

Switching to Wood

An Interview with Felix Skowronek

BY MEGAN LYDEN

Felix Skowronek studied flute with William Kincaid at the Curtis Institute of Music from 1952-1956, returning to his native city to play principal flute with the Seattle Symphony. In 1960 he was invited to teach flute at Puerto Rico's Conservatory of Music, and with his fellow faculty members formed the *Soni Ventorum* Wind Quintet. For two years he was principal flutist with the St. Louis Symphony before rejoining the *Soni Ventorum* at the University of Washington in Seattle, where the group comprises the woodwind faculty. Skowronek tours extensively with the *Soni Ventorum* and recorded more than two dozen albums with them. A past president of the National Flute Association and founding president of the Seattle Flute Society, Skowronek has long championed the wooden Boehm-system flute.

What prompted your interest in wooden flutes?

Not long after moving to Puerto Rico in 1960, I heard from an artist who worked in stained glass. He was also an amateur flutist and had accepted a wooden Haynes flute as a trade from a tourist for some artwork. The artist didn't want the flute and brought it to my house. I was transfixed with its depth of tone and called colleagues Bill McColl and Arthur Grossman to come over. After a half hour I said, "This is it," put away my silver flute, and never picked it up again.

That was all it took to convince you to change instruments?

I changed immediately. When I first studied the flute in Seattle, my folks ordered a silver flute with a C-foot and closed mechanism. I had to wait for delivery and my teacher gave me a wooden flute to play in the meantime. Rubber bands held the keys, and it had an odd look and smell. My first lessons were on this flute and many years later it occurred to me that the experience might have somehow influenced me. At Curtis I heard the famed Concertgebouw Orchestra when it came to Philadelphia for its first post-war tour in the United States. On the program was Beethoven's *Symphony #4*, and the flute player used a wooden flute. He sounded gorgeous and impressed everyone with his playing, which was not easy in Philadelphia, home of William Kincaid, where listeners tended to be highly critical of all flutists. That was also the year the Philharmonic Orchestra of London performed Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* there, and the entire flute section played wooden instruments.

What do you remember about those performances?

I recall that they used a minimal amount of vibrato. Part of the older English style of playing eschewed vibrato, and the effect struck me as a bit odd in a modern piece. Perhaps these experiences had something to do with switching to a wood flute, but the major influence was playing it. Of course the stucco, stonework, and tile of our apartment in Puerto Rico couldn't help but enhance the flute's resonance. Wooden instruments in general and wooden flutes in particular respond well to a humid tropical climate. The wood thrives in those conditions, so a combination of factors helped the flute sound or play well and I was sold on it.

What are the differences in tone color between metal and wooden flutes?

From my perspective the wooden flute tends to have a somewhat broader tone and not as focused or as shrill in the third octave. The tone is also more consistent from the second to third octaves. As with the wooden piccolo, the wood's resistance tends to mollify or mitigate the shrillness of the highest octave and produce a wider dynamic range, from pianissimo to fortissimo. Dealing with greater resistance reduces embouchure squeezing or overfocusing the tone as on the metal flute. Players feel more relaxed and able to broaden the dynamic range.

You mentioned hearing a flutist play on a wooden flute in Beethoven's Fourth. What are other examples in the flute literature where a wooden flute is more effective?

I've always thought that most late Romantic works, certainly those of Brahms and Tchaikovsky, would sound better. They were originally played on wooden flutes, but whether on Boehm-system flutes or old-system conical flutes is uncertain. A wooden flute is most effective in Central European works written around 1880 and later that call for a full, broad sound: Dvorak, Sibelius, Richard Strauss, and Wagner, although Wagner didn't like the Boehm-system flute. A solo piece such as the Reinecke *Concerto* would sound mar-

Flutist Megan Lyden studied with Alexander Murray and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in music from the University of Illinois. Currently a Doctor of Musical Arts candidate at the University of Washington, where she studies with Felix Skowronek, Lyden also teaches and performs frequently in the Seattle area.

velous on wood. That's not to say it isn't suitable for other music, but to me this music is ideal and sounds the most natural on a wooden flute. If the movement toward authenticity creeps up to the year 1900, then purists will be knocking at the door for my collection of wooden flutes.

What differences in response are there between wooden and metal flutes? What adjustments does a player make when switching between wooden and metal instruments?

There is less adjustment in going from a wood to a metal than in the reverse. The wooden flute is more difficult to play and blow, and it's not as immediately responsive. Players have to work to become conditioned to it. Clean, rapid tonguing is always a challenge on a wooden flute, and a player has to be in shape. Articulation is generally easier, more rapid, and probably cleaner on a metal head, but there are very responsive wooden heads and very dull, heavy, and resistant metal ones.

Did you play a wooden flute for orchestral music?

Yes, very often. When I took up the wooden flute, Soni Ventorum members and I were principals in the Puerto Rico Symphony. Throughout the season I played only wood but switched to silver for the Casals Festival during the summer. Occasionally I used a wooden flute when no one was looking. In 1966 I auditioned for the principal position in St. Louis and walked on stage with a wooden flute. Players didn't audition behind screens in those days so the committee saw it, for better or worse. It didn't seem to influence them negatively; I got the job and for the two years I was in St. Louis, I played the C-foot wooden flute from the stained-glass artist.

I assume your St. Louis colleagues played on metal instruments. Were there problems blending within the flute section?

There never appeared to be a problem. Naturally, I didn't insist that they play wood, but the blend seemed good and we got along well. On some children's concerts we once played the "Dance of the Reed Flutes" from the *Nutcracker Suite*. I happened to have a number of wooden flutes, so for this piece I passed them out to the other two flutists in the section. I still have the photo of all three of us playing wooden flutes.

How do you imagine Kincaid and others of his generation would regard the wooden flute?

I visited with Kincaid after switching to wood. With the Soni Ventorum I came back to Philadelphia for a concert when Kincaid was in his early 60s and told him about playing on wood. He didn't bat an eye and said he used to play wood and that there was much to be said for wooden flutes. The prevailing attitude was that wooden flutes hadn't kept up with modern developments. There was also a stylistic difference that con-



Felix Skowronek with his hand-made wooden headjoints

tributed to the wooden flute's disappearance. When the French style made its way to this country, most wooden flute players were German. Differences in style, ethic, and aesthetic eventually phased out the wooden flute, which unfortunately acquired a bad name because of the way such players played them.

You change headjoints two, sometimes three times during a concert. How do you decide which headjoint to use for a particular piece? Are these usually headjoints you made?

Under ordinary circumstances, I wouldn't change headjoints at all, picking a good head or two for a performance. The reason I change so much is that I'm testing headjoints as part of my research. All of these heads are made from Australian timbers I've collected. They are woods never before used for flutes, and the only way to test them is to play them in concerts. I determine whether a head I've chosen for a particular piece is appropriate by its response and the way I play it. Because the heads are homemade the embouchure cuts tend to vary a bit from one to the next, and some are better than others. I record the concerts and note how the heads behave, how I feel about them, and whether they crack.

What made you aware of the benefit of using Australian hardwoods?

I began reading about various woods. I hadn't been interested in Australia at all until I came across several reference book citations. My prime interest was tropical woods from Central and South America and from Puerto Rico, which has many species of quality hardwoods for such a small island. I considered using Australian woods more seriously after a chance encounter with a teaching assistant from western Australia who saw me working with some wood at the campus woodshop. He was interested in the project and told me western Australia had some very hard woods that might interest me. He also provided an address for contacting the state commission and I took it from there.

Beside experimenting with wooden headjoint design, do you make custom headjoints for others?

No, but I let those expressing interest play them. They are strictly experimental, and although I'm not in the business of making headjoints for sale I loan them to students for a chance to hear how they sound. I'll probably save making custom headjoints for my retirement.

Does playing a wooden flute suit the other instruments in a wind quintet?

It's the only kind I've used with the Soni Ventorum for more than 30 years so yes, it is suitable. Our concept of the wind quintet sound has always emphasized a blend of instruments rather than a

collection of individual sounds, and it developed over the years from playing we heard at Curtis or in the Philadelphia Orchestra. There are two schools of thought on a quintet sound, however. Some people like to hear the instruments maintain their characteristic sound within the ensemble, and others prefer an organ-like blend where it's difficult to tell which instrument plays a given note in a chord. From the beginning this mass of sound was the goal of the quintet, and it determined the group's personnel. Arthur Grossman and I were both Curtis students and had a quintet there. Clarinetist Bill McColl studied in Vienna and had a sound we thought would be right for the quintet, as it was different from the traditional French clarinet sound. The wooden flute ably balanced that sound so it's appropriate for the quintet. The only difference with wood is that its quality is so easily absorbed into the sound that the flutist has to remember to play out.

Do you favor a particular genre of woodwind quintet literature or have pieces that are favorites?

I'm quite fond of the Reicha quintets, which particularly challenge technique and blend. It's up to the players to make something exciting out of these quintets because there's no performance style or practice precedent. Otherwise we play the standard repertoire, some new works, and works commissioned for us.

The Soni Ventorum recently recorded Arnold Schoenberg's Wind Quintet, a work the group initially performed more than 20 years ago. What reawakened the group's interest in this piece?

We felt it was time to try it again. Oboist Alex Klein, our newest member, heard the faculty quintet at Oberlin play the work and was keen to take it up when he joined the group. We've played it a couple of times this year and scheduled another performance for next year. It's become a repertoire mainstay for us, and the more we play this beautiful work the more we like and respect it. Although not *avant-garde*, the piece may perhaps not appeal to listeners on first hearing. It's a late Romantic piece with sonorities akin to those of early 20th-century Vienna.

Alex Klein recently joined the Soni Ventorum. What adjustments were necessary to accommodate the change to such a long-standing woodwind quintet?

It was less of a change than you might imagine. At Oberlin Klein studied with Jimmy Caldwell, who was our oboist for a time, and had attended Curtis. We share a common musical background with Klein, a flexible player. David Kappy, our present horn player, studied with former New York Wind Quintet member John Barrows and so was quite comfortable playing in a wind quintet. Naturally we all have to get used to each other, but so far it's been easy.

Was the woodwind quintet a focus of study with Kincaid at the Curtis Institute?

Yes. Marcel Tabuteau, then principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, taught the Curtis woodwind class. A Frenchman who came to this country earlier in the century, Tabuteau was the reigning oboist of his time. Our class of 10 or 12 sat in a large semi-circle and from it Tabuteau selected students for a quintet. To perfect phrasing and intonation he put us through the wringer, spending most of the year on one piece, in truth about eight bars. After Tabuteau retired in 1954 Kincaid came in with an entirely different approach. Rather than such drilling he was more interested in having us read and play the works with each other collegially. Kincaid played beautifully in the Philadelphia wind quintet, the only place I ever heard him play piccolo. Of his several extraordinary recordings with the quintet I think the best one is *Mládí*, the Janáček "Youth Sextet" for wind quintet with bass clarinet.

Although you have been a principal orchestra player, chamber player, and a soloist, you seem to prefer playing in the woodwind quintet.

Yes, because over the years quintet playing is what I've done the most and it interested me early on. After the quintet at Curtis, I played with a quintet in the army, where I performed with Arthur Grossman and Bill McColl. The group's success prompted us to try to form a quintet as civilians. The opportunity came when we were colleagues in Puerto Rico, where we formed the *Soni Ventorum*. We all made sacrifices to start it, and we still do to keep the group going. My orchestral experience, by comparison, has been limited. Like others in the quintet, I trained to play orchestrally, but I preferred chamber playing over orchestral and left St. Louis to rejoin the quintet when it came to the University of Washington.

How has the sound and playing style of the Soni Ventorum evolved since its inception in 1962? What direction will the group take in the future?

We simply had a lot of time to develop the idea of blend we heard at Curtis. We were young and enthusiastic then and just starting our careers. Because we did little else besides teach, the relative isolation of Puerto Rico allowed us to buckle down and tighen up the quintet. There were few distractions so we weren't tempted to do jobbing and thus fragment the group, which unfortunately happens to many younger quintets. I'll always be grateful for the experience there, a kind of laboratory that helped launch the group and start recording as well. We made our first three or four recordings in Puerto Rico.

With more than two dozen albums to its credit, The Soni Ventorum has made more recordings than many other woodwind quintets. What is different about recording in a studio from performing live concerts?

Concerts have the pressure of performing in front of an audience, but in a recording studio the concern with getting everything right makes it more of a documentary endeavor, involving a number of takes. Players have to be careful that a recording won't sound stiff, strained, or lose some of the excitement of a live performance. Presumably in a recording situation the engineers can adjust balances for a somewhat artificially enhanced sound, whereas in live performances players have to listen carefully and immediately react to what they hear.

Recently you have pursued jazz flute. What prompted this interest in jazz?

Jazz flute has interested me ever since I heard Bud Shank when he came to Seattle in the early 1980s. He gave jazz workshops every summer in Port Townsend, and one year I took "Jazz Flute for Squares" with Sheridan Stokes as my coach. An eminent Hollywood studio player, Stokes was familiar with the jazz idiom but didn't consider himself a jazz player. He coached me in basics, and Los Angeles bass player John Clayton coached me for the workshop's combo portion.

Was it difficult at first to feel comfortable with free improvisation when you've spent most of your career in a more structured musical environment?

Of course, because it was completely different. There was one magical session of that summer jazz combo I'll never forget. John Clayton wrote a blues tune on the blackboard, and having no experience with jazz whatsoever, I didn't realize, for example, that a blues phrase is always twelve bars, not sixteen. We all learned the tune, or head, by playing it in unison a couple of times. Then the four or five of us did solos or choruses, one at a time.

Clayton started down the line, and I thought, "My gosh, he's going to get to me eventually." When it was my turn he just pointed. I started and was literally transported, as if some higher being was playing the flute for me. I blew and the fingers moved; I didn't know what was happening, but when the sound just came out I couldn't believe it. The feeling of improvisation went through me like an electric current. Amazingly I kept on going, like clothes in a washing machine or dryer that keep turning over. I wondered how I was going to get out of it because I was playing, yet not fully conscious of what I was doing. Everything happened in the right place and seemed reasonably effective. It was a high I can neither describe nor forget, but I'd give anything to have it again.

You have a wider range of performing experience than most flutists. How does this influence your teaching?

The many recordings I've made with the *Soni Ventorum* have taught me much about articulation, for example. Unlike in a live performance, the clear, precise articulation needed for a record-

Experience the finest in craftsmanship . . .



"Piccolo Specialist"

and everything else simply falls in place. Dependability. Ease of handling. Delicate tones and balance.

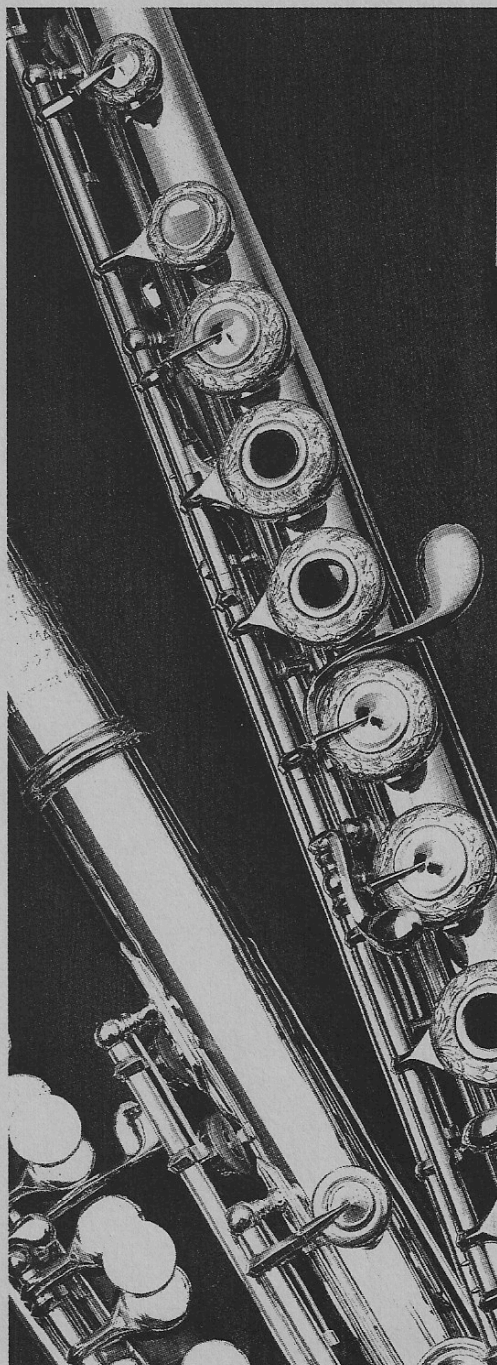
Every Hardy instrument is constructed of the finest materials available, and tested and inspected exceeding the standards of the industry. Hardy's; a name to be trusted.

Write for free brochure



**HARDY'S MUSICAL
INSTRUMENT Co., Inc.**

30462 C.R. 12 West
Elkhart, IN 46514
219-264-0414 1-800-676-6141



THE HAYNES FLUTE
MFD BY
WM. S. HAYNES CO
BOSTON, MASS
REG'D TRADE MARK

Capturing instrumental perfection in the world's finest flutes and piccolos.

Haynes is the first instrument of choice, delivering the vibrant, vivid sound contemporary artists prefer. The range of instruments offered, and the choice of Deveau or traditional headjoints and scales provide a versatility in Haynes flutes and piccolos that is unchallenged.

Handcrafted in the United States, every Haynes is a remarkably responsive instrument... truly a masterpiece of contemporary flute craftsmanship.

Write or call for your Haynes full color brochure today, and ask about our new video entitled "The Haynes Story."

Wm. S. Haynes Company, Inc.
12 Piedmont Street
Boston, MA 02116
Telephone: 617-482-7456
Fax: 617-482-1870

HAYNES

ing takes a special effort that carries over to my work with students. There my concerns about separating phrases and making the articulations clear are ever present. I think playing jazz has freed me up a great deal. We're so worried about playing the right notes that we become tied to our parts. Playing jazz gave me more of a laid-back attitude towards the classical things I play. Certainly not one of negligent playing but simply a different perspective.

Having heard Kincaid in nearly every orchestral concert he played while I was in Philadelphia was a tremendous education. Listening to what he did and learning how to reproduce things that work and avoid those that don't made an indelible impression that is impossible to ignore as I teach. Nor can I separate from my teaching the balancing, listening to others, and shaping phrases I learned from years of playing chamber music. Though I don't play period instruments, the Baroque movement has taught us a new approach to this music we once performed as if playing Brahms. We change and grow as musicians through our experiences and the experience of others.

Instrument Making Video

As part of its *Future of Music Project*, United Musical Instruments offers a 22 minute video, *Superior Craftsmanship, Tradition, and Technology* on how musical instruments are manufactured and tested (\$24.95, U.M.I., 1000 Industrial Parkway, Elkhart, Indiana).

Composer Software

Roland Corporation introduced an update of its MC-50 program for musicians to use in sequencing and studio work or live performance. The MC-50mkII has the MRP Performance System software in ROM to eliminate delays in loading, faster key shape, and a new tape sync II function for use with multi-track recorders. The internal memory can store eight songs with 9,999 measures per song or 40,000 notes. A built-in disk drive will store up to 150,000 notes on a 3.5" floppy diskette. Eight tracks record performance information with the capacity to send and receive information from all 16 MIDI channels, allowing 128 instrument parts to be recorded. A ninth track is for rhythm and there is a tempo track designated. MicroComposer records in either Realtime mode or Step mode (manual entering of notes). \$949.50, 213-685-5141.