
Interview with Gerald Corey – Principal bassoon
National Arts Centre Orchestra
FOURTH STAGE
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Please introduce yourself and tell us your position with NACO.

Gerald Corey: I'm Gerald Corey and since 1972 I've been principal bassoon with the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

Please explain what your position entails.

GC: Playing principal bassoon in an orchestra with two or three players (sometimes we have a contrabassoon added but normally we have two bassoon players) means that I am responsible for making sure that my section sounds together and beautiful and that all of the parts are correct. Also, I work with all of the other woodwind section leaders in order to make our chorus of woodwind instruments sound as beautiful as we can.

Why and when did you start playing the bassoon?

GC: I was playing clarinet in my junior high school band and the band director, Paul Wagner in Plymouth, Michigan, bought a brand new bassoon at the end of the school year. He showed it to me and said, "If I take you to a professional bassoonist for your first lesson and a free reed will you be interested in practicing this instrument in the summer so that you can join the band in the fall?" That was the perfect way to introduce me to this instrument. I didn't have any mystery about it and by that fall I was playing it regularly. And ever since then I have enjoyed playing it.

Do you play any other instruments?

GC: I play another kind of bassoon called the French bassoon, which I studied in Paris in 1972 with Maurice Allard, one of the greatest bassoonists that ever lived. Michael Namer and I have used this bassoon for many years to play French music in the Arts Centre Orchestra. We go back and forth between the instruments very easily. We've practiced them a lot and we know how to play them. Each bassoon has a different kind of sound. The German bassoon is the more traditional one played in North America now.

I also play the recorder, which I've taught at the University of Ottawa Music department. I have played recorder on the stage of the Arts Centre for the opera *Rinaldo* by Handel. *Rinaldo* required three recorders on stage with costuming. In this show I still played bassoon in the pit and went back and forth between there and the stage. That was in 1980 and it was lots of fun.

I also play the contrabassoon, which is the lower bassoon and twice as big as this one. I also play a very deep oboe called the hecklephone, which is

sometimes required for chamber music. It has oboe fingerings but is played with a small bassoon reed.

When did you realize that you wanted to be a professional bassoon player?

GC: Probably when I was in high school. I attended the National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan. I had the chance to play with twenty other bassoonists and got to see where I stood as far as competitive nature was. Because I was playing principal in the National High School Orchestra that year and the next year it gave me enough motivation to want to carry that on into a career.

What is the most difficult thing about playing the bassoon?

GC: I would say that sometimes keeping up with all of the other woodwinds because of all the woodwind instruments in the modern orchestra the bassoon has one of the oldest methods of fingering. Some people are working to improve the fingering but we've gotten used to it and manage to keep up pretty well.

What do you enjoy most about it?

GC: I enjoy the fact that we have so many roles to play in the orchestra: to accompany the woodwind section, to play with strings in solo passages and to have absolute solo passages sometimes, and sometimes to play concertos as well.

You are highly involved with teaching. Can you please tell us about it?

GC: As a teacher I feel that I am responsible for carrying on the tradition of understanding and communicating the quality of what a performance by a professional orchestra is supposed to be. As teachers, we try to give university age and even with younger students the best chance to show that they have talent. We try to provide them with the best tools to show them that they can make their way into the world as a professional. But, we also try to softly discourage those that aren't likely of success so that they won't be very disappointed when they try out for auditions. It's getting harder and harder to find a good orchestra position because there are so few positions available and there are usually a hundred players or more that are trying out for the same position. So, it's only the very talented young ones that we teach that we try to move towards orchestras nowadays

How important is a good teacher to a young musician?

GC: For my instrument it's critical. It's very important because the bassoon, the oboe and the French horn are probably the least found instruments in high school bands and music programs. These instruments require a lot of individual attention to make sure that the players' posture, fingerings and the reed are just right for the creation of a beautiful sound.

What advice have you got for a beginner musician studying the bassoon?

GC: My biggest advice would be to listen to bassoon recordings and concerts with bassoons. Find players with the nicest tone quality and make those sounds their ideal to strive for. Also, find a professional teacher if you are serious about the instrument.

Please provide some advice for practicing.

GC: To practice music when you begin the instrument, you practice everything. You practice scales, etudes and solo passages. You take in all the literature that you can find. As you become a professional and more seasoned you look at the pieces that are coming up and you decide which are the most challenging passages. You look at those intellectually first to figure out how they are going to feel and then you practice them. As for daily practice you always try to practice a little each day to work at improving your sound and improving the quality of your technical perfection so that you don't go downhill in any way. That is how you keep up your standard.

What is something that a lot of young players have difficulties with? Any advice for correcting it?

GC: One of the most common problems of both young and more experienced players is that they try to play notes in the middle register of the bassoon without using the vent keys, which are traditional to use on the current instrument. Register keys are used to open a little tone hole so that the note that we want to achieve in the middle range doesn't jump into the lower octave.

Many students don't know about "venting", especially if they are in a school without a professional bassoonist teaching them. I would like to tell these students that the notes A, B flat, B-natural, C and D in the tenor range of the bassoon all need to be vented.

This technique can be easily achieved. When we play a lower note and go to one of those vented notes we use a four-step procedure:

First, we play the low note with our octave key on.

Next, we continue playing this note but do so with the octave key off.

Thirdly, we move the thumb to the vent key. When we want to play the second note we press the vent key just momentarily at the start of that note.

It gets quickly released and that is the fourth step in the process.

If the music is ascending then we release the thumb going upwards. If the music is descending for the next note then we release the note going downwards.

This technique is psychologically a big aid to the music making process.

[On video, Mr. Corey demonstrates the venting technique from low “A” to high “A”]

That is the smoothest way to make those notes speak very, very cleanly at their beginning.

Please demonstrate some Do’s and Don’t’s (or poor and improved) examples for:

Embouchure

GC: For embouchure, most young players tend to hold on to the reed too strongly with their lips if they’re not given good instruction. What this does is quiet down the tone of the bassoon and you can’t get a full, natural resonant tone of the instrument. I’ll give you an example of that where the lips are a little bit too tight on the reed.

[On video, Gerald demonstrates]

You’ll hear lots of bassoonists practicing like that and I even had an experience with this in Israel when the orchestra was there two years ago. I gave one lesson to an adult woman bassoonist who came from the United States and was living in Jerusalem. When she heard me play the full range of notes and she was playing like this I explained how she could do it holding the same general embouchure for everything from low F to high C. That’s two and a half octaves without changing that embouchure. She tried this and for the rest of that lesson she played with a much better sound. So, a proper embouchure is something that we call a flexible embouchure and it starts with the reed going in the mouth. The bassoon is played with a double reed.

Achieving this embouchure can be broken down to a four-step procedure. The double reed that we use is placed with the lower blade on our lower lip, just at the front of the tip. Next, we put the upper lip at a comfortable position and we don’t have to reach far forward at all. That’s the second step. Next we close the air gap by bringing our lips together so that the reed doesn’t leak around the open sides of our lips. That’s the third step. For the fourth step we try to push the reed with the instrument in to the mouth a little bit. We make our lips fight that push so that they actually loose the fight and start to curl under just a little bit. That forms a perfect embouchure for the whole range of the bassoon.

[On video, Gerald counts the steps and demonstrates]

Tone Production

GC: What you want to do when you want to improve your tone quality is to remember that the tongue is a valve and the instrument sounds with the air we put through the reed and the instrument. Many players think too much of the tongue as a very important item but all it does is articulate the moment we start a note and the moment sometimes when we end a note. It's the air that does the job.

The column of air inside the instrument must be supported for the length of the instrument that we are using for a given note. After we have been playing the instrument for a few years we know just what part of the instrument is excited by that note. So we put just the right amount of support for the note on the column of air. That produces the most beautiful sound possible. Also by practicing several hours a week perhaps two hours a day as a usual minimum you will develop a tone quality by practicing that will be much better on a day to day basis.

Fingering

GC: For fingering, I like to show my students you can play with a very professional *legato* by playing a group of notes by moving the finger or the thumb that will go towards the next note in advance so that you are actually touching the key that you are going to play. When it's time to play that note you merely have to press that key and not grab it and push it. This kind of practice, especially when you do it with a chromatic scale where each note is a half step higher than the last one will make you realize that you can play a homogenous sound all the way up the instrument. It is a really very excellent way to learn fingering.

Another good point to make about fingering is that many players tend to move their fingers too far away from the instrument but if you can remember to stay within about half an inch to three quarters of an inch away from the keys or the holes that you're using, you'll be able to play fast notes with very great confidence.

Practicing

GC: Ideas for practicing. Many students feel that practicing is boring and that scales are boring. But scales can be played very musically with a goal in mind. If you play a scale just mechanically it's not very much fun.

[On video, Gerald demonstrates a scale]

But if you get the idea that you want to get a little louder at the top and a little softer at the bottom, emulating the kind of scales that you play in composition ...

[On video, Gerald demonstrates]

As you practice all of the etudes you'll learn that the harmony within the music is something that you can learn yourself as you're playing these etudes because they are studies in how a composer writes music. It will help you in your technique so don't forget to practice your etudes thinking very carefully, harmonically as well as melodically. This will help you become a very good musician.

Warming up

GC: I would say that when you warm up you should put your reed in warm water in a shot glass for about one-minute if you played it the day before. Then take it out of the shot glass and put it on a reed case for a second minute. After that's done you can wipe off the excess water, and it is ready to be played.

To warm up, start in the middle low register of the bassoon and start with low A. Play notes in that range for the first minute and then begin to go lower and a little bit higher and save playing in the very high register until about four minutes into your warm up. In this way your lips, instrument and the reed will be warmed up.

How do you take care of your instrument?

GC: I keep the instrument very carefully in order by swabbing it out after each use. I wipe it off about once every day and then once a year taking it to a very fine artisan repairer to do a minor tune up of the instrument to make sure that it's mechanically correct for the next season.

Please play an excerpt from the Four Strong Winds YPC.

GC: I'll play the bassoon solo from the second movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*.