

Honoring the Past, Nurturing the Future

An interview with John Thorne

By Meret Bitticks

After twenty years with the Houston Symphony Orchestra, flutist John Thorne is pursuing a “second act” as a flute professor at Northwestern University. Introduced to the flute by his babysitter when he was eight, Mr. Thorne received his early music education through the public schools in Westchester County, outside of New York City, and later as a student at the Pre-College Division of the Juilliard School (where his mother taught in the theatre department.) Growing up near New York City enabled him to hear concerts and observe master classes by flutists such as Jean-Pierre Rampal, Julius Baker, and Paula Robison. At age eleven, he heard a recording of Julius Baker and knew he wanted to be able to play with that sound. He went on to study with Baker and John Krell at the Curtis Institute and later privately with Anne Diener Zentner in Los Angeles, where she is principal flutist with the Philharmonic.

I’ve heard Baker students say that he taught mostly by example. What was your experience?

While Julius was very intelligent, he was not the most verbal of teachers. He definitely knew how and what he was doing. I always felt that he could have explained what he was doing. He just didn’t want or choose to explain things to his students. Watching him play, especially the way he held the instrument and the way he produced his tone, was very influential to me.

Baker’s technical expertise was amazing. He was like a good athlete with an intuitive, natural approach to the instrument. Julius wasn’t one to analyze his own playing like William Kincaid was able to do so effectively. Baker practiced until it flowed naturally and sounded the way he wanted, which was apparent in the ease of his playing. Baker worked very hard, practicing many



hours until it became part of his body.

On the other hand, you seem to really have considered how to articulate the mechanics of playing.

It all comes from John Krell and Anne Diener Zentner. They have had the greatest impact on me as a musician and as a teacher. Baker was a great flutist, but Krell was a great teacher and piccolo player. My approach to teaching and phrasing comes from John Krell and Anne Zentner. However, my approach to tone comes from Baker. Hopefully my teaching is a combination of the three of them.

What from the Kincaid tradition do you hope to pass on to your students?

William Kincaid is perhaps the most significant American pedagogue of the Twentieth Century. Through his teaching and playing, he influenced an entire generation of flutists, particularly in his approach to phrasing.

An example would be his grouping of four sixteenth notes as 2-3-4-1 versus 1-2-3-4. He oriented his phrasing towards the arrival or culmination of the phrase, not the departure. He analyzed and explained to his students how to support the line, not just through volume, but also through intensity of the air. Most phrases have forward momentum and then a release of that momentum or tension which listeners will intuitively understand, even if they haven’t listened to a lot of classical music. They can intuitively relate to the tension and the release of tension within a phrase.

Kincaid’s approach to phrasing, as well as his work with Leopold Stokowski (former Music Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra) and Marcel Tabuteau (former Principal Oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra) helped >>>

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establish what used to be known as the Philadelphia style. In his book, *Kincaidiana*, John Krell explains this school of playing in great detail.

Who else has influenced your playing and teaching?

I learned so much from Christoph Eschenbach while he was music director of the Houston Symphony. Christoph always had a clear point of view and a very personal interpretation of each piece. He was not afraid to be expressive in his interpretations and he was also not afraid to take risks. He was very encouraging and supportive of his musicians. He wasn't worried about someone making a mistake, but instead wanted his musicians to feel free. From Christoph, I learned to be generous with an audience. It is so important to give of yourself and be willing to be vulnerable onstage. I believe that the "bullet proof" performer that orchestras so often prize aren't always the most interesting performers for an audience to listen to.

How do you help students develop as performers and pass on what you learned from Krell, Baker, and Eschenbach in your own teaching?

For each student it's different. You're looking to help them find who they are as a performer. There are a lot of technical issues to straighten out first: posture, hand position, embouchure, use of air, vibrato, articulation, etc. These are the skills we need in order to have full command of the instrument. They also allow us to express ourselves musically. My main goal is not just technical competence, but to help students learn how to communicate with an audience and express themselves in their own ways; to help them develop who they are as performers and as musicians. After all, the goal of the teacher is to become obsolete.

You've taught at universities before, what do you look for in prospective students?

Basically I am looking for potential, which is a certain affinity for the instrument and for expressing oneself through the flute. For all of us, there are always skills to work on and improve, whether we are eighteen or eighty-eight. In young players, I look for a good rhythmic sense, awareness of pitch, command of the instrument, and the ability to be expressive. I also look for someone who will make the studio a happy and cohe-

sive group. We learn the most from our colleagues and I encourage a spirit of collaboration. The idea that you're competing against other members of the studio is just not healthy. How someone else plays has no bearing on how we play or perform ourselves. It is important to learn from what someone else does well.

There's certainly a long history of great flute pedagogy at Northwestern, do you have any goals for the program?

Overall, I hope to continue to build upon the great flute studio that Wally Kujala and Dick Graef have established at Northwestern University. My goal in my own teaching is to take the training I received from Julius Baker, which was mostly focused on execution, and apply that to John Krell and Anne Zentner's teaching regarding expression, phrasing, and communicating with an audience. I hope to pass on what I have learned from them for the next generation to build upon.

In addition, I've put into place some new initiatives. We built a new website for the studio (northwesternflutes.com), which is a great resource for prospective students. The website was built by one of the graduate assistants, Lisa Meyerhofer, and she did a great job. We started having a studio recital once a quarter where all the members of the studio perform. I also added an orchestral excerpts class, where each week we study either two standard excerpts or an entire work, such as *Daphnis and Chloe*. For pieces like *Daphnis*, we play through the entire Second Suite as a section, so that the students have an opportunity to learn how the flute parts fit together as a whole.

I also try to bring in one or two guest artists each quarter. This year Leone Buyse, Mathieu Dufour, Marianne Gedigian, and Stephanie Mortimore have given masterclasses at Northwestern. All the flute masterclasses are free to the public and open to the flute community. I hope that members of the Chicago Flute Club will join us next year. CFC members can find out about these classes and upcoming Northwestern flute recitals, ensemble concerts, and faculty performances at the Northwestern Flute Studio website.

I'm glad Chicago has such a strong flute club. It's an important resource for the flute community!

Flute Festival 2013
November 8-10, 2013
Hilton Orrington, Evanston