

Twenty-Five Years of Oboe Repairs and Sales: An Interview with Nora Post, Kingston, New York

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Nora Post

Lorraine Duso (LD): *When did you start playing the oboe?*

Nora Post (NP): When I was 10 years old.

LD: *And did you take oboe lessons?*

NP: Of course.

LD: *Where did you grow up?*

NP: I grew up on Long Island and then I went to the Juilliard Prep Division on weekends. After that I went to Interlochen during the summers and the Arts Academy during the year and then the North Carolina School of the Arts—I graduated high school from the North Carolina School of the Arts. Then I went to Northwestern University and studied with **Ray Still** for two years. I finished up my undergraduate at the University of California at San Diego, which was a real hot bed of activity for contemporary music—certainly the most interesting place for young compos-

ers in the country. That was a wild ride in the early seventies. After that, I did a Master's and a PhD at New York University.

LD: *You certainly had an impressive education.*

NP: Yes, I was very fortunate that I got a terrific education. I am very grateful for that because it's held me in good stead ever since.

LD: *What were your plans as a college student?*

NP: My plan was to have a university teaching job to support my playing activities. That's exactly what I did until I started my oboe business. In addition to oboe, I was able to teach music history, music theory, ear training and whatever else. Again, I was fortunate that I had the academic training for all of that. Playing was simply an addition to the teaching, so that I could play a lot of concerts during the year and then do summer festivals in Europe. It worked out really

well for me, because I could do anything I wanted to do in terms of playing—I could really pick and choose—since I wasn't depending upon it for a living.

I was an oboe performance major at Northwestern, but then I graduated from the University of California with a BA in Experimental Music Studies. I knew I did not want to play in a symphony orchestra, because my real interests were contemporary music, chamber music, and solo playing, which were all the things I ended up doing. I was also one of the very first pioneers of the two-keyed baroque oboe in this country. But in order to do what I was really interested in, I had to figure out some way to make it all work financially. So that's part of why I did so much music history and theory. My plan from the get-go was to have advanced degrees in fields other than performance so that I would be able to teach at a university in order to hold down the fort financially. Of course, I had always loved theory and history, so it really worked out perfectly for me.

LD: I see. Well, that was smart planning on your part. You had many composers writing for you. Can you tell me about some of them?

NP: I was really fortunate in that a number of major composers heard me play and wanted to write pieces for me—Iannis Xenakis, Lucas Foss, John Cage, Morton Feldman and many other wonderful composers. Probably the most important work written for me was Xenakis' *Dmaathen*. I worked with John Cage quite a lot, and a number of his pieces were written for the group I was playing in at the State University of New York at Buffalo. It was called the Creative Associates, and all we had to do was play contemporary music—much of which was written for us—and travel the world. What a great first job!

I was the second person to play all the oboe works of Stefan Wolpe. I studied them all with **Josef Marx**, for whom they had been written, and I played them all with the players who had done the first performances with Marx, including the wonderful Romanian pianist Irma Wolpe, who was Wolpe's second wife, and was the person who got him out of Nazi Germany in the thirties. She saved his life, and she was an awesome lady. At any rate, I also did the first European performances of all these pieces.

I also did the first American performance of the Berio *Sequenza*. This was right after I had studied the piece with **Heinz Holliger**, for whom it was written. These were great opportunities for someone in her early twenties.

LD: That's incredible. As a woman, it must have been very challenging at the time. Is that correct?

NP: Absolutely. Women were just starting to get into American orchestras, and it was not easy. The music and art schools had lots of women graduating, but there were very few professional opportunities in those days. Now it's completely different but back then, for example, there was one woman in the Boston Symphony. That was it.

I was almost always the only woman in the contemporary music groups in New York. There was usually one player per instrument, and they were the top players for each instrument in New York. They were amazing, and they were all men. When I was teaching at the City University of New York, my students who came to some of my concerts called it "Dr. Post and her All-Boy Band." Mind you, these "boys" were some of the principal players of the New York Philharmonic.

LD: Ha!

NP: But there were advantages. Whenever I went on tour to Europe I always got my own hotel room, since there were never any other women. I would say that was the biggest advantage of being the only woman...

LD: What got you into the business of selling and repairing oboes?

NP: Well, while I was busy writing my dissertation, I was an Artist In Residence at the State University of New York at Buffalo. As I mentioned, the Creative Associates was a small group of about four or five people. All we did was play contemporary music and travel. We didn't have any teaching obligations. Since I had some extra time I decided to go to machine school, since I was very interested in learning how to make a two-keyed oboe. I had studied baroque oboe with **Michel Piguet** in Switzerland at the same time I was studying with Holliger. I found the baroque oboe intriguing. At that time there weren't many good copies of museum instruments around. There wasn't anything good for a classical era late 18th century oboe—a nice Mozart era two-keyed oboe. There were no good historical copies available to buy. There were originals in museum collections but not much else. I received permission to measure and study a Grenzer oboe in a private collection. It was a German oboe from exactly the time period I was looking for; I already had played it, and so I knew it was just what I was looking for. It was made in about 1785. I made all the drawings, learned how to measure the bore, got all the measuring tools to do this, and it was fun. And

I needed an oboe. Then I went to machine school in Buffalo. There is a State University College in Buffalo that has a Manufacturing Technology master's program. So, I went to machine school part-time, and had the time of my life.

LD: How fascinating.

NP: It's kind of like kids playing with mud pies, but for an adult. I would arrive at rehearsals and I'd have pieces of curled up steel from making reamers in my hair and not even realize it. I was so grimy and grungy, arriving in a filthy shop apron with grease all over me. I remember showing my colleagues a square piece of boxwood before a rehearsal, announcing that this was going to be the bell of my oboe. People would just say, "Oh, sure..." But it all did work out, and I had such a great time building it. I had to make the keys, I had to do the woodturning, and I had to make the reamers. So, by the time I had done all of this, I had learned a good bit about making woodwind musical instruments. For its first performance, I played the Mozart *Oboe Quartet*—nothing like starting with the easy stuff! Later on, when I was thinking about starting an oboe business, I realized it wouldn't be hard to pick up the repair skills I needed because if you can make an oboe, you can certainly figure out what you need to know to repair one.

LD: I see. Tell me, who do you think is the best oboe repairer—the manufacturer or a professional repair person?

NP: This is a great question. Is the best repairer someone who works for the manufacturer or not? In other words, is there an advantage because the manufacturer can technically do pretty much anything, and a lot of repairers haven't done it from Square One? I think there is a lot to be said for being able to do it all, although people who only repair instruments would probably disagree with me. From my own experience making copies of 18th century oboes, I can certainly say that when you make an oboe, you really learn it inside out and I think that is a plus. On the other hand, most of the repairers at the factories aren't players, and that's a disadvantage. In a perfect world, the oboe finisher in a factory would be a mechanical genius who plays like a god. It hasn't happened yet! I do think the perfect combination is a really good player who has a lot of experience and confidence in his or her abilities—especially when it comes to the art of tuning—and has all the mechanical skills to make it happen. You have to know what you are doing and you have to be sure of yourself. Between the instrument, the reed and the player, no one needs more variables!



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LD: *Tell us about your time in Paris and London with the oboe makers. Did they help you get started in the business?*

NP: Oh, yes. I'd written a book that was a series of interviews with French and British oboe manufacturers and players of the late 20th century. That was when I interviewed **Leon Goossens** in his eighties and **Gillet** in his nineties. Then I interviewed Marigaux, Lorée, Rigoutat and Howarth.

LD: *Yes, I've read some of those articles in the IDRS.¹*

NP: That book was how I met everyone. This was in the early eighties, and I hadn't even thought about starting anything like an oboe business. I just wanted to write the book because I was so interested in oboe manufacture. I was already teaching musical instrument history. I was fascinated by the construction and the evolution of musical instruments. I liked to make things. So, it all kind of fell together for me. Then when I started thinking about the oboe business, which was about five years later, the manufacturers already knew me as a player, and they also knew me because of my book. Knowing everyone personally was a huge help in getting the business started.

LD: *Who trained you when you first started in the business?*

NP: I had spent a good bit of time in Europe, and I think I owe more to Howarths than to anyone else in terms of getting my repair skills up to speed and learning the fine points of tuning. They had an incredibly talented guy named Graham Johnson, and he was just great. During the first few years of the business, I always asked one of the top people from either Howarths or Marigaux to come work for me during the summers as a working vacation in New York. I had a steep learning curve there, and they were so helpful. There was an awful lot to learn. There still is, Lorraine. This is the kind of thing where every day is a new surprise. You never know what's going to come through the door or how you might solve any given problem. That's what still makes it interesting and challenging.

So I spent as much time as I could in Europe working with the repair departments of various manufacturers. I also needed to get set up with repair parts from each manufacturer, since parts are not interchangeable. I have an entire chest of parts just for Howarth, and I have a separate workbench just for Rigoutat with all their parts. Then I've got a closet full of Lorée parts, and another for Marigaux. Talk about

a junkie! But I can't put a Lorée part into a Marigaux oboe or a Fox oboe. So, a big part of starting the business was getting set with all the tools and equipment I was going to need—lathes, milling machines—the stuff we all want in our basements!

During about the first about ten years of my business, I had a wonderful old geezer—in the best sense of the word—working for me, and that was Bill Glover, the famous bocal maker. He had worked for Alfred Laubin, and they had both worked together for a guy named Evaldo Chiasserini at what was known at the time as Oboe City.

LD: *Oh, really!*

NP: It was in Long Island City, which was a fairly gritty industrial section of Queens, New York, at the time. The factory was called Penzel-Mueller, which was the name of an American clarinet manufacturer dating back to about 1880 that Chiasserini had bought out. Penzel-Mueller/Oboe City became the place where the lion's share of woodwind instruments were imported into this country. This all started in the fifties and continued right through to the mid-seventies, when they were bought out and sold off. Chiasserini had the exclusive franchise on Lorée oboes back then, so he imported every Lorée oboe that came into this country. Alfred Laubin was making Laubin oboes there in a joint venture with Chiassarini. The others making Laubin oboes at the time included Al Laubin's son Paul, Robert Chauvet, Bill Glover and Virgilio Roman. From 1958 to 1968 Laubin was working at Chiasserini's, but at the same time he was also making Laubin oboes at his home in Scarsdale, New York. In 1968, Al Laubin left Penzel-Mueller and opened A. Laubin, Inc. in Elmsford, New York. Bill Glover went with him, as did all the other oboe stars at Oboe City, including Paul Laubin. It must have been quite the oboe exodus.

So, Bill lived in Queens and I started my business in Queens. Before I started the business, I went to visit Bill, whom I knew pretty well because he had done my own repairs for years. I asked him if he would consider working for me and teaching me when I needed some extra help. He said yes. But he thought I would only last about five minutes, which had always been his experience with players who decided they wanted to learn about oboe repair. Once they figured out what was really involved, they were out the door! Ha! He gave me a terrible oboe and told me to go home and overhaul it, bring it back, and he was sure he would never see me again. About a week later I showed up and I had overhauled the oboe. He stared

at it for quite a while. He went over and over and over it. Finally he said, "Oh! This is clean work. Very clean, good work." I could tell from the look on his face that he was really shocked. After that, he was really great. He was a crusty old curmudgeon, but he was also very wonderful at the same time. He had some one-liners that will stay with me as long as I live. If I had some really difficult mechanical problem, he could take the time to help me out since he was working for me. He was amazingly talented, and worked for me right up to the week he died. I owe so much to him. He was so wonderful.

LD: *Was it difficult to establish yourself as a repair person?*

NP: It turned out to be very easy. I was in New York and there is a large population of oboe players there. That's part of the reason why I decided to start the business in New York, of course. Good oboe repairers are very difficult to find, so it was very easy to get started. If you're competent, you're way ahead. I also think a lot of it is word of mouth. Sometimes when I send an oboe back to someone after working on it, they tell me that they have to look at the serial number because they just can't believe it's their instrument! When you have folders stuffed full of letters and emails like that, you know you are doing something right.

LD: *Wonderful.*

NP: Another thing I'd like to add to this discussion, since we're both oboe players, is something Bill Glover used to say to me. He used to talk about talent. As players, we think about talent as having to do with playing an instrument, but Bill used to remind me that the mechanical skills and the ability to be a great repairer or manufacturer... that's a talent, too. I mention this because I think players may not even realize how similar repairing is to what they do—both are real arts. When you look at the European manufacturers like Rigoutat, Lorée, Howarth and Marigaux, the top people in those factories are outstanding artisans. Someone like **Roland Rigoutat** who, of course, was an Honorary Member of the International Double Reed Society, was a great artisan. He won the French Legion of Honor for his contribution to French musical instrument manufacture. This honor had never been awarded to a musical instrument manufacturer in France. When you consider the rich history of the other great oboe makers in France, not to mention Selmer saxophones and Buffet clarinets, this was really an extraordinary honor. **Alain deGourdon**, the

owner of the Lorée Oboes, once said to me that Roland Rigoutat was the only person who could actually make an oboe from start to finish. Mr. Rigoutat passed away a few years ago, and now there's not anyone left on this planet that can make an oboe from start to finish. I suspect most players don't realize this. The reamers are usually made somewhere else, reed wells, drill rod, flat springs, adjustment screws, octave vents—so many of the parts are made elsewhere. No one today does it totally from start to finish without bringing in at least some of the parts. But Roland Rigoutat? You could give him a piece of wood and he could make you an oboe. Amazing.

LD: *Do you have to be an oboist to be a repair person?*

NP: This is a really interesting question, and the answer is no. Some of the best repairers are not oboe players. In my experience, the only time you need to be a player is when you play an oboe just before you finish it. In the European factories, that person is called the finisher. That's really the final step in quality control when you listen to how it plays and figure out what else needs to be done. One or two factories have someone on hand who is a good oboe player and can do this work, but most don't. Most of them hire someone. At the Rigoutat factory, for example, they use **Jean-Claude Jaboulay**, oboist from the Orchestre de Paris, plus **Jacques Tys**, the principal oboe player of the Paris Opera. They come in every other Thursday and they play every single instrument that's coming out of production, telling the workers what needs to be changed—maybe the B \flat is too high or the C \sharp is too low or the final boring might need attention. I can tell you about Rigoutat as an example because I've been there when all of this happens. I don't know exactly how the other factories work this out, but I know that Marigaux and Fossati also have some of the best professional players in Paris to help with this. If you don't have a high level player on hand, you've got to find one for this kind of thing. This is truly the moment where the rubber meets the road in oboe production. In my case as a repairer, there's a tremendous advantage being a good player because I can make all the tuning decisions when I service new instruments, or am working on used instruments that are going to be sold. I had a wonderful education in tuning oboes primarily at Howarths, and they are really incredibly gifted at this. Bill Glover taught me how to use reamers, and I've got a big collection for when I absolutely need them. If I don't like the intonation on an oboe, that's it...I take it apart and

fix it. Of course, if I were repairing an instrument for the owner, I would never do any tuning without his or her permission. But on instruments for sale, I just want them to play well, and I will do whatever it takes. It's a nice skill to have. People always comment that our new Lorées, for example, are much more consistent than anyone else's, saying that I get the "good" ones. Of course this isn't true at all, but it does show what good servicing can do before an oboe is sold. On the other hand, having my particular skill set is also a curse, because every time I try to practice, I end up deciding almost immediately that there's something I can improve on any given instrument, and within five minutes the oboe is apart in pieces on my workbench. So much for practicing.

LD: *Another person I would like talk about in your life is the late Bob Gilbert. I remember him when I was working with you. Tell me how he helped you and if there are others you haven't mentioned who were also a big help to you.*

NP: Well, to answer the second part of your question, the one person who jumps to mind is **Steve Malarkey**. He is a wonderful repairer and he does all the woodwinds. He lives in Pennsylvania, where he has his own business, but we have also been working together for about fifteen years. After Bill Glover passed away, I was left with more work than one person could possibly handle, and Steve has done something like five hundred big jobs (like complete overhauls) for me over the years. That's a lot of oboes. As he says, "I was born to fix oboes." That's the kind of person you want to work on your horn.

Working with the oboe manufacturers for all these years has also been quite a lively experience. You just don't know what can happen with an oboe. We have our fair share of catastrophes every year, when people run over their oboes, or oboes end up in floods or fires. I've seen it all, and this year in particular has been a good one for people sitting on their oboes. In certain situations the work can only be done by the manufacturer. I can't make a Lorée top joint, but Lorée certainly can. So, a repairer really needs the support of the manufacturers for the major explosions. It's a partnership. Of course, it goes without saying that we depend on the makers for parts. Nothing is more important than that.

LD: *Before I leave this subject, did you want to mention anything about Bob Gilbert?*

NP: Oh yes! So let's go back to Bob. I knew Bob since my undergraduate days, when I used to show up in Los Angeles on my motorcycle carrying my Laubin in

my crash helmet. (No wonder it needed repairs!)

Once he got used to the idea of a woman being in this business, that I was going to be around for a while, he was incredibly helpful to me. We talked at least two or three times a week for twenty years. Every time I went to Europe on business, the oboe makers would sit me down at lunch or at a pub and say, "Well, now.... How's Bob?" They wanted to hear all the latest stories, of course, and there was never a shortage. At the end, they would always just shake their heads in disbelief and ask, "How can two direct competitors be such good friends?" It was nice.

LD: *I'd like to ask some questions about the manufacturers. Who were the most helpful when you got started?*

NP: Before I started the business I made a trip to Europe and went to see the oboe makers to find out if they'd be interested in working with me. This would have been late in 1984. My first stop was Howarths, and they said yes. That was Nigel Clark, John Pullen, and Michael Britton. For twenty-five years now, everyone at Howarths has been tremendous.

I also met with Hans Kreul of Kreul oboes in Germany. He said yes. Then I went to see Marigaux. At that time Yves Rilba was the president and we had been friends for quite a while. He didn't have an American agent at the time, and I was pretty sure he would say yes. But he said no. I was really disappointed, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was at the top of the stairs of the Marigaux office in Paris; I closed the door and started to walk down to the street thinking, "Well, I didn't get this one." Then Yves opened the door, stuck his head out and said, "Oh, by the way, I'll send you three oboes next week. Pay me when you sell them." Ha! It was like hallelujah! Not only did he say yes, but he also put me on a consignment basis, which no one else had done. But things went well and his bill was paid in a couple of weeks. If it had been two minutes later, I would have been on the street and he wouldn't have found me. I was his American agent for seventeen years.

I didn't go see Rigoutat at the time because Bob Gilbert was Rigoutat's exclusive American agent. But in about 1992 that relationship came to an end. Philippe Rigoutat and I talked, and I became his new agent. I was so interested because I've always been a huge fan of Rigoutat oboes. Anyway, that's when I started with them, and now it's eighteen years later.

LD: *Twenty-five years in the business...I thought I would talk about how we met and how I came*

