

## A Living Legend — Pierre Pierlot

### An Interview

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**P**ierre Pierlot was born in Paris, and grew up in Avenne-sur-Helpe in North France. He received oboe lessons from Gaston Longatte at the Conservatoire de Valenciennes for three years. Starting in 1941, he studied with Louis Bleuzet at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, and his last teacher was Myrtil Morel of the Garde Républicaine. At the conservatory he won first prizes for oboe as well as for chamber music, and he won the first prize at the famous Concours International de Genève. He founded the Ensemble de Baroque de Paris, with his friend Pierre Rampal, and started the Quintette à Vent de France. With these and many other groups and as a soloist he performed in concerts all over the world. He was the solo oboist of the Société des Instruments à Vent, of the Concerts Lamoureux, of the Opéra Comique and of the Théâtre National de l'Opéra de Paris. In 1969, he was appointed as a teacher to the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, and three years later he was appointed as professor of the oboe. He worked as a guest teacher in Europe and Japan. Pierre Pierlot retired a few years ago.

We met him at his apartment in Paris. We met a very cheerful, and still very energetic man.

*Our logical first question is: How does it feel not to perform any more, after so many years of great international successes as a soloist?*

I still have more than enough to do, and I am very glad I retired at 65. I have played the oboe since I was 12 years old. And the years weigh more for oboists then, say, for flutists. I advised by son to play the flute. And since he had no intention to follow in his father's footsteps he indeed started on that instrument.

He is now solo flutist at the Orchestre National. Seriously, when I turned 65 it was enough for me, so I had no problems with retirement. I play every day for about an hour, but that is only for my own pleasure.

*How did you start with the oboe?*

"Une chose curieuse", I might say. My father



**Pierre Pierlot**

was a "pâtissier" in Avenne-sur-Helpe. He went regularly to the Opéra Comique, and especially loved the flute. However, the oboe was my preference. Later, after some discussion I started, at twelve years, oboe lessons with Gaston Longatte at the Conservatoire de Valenciennes. Three years later, I went to Paris. After the war, I succeeded my teacher as the solo oboist of the Opéra Comique, until 1972. In that year, the Opéra Comique was dissolved; I never did understand why. It was a disaster, because that orchestra had an enormous diversity in its programming; much greater than the Paris Opera. There was the danger that you might fall asleep because of the monotonous programs.

*You have made many records, along the numerous concerts you gave. (Pierlot shows a booklet which contains all his recordings, the first one in 1945). How were you able to combine performing and recording as a soloist with working in an orchestra?*

That was very easy. I had a full time job, but I played with the orchestra half of the time only: fifteen days of playing and then fifteen days off. Therefore we could plan tours, solo concerts and recording sessions very well. Today, that is much more difficult. Once, on tour through Germany, a little boy was absolutely fascinated with the sound of my oboe. He looked at his father and told him "That is what I want to do, too". He became a great oboist in his turn: Lothar Koch. Many years later he told me this story.

*How is the financial situation of the musicians today compared with the old days? And what is your opinion about the number of music students in relation to the few available vacancies?*

As far as I can judge, musicians have a reasonable income today, but everything functions much more strictly. About the many students and the few vacancies: The competitions are very important in France, in the struggle for a job. Luck is a very important element in a competition. You have maybe ten minutes to prove your qualities. However, you can help your luck by studying very hard. And about the oboe: it is my impression that the number of students has increased substantially. However, there are no more excellent, highly talented oboists. And they find their way anyhow.

*About reeds: did you make your reeds?*

Yes, that was the general custom when I was young. I got the wood from the Département Var. One day, I went there to investigate. By sheer coincidence, I discovered that the wife of the owner of a reed company had lived, as a child, in the neighborhood of my parents. That meeting resulted in a car full of bags of cane ("Maison les Roseaux de Var"). They supply me with cane ever since.

I have met many people, who constructed all kinds of machines for making reeds, like the Henri Neuranter family, père and fils, in Lille, and Kunibert Michel in Germany.

*Can you mention some oboists who you particularly appreciate, or have appreciated? What is your opinion about Marcel Tabuteau, the Frenchman who had an enormous success in the U.S.A.?*

Maurice Bourgue is an excellent oboist, in my opinion. I never met Tabuteau; I only know him through his records. He certainly was a prominent performer, but then there were players of an equal level in France.

*In Russia after the war, there was a switch from the German style to a much more French oriented way of playing. Is it a correct conclusion that you played an essential role there?*

I do not know how this switch came about. I do know the end: they had made an enormous technical advance and their way of playing had changed completely. Not surprising, because, through a much improved communication, they learned to understand the Western way of playing. Truthfully, I never taught in Russia; I have even never been there.



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However, I had several students from Russia. Maybe I have had some influence in that way. They had miserable and very old instruments. I gave a master class, with an Argentinian pianist, in the centre of France. There were some students from the region of Tsjernobyl. They had studied recordings from the West, and were much better players than the students some years ago.

*What do you think about vibrato?*

To tell you the truth, I never did understand it. Of course, it has to be natural. It is horrendous if you can hear that it is produced artificially. But I cannot say anything sensible about it.

*We imagine that you could tell us many amusing anecdotes from your long career. Is it true that you played on cruises?*

That is correct. Those cruises were very pleasant. Sometimes they were a bit long, with too much food and too little exercise. And the anecdotes ... Maybe you should come back some day to treat that subject properly. ❖