L’Esprit Français

The Mysterious Workings of the French Flute School

by Nina Perlove
O MOST OF THE WORLD, Paris is best known for the Eiffel Tower, high-fashion boutiques, and gourmet cuisine, but to flutists, the city may be as famous for its conservatoire as it is for its croissants. For over a century, the Paris Conservatory has served as an international center of flute pedagogy and performance, producing many of the world's finest concert flutists. To outsiders, the inner workings of the French School remain obscure and its indisputable success difficult to emulate. Flutists from around the globe flock to Paris for a chance to understand the French musical mystique.

Leone Buyse, Ransom Wilson, Linda Chesis and Robert Stallman are only a few of the many prominent American flutists who were trained in France. As students, they were immediately struck by the high level of playing they encountered. Soloist and recording artist Robert Stallman recalls feeling as if he had stumbled upon something completely new. "In 1968, the French students were playing circles around the Americans," he explains. "In the United States, we focused on orchestral training, whereas the French were true virtuosi. I heard playing I never thought possible—incrédible détaché [articulation], long phrases, beautiful and effortless tone production."

Leone Buyse, former Boston Symphony Principal Flutist and Professor of Flute and Chamber Music at Rice University, also studied with several French masters. "In 1966, I attended Rampal's masterclasses at the Nice Summer Academy," Buyse says. "Alain Marion was Rampal's assistant. I have vivid memories of hearing French-trained flutists who played with sparkling articulation, technical security, energy and a fine concept of sound and timbral colors. I knew that the French style of teaching would be a perfect compliment to my studies with Joseph Mariano at the Eastman School. I decided I would return to France after college graduation."

As Buyse and Stallman quickly discovered, the French School is known for its characteristic open sound and lightening-quick articulation. Yale University Flute Professor Ransom Wilson explains that to the French, an ideal sound is homogenous in all registers. "They expect that all notes in a given phrase, whether high or low, loud or soft, brassy or woody, will be of the same resonance, vibrato and color," Wilson says. "This is not to say that they prefer the same tone color all the time—far from it! It is simply a musicianship based upon phrases instead of individual notes. Alain Marion's highest praise for a flutist was aussi homogene qu'un piano (as homogenous as a piano)."

Many believe that this fluidity in tone and articulation derives from the French language. Initially skeptical of this theory, Wilson became convinced after studying with Rampal at the Nice Summer Academy in 1971. "Rampal was wary of me until I spoke my first French words," Wilson explains. "Jean-Pierre believed that knowing French was an indispensable prerequisite to great flute playing. The idea seemed chauvinistic and comical to me at the time, but I came to understand that speaking French well requires an incredible amount of control and discipline of the mouth, lips, tongue, throat and jaw muscles. All of this helps to play the flute better, especially since sounds in French..."
pronunciation are produced in a forward position, leading to an immediacy of tone production and magically rapid articulation.” Because of the relationship between language and flute technique, French-speaking players may have a natural advantage.

But this alone does not suffice to explain the true secrets of the Paris Conservatory. To truly comprehend how the French system works, it is essential to first understand who makes it work. A school is, after all, the product of its creators.

The lineage of the French School can be traced to Paul Taffanel (1844–1908), who was appointed flute professor at the Paris Conservatory in 1893. Known for his rich, homogenous tone and technical virtuosity, critics of the period called him a Paganini of the flute. Examining his impressive list of students, which includes Marcel Moyse, Louis Fleury, Georges Laurent, Georges Barrère, and Philippe Gaubert, confirms his talent as a teacher. With his pupil Gaubert, Taffanel wrote a book of scale studies that remains a primary method internationally. To the French, the studies are gospel. Tafannel also championed repertoire (which had been neglected by his predecessors), including now-standard works by Bach and Mozart, and was responsible for the Paris Conservatory tradition of commissioning original works for the school’s annual competition.

Successors Adolphe Hennebains and René Le Roy continued to expand the school’s reputation. Marcel Moyse (1889–1984), professor at the conservatoire from 1932 to 1948, may have been criticized for his cantankerous personality and inconsistent finger technique, but he is widely recognized as one of the century’s most influential flute teachers. Like Tafannel and Gaubert, he wrote technical method books and expanded his approach to include studies for the development of sound and expression. He promoted a manner of playing linked to the naturalness of the human voice. His book Tone Development Through Interpretation (McGinnis and Marx Music Publishers) uses opera melodies to teach students to sing through the instrument like a soprano or tenor. Moyse’s students have become many of the most celebrated flutists in the profession.
One such student is Michel Deboeuf (born 1934), who also studied with French flutist Gaston Crunelle. The son of an American mother and French father, Deboeuf won prizes in several international competitions and taught at the Paris Conservatory from 1961-1989. As a soloist, he is known for his elegant style, which is ripe with personality. From her student days in Paris, Buyse remembers Deboeuf's many chamber recitals and concerts with the Orchestre de Paris. "His sound was always big, but beautifully varied depending upon what he wanted to express," she says. "He could embrace any style from Baroque of the most successful concert flutists ever, Jean-Pierre is credited with raising the flute to its current level of popularity. His discography spans every period and style. Known as "the king of détaché," Rampal's playing is virtuosic in technique and expression, exemplifying ease even in the most challenging works. As a professor at both the Paris Conservatory and the Nice Summer Academy, Rampal was a renowned teacher of the French style.

Rampal's assistant, Alain Marion, later replaced him as the head teacher at both schools. Although Marion himself never studied at the Paris Conservatory, he taught there until his death in 1998. He, too, earned an international reputation as a first-class soloist. Marion's style was dramatic and colorful. His recent and unexpected death at age 59 came as a profound loss to the worldwide music community.

Each of these major figures demonstrated an individual personality and style. So what distinguishes them as "French flutists"? Deboeuf himself dislikes categorizing musicians into national schools and believes that "if you hear 100 flutists, you will hear 100 different ways of playing. Crunelle was nothing like Moyse, and Rampal's playing was truly unique." And yet, nationalist stereotypes prevail. If there is a unifying factor to the French School, perhaps it is the passionate approach to teaching and performing that has its roots in French culture.

For example, the unique French conservatory system likely contributed to their success. At the Paris Conservatory, private flute lessons do not exist—all lessons are group masterclasses. Linda Chese, an active New York soloist and chamber musician who teaches at the Manhattan School of Music, remembers how the masterclass system influenced her studies in 1977.

"Playing in front of the class was wonderful because each lesson felt like a performance," she says. "There was a rush of adrenaline." This system not only places the student at center stage, it also puts the teacher on display. Such a performance-dominated approach is inherently French. A stroll down any Paris boulevard reveals the cultural obsession with "seeing and being seen." In France, café chairs do not face each other as they

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MARCEL MOYSE 1978, ROBERT STALLMAN (LEFT) AND ALAIN MARION IN NEW YORK CITY, 1984; ALAIN MARION (LEFT), JEAN-PIERRE RAMPAL through contemporary with a tremendous sense of ownership. Deboeuf and his wife, flutist Kathleen Chastain, currently teach in the United States at the Oberlin Conservatory.

Also central to the modern French School are the Marseilles Flutists, Jean-Pierre Rampal (born 1922) and Alain Marion (1938-1998), both of whom studied with Rampal's father, Joseph.
do in the United States (for comfortable conversation), but rather toward the street (for optimum people-watching).

Just as the Champs Elysées is transformed magically into a theater, so too the Paris Conservatory classroom becomes a concert hall. Because of the masterclass format, Chesis recalls “French teachers played in lessons all the time. Some of Rampal’s best performances were during class.” As a result, students in France learn largely from imitation. British flutist Trevor Wye recalls that Moyse used to say, “I have never tried to play like Marcel Moyse. I am proud to say, I have always tried to play like my teachers.”

Despite the benefits of this system, Chesis says that group masterclasses also had disadvantages. “There was not a forum to privately address a problem,” she says. “Because we were always performing in front of our peers, there was pressure to try and hide our faults.” Stallman recalls that Rampal did not want to use masterclass time to address technical weaknesses. “If a student had a technical problem, he would say ‘go to the assistant!’”

This is not to say that the French neglect technical study. Au contraire. Wilson recalls that French teachers generally had higher expectations of their students’ technical abilities than teachers in the US. “In my two summers and one year with Jean-Pierre and his assistant Alain Marion, I was to learn not just to imitate their sound and articulation, but to raise my standards to dizzying heights,” Wilson recalls.

Even Debost admits that the French generally place more emphasis on instrumental basics, especially in training young students. “It seems to me that there is a tendency in America to rush students into repertoire they are not technically equipped to handle,” he explains. “That can create bad habits. To this day, I always teach scales and instrumental work in my lessons.”

In pursuit of technical excellence, Paris Conservatory students also have separate teachers for scales and études. Raymond Gutie, the former assistant for Marion, is famous for his exercises, which target finger dexterity, embouchure control, articulation and rhythm. Each exercise is short and uses systematic repetition until the student obtains perfect control.

Wilson remembers the detailed, often tedious process of French technical studies. “I began with Taflan and Gaubert exercises, one note at a time, to achieve the clearest, crispest single-tongued attack in all registers, at all dynamic levels,” Wilson says. “Only after did I graduate to double and triple tonguing.” Buyse has similar memories from her studies in Paris with Crunelle. “He was incensed when I confessed to using double-tongue syllables for triple tonguing as I had learned in the United States; only ‘tkt-tkt’ would do,” she says. “I was assigned Taflan and Gaubert scale number four in triple tonguing as penance!” This logical, Descartean approach to pedagogy does not deny the expressive element, however; to the French, technique is merely a means by which the performer can communicate musical ideas.

Another unique aspect of French teaching is their physical approach, a manner of interacting with students that often is considered taboo in the United States. Buyse describes Debost as a very energetic and physical teacher. “I remember one lesson in particular,” she explains. “We were working on producing an open

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sound; he stood in front of me gesticulating intensely with his mouth exaggeratedly open, indicating how important it is to feel width and breadth when developing a bigger sound.”

Stallman recalls more direct contact with the French School. “Once in a lesson, Marion gave me a karate-chop in the gut to show me how and where to breathe properly. I learned quickly!” In addition, Marion was known to sing, stomp, dance, cry and yell during lessons.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the French School is an enthusiastic and contagious love for music. Chesis explains that lessons with Rampal were “all about feeling, emotion, expression. He wanted the music to be alive, he couldn’t stand anything that was wooden or stiff. His lessons were incredibly uplifting. I specifically remember playing the Khachaturian Concerto in class, and he was talking me through it while I played. I felt like I could fly, soar! And he loved teaching. If the student played well, he would give an incredible amount of energy to the lesson. If the student did not play well, he would lose interest, so we worked very hard to earn his attention.”

Stallman has similar memories of Marion. “Everything in Marion’s teaching came from feelings,” he says. “If the student’s emotions were buried, Marion could free them. He helped so many Americans open up. It was his passionate Mediterranean temperament. He used to say, Je suis roman, I am Latin.”

Buyse remembers how the Marseilles flutists were tireless in their passion for music and life. “Rampal and Marion were both high-energy teachers,” she says. “They seemed never to sleep, partying late into the early morning with all of us, often generously treating the class to pizza at the Café Félix Faure in Nice. In class a few hours later, they’d be as intensely demanding as if they’d had a full night’s sleep. Once we had to use an elementary classroom and Rampal was obliged to sit on a tiny chair (if he wanted to sit at all). Still, he seemed a giant among us.” To their students, the teachers of the French School were indeed larger than life.

Wilson, a self-described francophile, identifies other cultural traits that make the French School unique. “First, the French have a tendency toward refinement in all things, such as Dom Perignon champagne,” Wilson says. “Secondly, they celebrate and excel in all things sensual—their predominance in fashion, perfume, food and wine for example. Also, they produce art with a light touch, but one full of rich color and flavor. I think of a puff pastry filled with creamed wild mushrooms. They also have a tradition for maintaining high standards with strict regulation. France is the only country I know where the government controls the recipe for bread! Taking these into consideration, one begins to understand why the French play the flute in the
magical way they do, and why it is so difficult for foreigners to reproduce."

Today, the French School may be headed in a new direction, but on a path that, nevertheless, paved in the traditions of the past. The current teachers at the Paris Conservatory, Sophie Cherrier and Pierre-Yves Artaud, are both experts in contemporary music. Just as Taffanel pioneered new repertoire in the nineteenth century, perhaps these teachers will similarly model their instruction on methods dealing with new music. Artaud already "wrote the book" on modern flute techniques: "Harmonics Exercise Book: Simple Notes and Multisounds for Flute" (G. Billaudot, 1993). Although Cherrier is known for her interpretations of Boulez and Berio, her teaching focuses on sound development through meticulous study. Her straightforward teaching perpetuates the French tradition for a homogenous, open tone.

Today, some flutists believe the disparity between France and the rest of the world is diminishing. Stallman explains his view that this is not due to a decline in French training, but rather an overall increase in standards internationally. "Worldwide, the flute is more popular than ever and the level of players has risen dramatically," he says.

Debost agrees. "Flute playing around the world has evolved. For 10 summers, Kathleen Chastain and I taught in Assisi. At that time, there were some very bad Italian flutists, but now, there are really fantastic players." It is perhaps no exaggeration to credit the teachers of the French School for training and inspiring flutists of all nationalities to reach new heights of technical and expressive mastery.