

by Chris Vadala

# Tips On Doubling

## The Oboe



*More Double Trouble  
And Other Tales From  
The Woodwind Crypt*

In my last column I promised to include interviews with experienced double-reed performers. I've been stating my own opinions on the subject of woodwind doubling over the past several years and decided to solicit advice from others.

There are some terrific doublers around the world who include the oboe in their arsenal. I've mentioned names like Phil Bodner, George Marge, Paul McCandless, Yusef Lateef, Ray Ricker, and others in previous articles. In my own backyard the Wind and Percussion Division at the University of Maryland, the resident experts are faculty members Daniel Doescher, who is an oboist, and Edward Walters, who is principally a clarinetist and a very active doubler.

Daniel Doescher holds B.M. and M.M. degrees in oboe from Ithaca College and Peabody Conservatory of Music respectively. His teachers include Cynthia DeAlmeida, Jonathan Blumenfeld, Joe Turner, Elaine Douvas, and Peter Hedrick. He is principal oboe with the Fairfax Symphony Orchestra, co-principal oboe with the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, oboe/English horn with the Baltimore Opera, and Professor of Oboe at the University of Maryland.

Ed Walters graduated from Peabody Conservatory with a B.S. and received a M.M. from Catholic University. Since 1983, he has been Professor of Clarinet at the University of Maryland. Ed is also a contractor and freelance player in

the Washington, D.C. and Baltimore area, handling things like orchestral and chamber music, Broadway shows, television broadcasts and recordings. Some of his teachers include Harold Wright, Sidney Forrest (clarinet), Rudy Vrbsky and Gene Montooth (oboe).

*We started our duo discussion on oboe reeds. I asked, "What's the most painless way (if any!) to edge into choosing and working with reeds? What's the minimum reed equipment for a doubler?"*

### Daniel Doescher

Reeds are a pain for every level of oboe player. The critical skills needed by any player are to be able to thin the tip of the reed to restore vibrations, and clip the end of the reed to balance response and to raise the pitch of the reed. The basic tools needed for this are an easily sharpened knife (Vitry), a plaque to insert between the blades for scraping, and a block for clipping. Clipping the reed can be done with the knife, but I find using Gem single-edge razor blades gives a finer, cleaner result.

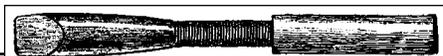
### Ed Walters

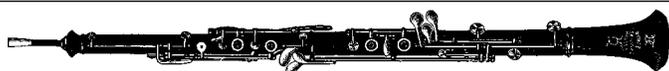
One of the first decisions a doubler has to make, when taking on the oboe, is whether or not he or she will learn reed making or depend on a supplier for reeds. A player is always better off making their own reeds, however, it can be done both ways. If you decide to make your own reeds, you should have the same training and equipment as any formal student of the oboe.

*Is it possible to get started on a ready-made reed? If so, what commercial brands or sources would you recommend? Take us through the initial encounter with a new reed.*

### Daniel Doescher

The best way to deal with the problems of reed making for a doubler is to purchase reeds from an oboist whose sound you like. Store-bought reeds are extremely inconsistent and are generally not refined enough to use. The matching of the correct tube, cane, shape, and scrape are not often achieved by players who work at this constantly, let alone by a commercial reedmaker who





is striving for quantity of production.

When a reed is acquired, an evaluation should be performed to insure correct construction. The reed should be wet in hot water before playing (for not more than one minute). Run very hot water through the reed from the bottom for about twenty to thirty seconds. The opening should be checked. If the reed is not open, try soaking longer. If the reed is too open, gently squeeze the opening closed from the top to the bottom of the cane (the plaque can be inserted to prevent cracking when squeezing closed a very large opening). The reed should now be "crowded," putting the reed in the mouth up to the thread and blowing hard with an open throat. A good reed should sound a C, with lower octaves sounding with increased air pressure.

#### Ed Walters

There are some good commercial sources for reeds today. The *Forrest Oboe Catalog* is a good source for oboe reeds and supplies. There are also many others. Some players today buy commercial reeds and then make final adjustments to them. I personally have relied for the most part on professional players to supply me with reeds. This, however, makes you very dependent and vulnerable to the whims of your source!

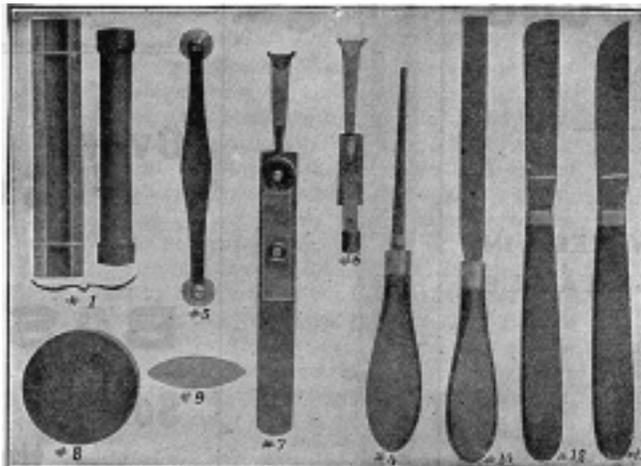
*What do you look for when selecting an instrument? What key options are recommended? What maintenance procedures do you recommend?*

#### Daniel Doescher

Choosing an instrument requires finding one that will complement your reed preference and manner of blowing, referred to as a player's set-up. Most professional oboists in the United States use instruments made in France, particularly Loree. These instruments may not be the best choice for a doubler because of their inherent instability and the relative difficulty of

## Tools For Making Oboe Reeds

from the 16th Edition  
Carl Fischer Band Instrument Catalog



1. Easel, 4. Mandrel, 5. Double Eraser, 6. Reed Cutter (small), 7. Reed Cutter (large), 8. Stand, 9. Erasing Plaque, 10. File, 11. Knife, 12. Penknife, 14. Wire, brass

(Please note: while these tools are from an "old" antique Carl Fischer catalog, many of these tools, though somewhat altered in design, are still in use today by oboe players. As the French say, "The more things change the more they stay the same.")

maintaining reeds for them. American players often sacrifice stability for flexibility and color of sound in choosing the Loree oboe: the reeds that result are more refined and more susceptible to changes due to temperature and humidity than reeds made for other oboes. Oboes made by Laubin, Fossati, and Marigaux are good alternatives. Look for an oboe with a full conservatory system with a left-hand F, low B and B-flat keys. The third octave is not necessary. If the oboe is made of wood, it must be kept humid between playing with a Dampit inside the case. Without this, cracking is probable, and the corks and bumper corks will tend to change, throwing the oboe out of adjustment. Regular adjustment and maintenance by an expert repairman is advisable. The oboe must seal tightly while playing. Any leak making the low notes unplayable and affecting the response of the entire instrument must be corrected.

#### Ed Walters

In terms of selection of an instrument, get the best you can afford. There is no perfect instrument. Specialists on one instrument constantly

adjust for the imperfections of their chosen instrument. Doublers with much less training and practice obviously will have a much tougher time trying to get the desired results from their instruments. A doubler friend of mine put it best when he said, "Doublers cannot afford to play anything less than top quality instruments. A master player can sound good on a student model, a doubler will not."

*Can you discuss embouchure development? Compare oboe embouchure to single-lip embouchure.*

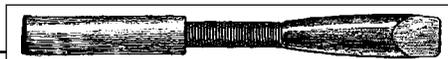
#### Daniel Doescher

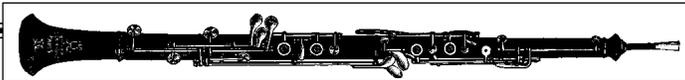
Regarding the embouchure, less is better. The embouchure must be the result of the interaction of correct, relaxed, forceful blowing, a good

stable reed, and a resonant, responsive instrument. The muscles involved are not able to support the pitch and make major adjustments to the reed for very long. The secret is to use the embouchure only for minor adjustments and build the sound and pitch around correct support. The embouchure should resemble the relaxed mouth as much as possible, with just a slight pursing of the lips in the corners as the only alteration necessary. The chin should not bunch, nor should the lips collapse behind the teeth. The teeth should provide relaxed support to the lips.

#### Ed Walters

Embouchure is perhaps the primary concern for any doubler attempting oboe. The oboe embouchure compared to the single reed instrument is very loose and free. Some oboists say there is no embouchure, meaning you simply cover the reed with the lips and blow. In actual practice, it is not that simple. Most doublers coming from either clarinet or saxophone will have an embouchure that is too tight and rigid. The doublers biggest adjustment will be to forget the clarinet or saxophone and use an entirely new approach.





The main focus of the oboe embouchure is to surround the reed 360 degrees and avoid taking too much reed into the mouth. This seems simple enough, but take it from someone who has worked at it for years, it is hard to avoid using your single-reed embouchure. As a doubler, I have always tried to approach each instrument totally fresh, as if this is the only instrument I play. Doublers often naively tackle a new instrument as if it were an extension of their first instrument. That is why most doublers sound like doublers.

*Talk about the significant differences in breathing between sax and oboe.*

**Daniel Doescher**

Blowing and breathing for the oboe can be problematic. The small reed opening creates resistance which often causes unproductive tension in the player. It is very hard to relax while expelling enough air through the oboe to sustain a long phrase, our biggest requirement. Part of the solution is to practice long tones consistently. It may also be helpful to exhale before inhaling, although not forcibly inhaling too much air. It is amazingly difficult to relax, exhale, and inhale after each phrase.

**Ed Walters**

As most players know, the problem with the oboe is how to get rid of the air. The opening of the reed and the bore of the instrument is so small that one cannot get much air through. There are also entirely different nuances and effects that only the oboe produces and that do not exist for other instruments. If you are comparing literature for oboe and single reeds or flute, the demands and requirements are quite different. In real-life playing situations you may be required to switch from a wailing sax passage to a delicate expressive oboe passage that severely tests your physical and mental dexterity.

*What general fingering similarities and differences can we look for between sax and oboe?*

**Daniel Doescher**

Fingering differences between saxo-

phone and oboe in general involve the upper register notes, the use of half-holing on the oboe, and the differences between F and F-sharp respectively.

**Ed Walters**

Fingerings for oboe and saxophone are fortunately quite similar. This is one advantage a saxophonist would bring to the table. They both overblow an octave and have the same basic written range from B-flat below middle C to F above high C. However, the key placement and feel of the instruments are so different that you will have to develop an entirely different fingering technique to get the proper response from the oboe. For oboe as compared to the saxophone, the touch is much lighter in general, there are holes to cover and half-holes to uncover, in addition to the differences that do exist in fingering.

*What about vibrato? Any similarities?*

**Daniel Doescher**

Oboe vibrato is a complex area to explain because it involves the control of involuntary muscles while maintaining an intense air stream for proper tonal support. The ideal vibrato is integrated in the sound and is a result of good support and, once again, relaxation. Lip (jaw) vibrato is not acceptable because of the compromised pitch and flexibility. The technique of vibrato can be approached in two ways, from the diaphragm (pulse) or the throat (articulated whistle), and ideally emanates from the upper chest and lower throat. A good vibrato occurs naturally in the peak of a long tone and should be cultivated from the long tone and applied to the phrase.

**Ed Walters**

Here again, the similarities can be striking. Both instruments employ the use of vibrato to varying degrees. Both the saxophone and the oboe are extremely varied in the types of sounds that can be produced. I believe they are the most flexible of all the woodwind instruments. It is imperative that a doubler listen carefully to good quality oboe playing to develop an ear for proper tone. One must have the

ideal sound in his head in order to attempt to reproduce that sound. There is not much in the way of tone production on the saxophone that will transfer to the oboe. A new player will have to spend countless hours on long tones to develop an embouchure and the control necessary for the oboe.

*Tell us a bit about intonation. What are the challenges on the oboe, and how can they be dealt with?*

**Daniel Doescher**

Intonation is a function of blowing, support, reed, and instrument. The embouchure is not strong enough to compensate for faults in the set-up. Build the sound and pitch around a relaxed, open third-space C. Construct the reed to play in tune in the upper octave without having to "bite up" the pitch. When this is done and the instrument is properly adjusted and sealed, the intonation should be consistent. Note: low notes tend to be flat, so push the reed into the upper lip to compensate.

**Ed Walters**

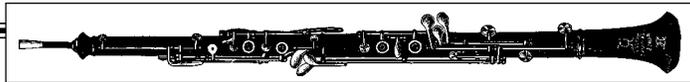
The oboe, like all the other woodwinds, has its own set of intonation concerns to deal with. It is not possible to adequately address them in a short article such as this, but we can identify some areas of concern. Assuming a player has a decent instrument, the reed will be the next most important factor. If the reed is not properly balanced and cut, no amount of effort will insure true intonation. The next most important factor will be the embouchure and air control.

*How about a step by step prescription for oboe doublers?*

**DAN DOESCHER'S TOP TEN TIPS FOR WOULD-BE OBOE DOUBLERS**

1. Find a respected oboe player to assist with reeds.
2. Finely tune and balance the reed.
3. Play slow scales, concentrating on the connection between the notes and how the fingers travel from note to note.
4. Practice long tones on a gradual crescendo and decrescendo, *pp - ff - pp*; use the metronome to practice, releas-





ing the sound accurately.

5. Use soft, relaxed hands with slightly curved fingers; let the hands fall evenly on the oboe; play on the finger pads, not the tips of the fingers; press and lift the fingers from the back knuckles so that the curve of the fingers does not change when raising and lowering them.
6. Build your playing on the breath.
7. Blow hard, deep, and relaxed. Plan your exhales and inhales carefully.
8. Take in a comfortable amount of air.
9. Always exhale before inhaling.
10. RELAX!

### ED WALTERS' FIVE BASIC STEPS FOR OBOE DOUBLERS

1. Secure a good instrument.
2. Find a good source for reeds.
3. Immerse yourself in the idiom--listen to players; talk to players.
4. Set aside practice time away from your other instruments.
5. Find a good teacher.

*Any concluding thoughts not already covered?*

#### Ed Walters

As doublers we have the daunting task of taking on more than one instrument and selling ourselves as finished players of those instruments. I won't dwell on the many difficulties this presents; just remember that all of the instruments demand practice time and dedication. The biggest fault of most doublers is that they feel once they have learned the scales and fingerings of a new instrument, they know enough to present themselves as a player of that instrument. To be a good doubler on the oboe you must be a good oboe player, period.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your input. I plan to give similar space to bassoon doubling and intend to provide similar interviews as well in the ensuing articles.

Finally, the chart on "fingering usages and harmonic fingering possibilities for the oboe," (page 32, July/August issue of *Saxophone Journal*, CHART INCLUDED) was inadvertently omitted from my July/August column, so I've included it in this column directly below! §

**Fingering Usages And Harmonic Fingering Possibilities For The Oboe**

Tok = Thumb octave key    Sok = Side octave key

\* Oboes with automatic octave keys will not produce harmonics from G# to C

