# A Tribute to My Teacher, John de Lancie

**By Richard Woodhams**
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

Several years ago I awoke on an unusually balmy July morning in Philadelphia from a vivid dream.

This was the dream: I was in an elegantly appointed room with Mr. de Lancie and his longtime colleague and friend Sol Schoenbach. Mr. de Lancie was stating to me, in a characteristically patrician manner, that he would demonstrate how air could be utilized on a woodwind instrument. He then proceeded, with some solemnity, to fill a wine glass with water from a decanter and place it on a shelf inside what appeared to be a fine piece of eighteenth century French cabinetry, with glass doors.

***Mahler's Sixth Symphony, 1968. The Philadelphia Orchestra oboe section, L. to R. John de Lancie, Charles Morris, Stevens Hewitt, Richard Woodhams, Louis Rosenblatt. Other principals shown: Murray Panitz, flute and Gilbert Johnson, trumpet. Photo courtesy of Roger Blackburn, shown playing 6th trumpet.***

As he closed the doors, the water in the glass began to move in a circular motion and formed itself into an ascending, rapidly spinning spiral, whereupon a violent precipitation seemed to take place within the entire cabinet. Mr. de Lancie then began to explain this remarkable occurrence to Mr. Schoenbach, and me, but it was at this point that I woke up in a state of wonder and delight, and I could not return to sleep to hear his explanation.

Since I am neither a strong believer in Freudianism nor a New Age kind of guy, I am very happy to accept the phenomenological nature of this dream, and the response it elicited, as being more meaningful for the possibilities raised about the oboe and music than the dream-answer could ever possibly be. So, I keep this dream intact, without explanation, without analysis.

Having had this dream set me to thinking about the instruction I received from Mr. de Lancie at the Curtis Institute from 1964 to 1968. Time has given me the perspective to look back and truly appreciate just how valuable that instruction was, and continues to be, for me. I know that many other productive students of his feel the same way. I consider my education with him to have been remarkably comprehensive, inclusive of everything from sound professional advice to addressing the magic and metaphysics of great music-making.

It is difficult to write about substantial musical ideas, since they can easily be misunderstood or trivialized if not actually demonstrated. It has been said, "Music begins where words end," a statement I think Mr. de Lancie would agree with. Consequently I have tried to keep this article economical in words and clear in expression. I hope that it is interesting to oboists today both familiar and unfamiliar with the distinct Philadelphia school of oboe playing. Not being monotheistic, I don't claim our school to be the only valid way to play the oboe, but do strongly feel that it is one of several that have had an enduring and wide influence in the twentieth century and is derived from much thought about the art of music.

A brief background on that school is necessary in order to understand it. Mr. de Lancie taught at the Curtis Institute from 1954 to 1985. He was a pupil of Marcel Tabuteau, who taught at the school from 1924 to 1954. Tabuteau was a pupil of Georges Gillet, who taught at the Paris Conservatoire from 1882 to 1919. Tad Margelli has written an excellent article giving great detail to the early history of this instruction (IDRS *Journal #24*, 1996), and Laila Storch has written extensively about both Gillet and Tabuteau in these pages as well.

Any tradition, if it is to continue to be relevant and vital, undergoes transformations, and ideas are inevitably re-interpreted by individuals, but there are nevertheless some eternal truths well worth sustaining in the interpretation of music; the most intelligent musicians I have ever known had the ability to extrapolate new ideas from old ones and, conversely, to point out the influence of prior history on what one might think is new. A good education provides, simply, a solid foundation upon which to build, and I would like to describe how that foundation was laid for me.

The oboe curriculum at Curtis consisted almost entirely of etudes, long tones, slow scales and arpeggios and occasionally duets. Annually there was an oboe recital in which each student would

perform one or two solo pieces, and after our first year or two of study we were allowed to accept professional engagements outside the school, provided that we kept up our studies satisfactorily and didn't create conflicts with our school obligations. Traditional French solfege was required of us for three years, ending in exercises in ungodly keys with long-abandoned clefs. In lessons, Mr. de Lancie always used his facile command of solfege in singing musical illustrations, with clear articulation and in tune. One was always aware at the Curtis Institute that many of the very finest oboists of two generations in America had studied there, so for me, as a fifteen-year-old, the atmosphere was exciting and somewhat daunting at the same time. (I might add that I consider solfege to be an extremely important part of musical training and the serious atmosphere was really the right thing for me.)

Mr. de Lancie began my first lesson by playing on his oboe and reed a low D natural of seemingly endless duration that began with a clearly enunciated whisper, developed to a deep, sonorous fortissimo with no distortion of tone quality, and then gradually diminished in a perfectly modulated way so that the actual ending of the note was virtually inaudible.

(I suggest that any oboist reading this article who feels the need for a lesson in humility soak up a reed and try this at home!)

This demonstration was a revelation to me, a revelation that one note could carry so much power, life and meaning; I was accustomed as most hot-shot young kids are to trying to play the maximum number of notes in the shortest period of time! I quickly deduced the following imperatives: that one must develop a prolonged sostenuto with one's air, have a clean and reliable attack in the low register, develop a real dynamic range that is not a mere illusion created by raising and lowering the instrument, and be able to create the tool helping one to do all of this, a vibrant and flexible reed. So many of the basic challenges of mastering the oboe were defined for me in the first note of my first lesson—Mr. de Lancie flung down the gauntlet in an unforgettable manner. Needless to say, I've been working at these things ever since. These skills are particularly valuable in orchestral playing, where an artistic player can make a one note solo say a lot.

Following this long tone, which I attempted to replicate without much success, I played the first sixteenth-note articulation study of Barret and was promptly reprimanded for my percussive staccato. Mr. de Lancie demonstrated how one should articulate "on the wind" without distortion of embouchure or interruption of support, and made the analogy of an oboist's use of air with a violinist's use of the bow. I believe echoing Tabuteau, he said, "Put the notes on the wind, not the wind on the notes." (I find that this elegant concept is often ignored these days by oboists of every level of accomplishment, with subsequent obliterations of melodic line, giving the music the expression of "bathos" rather than "pathos." Consequently, I value this idea more and more.) Mr. de Lancie also touched upon the importance of developing the ability to group the notes to play across the beats in order to avoid the pedestrian musical habit of over-accentuation, and he demonstrated how the quality of a clear but unexplosive attack determines the liveliness of articulation more than the shortness of the note. He emphasized that each note must have life.

We then went on to the first Barret melody where he explained how the use of the "speed of the wind" applied to musical phrasing by creating motion suggested by the underlying harmonic tension and relaxation defined by the bass line and by the melodic shape and structure of the music. In a variant of the dictum of "putting the notes on the wind," he said I must learn to "play between the notes" to achieve a true legato and compelling musical line, and demonstrated with a slow scale where all the notes were perfectly conjoined and matching in timbre. He urged that scales be practiced slowly, with an increase in intensity and volume as one ascends, to counteract the natural inclination of the oboe to be loud down low and weak in the high notes.

Lessons at that time were forty minutes long. I believe that my first lesson consisted of the most informative forty minutes of my life!

My instruction in Barret continued through all the Articulation excercises, Melodies, Sonatas, and Grand Studies. I recall many inspirational musical ideas conveyed to me through this music, which is full of many genuinely inventive and touching early romantic melodies and covers a wide range of expression. Mr. de Lancie brought out its worth to me by showing musical moods, contrasts, rubato (now almost a lost art), rhythmic variety of expression, and sensitivity to harmonic changes. He spent a great deal of time emphasizing the art of phrasing, as his teacher had and as I do, defining the relationship of the notes to one another in the music by grouping them with the use of "musical punctuation," and within each group finding, by intensity and duration, the best way to allow the music to "speak." This creates the possibility of an eloquent, poetic musical narrative and gives music a meaning to the receptive listener that is far deeper than the more common approaches of a declamatory style of expression, or a simply

unacceptable monotone devoid of musical meaning. Mr. de Lancie frequently employed Tabuteau's "number system" in order to point out how music must constantly move and develop, how it is built often upon progressions, and how notes should not arbitrarily stick out in a phrase simply because of the instrument's resonance on a particular note.

I do not feel personally that one can be taught deep musical expression, but one can be taught the means to convey it more effectively to the listener provided it is felt within. For me, many concepts were absorbed by a kind of osmosis, so that I like to think that they are an integral part of my playing without calling attention to themselves. The important thing to me about them is how Mr. de Lancie explained them in a way that made them an organic part of the music, and not something to be applied externally.

In addition to Mr. de Lancie's ideas of phrasing, I remember many vivid physical demonstrations of rhythmic impulse and inflection that helped steer the proper course for me between a mindless, aggressive accentuation and an amorphous blandness.

Never one to suffer fools gladly, Mr. de Lancie did not allow one to forget what one had been told before, and many insights were delivered in a manner that one might describe as highly animated and impassioned. This very effectively underlined the importance of these insights; I must say that they haven't been forgotten.

We frequently had group lessons at Mr. de Lancie's home on Sunday mornings, which I now realize was probably his only time free of concerts, rehearsals, and recordings during many weeks of the Philadelphia Orchestra season. We were sometimes told to prepare Sellner duets, and sometimes we had to sight-read them; occasionally Mr. de Lancie played them with us.

During my course of study, nearly every prepared etude had to be transposed either up or down a half-step or whole step after having been learned in the original key. I believe that this tradition came from a custom necessary to learn in order to play in opera in earlier days, to accommodate singers. Today it has little professional use, but I believe that it is invaluable, like solfege, in developing the ear and musical concentration. It also encourages evenness of sonority, good intonation, and reliable technique.

Now retired from active playing, Mr. de Lancie had a formidable and what I think of as "Chopinesque" finger technique. He used very little motion and a light touch so that the fastest passages came out cleanly and elegantly without any mechanical clatter whatsoever. I believe that he achieved this by using strong abdominal support on a responsive reed, thus allowing the notes to speak quickly of their own accord without having to slap the keys.

One morning at Mr. de Lancie's home I played the Barret Grand Study #12, "Lento Vigoroso." In the middle section, replete with trills, I played mordents instead, thinking it too fast to be played with real trills. He stopped me, asked me for my oboe, and, sitting in his easy chair and obviously having recently emerged from a deep and much-needed slumber, proceeded to play the passage faster than I did with perfectly even and well-delineated trills. He handed me back my oboe with an expression of quizzical, mild disdain.

All of his playing gave me the impression of ease and relaxed security. In the orchestra, one was drawn to his playing simply because it was musically captivating, not because he resorted to any techniques of showboating. In order to achieve this ease, I think that he worked on reeds and his playing a great deal to maintain a high level from which he never allowed himself to deviate, even in rehearsals.

There was no way that any student of Mr. de Lancie could graduate from Curtis without an excellent technique, given the curriculum demanded of us, not to mention instrumental control and musicality, harder to attain, that was at the very least acceptable professionally. After Barret came the Ferling etudes, which Mr. de Lancie indicated a special fondness for, and which he demonstrated very beautifully, then Brod and finally Gillet. I recall that I was called upon to transpose some Gillet etudes. Transposition does tend to raise issues of a student's diligence—for all the students of today, I'd like to point out the advantages of having a reservoir of technical ability as one sustains one's later career.

Oboe students may be surprised to learn that in my course of study I never played a single note of an excerpt or concerto for my teacher. Yet, I felt that I was taught a sufficient command of the instrument, and a thorough enough understanding of musical expression, to be able to play a great deal of music convincingly even at sight.

One's interpretations hopefully gain depth with familiarity,but, in orchestral playing exactly the opposite can occur as the playing of great music becomes routine. Because I was not taught someone else's exact interpretation of four or eight bars of music I am eternally grateful to have been given the tools by Mr. de Lancie to "Do my own thing," so to speak, for the music. I am still very reluctant to use, in teaching, orchestral music or solo music to address fundamental instrumental or musical deficiencies and don't like to belabor great music by endless repetition until it begins to lose its flavor and non-verbal meaning.

From Mr. de Lancie I gained the sense that music

is a living Art subject to re-thinking and re-interpretation, and, for any player, this perspective is essential to maintaining life in one's playing. Although he was an interpreter of deep conviction, Mr. de Lancie told me that he frequently changed his interpretations, if he felt so inclined, after some thought.

Problems of endurance and reed-making were frequently addressed but not dwelt upon, since I believe that he had the confidence in our talent that we would figure most of it out sooner or later. One learned that diligence and determination were an integral part of success on the oboe, and we didn't spend much time on oboe trivia or idle chit-chat. To modify a well-worn phrase of the 90's, "It was the music, stupid!"

The concept of a good reed was effectively conveyed and Mr. de Lancie sometimes scraped on our reeds, if they were bad enough that he couldn't stand to listen to them! The reed had to speak softly and have a clear, smooth and compact tone with center, depth and dynamic flexibility, and one quickly learned that a good reed made life a lot more pleasant in lessons. But, whatever the shortcomings of our reeds or instruments, Mr. de Lancie could always play them and get far more tone and music from them than we could.

His belief that true control is developed from the soft end of the dynamic spectrum upwards is simply inarguable for all instrumentalists and singers in any refined form of music-making. Loud, which most oboe students strive for from their high school orchestra days onward, is not the same as big, and a large tone that carries is an amplification of a soft, dolce tone. Anyone having the good fortune to get into a first-rate orchestra immediately recognizes the importance of this concept, so simple, yet difficult to maintain.

Perhaps what I value the most from Mr. de Lancie's teaching is the aesthetic sensibility he tried to impart to his students that would allow us to see subtle possibilities of nuance where they are easily overlooked. Creativity in interpretation can be easily misguided or misunderstood; his direct, sincere delivery of sensitive musical ideas avoided both the precious and the cynical.

I recall reading an interview with the eminent piano pedagogue, Karl Ulrich Schnabel, in which he was asked what made one musical performance better than another. He answered with one word: "Proportion." Mr. de Lancie told me exactly the same thing at Curtis, making an allusion to a painting hanging on the wall. Some ideas have timeless validity. The belief in "good taste," which would include a consideration of proportion, attention to detail and refined expression, may not exactly be enjoying a sweeping renaissance right now, but quite possibly it never has. Mr. de Lancie followed his own course and beliefs in music without really caring whether they enjoyed vast popular appeal or not, which one can only admire, but in fact they *were* widely appreciated.

Knowing now what I do about the history of the Philadelphia Orchestra, I am sympathetic and grateful to my teacher in having given so much care and energy in teaching me since this instruction came at a time when the orchestra simply worked harder than any other orchestra has before, or has since, with a grueling schedule of endless recordings, tours, concerts and run-outs going practically year-round. Juggling teaching with performing, practicing, reed-making and a family must have been difficult for him, but I always felt that he was an impartial, fair teacher who happened to be quite demanding because he cared about high standards.

By no means have I touched upon all the knowledge I gained or the experiences I had that might be illustrative. I haven't mentioned his influence on many American woodwind players and horn players who attended his class at Curtis, nor what a thrill it was to play second oboe to him as a substitute while still a student. Mr. de Lancie was a consistently inspired performer under circumstances that were frequently less than inspiring and had a unique, instantly recognizable musical voice; he also has encouraged some of the most significant contributions to twentieth century oboe literature. I could easily write another article about him.

But for now, I hope that this tribute to my teacher will inspire those who choose to pursue the oboe, and will serve to acknowledge to him my deep appreciation for his efforts.

Because of him, I will try to retain my dream, and all that it suggests, for as long as I play music on the oboe, and I am grateful for having had a teacher who gave me a sense of the limitless wonder of music and its beautiful, unanswerable questions in addition to all the answers that have served me so well. ❖