WHAT I LEARNED IN THE LENOIR HIGH SCHOOL BAND

Despite more than three decades of generous private and government support for the arts, arts education in the United States can boast of only meager results. In this time of diminished funding and growing skepticism, the solo oboist of the New York Philharmonic explains what was so crucial in his own musical education—and why it is precisely what is missing, and needed, in arts education today.

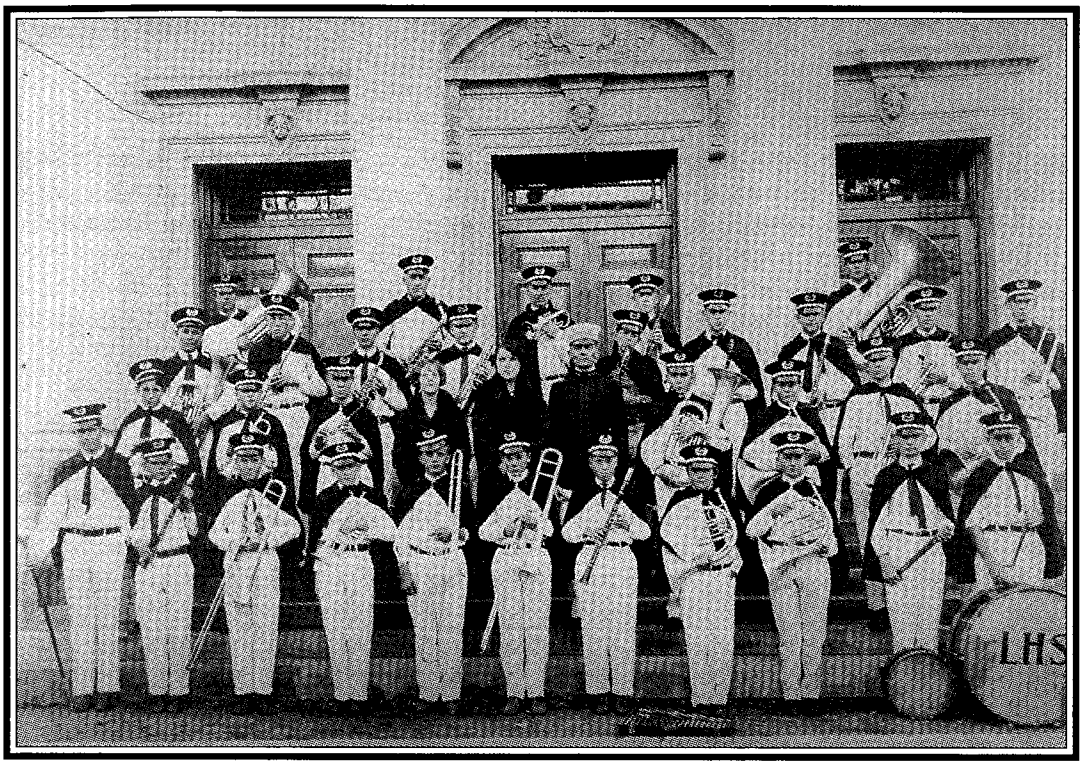
BY JOSEPH ROBINSON

I have been oboist of the New York Philharmonic for 18 seasons, but many fans and colleagues still view my success as unlikely—even miraculous—because of two peculiarities in my résumé. The first is that I grew up in a small town in North Carolina instead of the kind of cosmopolitan urban center that produces most classical musicians; the second is that I attended a liberal arts college rather than a conservatory. But in fact these "handicaps" were crucial assets in my improbable rise to the top of the orchestra world.

For as long as anyone can remember, Lenoir, North Carolina, has called itself "Gateway to the Blue Ridge Parkway." In 1954, however, it was known chiefly for two things: the manufacture of quality wooden furniture and a remarkable high school band. Most of the town's 8,000 residents worked for Broyhill, Bernhardt, Kent-Coffey, or one of the dozen or so other furniture manufacturers. What was surprising was how many of their sons and daughters played in the high school band.

That band was created in 1924, the product of miscalculation rather than prescience. The local American Legion had formed a band a few years earlier, hoping to march up Main Street on Armistice Day to its own music. When the Legionnaires wearied of all the hard work, the blatts and the squawks, they donated their 24 instruments to the local high school. The Legion's conductor, Captain James C. Harper, a wealthy scion of one of the local furniture families, agreed to give some of his time to the school "just to get things started." The Captain—whose title stuck from his World War I commission—stayed for 50 years, betting his entire life and family fortune on a premise that no foundation board of directors would have accepted—namely, that a handful of mountain children in North Carolina deserved to have a conservatory education absolutely free of charge.

The site of that education was a three-



The Lenoir High School Band in the second year of its existence, 1925–26. The band acquired its first instruments, and two adult members, from Captain Harper's short-lived American Legion Band.

story brick building that stood on West Harper Avenue, directly behind the main school building. It boasted 18 practice rooms, a magnificent rehearsal room, offices and storage rooms, locker rooms for boys and girls, and a library full of music, records, and scores. The band itself had three sets of uniforms, as well as a fleet of buses and instrument trucks to transport it to events around the region, including parades, gubernatorial inaugurations, and halftimes of the Carolina-Virginia football games.

Of the five full-time faculty members, the brass teacher had once played solo cornet in the Sousa Band, the woodwind teacher had studied with the Philadelphia Orchestra's legendary clarinetist, Ralph McLean, and the marching band director was the brother of Metropolitan Opera soprano Dorothy Kirsten. The best instruments in the world at that time—Heckel bassoons, Lorée oboes, Buffet clarinets, Conn horns and trumpets, and Selmer trombones—were made available to band members at no cost. And when I entered the band in 1954, a 30-year tradition of success loomed menacingly overhead, threatening to bring vengeance upon any of us who betrayed the standard.

What resulted from Captain Harper's provincial experiment in music education were instrumental proficiency and professional achievement that defy all demographic probability. From my era alone, the Lenoir High School Band produced the tuba player of the Minnesota Orchestra, the principal bassoonist of the Dallas Symphony, a successful New York free-lance flutist, and the first oboist of the New York Philharmonic. Another "wave" 10 years later yielded the composer in residence of the St. Louis Symphony, a percussionist with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, a prominent North Carolina trumpeter, and a professor of clarinet at the University of

North Carolina. There were dozens of others before and after—the stalwarts of the band who had more than enough talent for careers in music. Many of them remain in Lenoir, still recalling their band experiences as the most challenging and fulfilling of their lives.

We were not a remarkable group. Bassoonist Wilfred Roberts was the son of a cabinetmaker and a schoolteacher; he played organ in Lower Creek Baptist Church and exhibited prize-winning steers at the county fair each year. When she wasn't practicing flute, Katherine Menefee waitressed at her father's café, the Gateway, where the rest of her family pitched in to cook, clean up, and count whatever change had come in by the end of the day. Lynn Bernhardt's father ran the hardware store (which may explain why she chose percussion), and tuba-player Ross Tolbert was a good-natured farm boy with the reddest neck you ever saw.

The point is, we were just average North Carolina kids. What was not average was the band itself. It remains the most effective instrumental training program I have ever known—and proof beyond doubt that talent lies everywhere, waiting to be tapped. If Captain Harper and his colleagues could find children behind mountain rocks and in trailer parks at the end of red clay roads and turn them into competitive classical musicians, then education can accomplish anything.

Unfortunately, Davidson College did not keep musical pace with the Lenoir High School Band, but it did provide the quality liberal education my father insisted I receive. My first appearance as an oboist at college was atop a table in the Phi Delt house, accompanying a pledge brother in "Columbus Stockade Blues," for which achievement I was invited to eat a jar of peanut butter on the spot. The first rehearsal of the college wind ensemble was scarcely more promising, with 12 students (four of them saxophonists) showing up to slog their way through Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture."

In the middle of my sophomore year, I considered transferring to Oberlin, where I could have studied in its outstanding conservatory while pursuing a degree in English. But increasing involvement in orchestras around Davidson gradually compensated for the absence of on-campus opportunities. As well as playing regularly in the Charlotte Symphony and the Greenville (South Carolina) Symphony, I joined a number of pick-up groups and spent my summers as an eight-hour-a-day oboe player at Tanglewood and the Brevard Music Center. Sticking it out at Davidson, I ended up with an excellent transcript and a Fulbright grant to study government support of the arts in West Germany. And it was thanks to the Fulbright that I had the opportunity to seek out the greatest oboist of the 20th century—Marcel Tabuteau.

Born in France, Tabuteau was the archetypal émigré musician, one of the first of the hundreds who staffed America's orchestras in their infancy. He was recruited for the New York Philharmonic by Walter Damrosch in 1903, played for Arturo Toscanini in the Metropolitan Opera until 1913, and then spent 39 years as principal oboist in the Philadelphia Orchestra. During that time, teaching at the Curtis Institute, he created a distinctively "American school" of oboe playing and guided his students to virtual domination of the field. But in 1954, following political battles with musical di-

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rector Eugene Ormandy, Tabuteau returned to France, resolving never to play or teach again.

Sitting at a sidewalk cafe in Nice one March afternoon in 1963, I pondered my chances of meeting the man who had rejected the overtures of oboe students from Curtis, Juilliard, and Eastman for so many years. Captain Harper's favorite advice came to mind at just the critical moment: "Strike while the iron is hot." In one of those 51-to-49 decisions that sometimes make all the difference in life, I got up and walked to Tabuteau's apartment. The great man was not at home, but his maid let me in long enough to write a hasty note explaining who I was and saying that I hoped to return at 8 P.M. "just to shake your hand." When I arrived, Tabuteau himself answered the door and graciously ushered me inside.

"So you're the one!" he exclaimed. "You don't look like an oboe player!"

At dinner that evening, and during the next day, when we explored the nearby fields in search of reed-making oboe cane, Tabuteau treated me like a grandson and told me that I reminded him of himself as a young man. It proved to be a further stroke of good fortune that I had left my instrument in Paris for repairs, because when Tabuteau invited me to return to Nice that summer to study with him, he had never heard me play a single note on the oboe. Only when I returned to Nice in July did he reveal his motive for my unprecedented reception. At age 76 he had one unfinished piece of business—to produce a method book that would codify his principles of the American school of oboe playing. And when Tabuteau met me, an oboe-playing English major, he was sure God had sent him his scribe.

If Davidson opened Tabuteau's door for me that spring, the five weeks of lessons I had with him the following summer opened the door to my professional career, more than compensating for the conservatory training I had never received. Tabuteau astonished me repeatedly with his mastery of elements of playing I had not known even existed. In an eight-note phrase of his own invention, he would trace an arc through time, then change the inflections of notes along the curve in terms of shape, color, and articulation. He would establish a rhythmic pulse, then retard it or speed it up, with magical effect. He adorned his tone with a multilayered vibrato, his melody with ingenious ornamentation. And the effect of it all was to demonstrate, beyond any doubt, that the artistic challenge of playing an instrument is infinite, limited only by a player's imagination, perception, and discipline.

Joseph Robinson, president of the Lenoir High School band, presents Captain Harper with a silver bowl at his retirement ceremony in 1958.

In a letter he penned a year and a half later, in December 1965, Tabuteau promised to help me "join the club of [his] star pupils" if I would return to Nice to assist him with his method book. Tabuteau died just two weeks later, before either of us could put his offer to the test. But almost 12 years to the

day after he wrote that letter, I won the national audition to succeed the great Harold Gomberg as solo oboe of the New York Philharmonic. Ironically, my undergraduate degree played a decisive role again, by sustaining me through the audition process—the most important opportunity in my career.

Auditions are musical decathlons—torturous lists of the most difficult excerpts from the repertory, any of which would be sufficient challenge in a typical subscription concert. Because of this, it is often harder to win an orchestra position than to retain it. An audition tests a player's skills in every direction at once—and usually attempts to do so in under 12 minutes. Adding to the difficulty, I came to the audition with what I was certain was a distinct disadvantage. Although I had played principal oboe in the Atlanta Symphony for six years, I was teaching at the North Carolina School of the Arts when the New York audition was announced. As a result, I knew that the audition committee members had less interest in me than in some of the "very important oboists" who were waiting in the wings when I stepped out onto the Avery Fisher Hall stage to begin playing. But then things seemed to turn my way. Instead of performing for 10 minutes, I was asked to strain in the traces for an hour and 20 minutes, until I could no longer hold my lips on the reed. I flew back to North Carolina confident that my extended trial boded well.

Three days later the Philharmonic's personnel manager, James Chambers, called to tell me that music director Zubin Mehta had judged my tone "too big" for the New York Philharmonic. Two players had been called back, but I was not one of them. At that moment my candidacy for Gomberg's job should have ended. Instead, at 3 A.M.—my Davidson College muse stirring within me—I rose from bed to pen a letter to Chambers, arguing that since it was impossible for any player to surpass Harold Gomberg's heroic tone, the acoustics of the empty stage must have created a misconception. I added that the Philharmonic would not make a mistake by hiring either of the remaining candidates, but it would make a mistake by excluding me "if tone were really the issue."

Several days later, Chambers called again, this time to say that he had read my letter to Mehta in Los Angeles and that they agreed it could not have been "more persuasive or fortuitous." In the final audition, to which I was now invited, I won unanimously—and the winning lottery ticket had Davidson College written all over it.

When I was 16 years old and crazy about the oboe, my father warned me, "Son, this music business is like religion; just don't go off the deep end." In the nearly 40 years since then, I can report that I have been to the musical mountaintop as well as off the deep end. I have performed with Stokowski, Horowitz, and Casals. I have recorded Mahler with Leonard Bernstein, Brahms with Isaac Stern, Tchaikovsky with Emil Gilels, and Dvorak with Yo Yo Ma. Nearly 3,000 concerts have taken me five times to Asia and Europe, and four times to South America. I have appeared on dozens of television programs, many of which still circulate as videotapes around the world. The best moments have been breathtaking, transcendent, and unforgettable, and each reminds me of what Tabuteau once said when I asked him whether he could remember any "best moments" in his long career. Pausing for a moment and looking toward the Alps, he said, "There were a few good notes . . . there were a few good notes . . . and they are still ringing!" Ultimately, it was for the sake of the "good notes" that Captain Harper started so many mountain youngsters on a lifelong quest for musical truth. And certainly it was for their sake that Tabuteau wanted me to write his method book. Without realizing it, I think my father

also touched upon something quintessential in pointing to the connection between music and religion.

Faith in the transcendent and redemptive power of the arts was at the heart of the Rockefeller Panel Report's resounding affirmation in 1965—that "the arts should be for the many and not the privileged few; should be at the center and not the periphery of society." It is a credo that inspired the "culture boom" in America at the time my professional career was just beginning. In fact, I came of age with the National Endowment for the Arts and in a very real sense bet my life on the premises that inspired its creation.

In 1966, the Ford Foundation introduced its colossal program of matching grants for symphony orchestras—the same year Title III programs began spending $75 million annually on arts enrichment in the schools. Arts councils sprang up everywhere; corporations initiated new sponsorships for programs in theater, dance, and painting; experts declared that increased leisure in America would turn us all, if not into Rembrandts, at least into avid consumers of high culture. In such a time of blue-sky optimism, everyone seemed to rush out for an arts tan.

Thirty years later, there has been a serious change of weather. As Martha Wilson, director of an avant-garde theater in New York put it in the *New York Times* recently, "The climate that was once warm is now cold, and we will have to find other ways to survive." Foundations that led the way into arts patronage in the 1960s led the way out in the 1980s; corporations that once contributed, discretely, out of a sense of good citizenship, now wave their sponsorship banners at performing arts events, demanding marketing "bang" for their bucks. These extravaganzas often fill entire concert halls with customers who care more about the pre-performance cocktail party than the performance itself. Even the National Endowment for the Arts is on death row, facing the prospect of fiscal starvation within two years. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars spent to introduce the arts to new consumers in the past three decades, aging and diminishing audiences threaten our most venerable institutions. The national infatuation with the arts now seems to have been only skin deep, and the tan is quickly fading.

What went wrong? I believe a naive assumption underlay thousands of showcase events that were staged throughout the 1970s and '80s in schools, malls, churches and inner-city storefronts. It was the notion that the arts would prove irresistible if they were brought to the uninitiated. Establishing vast bureaucracies of arts administrators and funders, we employed thousands of musicians, actors, dancers, and painters to accomplish the goal. But while enrich-

Joseph Robinson performing in concert with the New York Philharmonic

ment and inspiration did indeed flow from many of the performances, "exposure programs" seemed in general to benefit the performers and producers far more than the audiences.

In my experience as a clinician at hundreds of school concerts of different kinds, I found that very few young observers were more persuaded than impressed by what they witnessed. The lesson we slowly learned was a basic one: it is not enough to hear the "arts language" spoken; children (and adults also) must learn to "speak" it if they are really to get the message.

"What do 80 percent of our audience have in common?" asks Gretchen Serrie, executive director of the Florida West Coast Symphony, in a letter this year to the Knight Foundation. "They have played a musical instrument. It is 'hands-on' musical experience, much more than early concert attendance, that has created our musical audience."

Serrie believes it is our orchestras' greatest failure to have stood by and watched the dismantling of 50 percent of public school instrumental training programs nationwide since 1960. We have only just begun to reap the meager harvest of an educational policy that invested so much money in "show and tell" school concerts and so little in the choirs, bands, and orchestras that would have continued to make our children musically literate.

"Even now," Serrie declares, "we play at children, rather than teach children to play. However creative our programs become, despite all the school concerts, workshops, enrichment programs, and integration of music teaching with other disciplines, there will be no [path] to the Symphony for the next generation unless there are strong instrumental training programs in the public schools."

For me there is no more poignant metaphor for the decline of these programs than the Lenoir High School Band building as it stands—or barely stands—today. The floor is rotting, the ceiling is falling; tiles have dropped from the walls and windows are broken everywhere. The once-exuberant hallways are silent and forlorn. In the name of educational progress, the Lenoir school system was replaced in the mid-1970s by a regional network of schools. The band's instruments and music were distributed among four county high schools; the scrapbooks and endowment, along with other expensive equipment, went to Davidson College (where, ironically, students with musical interests now receive better instrumental training than do students in Lenoir). In short, the Lenoir High School Band no longer exists. Like hundreds of other programs that vanished or were seriously curtailed after the start of the space race, it was a casualty of educational priorities that shifted radically toward math and science and away from the arts and humanities.

Some 2,400 years ago, at the height of a civilization that in so many ways inspired our own, Plato prescribed the ideal curriculum for the most promising children of Athens: music and sport until age 16, then mathematics and moral philosophy to complete the education of future philosopher-kings. His plan has found contemporary endorsement in the work of Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner, who theorizes that the highest manifestations of human intelligence are musical, spatial, kinesthetic, and empathic, as well as mathematical and verbal. Not long ago the *New York Times* reported that college students who listened to a Mozart piano concerto for 20 minutes before taking a strenuous examination did 10 percent better than those who did not. Professor Frances Rauscher, of the University of California at Irvine, has tested young children before and after eight months of regular piano and voice training, and discovered that their spatial perceptions increased 35 percent as a result of musical activity, which enhanced apparently unrelated potentials

within the brain. The startling implication is that music seems to make us smarter. Perhaps Plato was right all along. In any case, it is certainly time to reconsider the idea that human beings need wholeness in their development if they are, as the saying goes, not only to "do the thing right" but to "do the right thing."

With that idea in mind, many American orchestras have begun to forge new partnerships with local schools in hopes of reinstating instrumental training for all students. The most dramatic example of this effort is a project in Boston involving the Boston Symphony, the New England Conservatory, and the WGBH Foundation. At the New York Philharmonic, educational programs are tailored to all ages, while "adopt-a-school" initiatives involve orchestra musicians in on-site teaching, supervision, and teacher training. But well meaning as all such efforts are, they are still inadequate. Orchestras themselves cannot possibly fill the shoes of thousands of music educators and administrators who were once charged with day-to-day music instruction but who now no longer have jobs. In the end what is really needed is to rebuild the Lenoir High School Band and to create about 500 other programs just like it across the United States.

If skeptics think that is impossible, I should add that I recently encountered an astounding high school band that reminded me of Lenoir's. While on tour with the Philharmonic, I was invited to give master classes at a school in a city not far from one of our concert venues. I was met at the local train station by a white-gloved chauffeur, who drove me directly to the front entrance of the school. There I encountered three television crews and dozens of students, some of whom held little bunches of flowers in their hands. The mayor of the city sat in a prominent place as I coached young performers in a woodwind quintet by Jacques Ibert. Then the entire ensemble—about 90 students—appeared in full dress to play a band arrangement of Leonard Bernstein's overture to *Candide*. The piece was performed with feverish intensity in a rendition as memorable for the pride and quality of the students' commitment as for its musical excellence. Afterward, in the director's office, surrounded by a large staff of assistants and dozens of trophies, awards and photographs, I felt strangely at home, once again in the Lenoir High School Band . . . in Okayama, Japan!