



Richard Woodhams in a studio class with students William Welter, Rex Yape, Joshua Lauretig, Corbin Stair, and Cassie Pilgrim PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

## Liquid Fluency

RICHARD WOODHAMS TRANSMITS A CHERISHED TRADITION TO HIS OBOE STUDENTS.

BY DIANA BURGWYN

When Daniel Matsukawa arrived for his first rehearsal as principal bassoon of the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2000, he wasn't sure how to approach his colleague in the principal oboe chair: Richard Woodhams, with whom he had studied woodwind repertoire at Curtis. After all, Mr. Woodhams had been a formidable presence—a man whose strong work ethic and devotion to his art were legend among students.

“Hi, Mr. Woodhams,” he said.

“Call me Dick,” said his new colleague with a smile. That changed everything.

“Especially for rookies in the profession, Dick Woodhams is nothing but supportive and encouraging and warm” to younger players trying to establish themselves, says Mr. Matsukawa.

But in lessons, being supportive doesn't keep Mr. Woodhams from demanding the best. With students he maintains a polite, soft-spoken manner. Still, nothing gets past him: a faulty rhythm, questionable intonation, a tone inconsistent with the mood of a piece, phrasing that is unconvincing, or any other infringement on the integrity of the music. “No,” he says, and “try it again”—until it is right.

“Mr. Woodhams is very invested in his students,” says Corbin Stair, who will graduate from Curtis in May and was recently appointed second oboe of the Cleveland Orchestra. “He creates an intense environment so that we will be able to deal with stressful situations when we go out into the real world. And he brings his own prodigious understanding of music to us.”

That does not mean he expects others to take on his interpretations. “Rather, he wants to enhance the individuality of each player,” says Katherine Needleman, principal oboe of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and a former student of Mr. Woodhams at Curtis. “He always encouraged us to develop our own artistic voice.”

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Mr. Woodhams coaches William Welter.  
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

“Every time I hear him play, I am—without exaggeration—awestruck and inspired,” says Mr. Matsukawa.

Like all great musicians, Mr. Woodhams has a unique and immediately recognizable sound on his instrument. Former Curtis student Robert Walters, principal English horn at the Cleveland Orchestra and the oboe professor at Oberlin Conservatory, describes this distinctive timbre with particular eloquence. “There is an utterly liquid fluency to Dick Woodhams’s voice on the oboe that is unmistakable,” he says, “an unparalleled cultivation in the quality of his sound as he glides seamlessly from one note to the next. It’s as if the material particularity of his instrument simply dissolves and there is no membrane of actual wood between him and the listener; what remains is purely voice.”

“I often think,” says Mr. Matsukawa, “that I have the best seat in the house because I’m right behind him, and every time I hear him play, I am—without exaggeration—awestruck and inspired.”

#### A PROUD TRADITION

In the past century, there have only been three principal oboists at the Philadelphia Orchestra. As the third in this lofty line, Mr. Woodhams is the bearer of a proud tradition that has been passed on to generations of students at Curtis. That tradition began with the French-born Marcel Tabuteau.

“Tabuteau’s music-making was both vivid and refined,” says Mr. Woodhams, “and he was constantly searching for the best way to express great music through phrasing, nuance, and proportion rather than just playing with a beautiful sound, which he had as well. It was said of him that he never played a meaningless note.

“I try to keep his approach alive and relevant in the present. His ideas were timeless and grounded in basic principles first expressed centuries ago.”

Mr. Tabuteau’s successor, John de Lancie (who also served as director at Curtis from 1977 to 1985) built upon his teacher’s foundation, commissioning works for oboe by Jean Françaix and Benjamin Lees. Mr. de Lancie also suggested to Richard Strauss that he write an oboe concerto, which Strauss ultimately did. The resulting work is now beloved by oboists and audiences, as is the Françaix *Flower Clock*.

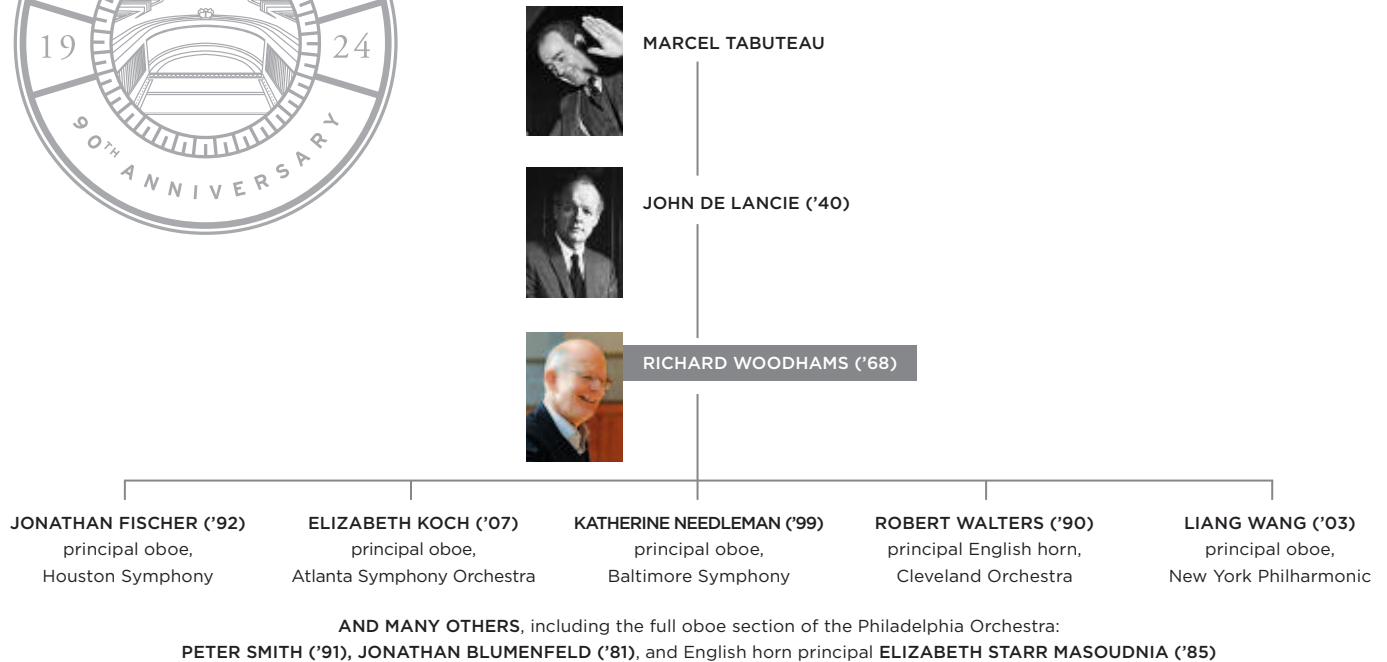
“From the first time I heard him as a kid, I was enthralled by his playing,” recalls Mr. Woodhams. “It was both bright and dark in timbre, light and clear but with weight and depth. And it was always thoughtful. Even the tuning A-440 he gave in the orchestra was exquisitely cultivated.” From his students Mr. de Lancie expected the highest standards—“but he was supportive in the end if they did their best.”

Both Mr. Tabuteau and Mr. de Lancie, who taught Mr. Woodhams, had their students play only études, long tones, scales, arpeggios, and—occasionally—duets during their lessons. The idea was for students to learn basic principles of musicality that they could then apply



## HEIRS TO A LEGACY

Curtis alumni and students benefit from an extraordinary lineage. Richard Woodhams connects several of today's major orchestra principals to the traditions handed down from John de Lancie and Marcel Tabuteau.



to any music. Mr. Woodhams has modified that approach, given today's stiff competition among young oboists for rare openings in major orchestras; he often works with them on music they might have to play in auditions. But he worries that constant exposure to the same great music can cause musicians to play by rote, without the spontaneity and imagination that are so important. "Every time the Philadelphia Orchestra plays a great masterpiece, like the Brahms First Symphony," he says, "I try to imagine that I've never heard it before—which of course is far from the truth—just to keep the thrill alive and the music fresh."

Mr. Woodhams' curiosity and openness to new ideas extend to culture, politics, history, language, literature. His vocabulary is so rich that students find themselves running to dictionaries to learn the meaning of abstruse words he used in a lesson. Precise language is important to him, especially when it concerns music.

"There's a term that I really hate applied to classical music and that's 'the music industry.' Every time I hear it, I cringe, because I encourage my students not to play in an industrial way," Mr. Woodhams declares. "Music is many things; it's an art, a profession, a craft, but it should not be something manufactured. It is a medium of expression for so many thoughts and feelings. It touches our humanness in an inexplicable way, if we are receptive to it. At its very best, it represents the highest aspirations and achievements of humanity.

"We need this idealism—now more than ever."

Once graduated, students of Mr. Woodhams, a large number of whom take on key positions in major orchestras throughout the country, remain extremely loyal to him. For his 60th birthday a few of them planned a surprise party. So many attended that they could have formed a chamber-sized oboe orchestra.

Among them, of course, was the full oboe contingent of the Philadelphia Orchestra—every one of them a Curtis graduate. ♦

*Diana Burgwyn is a Philadelphia-based writer whose articles have appeared in Overtones, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and Symphony, among other publications.*

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