
Interview with Charles Hamann – Principal oboe
National Arts Centre Orchestra
FOURTH STAGE
March 14, 2002

Please introduce yourself and tell us your position with NACO.

Hi my name is Charles Hamann and I play principal oboe with the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

Why and when did you start playing the oboe?

I started playing oboe the summer before grade five. I started playing because we had a music program in our public schools, which was a wonderful thing. The band program began in grade five and all the students were asked the year before if they were interested in playing. I had been thinking about it and my parents took me to a concert where an oboist was playing a concerto and I thought it was the most beautiful instrument. So, that's why I started to play the oboe.

Do you play any other instruments?

Yes. I play the piano very badly but I did study for nine years and that was my first instrument. I started playing piano when I was five. That gave me a musical background and some foundation for playing the more difficult oboe later on.

What is the most difficult thing about playing the oboe?

The oboe is not really that hard to play if you have a great reed. The problem is that you have to have a great reed and you have to make great reeds all the time if you want to be in a professional orchestra. Unless you have some magical person somewhere that can provide reeds for you, you have to make them yourself or you have to be able to fix the ones that you get. So that's the hardest thing about playing, it's keeping up with the reed making.

What do you enjoy most about it?

I think the most wonderful thing about playing the oboe is getting to play the wonderful orchestral literature that we get to play. The great composers wrote many beautiful oboe solos and orchestral works; symphonies and concertos... They are a real thrill to play in the context of an orchestra because you get to play solos, you can be a team player, sometimes you accompany, sometimes you play in harmony with all the other wind instruments and there are a lot of

different roles that we have. It's fun to play solos and the solos that we get to play in the orchestra are some of the best in all the musical literature.

What are your habits – things you always or never do – before a performance?

I like to stretch before a performance. Just like an athlete would stretch before any kind of running race or athletic event. I like to stretch my arms, chest, shoulders, upper body, and my back because I use my back muscles a lot to play the oboe. They support my body and direct my air through the instrument. This is why I like to get all of these muscles working. I also like to do some breathing warm-ups. I learned a trick from some trumpet players. They like to buzz their lips and blow out slowly. I do this before a performance or when I have a rehearsal. I think it helps relax the face and get my breathing going. It's kind of fun and it looks like this...

[Charles buzz's his lips on the video]

What I'm doing is kind of humming while I'm buzzing my lips. With this you can do different things. You can do scales or hum different pitches. This exercise forces you to produce a constant air stream which is something we all need to play wind instruments. I found it to be a good technique so, thanks to the trumpet players for that one!

Is it stressful being a professional musician – performing, travelling, touring? If so, how do you cope?

Sometimes it can be stressful to be a professional musician. You're under pressure to perform. You're expected to deliver the goods. So yes, sometimes it can be stressful. For me the best way to avoid stress is to be very well prepared and I think that's probably true for most things in life. If you're prepared then you'll have more confidence to do things.

I think some other ways to deal with the pressures of a difficult job can include exercise and stretching, like I said before. Just finding a way to relax and get away from whatever it is that's stressing you out. I like to take walks. I like to stretch. I like to work in my garden. I like to cook, go shopping, and work out. I do all sorts of different things.

Being prepared is really important. If I have a really difficult solo to play or something that makes me a little more nervous than normal then I like to eat a banana right before I play. Bananas contain potassium, which is a natural calming agent that your body responds to by relaxing. If I am really nervous then

I'll eat three or four bananas! It's one way that you can calm your nerves if you're nervous before a performance.

How many reeds do you go through in a week? What do you do to prepare your reed?

The reed is the aspect of the oboe that makes it difficult because the reed is hard to make. It takes a lot of years to learn how to make your own reeds. It's a good idea to start making them as early as you can. Also, try to find a really great player to study with who makes their own reeds and can show you how to do that. I make my own reeds from scratch. I buy cane in the form of tubes. They look like bamboo, if you've ever seen bamboo furniture, it looks like that. The cane has to be processed in many different ways. You have to cut it, split it and gouge it, plane it and shape it and scrape it and do all sorts of things until it ends up looking as it should.

[Charles holds up his reed on the video]

Even after I have made my reeds they can change with the weather. They also change when you play on them. The reed I use during a rehearsal might feel totally different the next time I pick it up. If I have to play a reed for a morning rehearsal that same reed might not work for the concert so I always have to have several different reeds in process: some that are brand new, some that feel good and are in the middle of their life span. I always have to have my raw materials ready so that I can make a reed on any given day because they can and do change.

Do you get nervous before a performance?

Yes, I get nervous before a performance. I think every musician gets nervous before performances. Even if they say they don't I think they are lying. Maybe Pinchas Zukerman doesn't get nervous but I sure do and the reason is because you're excited. You want the show to be good. You want to live up to the audience's expectations. You want to live up to the expectations of the composer. Hopefully the composer is somewhere there, maybe on the other side, listening to it and hoping that it'll sound like he or she wants it to sound. So, yeah, professionals do get nervous.

Do you recall your favourite or best concert?

What's my favourite concert or my best concert? That's a difficult question to answer because I think that as a musician you're always trying to play better and better. You're always trying to make the next concert better than the last concert you played. Sure there are some memorable concerts, some of the concerts that

we have played on tour, or a concert where a solo went particularly well, but, I think the best concert is the concert I just played. Usually it is. I think that the next one hopefully will be better than the last one so I guess I prefer to think of it that way.

Do you have any horror stories of performances?

Horror stories of performances! Yes, sometime things do go horribly, horribly wrong. Not very often but they do sometimes. One thing that can happen to any wind player is that water can condense inside the tone hole. What happens when you get water inside a tone hole is that the note makes a gurgling sound. Instead of having a note come out beautifully and clearly it sort of gurgles and sounds ugly. This can happen in the middle of a beautiful solo and it often does happen.

The best way to deal with this if you ever have this happen is to very discreetly blow the water out of the tone hole while no one else is playing. Wait until it is an opportune time, like between movements or when it's really loud and everyone is playing fortissimo. That is when you can sometimes do this and not be noticed. Do not do it during someone else's solo. It's very rude. If you just blow sideways across the tone hole you will direct water back down inside of the oboe where it is supposed to go. That has happened to me many times. Sometimes when I have been playing solos and concertos in front of the orchestra. I just explain to people that I am having some plumbing problems and to please bear with me.

Another thing that sometimes happens is getting a swab stuck in your oboe. The best thing to do is stop pulling it through the oboe. You should always try to remove the swab from the other end and the best way to do this is to have a piece of string attached to the other end of your swab so that you can pull it out if it accidentally gets stuck.

One time I got a swab stuck in my oboe five minutes before a recording session. I was in a panic and luckily Tim McGahey, who is our property master at the NAC, was a genius and figured out a way to remove that swab with a coat hanger that he bent. He was able to remove it by pulling it back out. I was able to play the recording session but I was pretty nervous so that was not so much fun.

If you ever get a swab stuck in your oboe don't keep pulling it through. I have a pull through swab and if you have one as well you should always make sure that there are no knots in the string any place or in the swab itself. When in doubt don't pull it all the way through. Just pull it part way through or take your oboe apart. What I have done to guarantee that I never have a stuck swab anymore is to cut off the bottom part so it's very narrow at the bottom. I'm always careful, every single time I use it, to make sure that there are no knots anywhere along the swab because those can get stuck. You can also tie another piece of string to

the other end of your swab so that in case anything should happen and your swab got stuck you would be able to pull it back out the same way it went in.

The other alternative is to use a feather to clean out your oboe. Some people advocate the use of feathers and they are good for dispersing the water but they don't remove it. Personally, I like using a swab because it helps to remove the water and reduce the risk of cracking a wooden oboe, which is always a concern.

Please demonstrate a good warm up exercise.

For warming up I recommend scales but I do something I call extended scales. I like to challenge myself in my warm ups. If you've ever been involved in a sport you know its always good to push yourself a little bit more when you're training. When you're running or swimming or training for an event it's always good to push yourself. Extended scales are a musical example of this. Instead of simply playing a scale of an octave up and down I like to extend it. I start with five notes of the scale and then play an octave and then two octaves and then play that two octave scale another time so that I'm challenging myself to play longer and longer without taking a breath.

I'll try to demonstrate what I do and I do this all over the oboe for all the major scales. If I have time I like to do it with the minor scales as well. I'm going to start on low C and like I explained I'm going to play five notes so I'll play C, D, E, F, G, F, E, D, C. Then I'll go up to octave C - to middle C - and back down to low C. And then up two octaves to high C and back down.

[Charles demonstrates these scales on his oboe on the video]

I like to do that with all of the major scales and I believe that it builds many things including control of your air; your wind. It builds finger technique, it builds smoothness of line. It can also build flexibility of your embouchure. It can build awareness of your tone quality and your pitch so it works on many different things at the same time. It's one of my favourite warm-ups and I like to try and do that every single day.

What are some practice tips you can suggest?

I have a couple of ideas that have helped me in practicing and I think I get better at practicing all the time. I think learning how to practice is one of the biggest challenges any musician faces. Everyone is busy and we want to get the most work done in the shortest time possible so that we can spend our time having fun playing and doing other things. One of the things I found really useful in practicing is to play whatever difficult passage I have at the tempo that its written

but just to play a small fragment at a time. Instead of playing everything fast or everything slow I play just a little snippet.

For example, I have a difficult solo to play in the concert tonight. It has some technical things and I have had to practice it. What I would do to master that difficult passage, instead of playing the whole thing is that I would play just a little bit of it while gradually adding a note until I finally have the whole passage.

[Charles demonstrates this technique on the video]

Other times I'll start from the end and work my way backward.

[Charles demonstrates this technique on the video]

In this way I am programming the right tempo, the right articulation, everything as it should be in the normal context but I'm simply taking a smaller portion of it at a time. Your brain can handle that smaller portion while sometimes if you try to play everything at once, it becomes overload and you can't do it.

Another technique that I think works well is to practice a difficult passage five times slowly and then one time fast. It's like you're ironing it in enough times at a slow tempo that when you do play it at a fast tempo you've programmed yourself to play it correctly.

Another thing I recommend, since a lot of people have problems with their fingering technique, is to know the importance of keeping your fingers curved at all times, if possible, with the exception of the pinky. Sometimes the pinky needs to be flat in order to reach certain keys. The fourth, third and second fingers should always be curved and they should stay close to home. They shouldn't go too far away from home base, which is over the tone hole. Often times I'll see people with their fingers so far away from the keys that when they have to come all the way back down their fingers don't land in the place that they should. This is particularly true of the little pinky on the left hand. It should stay near left hand F if you have a left-hand F on your oboe. Or if not, it should stay somewhere around the low B and B-flat key. It should stay around there and not wander too far. That'll help you facilitate the use of the little pinky with the use of those finger keys. The fourth finger of your left hand should also stay closer to the key.

The one exception to this is when I'm playing a legato passage. *Legato* describes a long, lyrical, sustaining passage. During these passages I sometimes use something I call sneaky fingers. Elaine Douvas who is a wonderful oboist and teacher likes to talk about sneaky fingers and I learned this from her. She talks about lifting your fingers in a very graceful way when you're playing a legato passage in order to make the line smoother. I'll see if I can demonstrate this...

[On video, Charles demonstrates this technique].

You can see my fingers coming up gracefully. Sometimes clarinet players do this as well. I think it's a nice technique. You don't want to slam your fingers down because that breaks the line and it destroys the legato quality that you're going for.

What can a student do to improve his or her tone?

If you play the oboe, one thing that people often complain about is that they can't play with a beautiful tone because they've got an awful reed. It is true that having a good reed can help you to play with a more beautiful tone but don't ever forget that your tone comes from you. It comes from the way you blow, from the way you hold your reed and from the way you put your own personal voice into what you're playing.

I like to try to build my tone every day when I warm-up and when I'm playing in the orchestra by doing things that build good habits. With whatever reed I have, even if it isn't my best reed since certain reeds are better than others, I still try to play with a beautiful tone. The best thing you can use for this is your own ear. Listen to yourself and imagine the most beautiful tone that you can in your head. Try to reproduce that sound. This is the very best thing that you can do. Following that, it's a good idea to do some kind of a long tone exercise as part of your practicing. Playing long tones means holding one given note over several counts - maybe eight counts - and then possibly changing to another note. In sustaining that one note, listen to it for quality of sound, beautiful tone, vibrato. Note all of these qualities so you can eliminate all of the other variables like technique problems and articulation problems. In this way you will focus more on getting a beautiful sound and using your wind to produce that sound. I really recommend that you incorporate some kind of a long tone exercise into your practicing. Usually the beginning of your routine is the best time.

I like to start in the low register of the oboe. It helps me to loosen up and get the feeling of the whole instrument ringing. One exercise that I do is a descending scale and I try to go very slowly, holding each note for about eight counts before I change notes. I start on G and play G, F, E, D, C - down to low C. I try to hold each note for about eight counts.

[On video, Charles demonstrates this technique].

I start very softly and I end very softly. Each note gets louder as I play through it. I think this is a good way to work on control of your attacks and your releases.

Again, just like the extended scales that I talked about, this exercise builds many things. The primary one being the quality of your tone.

Can you please play an excerpt from the upcoming Four Strong Winds YPC concert?

I'm going to play an excerpt from Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic poem *Scheherazade*, which is a tale of how a woman saved her own life by telling her slave keeper stories over the course of 1001 nights. In doing this she entertained him and dissuaded him from taking her life. Rimsky-Korsakov adapted this piece for orchestra with the intention of giving many different instruments in the orchestra chances to play solos. Perhaps the solos represent some of the many tales she told and the many variations in her storytelling.

I like the oboe solo in the second movement because I find it very evocative. It reflects the quality of the oboe very well. It is something that I would consider haunting, a little exotic sounding, full of emotion, very expressive. It's a very wonderful use of the oboe in the orchestral context.

This is the second movement solo from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*.

[Charles demonstrates this piece on video]