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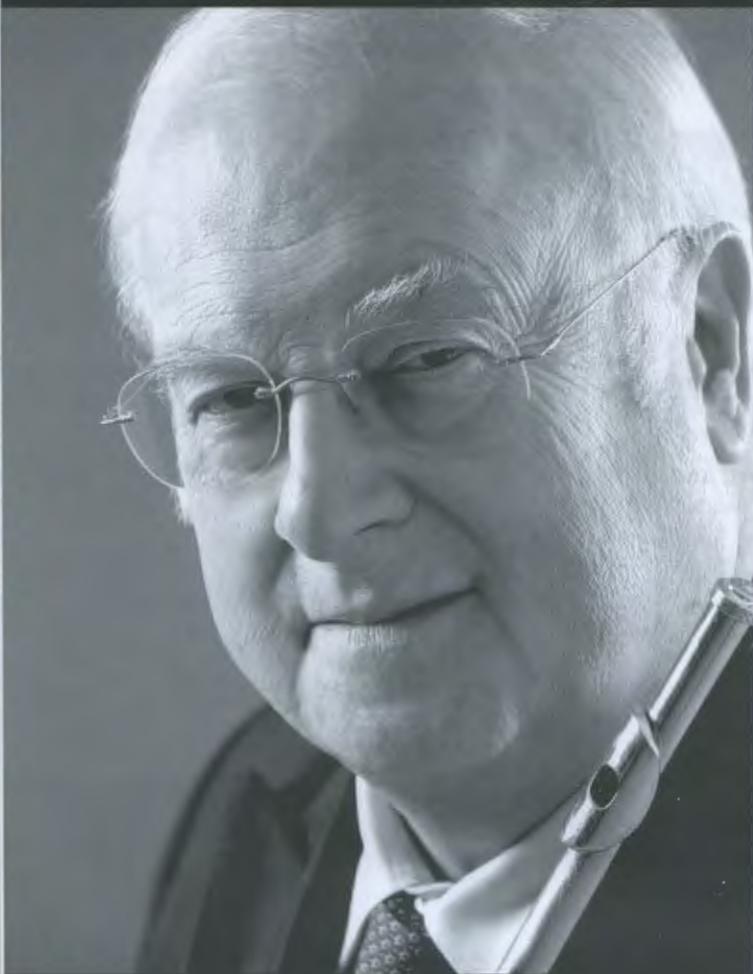
THE **f** LUTIST QUARTERLY

**Scales: An Incomplete Look at  
What Every Flutist Should Know**



**Developing an Online Presence**  
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**Remembering Jack Wellbaum**

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# Michel Debost: Teaching Artistry

**Michel Debost, who retired from his position with the Orchestre de Paris and joined the faculty of Oberlin Conservatory in 1989, retired from that position in 2011. He speaks here with a former student about his long career, teaching, and the beauty of scales.**

**by Martha Cuncell-Vargas**



**H**aving built a playing and teaching career that spans more than 50 years, Michel Debost is one of the world's most highly respected flutists and teachers. Charming and delightful, personable and passionate, Debost's effectiveness as both a teacher and performer comes from his primary focus on artistic communication. His teaching, like his playing, strikes a balance of focus between technical capability and expressive intention. His students have achieved success in a wide variety of flute careers; they hold positions in major orchestras, new music ensembles, chamber groups, and military bands and professorships at top universities and conservatories. On the occasion of his retirement from Oberlin Conservatory, I sat down with my former teacher to look back on a monumental career and to learn how he developed his approach to teaching artistry.

## **How did you get started?**

In 1943, a friend of my father's, Jan Merry, started me on the flute. He loved to play. His teaching was based on reading—first the original Altès Method, then duets of the Baroque, and many Mozart duets. I still think this reading skill is essential, because many technical hurdles in repertoire are just bad reading.

In 1946, I came to study one year in California. I was 12 and I took lessons with Merrill Jordan of the San Francisco Symphony who didn't think I was good for anything. I called him up later

and he asked what I was doing. I told him I was a professional flute player and he said, "I don't believe it." He didn't believe it because I didn't practice! I got to California, coming out of the war—the schools in France were like prisons: no sports, no music, no girls. Mind you, education is free in France, which is a good thing. So I thought I was in paradise because I discovered everything I was dreaming of but never could do. All the firsts! At that time, I played like an amateur; I played to occupy my time.

## **How did you transition from an amateur's approach to a more serious one?**

A friend of my father, Maurice Maréchal, was a famous cellist. He had played the premiere of Debussy's sonata for cello. His American wife, Lois Perkins, was a really funny character. We were very good friends with them. Maréchal told my parents "You should encourage him to play more." So that's how it started. I had been studying with an amateur and after that I studied with Gaston Crunelle at the Paris Conservatory.

The Paris Conservatory was then a 150-year-old institution where everything was set in stone. There were 12 flute students and every time you played there were 11 other people listening, masterclass all the way. Crunelle was a very thorough professor. He never made a career as a performer because he was not interested in it, but he taught us the basic stuff, like how to play relatively in tune, move the fingers, use a good tone, etcetera. All



Michel Debost with his sister, Ann.



Michel Debost in San Francisco in 1947.



Jan Merry, left, and Michel Debost.

his students were pretty good—Nicolet, Rampal, Larrieu, myself. So I entered the Conservatory and was very happy because that is what I really wanted to do.

### How did that structured environment influence your own teaching?

I don't think I could avoid it! I did take lessons from Moyse, but Moyse was a very hard person to deal with. He refused to deal with technique. We talked only about interpretation. Many of his students in America knew nothing about the basics of the flute. They worked with him on opera melodies and things like that. He could be really mean because he was basically an unhappy, paranoid person. He always thought that somebody was offending him. He left Paris in 1949. When I called Moyse to ask if I could come see him in Switzerland, he said, "Bring your flute." When I played for him, he gave me a terrible time. Finally I said, "Mr. Moyse, I have come here to learn." And Moyse responded, "I thought you had come to Boswil to show me how the flute was played in Paris since I left!" He was tough when people played well. However, he was patient with some who had problems in their playing or interpretation. In hindsight, I think Moyse had more imagination and fame but as a teacher was not as thorough as Crunelle. This personal opinion will raise eyebrows with the worshipers. But I am too old to care!

### You spent more than two years in the army after your time at the Conservatory. How did you rebuild your flute playing?

I went with the French Army in Algeria, which was a post-colonial war. I had been a translator for Boeing Aircraft in Algeria. When I came back [to Paris] I had kind of a nervous breakdown. I hadn't played for two years! Boeing offered me a job to open an office in Paris. I said "Well, I would like to try my flute for six months," and the guy very nicely said, "If you change your mind in six months, I have a job for you." So they liked me, but they didn't know how I played the flute!

So, I had to build my playing from the ground up. After two years you don't really forget, but the fluency is not quite there. I took all the auditions in Paris; I decided I would do everything. All the second flute, third flute, fifth flute, jazz, saxophone—I decided I would do everything and something would give at some point, and it worked out!

### Try Everything

I applied six times for the Paris Opera Orchestra, and six times I was rejected. But you know, every time I would say, "Okay, next one!" [The winners] were all people who played very well, so I wasn't upset. I thought, "They're better than me. I'll go practice."

The last time I applied for the opera, there was a member of the jury that was first flute in the *Société des Concerts*. He told me there would soon be an opening [for second flute] in that orchestra. Everybody told me not to bother trying because there was someone who had been doing the job for two years and the job was his. But I got in there and I was the first one surprised! The *Société* was a prestigious orchestra. A year later the principal flutist fell sick and I became first flute. The *Société* eventually went bankrupt and reformed as the *Orchestre de Paris*. When the new orchestra was founded, it was funded half by the city of Paris and half by the Republic of France, so I had to take another audition for that. I got the job, and the rest is history.



The Paris Conservatoire in 1952 with Crunelle.

A lot of people don't try to take auditions because they think, "They don't want how I play, they have other ideas," but who knows? That's what I did with Mathieu Dufour. [The Chicago Symphony Orchestra] heard 150 flute players they didn't like. Then I called my friend Daniel Barenboim and said, "Listen, if you haven't found someone, try this guy who is wonderful," and he was hired after an audition with the orchestra. It's not because he's French—he was not even a student of mine—but he's a fantastic player.

So you must always encourage your students to keep an open mind and try everything, especially competitions and performing. That's what I tell the kids here [at the Oberlin Flute Institute]. I told them on the first day, "There are three things you have to do here this week: Perform, perform, and perform." They've all played and they've all performed, and they're happy as larks because they did things that they didn't think they could do.

If there's one thing that stands out from my Oberlin experience, it's the three-hour weekly studio class—a two-hour masterclass followed by a one-hour performance class.

You learn about yourself when you perform, things that you don't learn even by practicing very much. Practice, practice, practice, yes, but in performance, you realize that there are things that work and things that don't work, and maybe your professor was right or maybe your professor was wrong, and the only way to find out is to try it!



## Michel Debost: A Life

Born in Paris, Michel Debost graduated from the *Conservatoire National de Paris*. During the 1960s, he won the major international flute competitions (Moscow, Prague, Geneva, Munich, Turin). For many years, he was the *Orchestre de Paris*' principal flute under music directors Charles Munch, Herbert von Karajan, Sir Georg Solti, and Daniel Barenboim. In 1982, he succeeded Jean-Pierre Rampal as professor at the *Conservatoire National de Paris*. In 2001, the NFA honored Debost with its Lifelong Achievement Award.

Debost has recorded most of the flute repertoire; his long-time partner is Christian Ivaldi, piano. His book *The Simple Flute* was published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. His CDs include *Flute Panoramas I, II, III, IV, and V*; *Panorama of French and American works for flute and orchestra*; and *Serenades* with Cleveland Orchestra members.

### You also have a thorough approach to introducing students to the standard flute repertoire.

I used to do that in the Paris Conservatoire also. My yearly list included practically the whole repertoire [over four years]. I covered the biggies: Partita, C.P.E. Bach, Schubert, Prokofiev, Martin Ballade, Boulez, Lieberman, and *Chant de Linos*—every year a different two of those. Then I would do pieces from the 20th century and solo pieces; although it's not really my specialty to do contemporary music, I think it's good to be in contact with it.

I have doubts about people who play only contemporary music or people who play only Baroque. I think there has to be a mixture. I would also put in something unknown, like Karg Elert's *Sinfonische Canzone*. I discovered things that are off the beaten track. Of course in auditions they always request the same things, but I believe it's important to try new things even if you can't really completely play them. You'll never be completely ready, but do it anyway. By doing it, you learn about things and about yourself that are really important.

With such a broad range of repertoire, you are also able to stress the fundamentals. There is a balance in the way you've designed your teaching, between becoming competent as a flutist and immersed in interpretation and artistry.

I always admired violin players. Violin is so difficult that you really have to know how to practice, and you have to practice the basics. What I regret sometimes is that I hear few flute students who are looking beyond the big sound. I think the people who make flutes and the people who make headjoints, obviously they want to sell their merchandise, but there are some headjoints you just can't manage. I think it's not the only issue to play so loud, but to also vary the sound and play with a poetic feeling, which you can do even with scales. You can learn scales and learn to play piano or to play loud or play staccato.

### That's what I really enjoyed the most about your teaching. You teach the fundamentals as music.

Scales are still music. That Moyses told me. One day I went to see Moyses in Vermont. I tried to play one of his opera melodies, and instead he asked me to play a scale for him, a G flat minor scale, and he gave me a lesson that I never forgot and that I've used all the time. It's a very beautiful scale. He explained to me how to be poetic with the modulation. I'm grateful for that. He was a very devoted student of Paul Taffanel. He would say, "You should have heard Taffanel play that scale. That was a lesson in and of itself."

### How did that lesson affect your teaching? Is that where you got the idea for the scale game?

I've always played scales, but I thought the examples [in *Seventeen Daily Exercises* by Paul Taffanel and Phillippe Gaubert] are just a bit limited. So I started to make variations, like repeated notes, fast runs, slow runs, tuning and runs. There are many different versions of the scale game because I changed it a lot.

It's very important to do the connection like a piece of music. It should always be slurred, always legato, even if you come from a staccato or are going to a triple staccato. There's so much you can practice that you don't have to spend forever on long tones.

### Your approach to teaching excerpts is also unique.

In Paris and throughout Europe, it's not as common to teach excerpts, not so much as in the United States. When I realized the kids in America or my colleagues added a lot of importance to that, I decided to do more of them. I would rotate over two years Daphnis, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Birdies (Aviary), Prokofiev (Classical or Peter and the Wolf). About six excerpts per year but repeated three times. That was my last brainstorm!

What is too bad is that students often have no clue what the excerpt's context is. Leonore #3 is one of the most beautiful pieces of music you can ever hear; it's really important to know what it stands for: Liberty, Love, Courage.



1968: With Daniel Barenboim at the piano.



Paris 1982: Jean-Pierre Rampal, Jimmy Galway, and Debost.



Munich 1984: Flötenabend (Aurèle Nicolet, left).

**Your students have found success in all different areas of music. There are specialists in new music, principal players in great orchestras, and accomplished solo and chamber artists. How is it that they all come from one studio?**

As far as I'm concerned, as I told you, I decided to never say no. That's why I learned how to sight-read. I think sight-reading is very important. You have to be able to do the first gig that comes along without saying no because you haven't had your part for three weeks. If you are really on top of your playing, you don't need to practice too much. It comes naturally if you're in good shape.

**Did your approach to teaching change once you started teaching in the U.S.?**

At the Paris Conservatoire the level was very high. I taught the basics there, too. When I got to Oberlin, I realized that U.S. students don't really start from the ground up but rather in band, and they learn bad habits in band. I had to adapt and tried to do that without being mean. Of course, there were some students who would always have a better solution, but then the performance was always the moment of truth. In Paris I would say, "That's the way it is!" Here I became more lenient and tried to help students along.

### **I Would Do It Again**

If I had to live my life again, I would do the same. I came from a well-to-do family, and I was lucky to find a really perfect woman (flutist Kathleen Chastain). I was 33 and she was 18. In those days you didn't go to jail for that! I told her mom that she should come study with me in Paris, and her mom said, "No way," so we got married. We said, "If it works out, great!" Forty-four years later, I think it's safe to say it worked out. I was lucky to have two children, and my daughter has three boys. Her husband is a conductor and she is an opera director.

I loved the flute and I was very fortunate to play with great artists like Pavarotti, Rubinstein, Horowitz, Rampal, and great conductors. I don't regret anything. I left the orchestra because I had a little bit of a nervous breakdown. There were co-principals on every instrument except flute, so I had to play everything, and it was exhausting. Of the flutes in the orchestra, the second flute had focal dystonia and I didn't have the heart to let him go, the third didn't want to play principal, and the fourth flute/piccolo player wanted to play principal, but nobody wanted him to! So I left the orchestra because my section was not functioning properly. I believe in the U.S. system of higher education. There is a respect for knowledge, books, culture, and information that puts others to shame.

**What advice do you have for today's teachers?**

Accept the fact that if you accept four or five students, some will be better than you expected and some will be worse than you thought. You must adapt to teach them all and be willing to start from scratch with those who need it.

A good way to improve those who need improvement is to have them play something simple but well. Scales, for sure, make you improve better than anything else, but some resist that. They say, "I didn't come to college to play a scale!" and I say, "Well, what did you come to college for?" and they say, "To play repertoire," and I say, "Okay. Play a G flat minor scale." \*

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Marcel Moyse, Kathleen Chastain-Debost, and Debost, Marlboro, July 1974.

