Oboe Reeds and Contemporary Music.

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I would like to be able to say that below there is a foolproof way to make reeds for contemporary music performance. As usual with oboe reeds there is not! As a general guiding principle good reeds are good reeds and are therefore often usable for contemporary music. However see below for some tips.

This brief article is meant only as a guideline for those interested in performing contemporary music and, more specifically, contemporary music which places extra demands upon the reed and performer (extreme high range, multiphonics and so on) and wondering which reeds are most suited to this area of performance. The article is a developed version of several paragraphs in the middle of an article I wrote for the IDRS Journal [*Redgate, Christopher. Developing the Altissimo Range of the Oboe: The Double Reed, Journal of the International Double Reed Society, 33/4 (2010): 81-95*] and the BDRS Journal [*Redgate, Christopher. The Altissimo Range of the Oboe: Double Reed News, Journal of the British Double Reed Society, 93 (winter 2010): 12-18*] on the subject of the altissimo range. I have assumed that anyone reading this has a thorough knowledge of reed making!

Many oboists suggest that any style of reed can be used to perform contemporary music. Indeed every reed style can be found being used; long scrapes, short scrapes, thicker gouges and thinner. My personal experience suggests that a good reed, which will do what I ask of it in the performance of standard music, will also be the reed I use for contemporary music. There are some exceptions where, as with any music, I may choose one reed over another because it excels in a particular area. As with all discussions concerning reeds the fine detail is very individual. What one performer considers a free reed another will still find harder to blow and you will probably be able to find a performer who does exactly the opposite of what is suggested and is successful. The general guidelines below, therefore, should be modified to the individual requirements. Having said that, if you are struggling then do experiment with these suggestions.

Light(er) Reeds

Every writer who touches this subject suggests that the reed should be free, or light to blow. This is important for many reasons not least that a great deal of contemporary writing is very demanding for the performer and a reed which is too tough may well cause stamina problems in addition to problems of response to some of the exacting demands asked of it. There is a requirement from many contemporary techniques for the kind of response only a light reed can offer.

A lighter reed than the performer is used to may cause problems with sound quality. Roxburgh offers the following advice:

'Less wood in the reed than usual will certainly produce a slightly thinner sound, which many players might consider too much to ask. There is no compromise. Players approaching this part of the repertoire for the first time are well-advised to begin with a very easy reed. Facility and ease of production diminish the problems by half, and the conditions of the embouchure for less conventional demands will

gradually mature to compensate for any thinness initially experienced.' [Goossens, L., and Roxburgh, E., *Oboe*, (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977).

It has been my experience that when a reed needs to be lighter then further thinning of the tip, leaving the heart in good shape, has produced the greater response levels I require without compromising the quality of the sound.

The lighter reed is particularly important for a range of techniques including the altissimo range, some multiphonics, flutter-tonguing and response to the virtuoso leaps around the instrument that are often to be seen today.

I have seen the suggestion that one should use a harder reed. I totally disagree with this. Yes, it can help sometimes in the production of the top notes but the cost is too great and can lead to poor habits as well as causing real problems in a demanding recital.

Tip Opening

The opening at the tip is a second area for discussion. Libby van Cleve suggests '...extreme high notes are played more easily with lighter reeds and narrower openings'. [Cleve, Libby Van, *Oboe Unbound*, (The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2004).] I thoroughly agree with this comment, I have found that narrower openings can be very beneficial in the execution of the altissimo range. The one down side is that they can sometimes inhibit the higher dynamic levels in this range. However, if you are going to use your teeth on the reed a great deal, (for multiphonics, high range etc.) then a wider opening is preferable. It can be more resilient to the use of teeth and often offers a wider range of dynamics. Narrower openings can be closed so easily by the use of teeth unless you are very proficient! (It should be remembered that the way in which the high range is produced is different when using teeth or when using the standard embouchure. The use of teeth effectively shortens the vibrating length of the reed to obtain the high range while the standard embouchure relies more on the speed of the breath through the reed.) One other problem sometimes appears when opening is narrow: the responses to some techniques can be limited.

Scrape Length

It is possible that a shorter scrape could give an advantage for the altissimo range pitches and may offer more dynamic range in that register but I have yet to form an opinion on this. The length of the tip can have an effect. My experience suggests that a short tip, 1- 1½ mm, is ideal. I have found that longer tips, particularly for the altissimo range, can be a problem.

Reed Wiring

Wiring the reed is another of those thorny issues. A number of writers are very opposed to wiring, and especially so when it comes to contemporary techniques. I have, at different times in my life used both wired and unwired reeds. As a generalization I have found no real difference in their effect on the production of contemporary techniques. The only significant problem that I have encountered is when placing the teeth on the reed or producing multiphonics that require a great

deal of reed in the mouth the wire can catch the lip. I have been able to get around the problem by wrapping some silicon tape around the reed which protects the lip: this however has been rare. I have noticed that wire can have a positive influence on altissimo range pitches. Either by pushing the wire a little further up the reed or by deliberately wiring the reed around the halfway point on the cane. I suspect that this has a similar effect on the reed to placing the teeth on it. It obviously needs to be done with care otherwise the performer may find that other responses are poor.

Staple (Tube) Choices

I have recently been using Chiarugi adjustable staples. The reeds I have made on these staples have a much better response for the high notes and produce greater consistency. These staples are really worth a try.

To Sum Up

Out of all the comments and suggestions above the single most important area to research is the use of a ‘light’ reed, one that responds really well and does not exhaust you when playing. If you are encountering difficulties then this is the starting point.