

# CLASS Quarterly Meeting Feature Presentation

October 21, 2004

The Clear Lake Area Symphony Society (CLASS) held its third quarterly meeting on October 21, 2004 at Forshey Piano Company located on Clear Lake City Blvd. at 7:00 pm.

The feature presentation was by **Beth Watson, Principal Oboist**, for the Clear Lake Symphony. Beth went into detailed discussion of how reeds for the oboes are made to deliver the right pitch for the oboe. Beth said she made her reeds from cane imported from France. Equipment to manufacture reeds can be quite expensive as Beth noted. The pitch the reeds made can vary with humidity. She noted that when performing in a symphony that a cold front came through which lowered humidity in the air and changed the pitch of the reed as she was playing. She generally soaks her reeds in water prior to a concert to maintain moisture in the reed to produce an even pitch. She performed with several types of oboes to demonstrate the type of musical notes each could produce.

## History of the Oboe



The oboe was the first woodwind instrument to be included in the orchestras of the 17th century. It has a distinct nasal voice that is the highest pitched of the three double-reed instruments in the orchestra. The name oboe comes from the French *hautbois*, meaning "strong," "high," or "loud".

Compared to woodwind instruments such as the flute or the clarinet, the oboe is very difficult to play and produce a good sound on. Amateur players often produce an unpleasant, out-of-tune strident tone that blends badly with other instruments. It was the main melody instrument in military bands before it was ousted by the clarinet.

Because the oboe has a very penetrating tone which can be heard through other sounds on the concert platform, it is widely called upon to set the pitch for orchestras, usually by playing concert A (now days 440Hz in most orchestras). Careful manipulation of pressure on the reed allows the player to express a huge range of emotions and moods.

The chief factor in playing the oboe is the making of the reed and its control by the lips and mouth. Most serious players make their own reeds, although ready-made reeds can be purchased. The raw material for the device is the plant *Arundo donax*, which resembles bamboo in appearance. It grows in warm temperate or subtropical regions, but only the crops of the southern French departements of Var and Vaucluse are satisfactory for reed making. The finest cane is grown in the Var region of France. Some reed makers are Vandoren, La Voz, Rico, Hemke, and many more.

The oboe first appeared in French courts around 1650. In the 17th century Jean Hotteterre and Michel Danican Philidor modified the shawm, so that the new oboe had a narrower bore and reed, which is held by the player's lips near the end. There are several types of reeds: double reeds used on the bassoon, oboe, bagpipes, and some organs and single reeds used on the clarinet and saxophone.

Henry Purcell Henry Purcell (c1659 - November 21, 1695) was an English Baroque music composer. He is considered to be one of England's greatest composers. He was the first composer to specifically score for the oboe.

The oboe is most commonly made from grenadilla (or African blackwood). The oboe has an extremely narrow conical bore, and double reed mouthpiece consisting of two thin blades of cane tied together on a small-diameter metal tube. This setup leads to overblowing at the octave (compared to the clarinet, which overblows a twelfth). [Note: Overblowing is producing a different note in a wind instrument by forcing air harder. This can be a deliberate technique to get additional notes, or an inadvertent problem which results in notes other than those intended.]

The commonly accepted range for the oboe extends from B $\flat$ 3 to A6, nearly three octaves. Together with the flute/recorder it is one of the oldest woodwind. A woodwind instrument is a musical instrument in which sound is produced by blowing through a mouthpiece against an edge or by a vibrating reed, and in which the pitch is varied by opening or closing holes in the body of the instrument. Woodwind instruments were originally made of wood, as the word woodwind implies.

The oboe has several sibling instruments. The most widely known today is the *cor anglais* (English Horn), which evolved from the Baroque *oboe da caccia*. Both are pitched a perfect fifth lower than the standard oboe. The oboe d'amore, also popular during the Baroque period, is pitched a minor third lower than the oboe. Johann Sebastian Bach used the oboe d'amore extensively. Even less common is the baritone or bass oboe, which sounds an octave lower than the regular oboe. Delius Delius and Holst both scored for it, but today it is almost a museum piece. Instead, the more powerful heckelphone is used.

### Biography

Beth Watson couldn't help but to become a musician. Her parents were avid classical music fans who raised their four daughters to enjoy and appreciate fine music. Beth began her music studies at the age of 6 with piano lessons. She played the violin and flute in elementary school but had a burning desire to play the oboe. Her parents, though fully supportive, made her wait a few years since the family did not really own an oboe. Her dream to play the oboe came true in the seventh grade, and she has never regretted her decision to beg her parents to buy her an oboe!

During high school in Atlanta, GA, Beth studied oboe with Joseph Robinson, who is currently the principal oboist of the New York Philharmonic. She credits his influence for any nice sounds she might make.

Beth attended the University of Kentucky, where she received a full tuition grant to play in the University Orchestra. However, having observed the hard work of her sisters who majored in music in college, she chose to major in accounting, believing that it might be a steadier way of earning a living. After she graduated, she married Ben Watson and got an accounting job, relegating the oboe to a closet and very occasional use. For the next seventeen years or so, the oboe was in the background while Beth concentrated on raising two children and running the household. She started playing the oboe again seriously when her kids were starting to play in the school band.

Beth has played with the Clear Lake Symphony since 1996 and is active in the music program at South Main Baptist Church. She teaches several oboe students in her home and has recently begun teaching the hammered dulcimer as well.



Beth discusses how the sound of the oboe is made with the reed and shows some of the reeds she personally made.



Beth demonstrates with the help of one of her students the various musical sounds that can be produced on several types of oboes.

