

## Travels Without My Oboe

by Aaron "Dodo" Knacks, as told to Jud Barry

When the purpose of one's life is to spend somewhere between a half-hour and an hour a day playing the oboe, no more and no less, there are a number of obstacles that somehow must be gotten around.

1. REHEARSALS: These are major time-wasters. Why should you sit there and suffer while the strings, yet again, scratch and claw their way through a briar-patch of notes that, come concert time, will be all the thicker for the fact that everybody's dressed like tar babies? The best thing to do is to link up with musical entities, like churches, that can't afford to pay for rehearsal time. Besides, churches are used to doing things on a wing and a prayer.

2. PERFORMANCES: You have to decide--are you an oboist, or a pyramid-building slave extra in a Hollywood extravaganza? Best steer clear of symphony orchestras, unless your idea of fun is counting "one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve, two-two-three-four," etc., for twenty-one bars at a tempo of approximately the pace of a sated snail.

3. REEDMAKING: One of the supposed shibboleths of oboedom is that all oboists make their own reeds. But then you read, in this periodical and elsewhere, that great players like Gillet, Goossens, and Bloom routinely used reeds made by others. You also notice all those ads from people who make reeds for sale, presumably to such players as Gillet, Goossens, and Bloom. So you start thinking, "If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me," and then discover that the right supplier can get you dependable reeds, thus freeing up what used to be hours of reedmaking time for activities with a more dependable return, such as gambling.

4. TEACHING: The key here is to set explicit practice requirements of any potential students. Be fair, but firm. It will make best use of your time--and will be good for the student--if you require them to get in no less than twelve hours of tape-recorded practice per day, with a weekly note from their parents that they (the parents) have listened to the tapes and can vouch for the fulfillment of the practice requirement. Then, once a year, you give that student a lesson. Why waste time with slackers?

5. INCOME FROM OBOE PLAYING: It should be obvious at this point that, in order to spend between a half hour and an hour a day playing the oboe, you should expect an annual income from oboe playing equal to that of a street waif in Calcutta. You will most likely need to find supplemental income in order to support a family of four--you, your dog, and two cats. Even moreso if you expect to foist upon society another generation of eternally-enrolled, nongraduating liberal arts collegians much like yourself.

For that reason you will most likely need to get a Job. For those young people and full-time professional oboists out there who have never had a Job, it is best described in the book of the Bible by the same name. Obviously an allegory, a man named Job (the name being an interesting example of a Hebrew-English cognate that left Palestine during the Diaspora, set up shop in Byzantium for a while, relocated to a shtetl, and finally made its way to the U.S. where it settled in Baltimore) is visited by a number of misfortunes in spite of the fact that he has never in his life played the oboe. Most of the misfortunes have to do with an egregious lack of fringe benefits, such as the lack of insurance to cover crop failure and dead livestock, the lack of life insurance, lack of health insurance, no paid sick leave, and no employer contribution for counseling necessitated by angst-inducing economic and meteorological uncertainty. There's lots of arguing about what the boss wants, and the boss not only doesn't bother to clarify matters, he's shown as being in cahoots with the competition just to stir up the workers. But worst of all, there are no 15-minute oboe breaks.

(Some people have said that life is a Job, but I would hate to labor under a blighted conception of existence that doesn't allow for oboe breaks.)

Things have changed since Biblical times. We now have full-time Jobs and part-time Jobs. Typically the major difference between the two is that the latter are held by Biblical Fundamentalists who believe that fringe benefits are ungodly.

Another important difference is that full-time Jobs sometimes necessitate out-of-town travel. The reason for this kind of travel is unclear. It purportedly allows for the exchange and acquisition of important professional information among people in the same types of Jobs from different parts of the world, important professional information such as "The draft beer in this overpriced hotel here tastes like

mopwater." Experience has shown, however, that every bit as much unimportant, nonprofessional information is exchanged, such as "The mopwater in this overpriced hotel here tastes like draft beer."

Whatever the case, out-of-town travel poses a real problem to the hour-a-day oboist. It is always possible to take the oboe and practice in the hotel room, but this leaves you open to the following difficulties:

a. The cleaning staff fall in love with the exotic sound and throw themselves upon you bodily. This might not be so bad except that it cuts into your practice time, violates the Geneva "Do Not Disturb" Convention, and irretrievably damages your amour-propre when it turns out that you've been mistaken for Kenny G.

b. You're practicing, because you happen to like it, the first oboe part to Dvorak's Serenade for winds (mostly), op. no. 22, when there's a knock at your door (again, either a violation of convention or an indication of illiteracy), which you answer. A severe-looking fellow of conductorly mien (or should that be a mean-looking fellow of conductorly severity?) hovers hawklike in the doorway, introduces himself as Maestro Piuicelli, and informs you icily that your dotted rhythms are too tight. You inform the maestro that your dotted rhythms come from Berlin where they like them that way, and that he can go eat *funghi con moto*. You slam the door as politely as you can.

Then, later, an ensuing knock shatters the tranquility of your practice session. It turns out to be a uniformed delegation from the Moravian Anti-Defamation League, who have been apparently summoned by Piuicelli. They seize you and drag you to the local Brethren lovefeast, where you wind up playing *cantus firmus* for two solid hours of congregational singing. "And nothing more!" you are warned, "Or we exile you to Bohemia!"

c. You're practicing the tarantella from Tchaikovsky's "Capriccio Italien" when you hear what sounds like an echo. Then you realize that it's someone mocking you with wrong notes and sloppy articulation. You switch to the shepherd's dance from "Amahl and the Night Visitors" and what you play is played back to you, transposed up a half step, with "shave and a haircut" added as a musical raspberry. You fling open your door and race up and down corridors on all floors in a feverish attempt at finding your tormentor. Frenzied, you ask at the desk for the room of the other oboist. They look at you like you're crazy and have you taken away in a straitjacket. It turns out that your personality has acquired a roommate named Bugs Bunny.

As you can see, taking your oboe with you for Job-related out-of-town travel is a risky proposal. About the only advantage might be, provided that you have over-insured a cheap oboe, that your instrument would be stolen. To be sure you get the proper amount of excess replacement value, however, be sure to carve "Lorée" into the bell, as this word has talismanic power in the netherworld of insurance agents.

What then can you do, when faced with the prospect of sacrificing your embouchure, due to out-of-town travel, on the altar of Job performance?

Well, here's an idea that almost worked for me that might work for you. Go to the local dump and find a cast-off bassoon bocal (they're in the same aisle as disposable diapers. Don't ask me why.). Then find a reed you don't like so well and put it on the end of bocal--it'll just fit. Using your best, rounded embouchure, blow into the reed. The bocal provides some length, enough for you to hold in one hand, so it feels like an instrument.

Soft, elusive, and best heard in dark hiding places, the tone quality of the "practice obocal" might be said to occupy a position in the audiothèque of tones that is analogous to the position in the animal kingdom of the roach. Cupping your hand around the end of the obocal, you can even attain one or two lower pitches, which is very exciting if your favorite composer is the turtledove. The very limitations, however, force you to focus on embouchure and on getting the most out of the reed, undistracted by the come-hitherness of music. You can practice breath support, tonguing speed, long tones, dynamics, circular breathing, etc. I hesitate to bring this up, lest too many people trade in their oboes for practice obocals, but you can do all this even while you're watching TV.

I am convinced that this is the way for the short-time oboist to practice while on the road for a Job. However, I would be remiss if I didn't explain why earlier I said it was a method that "almost" worked for me.

If you drive out-of-town, no sweat. Heck, you could almost practice while you drive. If you fly, however, beware!

This is what will happen if you pack your obocal with your carry-on luggage: You will put your carry-on luggage on the conveyor belt, its insides will be scanned, and the security personnel will see an odd-shaped tube on the inside. You will be asked to open the bag, from which will be extracted the bassoon bocal. Security personnel will regard this bent tube with some suspicion; they will try to fit it into the universe of airport criminology, and many bells will be going off in their brains. They will peer up into it. They will sniff it, first at the large end, then at the small end. After a while, with the alarm bells in their heads still tintinnabulating wildly, they will ask you what it is.

You will chuckle, a little nervously. The law's asininity, as observed by a character in Dickens, was an attribute of limited intelligence. Surely, however, that quality lies as much in its kick as in its stupidity. Put the two together, and let's go to the rodeo!

Anyway, by way of explanation, you will find the oboe reed and mumble something about using the two to practice a musical instrument.

Suspicion will deepen. One of the security personnel, it will turn out, will have taken music appreciation in college without falling asleep in class. As you marvel at this wonder, he will question you with narrowed eyes how it is that you happen to have a bassoon bocal and an oboe reed. And where is your instrument? Or instruments?

Then, suddenly, you will realize the enormity of your crime. It is little short of mad-science bestiality, this marriage of oboe reed and bassoon tube. It is a miscegenation, a ghastly mutation that is beyond the imagination of the man of virtue and goodwill. It all went wrong for Frankenstein, so why not for you?

The security personnel, of course, will not think of any of those things. They will stick with what they understand and will try to discern the aroma of marijuana or Havana cigar or gunpowder in and around the orifices of the bassoon bocal. But you will sink not only beneath their presumption of your guilt, but also beneath your own resolute, unswerving conviction of it. And you will lose all hope.

There is an answer, though. Pack the obocal with the baggage that you entrust to the airline--you'll see it again someday. Save the existential dread for a more deserving time, like your next bout of counting twenty-one measures' rest in a sluggish twelve-eight.