**OBOE WOES - CHALLENGES FACING THE OBOIST**

by Andrea Newhouse Fedele I wouldn't be surprised to find someday in a dictionary under the word 'tight' a phrase such as "the state of the oboist" or "the state of most anatomical parts of the oboist". The challenges facing the oboist are considerable and the tendency to face these with painful tension is a common problem. As an oboist and an Alexander Technique teacher, this concerns me directly. My doctoral dissertation was written on the possible use of the Alexander Technique as a basis for oboe playing and teaching. In preparation I conducted a survey of oboe teachers in the United States and did many interviews with oboists who have had Alexander lessons and with other Alexander teachers who are oboists as well. There were three intentions behind the survey: to find out how oboists think about certain aspects of oboe playing such as "posture", the hands and arms, embouchure and the jaw, breathing and support, articulation, and practicing; to learn what percentage of oboists experience pain or discomfort while playing, where the pain occurs, and what might be causing it; to find out how familiar oboists were with the Alexander Technique and whether they thought lessons in the Technique may or may not be useful in addressing various aspects of oboe playing. To make a long story short, 71% of the oboists who returned their surveys experience pain or discomfort while playing and 58% of responses specified arm or hand pain, usually on the right side. Most oboists answers also seemed to indicate that their arm or hand discomfort was related to a form of misuse. Additionally, most of those surveyed had heard of the Alexander Technique and thought it could be helpful to the oboist.

As Alexander teachers, we would approach teaching an oboist the same way we would teach anyone else, beginning with the general use of oneself, since one's general habits have an affect for good or bad on every single aspect of oboe playing. However, the Alexander teacher may also appreciate information regarding some of the peculiar challenges and requirements facing the oboist. This may provide some familiarity with where oboists are coming from and some of the thought processes that are behind some of the really weird things that we do with ourselves.

The sound of the oboe is produced by blowing air through the reed and causing it to vibrate. The oval- shaped opening of the reed is extremely small, about 7-8 mm wide and 1 mm high in the center. This small opening has had a couple of results that are unique to oboe playing. First, the amount of air going through the reed is very limited and therefore the oboist can play for an unusually long time on one breath. Many composers have taken advantage of this unique fact and written very, very long phrases (30 - 60 seconds is common) for the oboist that she is expected to complete without any break in the phrase. Second, unlike other wind players, the oboist is never able to empty her lungs of air by playing; the air in the lungs becomes "dead" before it is anywhere near being expelled. When coming to a rest in the music, no matter how short, she therefore needs to first exhale the dead air before inhaling in order to continue playing. Third, the structure and small opening of the reed results in a fairly strong resistance that the oboist must neutralize with air pressure in order to play. Oboists will create air pressure in any way possible, usually squeezing with the abdominal muscles or chest and probably many other places.

The weight of the oboe, which is not more than two pounds, is supported entirely by the right thumb. The thumb rest is located about halfway down the back of the oboe and rests at the base of the right thumbnail. The left hand is placed above the right hand on the oboe and the fingers of the left hand provide a counterbalance that keeps the oboe from tilting forward. At all times there is at least one finger of the left hand pressing a key and providing that counterbalance to the right thumb. The right side is, however, supporting the entire weight of the oboe. A neck strap can take part of the weight of the oboe and a support system called "Phred" takes the full weight of the oboe but can only be used if the oboist is sitting. A strong reluctance to use these tools is still very common among oboists and the supports are usually only considered after the oboist begins to hurt.

The shape of the hands as they dangle by one's side is similar to the shape the hands can have when placed on the oboe, with the fingers spread more apart. The oboist can explore the half dozen thumb rests that



exist in order to find the one that does the best job of encouraging a lengthening and free hand for her. The keys can be pressed with a very light, lengthening touch, as long as the oboe is mechanically sound. The temptation, however, is to squeeze the oboe, pull the fingers back toward the hand like a claw, pull the hand back toward the wrist, pull the arms and oboe in toward the body, collapse and squeeze the chest, poke the head out to meet the reed, then blow really hard against all the resulting tension by gripping with the abdominal muscles and squeezing the torso. Needless to say, the Alexander teacher has a lot to offer to the oboist here! Additionally, the oboist is required to play for hours in this relatively fixed position, so another challenge for the oboist is to find ways to avoid being fixed and to free up as much as possible.

Endurance can be a challenge for the oboist, as for any musician. Knowing how to release quickly the higher level of muscle tone that is required for playing oboe and to return to a state of minimal tension for a moment allows the oboist to maximize the benefits of even the shortest rests in playing and increase her endurance. The idea of having a "neutral" to return to was mentioned in my interview with Jim Mitchell, an oboist in Chicago studying the Alexander Technique with John Henes, who said he takes every possible chance to "back up, let go".

When the oboist is in the process of trying to eliminate some of her habitual, excess tension, she may feel she has lost some "air support." The idea of breath "support" is a confusing idea, and difficult to pinpoint. It is difficult to identify "support" because it is a concept rather than a concrete physical reality. Oboists are always told to "use more support" or "support the air", and everyone agrees that support is necessary, but identifying what this means is challenging. Comments about breath support in the responses to my survey varied greatly. There was some confusion about the diaphragm and the need to "use" it or to "support from the diaphragm." Some oboists maintain that support is simply the inward and upward push of the abdominal muscles, but one is able to do or overdo this push and get an unsupported sound. Others oboists in the survey talked about air pressure, speed, focus, or direction in reference to support. It seems "support" has something to do with all of these ideas together, and that the lack of a sufficient amount or efficient use of any of them - pressure, speed, focus, direction, or involvement of the abdominal muscles - can result in an "unsupported" sound. When all of these are in balance, a feeling of "support" results, which seems to imply that support is an effect of playing well. An interesting definition of "support" is proposed by Michael McCallion: "To put it simply, it is the refusal to collapse."(1)

The "embouchure" is the arrangement of the lips, tongue and teeth while playing a wind instrument. The typical shape of the "American school" oboist's embouchure is similar to the shape one has when whistling, with the lips a little more rolled into the mouth. Articulation, or "tonguing," is the action of briefly touching the tongue to the reed to interrupt the vibration of the reed and can be simulated by saying "tee, tee, tee," or "dee, dee, dee." In response to my survey, the most doubt was expressed by oboists concerning the relationship between "posture" and the embouchure, jaw, and articulation. Likewise, of all the possibilities listed of areas in which the Alexander Technique may be able to benefit the oboist, more people expressed doubt regarding the helpfulness of the Technique to the embouchure, jaw, and articulation, than to any other aspects of oboe playing. Those with more experience of the Technique were clear that there is a connection. For the oboist, the embouchure or jaw often ends up either compensating for a breathing mechanism that isn't functioning optimally, fighting against other unnecessary tensions the oboist is producing in herself, or fighting against an inadequate reed. The reed should be balanced and tuned in such a way as to allow the oboist to play with a released jaw rather than requiring pressure to be applied to the reed by "biting" or closing the jaw in order to reduce the opening of the reed.

Regarding articulation, the student oboist is often taught to prepare for beginning to play by placing the tongue on the reed, setting the embouchure, building air pressure behind the reed, and then releasing the tongue from the reed to allow the air to vibrate the reed. Oboists in my survey were asked how they prepare to articulate in order to find out how prevalent this method was. More than half of the oboists described this method or something similar that indicated "getting set" or "holding" in preparation for the articulation. Most of the rest of the oboists seemed to be describing a method that indicated the tongue, embouchure and air are involved fairly

simultaneously, without "getting set" or "holding". The whispered "ah" applies nicely to the moment when the oboist begins to play, by asking her to begin playing when the resulting inhale turns back around to another exhale, rather than holding or getting set. For the more experienced oboist, knowing what is required in the music will determine an immediate and appropriate formation of embouchure and use of the tongue, air, and everything else. Many oboists clearly find the first method of "getting set" to play to be effective, however, and may be quite attached to that method, as was one oboist whom I interviewed. Alexander principles are therefore used by that oboist to be careful not to induce any undue tension while preparing to articulate in this way.

Oboists are probably almost as well known by the public for being hunched over whittling a piece of wood for hours on end as for giving the tuning "A" in an orchestra concert. Oboists have so much invested in reed- making and relying on their success at making reeds that they literally tie themselves up into knots in an effort to make the perfect reed, or at least a reed that is good enough. Oboists' bad habits related to making reeds are possibly even stronger than those related to playing the oboe and are probably considered by them to be relatively unimportant. However, the way the oboist uses herself while making and testing reeds could have an affect on how the reeds are balanced. Testing a reed while collapsed into a little ball is going to affect how the reed subjectively feels. Therefore resistance the oboist feels may not be resistance from the reed, but from herself. As Jim Mitchell said, "you could be making reeds that abet the tension." At the very least, the oboist may appreciate a way to be comfortable while making reeds rather than feeling strained and sore from making reeds. This would be particularly helpful for oboists who sell reeds and who therefore spend even more time making reeds than the average oboist does.

Like other musicians, an oboist is often very attached to the feeling of her mannerisms and her habitual tension. She equates the feeling of tension with expressiveness and feels that a loss of this tension would eliminate her individuality and ability to communicate the music. This is clearly not true; she is expressing the music despite the tension she is feeling, not because of it. If she rids herself of habitual misuse and the associated excessive and unbalanced tension, she will become freer to choose how she uses herself and therefore freer to express her individuality through the oboe and the music she is playing. When she does not have to attend to the difficulties of playing the oboe that arise from misuse, she can instead give her attention to playing the music, not the oboe. (1) Michael McCallion, The Voice Book (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), page 3. The Voice Book, and a great many other books, videos and DVD's relating to the Alexander technique - including several of special interest to instrumentalists and singers - can be found at The Alexander Technique Bookstore(USA and Canada) in Association with AMAZON.COM and AMAZON.CA and The Alexander Technique Bookshop (UK) in Asssociation with AMAZON.CO.UK \*\*\* Andrea Newhouse Fedele pursued her Bachelor of Music degree in oboe performance with Marion Arthur Kuszyk at the University of Missouri - Kansas City, graduating in 1995.She received her Master of Music degree in 1997 from Indiana University in Bloomington where she studied with Marc Lifschey, and began to study the Alexander Technique with Jeff Tessler.Andrea then went to Urbana, IL, to pursue both a Doctorate of Musical Arts (DMA) degree with Nancy Ambrose King, and an Alexander Technique teaching certificate.In 2000, Andrea completed the three-year training course at the Urbana Center for the Alexander Technique with teachers Joan and Alex Murray and became a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique.She graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2003 with a DMA degree after completing her thesis entitled, "The Alexander Technique: A Basis for Oboe Performance and Teaching." Andrea has played oboe and English horn in numerous orchestras, including the Indianapolis Symphony, the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, the Chicago Civic Orchestra, and the Kansas City Symphony. She has also participated in many music festivals such as the Banff Centre for the Arts, the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria, the National Orchestral Institute, and the Sarasota Music Festival. Andrea is currently teaching oboe at St. Cloud State University and the College of Saint Benedict/St. John’s

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