‘annnhh.’” he explains. “We’re desperately neurotic in our failure, but enchanted by the potential. As Mack says, ‘A reed a day keeps the psychiatrist away.’”

From studying with Tabuteau for five weeks in 1963, Robinson garnered an appreciation for gouging machines. “I caught the bug: the gouge is everything,” he says. He also learned that visual symmetry should take a backseat to functional symmetry: reeds should be made to play well, not necessarily to look good. “You don’t impose your scrape on the cane, you let it tell you what it needs.”

When Tabuteau was asked to describe his greatest attribute as an oboist, according to Robinson, he replied: “I knew when I was off track and how to get back on.”

“All of us are trying to get along with reeds that are not good enough,” Robinson explains. “We develop compensatory skills -- to make a reed sound brighter or darker, or to make it vibrate more -- that spin us off in the wrong direction.” It is that eternal struggle, balancing the quest for the perfect reed with the musical technique required to coax great performances from perennially imperfect reeds, that fuels both an oboist’s passion and his madness. A reed must have three mutually exclusive qualities -- response (ease of vibration), pitch stability, and quality of tone or voice. But the high premium placed on the complex “rich mahogany” tone (versus a simplistic “pine” tone) is often achieved at the sacrifice of responsiveness. And what works best “piano” may not work as well “forte.”

In his junk-strewn basement where he makes reeds, along with 100 boxes of fresh cane, Robinson keeps a “museum box” of notable reeds from his career, including the first one he ever made at age 14. Growing up in North Carolina, Robinson wrote to Mack asking to buy his reeds. Mack wrote back that it was against his professional ethics, and told the boy where to buy cane. So Robinson fashioned his first reed and sent it to Mack for his appraisal. “He sent it back and marked where I had scraped too much or too little.” Citing strenuous academic demands, Robinson eventually convinced Mack to send him reeds until he got through school, and so he was spoiled by the best. Remarkably, he says, “I didn’t play my first self-made reed for 12 years -- for my second professional concert in 1966.” Now he typically fashions five new reeds a day, hoping to achieve one “playable” one.

Robinson’s alternate principal oboist, Sherry Sylar, says that, of ten new reeds she makes per week, four will be concert-worthy, four will be for rehearsals, and two will be throwaways. “I try to break in a reed at rehearsal to use that night,” she says, “ but I won’t play my *best* reed at rehearsal.”

Sylar’s biggest adjustment came when she graduated from being second oboist with the Louisville Orchestra to the New York Philharmonic twelve years ago. “A second oboist requires a different reed,” she says. “It’s lighter and easier to blow, because you need to play low notes which require very little resistance. It doesn’t have as full a sound, because you don’t want to overpower the first oboe.” Consequently, the reed is thinner and balanced differently. Switching to New York also necessitated a major modification in her reedmaking technique. “I needed a fuller sounding reed, so I had to beef them up a bit, cause it’s easy to get lost in a larger orchestra. It took me a couple of years to make the transformation.”

For all the precisionist attention paid to the arsenal of manmade tools, ultimately the oboist is at the mercy of nature-made cane. Because it is affected by such whimsical factors as climate and soil conditions, the best cane -- from *arundo donax* bamboo tubes -- is to be found near the region of the greatest vineyards, in the province of Var in southeast France. The alluvial, sandy soil is ideal for growing the 10-foot tall plants required for oboe reeds. (Clarinets and saxophone reeds, by contrast, require dark rich soil for taller plants.)

John Hayden, the revered Connecticut-based cane manufacturer who since 1959 has processed and shipped up to 300 kilos a year to the world's leading oboists, has walked those fields of Frejus and Cogolin, the cane-capital farm towns near Antibes and Nice, and instinctively knows the difference between the hard, smooth variety that produces a desirable gouge and the woody, grainy variety that doesn't. In 1972, he abandoned Marcelle Ghys' product, because he wouldn't take back a bad batch of 100 kilos -- "soft, pithy stuff" -- and now relies on Francois Alliaud. But those rival French farmers are well into their eighties, and it is questionable how much longer they will produce oboe cane. (Neighboring Albert Glotin, who in 1945 founded what would become the biggest reed company in the world, has gotten out of the business and opened a woodcraft shop that produces furniture and cabinetry.)

Hayden has endured good years and bad. (Hot, sunny, dry summers resulted in notably fine harvests in '83, '86, and '89; the sleetstorms of '84, on the other hand, produced a disastrous crop that had to be burned. " '95 is beginning to look like a very exceptional year," he reports.) The vicissitudes of nature comes with the territory. But what Hayden has trouble adjusting to is, essentially, the end of an era: "the jet-age younger generation" of exporters who have never set foot on a cane farm, and who, in their haste to turn a profit, aren't patient enough to wait for the cane to dry and age properly, a meticulous curing process that takes years. Some would sooner sell their lots to secondary-housing developers who are building summer vacation homes, a trend whose impact will extend far beyond the bucolic French villages and into orchestra pits around the world. At 62, Hayden -- a retired Army oboist who now toots on reeds only to test them -- fantasizes rescuing reedplayers by relocating to France to take up cane farming.

Spain and Italy have unsuccessfully tried to grow cane for reeds. Perhaps the brightest hope is from the unlikeliest of spots. Back in 1968, Joe Robinson was in Guatemala City to participate in a school program for Central American students. While wandering through a vacant lot, he noticed some cane and, with a pen knife and the overpowering curiosity that only another oboist could appreciate, cut some to see if it might make good reeds. Amazingly, it did. He won his New York Philharmonic audition on a reed made from that cane. "I never had the opportunity to go back," he muses. "Besides, I hear the Guatemalans fill the cane with gunpowder and use it for firecrackers."

Originally published in TICKETMASTER LIVE! Magazine.