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TAKING NOTE OF A REMARKABLE OBOIST

By Daniel Webster, Inquirer Music Critic May 14, 1988 Publication: Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA) Page: D01 Word Count: 1203

Instrumental groups begin performance by tuning to the A played by the oboist. For the 750 people who will gather tomorrow afternoon at Alice Tully Hall in New York to honor oboist Robert Bloom on his 80th birthday, his A involved something more than exact pitch.

"Sometimes when we were playing a job," says Vincent Abbato, a clarinetist who has just retired from the Metropolitan Opera orchestra, "I'd hear Bob play that A, and I'd think: 'I won't hear anything more beautiful than that all day.' But, of course, I would, as soon as he played."

Bloom's name produces this kind of anecdotal awe. His colleagues call him seminal in the development of an American school of oboe playing, both as a player for nearly six decades and as a teacher for almost as long. The weight of his influence is all the more intriguing, these colleagues say, because he had permanent orchestral positions for only 12 of those 58 years. He was the archetypal New York free-lance player.

"You've heard him many times without knowing it," says Richard Woodhams, the Philadelphia Orchestra's solo oboist, who studied briefly with Bloom before Woodhams came to Curtis Institute. "He was the oboist on all those records made by the Columbia Symphony, the RCA Symphony, Leopold Stokowski's orchestra. When Bruno Walter, Fritz Reiner or Stokowski

recorded, Bloom was their oboist."

Bloom returns to Curtis each year to coach student ensembles. He lives in Cincinnati, where he and his wife teach at the University of Cincinnati

Conservatory. At his last session here, he sat in the Tabuteau Room at Curtis and looked back over the 60 years that separated his student days from this coaching session. He had worked with Marcel Tabuteau in this room - and others - and his memory was not clouded by sentiment.

Tabuteau, a French-born solo oboist with the Philadelphia Orchestra until 1953, was a great player, Bloom agreed. "Very precise, very balanced. But you know, I don't think his playing would be accepted now. You see, he never soared. The notes were there, the sound was exactly what he wanted, but his playing never went beyond that; it never soared."

In that appraisal, Bloom was unconsciously describing the quality that has made his own playing the touchstone for two generations of musicians. Says clarinetist Abbato: "He is the Stradivarius of the oboe, the king of them all, because of that musical mind. He never played a note in his life; it was always music."

The oboe is daunting to master, and Bloom may hold a record for the least elapsed time between starting to play and entering the top of the field. Born in Pittsburgh, he played cello, violin and piano and decided he wanted to be a saxophone player, hoping to play in the Grand Theater's orchestra. An older brother, a violinist, vetoed the sax but recommended the oboe. Bloom tried a used instrument, liked it and auditioned for Curtis Institute after only a couple of months. He played for Tabuteau.

"Tabuteau had me try some scales, and then he said, 'I think it will take you about three years.'

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Tabuteau's judgment was right. At the end of three years, Bloom had an offer from the Cleveland Orchestra. "I was going with a harpist then," he recalls, "and her teacher at Curtis, Carlos Salzedo, went to Stokowski to urge him to hire me for the Philadelphia Orchestra. Stokowski called me in and told me: 'Young man, it's easier to walk to the Academy of Music than it is to go to Cleveland.' And he signed me to a contract before he ever asked to hear me play."

Stokowski, however, asked Bloom to play English horn, the alto oboe whose melancholy voice typifies the anguish of Tristan and Isolde.

The three-year wonder became one of the orchestra's advertisements. Recalls Julius Baker, the flutist now retired from the New York Philharmonic: "When I

went to Curtis a few years after Bob, the students all had favorites in the (Philadelphia) Orchestra. But everybody said, 'Wait until you hear that English-horn player.' They were right."

Bloom says he would have been happy to stay on, but "I began to get a little tired of Franck, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky. Jose Iturbi was conducting in Philadelphia, and he asked me if I had ever thought about being a first oboist. 'Every day,' I told him, and he hired me to play in the Rochester Philharmonic in 1936.

"I had hardly started in Rochester when we all heard that Toscanini was forming the NBC Symphony. Toscanini's management invited me to be solo oboe, but I guess I would not have gone if Iturbi hadn't told me I'd be a damned fool not to go."

Bloom vaulted over an established field of players, as he had at Curtis, to take the premier orchestral position in America. In six seasons, he was heard by national audiences in broadcasts. Unfortunately, however, his tenure with Toscanini did not come when the orchestra was recording as busily as it was to do later. Many Toscanini recordings feature an Italian oboist whom, most listeners say now, only Toscanini could have admired.

Bloom's restless nature led him to step from the NBC Symphony to the free-lance world. There, he was solo oboist in the Columbia Symphony, the Red Seal Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski's orchestra, the Bell Telephone Hour orchestra, orchestras recording with Igor Stravinsky and virtually every other recording orchestra. And when William Scheide founded the Bach Aria Group in 1946, Bloom was the obvious choice to play the cantatas and chamber music in which it specialized. The association lasted until 1980.

Of Bloom's playing, Woodhams says: "He was the first American to combine the deep quality of the oboe with a real singing style. It is part of him; he's a humanistic guy. I used to like watching him play. He rarely moved, you know, and he practiced to make it look easy. And he always had a very live, warm tone. His playing was refined, but never bland, combining energy and control."

Woodhams has a list of favorite recordings with the anonymous Bloom playing the oboe solos. "If you have heard Milhaud's *La Creation du Monde* with Baker and Benny Goodman, you have heard a great performance. But I treasure the *Afternoon of a Faun* he made with Stokowski and Baker, Sibelius' *Swan of Tuonela*, in which he plays English horn, and that terrifically anachronistic *Water Music* he made with Stokowski."

Woodhams has made videotapes of Bloom's teaching sessions at Curtis, but he said nothing had

told him as much about Bloom as a dinner they had together a couple of years ago at Woodhams' house.

"We had a couple of drinks before, and had wine with dinner, and all at once Bob said he wanted to see my studio. I took him in and he saw an oboe lying there, and he said, 'I want to play.' He hadn't played the oboe for a few years, but he picked it, and picked up a reed that was just lying there. He didn't even soak it; he just put it in the oboe and played. There was all the sound, the music and the passion that I remembered. That was his way: He had always heard that distinctive oboe sound - and then made it happen."

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