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John M. Cipolla
Western Kentucky University, john.cipolla@wku.edu

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Pedagogy of Master Clarinet and Saxophone Teacher, Joe Allard: A Panel Discussion

I.C.A. ClarinetFest® 2008, Kansas City

Transcribed and edited by John Cipolla

Michael Dean (Associate Professor of Music at Southeast Missouri State University) organized a panel discussion about the Pedagogy of Master Clarinet and Saxophone Teacher, Joe Allard. The panel consisted of Deborah McKim, Associate Professor of Music at Hastings College, who wrote a dissertation on Joe Allard, (McKim, Debra Jean. "Joseph Allard: His Contributions to Saxophone Pedagogy and Performance," Published Doctor of Arts Dissertation, University of Colorado, 2000); John Cipolla, Associate Professor of Music at Western Kentucky University, who studied with Allard at The Juilliard School; and James Meyer, bass clarinetist, clarinetist, and saxophonist with the St. Louis Orchestra, who also studied with Allard at Juilliard for five years, then another three years, while stationed in the Army Band at West Point. This article presents an edited transcript of the panel discussion at ClarinetFest® 2008 in Kansas City on July 3, 2008.

McKim: Allard was very much a recognized performer in the New York musical scene in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. His musical activities during the first 35 years of his career were essentially as both a freelance performer and teacher. He didn't perform as a soloist or solo recording artist. Then from the mid-1960s, he curtailed his performing to focus the last 25 years of his career on teaching. Joe taught at Juilliard, Manhattan School of Music, New England Conservatory, and privately, first across from Radio City Music Hall, then from the Carnegie studios, and then out of his home in Tenefly, New Jersey. He had an apartment in New York, but many of his students would come to his home in New Jersey, and usually were invited for a meal because many were "starving" college students.

One of the unique things about Joe, was that he brought his professional performing experience into his teaching, and he influenced an extensive number of clarinetists and saxophonists who, themselves, because prominent performers as well as teachers. Although his performing experiences were not unique to the working musician of the 1930s and 1940s, Allard took the common–place experiences and he found a way to make them intriguing, enlightening and give them purpose. And he used all of his own experiences as pedagogical material as well.

Allard's first serious study of the clarinet began at age 16, when he studied with Gaston Hamlin, the principal clarinetist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Allard recalls that Hamlin conducted those lessons in French, so there was just as much language instruction as there was clarinet instruction. Allard studied very little, formally, after Hamlin returned to France in the early 1930s. His learning from that time on came from experimenting and what he called, investigation. His teacher was any resource that he could glean from. He was a veracious reader—science, especially anatomy, physiology, acoustics, as well as philosophy and religion—anything was fair game for him to make connections to the art of music. He also observed and questioned other musicians, though rarely were they clarinetists or saxophonists. He preferred to glean ideas from vocalists and especially from double reed players. He thought that they had a better understanding of the breath, sound projection, and of resonance, which became very important concepts in Allard's arsenal. He would analyze their physical and musical approach to playing, and then try it out for himself. His descriptions of these concepts were based on this investigation, experimentation, along with the interpretations and writings that he would come across.

Some of his concepts were tongue position, throat position, laryngeal flexibility through the use of overtones and voicing, lip and teeth pressure in the formation of the embouchure, and reed working. Though he was known as a reed wizard, he basically fixed reeds for the immediacy of the moment.

Some considered him a reed expert, some an embouchure expert, others put his concept of line and phrasing at the top of the list because Joe had a solution for any problem, or so it seemed, when talking to his students. When you ask a former Allard student what Joe's legacy is, they will mention the concepts and pedagogy, but it always comes down to this—they will talk about the fact that he was an empath—that he felt what they felt and that he taught them how to teach themselves as well as others. That he inspired them to be lifelong learners.

Cipolla: Joe played both clarinet and saxophone. This stems from his professional/practical experience, which necessitated knowing more than one instrument. His career was in a different era—not so specialized as things are today. There was a variety of musical playing work available in many styles and ensembles. Musicians honed their skills on-the-job, adjusting to the needs of a particular musical situation. Joe played in symphonies but also in dance bands. I think the focus was different then than it is today. He was simply a musician. With Joe, it was more of an emphasis on the actual process of learning to play your instrument and music well. That process lasted over the course of one's lifetime. In Joe's playing career the emphasis didn't seem to be so much on getting the "big" job, but rather to simply learn to be as good a musician as possible. There was also a very practical side to him as well. He had to work to provide for his family. Therefore, he did what he had to do to work as a musician.

His associations with historically outstanding musicians, such as violinist Jasha Heifetz and saxophonist John Coltran, helped him form his concepts of sound production and general musicianship. These experiences were the basis for his teaching. His rapport with his students was very relaxed, positive and encouraging. His lessons were not vocation preparation. They were musicianship preparation. They were more like apprenticeship/mentoring sessions. There were no books assigned and no syllabus. We just sat and talked for an hour and experimented. I never played more than a few lines without him stopping to comment with a story about someone he worked with in his professional playing career, and seamlessly tied the story into what I was doing and how to make it better. I remember many of those stories

all these years later and it is no exaggeration that those lessons impacted my own playing and teaching career more than any other teacher I had.

On his actual teaching concepts, I can summarize them into categories of reeds, overtones, the embouchure, our inner hearing, breathing, the throat and larynx, and phrasing and musicianship. These were the things that we worked on in our lessons. It took a lot of on–the–job trial and error to put his concepts into practice. Things like playing with only enough embouchure pressure to not let the air leak and to allow the reed maximum vibration; using lots of air and using it efficiently to produce a big vibrant and flexible sound; using overtones to learn to naturally feel how much pressure to use with our lower "and" upper lip and also how to place or voice each note; learning how to really let our ears be the primary guide to what our embouchure and body does to produce the sound; learning to not let the sound get constricted by the throat or larynx, but rather to let these be an extension of the instrument; to learn phrasing by listening to other types of instruments, like cellos, great singers, and violinists; and to learn phrasing by singing out loud.

Joe once told me a story about Jasha Heifetz. Once, when playing with Toscanini's NBC Orchestra, and Heiftz was the soloist. Joe was sitting in the orchestra and not playing on that piece. He listened to Heiftz and noticed that he heard quite a bit of extraneous scratching in Heiftz's sound. So Joe went out to the audience to sit and listen from there. When he went out, he noticed that the sound became pure, beautiful, and projected wonderfully. This little story meant more to me in how to learn to project my tone, then anything that anyone else has told me.

For the embouchure, we did an exercise where you take the top teeth off the top of the mouthpiece. This seemed to make me much more aware of my lower lip and jaw pressure against the reed. He also used to talk about developing a chewing motion so as to "feel" the reed with the lower teeth, through the lower lip. This was not to bite, but rather to simply feel and be aware. He also made me aware of the sound possibilities by having me flex my upper lip while playing.

He didn't believe in the drawstring embouchure, where the entire embouchure draws together like a bag with a draw–string. He believed in keeping a flat lower lip like a shelf that the reed can rest on so there is a maximum portion of the lip for the reed to vibrate and have even pressure all across the reed. To keep the lower lip flat, he put toothpicks in the sides of the mouth to keep the corners down and not curled up. He emphasized playing with very little top teeth and top lip pressure on the mouthpiece. This is because he had dentures due to a childhood accident. And thus, he learned to play with very little embouchure pressure and superb air control.

Jim Meyer: I am going to offer ideas that are intended for players to take home and try for themselves. This point of view is from a professional musicians perspective, including many of the demands that come with being a professional player. Joe did indeed teach embouchure not from the point of view of the saxophone, clarinet, or bass clarinet, all of which I studied with him, but his techniques applied to the single reed. His idea was that the lip should function passively, as a pad. The lip should not be an active body, where as the teeth should be an active body. This is a little difficult for us humans to understand because the lip looks like an upper and lower, but it's not. It is one round muscle and we instinctively use it like we do when we drink from a straw. That is not a good idea for a single reed player for a couple of reasons. One is that putting pressure on the sides of the reed is like putting on the hand break on your road bike. It creates resistance. And you are creating a resistance that you are struggling against. Also the sides of the reed is the part that produces the low frequencies of the reed. So wrapping the lip aound the reed, inhibits vibration, and it locks up the response of the low frequencies.

Joe really liked word formations that you could remember easily. The tongue should be high, wide, and stationary. Joe spoke French and there is a syllable to use for that position. It is ou [u]. We don't have that sound in English. This syllable keeps the tongue in a high position. As you move the tongue higher, you have a given volume of air going through a smaller opening at a higher speed. That's where you get air speed. It also pulls the base of the tongue out of the throat, freeing the throat. So the ideas on tongue position are that the tongue is high, wide and stationary.

There are two basic ways to breath. You can breath with your ribs, that is chest breathing, and you can breath abdominally or diaphragmatically. The chest shouldn't move when we breathe. Also, we don't want to get the throat involved in controlling the air stream because it has to change when we play. The throat opens every time you put a finger down and when you lift your fingers, the throat narrows. The throat can't be involved in controlling air speed. A simple exercise to learn this is to tie a piece of string around your ribs just about the middle of shirt pocket level. Make it snug, not tight. Now when you take a big breath and expand your chest, the string tightens. So the only other way you can breathe through the interaction of the abdominal muscles. You may not be able to do it at first, because the two muscle groups are used to working together. All of these concepts really work. I've tried and used them for 42 years in the St. Louis Symphony.

Joe talked about overtones. This is a control exercise. Start on the saxophone on a low C. If you put a little more mouthpiece in your mouth, you get the octave above. Then if you pull the mouthpiece out a bit, it drops back down to the fundamental because the saxophone is unstable in the low register. Then you can continue this by overblowing, with the low C fingering, a G on top of the staff and then a C above the staff. Then try writing out a little melody that is above the staff. Then get those notes with the overtone fingerings. The idea is to blow through this melody with these overtone fingerings. That is a tremendous control exercise for the throat.

Audience comments/questions:

Audience question: *Did Joe Allard ever talk about the tension of the keys of the instrument, such as the spring tension.*

Meyer: Yes, Joe did talk about that. He felt that the spring tension should be even on all the keys. And a good way to learn this was to open and close the keys in slow motion so that you get a glissando. Joe learned that from Ralph McLean. McLean was maybe one of the best clarinet players to ever play on the concert

stage in this country. He was the principal clarinetist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and many of the things I've told you were the practical implementation of McLean's techniques. Joe told me that this was something he learned from McLean. First, even spring tension on all the keys, and second, opening and closing the keys so slowly that the muscle memory learns exactly how much tension it takes to close the key.

Audience question: *The speaker spoke at a David Liebman Video, "Developing a Personal Sound on the Saxophone." The speaker explained an exercise in the book where you play the upper register of the saxophone without the octave key, and then the lower register with the octave key. This teaches the player to be flexible. And the speaker noted that the essence of the video is to develop flexibility.*

McKim: The flexibility is the key to Joe's tonal concepts.

Meyer: There is another similar exercise. Playing a high B♭ with the side fingering, we had to learn to warp down the note in half–steps: B♭ to A, B♭ to A♭, B♭ to G, etc., down the chromatic scale. Cipolla demonstrates this exercise on the clarinet. This teaches flexibility and control.

Meyer: Joe taught the French "eh," through the word, roulette. When I say the word roulette, something does happen to my upper lip. The high tongue position is very important because of the channeling of the air, the air speed, and pulling the tongue out of the base of the throat. I guess any way that you can get these things to work is okay. If you can find a way to get these ideas across, I think Mr. Allard would have approved of that.

Conclusion

As the panel discussion ended, the audience members mingled with the speakers and among themselves. They talked about Joe Allard's concepts and traded stories about Allard and his teaching. There was a relaxed mood that had a comfortably blurred line between the speakers and the audience. Joe's lessons were conducted in this manner—with Joe being as inquisitive as the student he was teaching. Thanks to Mike Dean, who organized this event, and to the organizers of the ClarinetFest® 2008 in Kansas City, the pedagogical ideas of Joe Allard were given center stage at this major international conference.

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