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Looking Back At The Career Of Fred Ormand

by Phillip O. Paglialonga

My first experience with Fred Ormand was during a horrible blizzard. I had traveled by train from Chicago to have a lesson with him in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Unfortunately for me the friend who had agreed to pick me up at the train station could not get his car started, so without hesitation I simply began the bitter cold walk to Mr. Ormand's home which was a mile or two from the station. As I struggled through the snow for my lesson with Mr. Ormand I couldn't help but wonder if it would all be worth it.

By the time I reached the driveway I was sure nothing he would say could be worth the trouble. I could not have been more wrong; the lesson was fantastic. Within a short period of time he identified several fundamental problems and then gave me the tools to overcome these issues. As I headed for the door I was excited to get home to work on what I had just learned, but dreading the long walk back to the train station. Something in my expression must have given it away because he quickly asked how I had gotten to his house. I then explained the situation to him and before I knew it he was driving me through the snow to the train station!

The station was quite crowded prompting several people to brave the cold as they waited for the train. Seeing this, Mr. Ormand pulled into a vacant parking space where we could see the train as it approached and waited with me in the car for my train. Those minutes in the car forged my relationship with Mr. Ormand, as well as taught me much more about clarinet playing and teaching than your average clarinet lesson.



Fred Ormand
(photo: David Weiss)

This past July Mr. Ormand was honored at ClarinetFest® in Kansas City for his long and distinguished career as a performer, teacher and scholar. This included a tribute recital in which several of his former students performed and spoke about their experiences with Mr. Ormand.

In retirement Mr. Ormand has shifted his focus towards the golf course, but still finds time to make himself available to those students seeking help through private lessons, master classes and his new Web site <www.fred-ormand.com>.

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The following excerpts are from an interview with Fred Ormand that took place in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on August 18, 2007:

POP: When did you start clarinet and who was your first teacher?

FO: I started clarinet in Mount Pleasant, Texas in a Music Man situation. The school system hired a band director to start an instrumental program. He did this in the high school and junior high and they came and played for the grade school. This was advertisement for a summer program. We bought the instruments and he left town. We moved shortly thereafter and I didn't do anything with the clarinet for a year. While living in Quanah, Texas, Edwin Estes, who had played in a number of dance bands around the Dallas-Fort Worth area came home to visit his mom. He gave lessons and got me really started. Shortly thereafter we moved to Plainview, TX, where I started





Fred Ormand and Lee Morgan, principal clarinetist of the Royal Danish Orchestra and former student

lessons with Robert "Chief" Davidson. He was really the one responsible for getting me involved in music. He had studied with Joseph Schreurs in the Chicago Symphony while playing the music theaters and summer bands in the Chicago area. When that business dried up, he got a music education degree and came back to Texas. He had an extremely successful high school band there for over 25 years. He taught clarinet and was a really excellent teacher. Our high school held first chair in the Texas All-State band for five consecutive years, and I had it for three of those. Nobody was teaching clarinet in Texas like he was at that time.

POP: So at what age or grade did you start?

FO: Summer after the third grade I guess it was.

POP: And after your studies with Davidson...

FO: I came to the University of Michigan because of playing for Dr. Revelli¹ in the Texas All-State band.

POP: Did you know anything about Alberto Luconi² at that point, or was it just Revelli?

FO: No, just Revelli [chuckles]. Revelli recommended that I study with Luconi. Luconi had come to this country in an orchestra led by Toscanini, and had basically jumped ship and stayed in the United States. He settled in Detroit and taught there many years and in the university, and was an incredible

musician. He could solfege anything, could transpose like a fiend, played a glass mouthpiece with number 1 ½ reeds, double lip of course. He could sit at the piano and play operas from memory. (I recently spoke with his niece who lives in Philadelphia and who has two children who are musicians.)

POP: Seriously, a Vandoren 1 ½?

FO: Yes. He always seemed to look for the best cane with great vibration.

POP: Did he play single lip?

FO: No, double. But he didn't try to teach anyone double lip.

POP: Were you a performance major?

FO: No, Music Ed.— Instrumental. Went to Michigan State directly after because I thought I was being drafted. I auditioned for the West Point Band and got in and then flunked the physical.

POP: [laughs] I would have never thought you would flunk a physical!

FO: I went to Michigan State because they started late and I had studied with Keith Stein at the National Music Camp. He was again a real mentor to me in many ways, both as a teacher and as a teacher of teachers.

POP: So if you had to give one or two big things you really got from Luconi...

FO: Musicianship. Phrasing and musicianship.

POP: And then from Mr. Stein?

FO: Sound and solid basics. It should have been the other way around, but it just

happened that that was the way it went. Stein was really terrific at emphasizing the basics for good clarinet playing.

POP: When you talk about basics, would you say that these basics are the same as in his book?³

FO: With one exception. He changed a great deal after he wrote the book in relation to the chapter on breathing. He later learned of the Alexander Technique from Alexander Murray and it changed his whole thought process about breathing.

POP: You were at Michigan State for two years?

FO: Actually for one year, and I got the job at Amarillo College⁴ after the first year even though I hadn't finished the degree. By the way, I was doing a woodwind specialist degree — flute, oboe and bassoon as well as clarinet. I went to Amarillo to teach at Amarillo College and to conduct the band and to play principal clarinet in the Amarillo Symphony Orchestra conducted by A. Clyde Roller.

POP: You got the job as a clarinet teacher and you ended up doing these other things?

FO: Yes. I went back to Michigan State the following summer and finished the degree and then continued to teach at Amarillo College for two more years. We had formed a woodwind quintet there which was hired almost intact to go to the Interlochen Arts Academy to be in residence there. While at the Academy, I had a year's leave of absence for a Fulbright scholarship to study with Bernard Walton at the Royal College of Music.⁵

POP: And then from Walton what two big things would you say you learned?

FO: Walton was extremely good about teaching an approach to the clarinet that you could use anywhere. Well, I should say that Walton said, "You know, if you end up playing like me you'll never be able to work in the United States." I said I understood that but I wanted his ease and his beauty of playing that he achieved. By the way there is a new record out, which I picked up in Edinburgh when I was there, on Testament Records. It has the Mozart Clarinet Concerto and the Brahms Clarinet Quintet and a tribute from Jack Brymer about Walton. Von

Karajan⁶ at one time said he was the outstanding clarinetist of his time.

POP: And then you returned to the United States and what then...

FO: Continued to teach at Interlochen.

POP: Was that the point that you met Mr. Marcellus?⁷

FO: In 1969 I went down to Battle Creek to hear him play the Debussy Rhapsodie with the Cleveland Orchestra, and met him afterwards. The following fall I started traveling down to Cleveland to study with him when I could manage to get away. It was a real wonderful time as I would often have a lesson and then stay for the Cleveland Orchestra concert on Saturday night.

POP: How familiar were you with his playing before that point?

FO: At that time he was THE orchestral guru of clarinet playing. Because of the threats to close Interlochen Arts Academy and be without a job, I started taking orchestra auditions so it was natural that I would want to go study with him.

POP: Then what would you say about Mr. Marcellus – two biggest things...

FO: Just the immense knowledge of literature

POP: By literature you mean...

FO: Orchestral literature and the solo and chamber music repertoire that he taught. I really coached a lot of that with him over that time.

POP: And is there another thing you would single out?

FO: The other thing that he really worked with me on a great deal was the articulation and the depth of sound. People that heard me play noticed it right away.

POP: By "depth of sound," you mean resonance, size of sound?

FO: Yes and the focus to the tone.

POP: About how long a period were you studying with him?

FO: Probably about two years. We stayed in touch after that quite regularly.

POP: Is this time period when you moved to Chicago?

FO: In 1973, I was offered the one-year appointment at Northwestern University to replace Jerry Stowell,



Fred Ormand (age 26)

who had just died of cancer. During that time I took the audition for the symphony and was one of the four finalists. Solti⁸ invited me to continue playing with the symphony through the rest of that year, as Larry Combs was committed in Montreal.

POP: So when Mr. Combs was committed in Montreal, you played with the Chicago Symphony?

FO: I taught a full load at Northwestern and literally played a full service every week with the Chicago Symphony.

POP: When you left Chicago...

FO: I went to Fredonia, New York for one year. At that time David Shifrin was the principal clarinetist in Cleveland, and he invited me to come down and sub with the Cleveland orchestra a couple of different times. The following year I went to Michigan State University.

POP: What differences did you find between the Cleveland Orchestra and Chicago Symphony?

FO: Both orchestras were great; both had their own personality. Chicago reflected Solti's approach to music, while Cleveland still maintained Szell's approach to music. If you listened to their recordings you can hear the difference.

POP: How about teaching? How did you first get into teaching, or learn how to teach? Or did you just figure it out on the way?

FO: [laughs] That's a good one. When I was teaching at Amarillo College, I was teaching 45 junior high and high school students all on the side to make a living. Those were half-hour lessons, which was not so bad. Basically at that point I followed Keith Stein's approach, because he always said that even when he was teaching at the university he always tried to keep a junior high or a high school student as a student that he would teach every year, just to remind himself of those fundamental things.

POP: So you started off with Mr. Stein's ideas and gradually developed your own ideas...

FO: Right. When I started teaching at the Interlochen Arts Academy, as the level of the student went up there, there were three students that really stood out. David Shifrin was the student who really stood out among all of them. Teaching somebody that talented, you learn what things to insist on and what things to stay out of their way on. David reminded me this summer that he still has the report cards that I wrote. His mother had saved them, and before she died she gave them to him. He said the one that stands out said "If David

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Performing the Mozart Concerto with the Shanghai Symphony in 1989

would practice as much for his lessons as he does for the concerto competition he would advance a lot quicker," or something to that effect.

POP: So after you left Interlochen...

FO: I taught at Northwestern for one year; then went to Fredonia for one year; and then to Michigan State University for seven years, Florida State for two years, and then 23 at Michigan.

POP: So when you started teaching at these major universities after you'd been at Interlochen, how did your approach change with the university level?

FO: I just simply found the same thing you're going to find today. And Marcellus had emphasized this too; just having very solid fundamentals and applying that to more advanced repertoire, let's say. So I kept working with that.

POP: But when you were teaching the high school students, you felt you still gave them the same theoretical understanding you were given...

FO: I think so. David still gives me credit for really setting him up as a clarinet player.

POP: At what point did you start doing your Ponchielli research and how did that come about?

FO: I had learned of Il Convegno from a student who found it in the Library of Congress in Washington, and I happened to play it with one of my graduate students at Florida State. I

noticed there were several mistakes in it. When I came to the University of Michigan, I had also performed the Quartetto at the Grand Teton Music Festival and had some questions about it, and then I had heard of a third Ponchielli piece called Paolo e Virginia, that had been recorded on an LP but was not available any place. So I put forth a research grant to go study these scores and make editions of them. I was awarded a grant which I used during my sabbatical year, which was '88 or '89. I was just incredibly lucky with the people I was put in contact with there; and that relationship has continued until this day. Licia Sirch, now the librarian in the Conservatorio in Milano, has been a huge help in this regard and she helped me to find the missing parts to Ricordanza della Traviata.

POP: What are the biggest things you've seen change in the clarinet world during your career?

FO: There are several things. I would say the quality of the instrument has gotten better; the quality of the mouthpieces has gotten better; the level of advancement of the younger player today is much quicker due to the fact that we have distilled all the information that we had over 50 years and can present it to the student that much quicker and with fewer distractions to it.

POP: Would you say that the typical student starting in your studio now is more or less the same type of student you would have had earlier in your career?

FO: Teaching at the University of Michigan, I would say that there are two things that are very much present in the clarinet studio. There are students who really have a desire for a profession in music, and also the fact that they generally come with a very high level of intelligence. Definitely, the total level of playing in the clarinet studios is much higher than when I was a student at the University of Michigan.

POP: So if you had to give some advice to aspiring clarinetists, generally, then what things would you tell them to be doing?

FO: Number 1: listen. Good recordings, go to live recitals, hear as much music as you possibly can, and literally compare what they sound like to the really good recordings. Then seek out the teachers who are consistently producing good students. Try to get good equipment as quickly as you possibly can. Those would be some of the things... but mainly develop their musicianship by listening. This includes listening to great singers, string players and pianists. It's no good to have all the tools and not know what to do with them.

POP: How about people aspiring to be teachers?

FO: I think that every clarinetist that is a performer should be a teacher. I think that it's our responsibility to pass on the knowledge that we have to students and I think every teacher should be a performer. I do my best teaching when I'm practicing and maintaining my skills on the instrument.

POP: So, to aspiring teachers you would say "learn how to perform, and cultivate both?"

FO: Definitely.

POP: Are there any things in the field, whether it be teaching or scholarly interest that you think people should be exploring? Is there an area you think has been neglected?

FO: This is tooting my own horn, but clarinet players need to stop complaining about reeds and start learning to deal with them.

POP: So do you think people need to take individual responsibility for it, or do you think people need to change... is it the way we're using commercial reeds, or...

FO: I think players need to learn how to deal with commercial reeds, or to make their own reeds from cane, but my approach has always been to adjust commercial reeds. I can do the other, but first off all the commercial reed makers get the best cane. The tube cane that is left over is maybe not quite as high quality.

POP: Do you have a general teaching philosophy?

FO: The thing that has always troubled me about teaching that I articulated to Paul Boylan⁹ when I came to the University of Michigan was we're producing so many clarinetists and there's no place for them to go. It has always been my philosophy to prepare my students to go out and work in the music profession in some way. I like the statement that Mitchell Lurie made several years ago, and I can't remember the exact words, but it was "there is always room at the top." I had it on my door for years and they took it away. But if a student wants to be in music, then I want to give him the tools to do whatever he needs to do to work in music, either going to a community and opening a teaching studio and becoming a part of the performance network of that community, or auditioning for the biggest orchestras in the country and going there, or the military bands, or whatever. But I've always had a driving desire to see that the students were able to go on. That's basically what's driven me over the years. I felt like it's so much more difficult today than it was when I was coming up, just because there are so many better players. Somewhere in there I should say that the reason I emphasize the listening so much is that we have these players with phenomenal technique and facility today and it's very easy to make that the main goal when the real goal is to make music exciting so that people want to come and listen to it.

Published Works by Fred Ormand

The Single Reed Adjustment Manual,
Amilcare Publications, 2000.

Editions of the Music of Amilcare Ponchielli by Fred Ormand

*Gran Duetto Concertato for B \flat and E \flat
Clarinets with Band accompaniment*
by Amilcare Ponchielli (adapted for

modern bands by Henry Howie),
Amilcare Publications.

*Gran Duetto Concertato for B \flat and E \flat
Clarinets with Piano* (by Luigi Bassi),
Amilcare Publications.

Il Convegno for 2 Clarinets and Band
(based on band scores of the period),
Dorn Publications, 1994.

Il Convegno for 2 Clarinets and Orchestra
(original orchestration by the
composer), Dorn Publications, 1994.

Il Convegno for 2 Clarinets and Piano
(based on Ponchielli's manuscript),
Dorn Publications, 1994.

*Il Convegno for 2 Clarinets and String
Quintet* (anonymous arranger in 19th
century), Dorn Publications, 1994.

*Paolo e Virginia for Violin, Clarinet, and
Piano*, Amilcare Publications, 2000.

*Quartetto for Flute, Oboe, B \flat Clarinet and
E \flat Clarinet, with Orchestra* (original
orchestration by composer).

*Quartetto for Flute, Oboe, B \flat Clarinet,
and E \flat Clarinet with Piano* (based on
Ponchielli's manuscripts (in progress)).

*Ricordanza della Traviata for Flute,
Oboe, Clarinet, and Piano*, Amilcare
Publications, 2000.

Fred Ormand Discography

**Il Convegno: Premiere Recording of
Solo Works for Winds** by Amilcare
Ponchielli. Danacord Records:
DADOC 471.

Extensions of the Tradition by William
C. Banfield with Lynette Diers Cohen,
Fred Ormand, Ellen Weckler, and Harry
Sargous. Innova Recordings.

Hindemith: Sonatas for Woodwinds
with Fred Ormand, Leone Buyse, Harry
Sargous, and Anton Nel.

**Of Shepherds, Romance and Love - 19th
Century Songs for Soprano, Clarinet,
and Piano** with Julia Broxholm, Martin
Katz, and Fred Ormand. Danacord
Records - DACOCD 538.

**Transcience—A Musical World of Works
for Soprano, Clarinet, and Piano** with
Julia Broxholm, Martin Katz, and Fred
Ormand. Equilibrium 85.

ABOUT THE WRITER...

Phillip O. Paglialonga is assistant professor of clarinet at Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida. He did his undergraduate study at DePaul University where he was a student of Chicago Symphony Principal Clarinetist Larry Combs and earned both a master's and a doctorate from the University of Michigan as a student of Fred Ormand and Daniel Gilbert. He has held positions with the Sarasota Opera Orchestra in Florida, New Jersey's Haddonfield Symphony and has performed with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic, Kalamazoo Symphony and the Windsor Symphony in Ontario amongst others. He has also participated in numerous summer festivals including the National Repertory Orchestra, the Music Academy of the West, and Lake George Opera in Saratoga, New York. He has authored several articles for *Keynotes Magazine* and *School Band & Orchestra* which are available on his Web site <www.thefirstgissilent.com>.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ William D. Revelli, Director of Bands at the University of Michigan 1935-1971.
- ² The Professor of Clarinet at the University of Michigan at the time.
- ³ Keith Stein, *The Art of Clarinet Playing* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred, 1958).
- ⁴ Amarillo, TX
- ⁵ London, England.
- ⁶ Herbert von Karajan, legendary conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic.
- ⁷ Robert Marcellus, who was then the principal clarinetist of the Cleveland Orchestra.
- ⁸ Georg Solti, the music director of the Chicago Symphony.
- ⁹ Former Dean of the University of Michigan School of Music

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