

ARTS & CULTURE

THE CREATIVE SPIRIT, DELMARVA STYLE



Dana Limpert has been making her own reeds for about a decade. The reed starts as a tube of cane that she'll cut and wrap around a staple with some thread. Then, she begins to scrape, constantly using one of many sharpeners to make sure her knife is as sharp as it can get. She refines it enough that when she blows into it, it will vibrate and make a constant high-pitched sound. STAFF PHOTOS BY LAURA EMMONS

Whirlwind of WOODWINDS

For oboe player, crafting reeds is intricate, yet necessary process

By Jon Bleiweis
Staff Writer

DOVER — If Dana Limpert notices something that doesn't sound just right, she's armed with a case of her sharpest knives and razor blades to make sure everything is OK.

Such is life as an oboe player. Limpert, 28, has been playing the oboe for about 15 years — the last five as a member of the Mid-Atlantic Symphony Orchestra — and has been making her own reeds for about a decade.

"If you have dull knives, don't even bother making reeds because you'll just frustrate yourself and you will not get good results," she says.

While the case of knives and frequent unscheduled adjustments can be a constant worry and the source of many jokes during rehearsals, making her reeds sound just right is an intricate, yet necessary process. For every hour a musician spends practicing, she says she spends about half of it

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Dana Limpert listens as student Sommer Bedford, a ninth-grader at Caesar Rodney High School who started playing the oboe about two months ago, plays during a lesson. Limpert has been giving private lessons in Delaware for the past three years. STAFF PHOTO BY LAURA EMMONS

Woodwinds

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crafting her reeds.

"Everybody's instrument and everybody's body are so different and there are so many variables," she says. "It's just easier if you are in control of the variables."

Getting the crow right

The oboe is a double reed instrument, meaning there are two pieces of cane that overlap to produce a sound — in contrast to most woodwinds such as the clarinet or saxophone which use just one.

The reed starts as a tube of cane — similar to bamboo, a 4-6-inch-long tube of cane can make two reeds, three if she's lucky — that she'll cut and wrap around a staple with some thread. Then she begins to scrape.

It's a process she does throughout the course of a couple of days, constantly using one of many sharpeners to make sure her knife is as sharp as it can be.

The reed has a small opening which Limpert wants to make thin enough that when she blows into it, it will vibrate and make a constant high-pitched sound, which she calls a crow.

"You have to get the crow right," she says, adding if the cane is too thick, it won't produce the sound she wants.

"You have to refine it, so you're constantly checking it and scraping it." And then when Mother Nature inevitably decides to intervene, Limpert has to be prepared to compensate. The oboe is so finicky, she says, that the slightest thing can make everything go wrong. If there is no humidity, the reeds close down and the sound becomes too thin. In the winter, she is sure to stock sponges in her case so the instrument doesn't crack.

All in all, it will take hours throughout the course of a couple days to get the reed to the specifications she wants. If she's lucky, the reed will last through a week's worth of performances, rehearsals and practicing.

"We're trying to get it perfect this way before we even go out into public," she says. "Everybody has their own thing that they have to get perfect before they can be heard in public."

An early love

When Limpert was in fifth grade, she picked up the flute. Two years later, she got bored with it, so she approached her band teacher and asked her what

UP NEXT

The MSO will hold its winter concert series, "HOLIDAY JOY: 'Amazing Voices!'" in early December. Five shows will be performed across the Delmarva Peninsula, an increase from the typical three that are usually held.

The extra shows are encouraging to Limpert.

"It means that people are interested," she says. "That makes you feel good — knowing people want to come hear an orchestra play and they want to spend their time and money enjoying that."

The show, conducted by Julien Benichou, features a variety of holiday tunes. Featured musicians are bass-baritone vocalist Kevin Short, soprano vocalist Esther Jane Hardenbergh and vocalists from the University of Miami's Frost School of Music. The concert will conclude with a sing-a-long.

instrument she needed. The oboe was the answer.

She's now she's been playing it about half her life and has made a career out of it.

"If you're really dedicated to something, you're never going to fully give it out," Limpert says. "It's never going to lose its interest."

Her oboe of choice these days is a Yamaha model she has had for about three years. It is made of violetwood, giving the instrument an atypical reddish hue, though she prefers the sound it produces.

Limpert started her time with the MSO while studying at the Peabody Institute, where she received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in music performance during the course of six years.

Five years later, she plans her schedule each orchestral season around the MSO.

"I love all the people and we get to make great music together, so those are huge draws for me," she says.

MSO rehearsals take place in Baltimore just days before the first concert on a long weekend tour. The music is given to musicians long enough in advance for them to prepare for the rehearsals, though.

For the December holiday concert — the most fun one of the year, she says — Limpert received her sheet music in October. She'll practice it and have it well prepared so that, like putting together a puzzle, it will just fit in with the other parts when rehearsal time comes.

As a full-time freelance musician, Limpert routinely travels to Richmond, Baltimore or Lancaster, Pa., for gigs, making Dover a convenient hub for her — especially for the MSO performances, which this year are as close as Lewes. Typically, she gets plenty of notice before an opportunity arises, but every once in awhile she'll be asked to play in Florida with a week and a half's notice.

"That's what keeps things interesting," she says. "If you're freelance, you

never know what you'll be playing next week, or with what group, or what part, and it just changes all the time."

Limpert says she can see herself doing what she does for a while longer, as she enjoys the travel and being able to tailor her schedule to her liking. But it's the unreliability of life as a freelancer that can make the profession difficult at times. Many look for summer opportunities, as the orchestral season typically lasts from September to June. Others teach, and Limpert is no exception.

She has spent the last three years giving private lessons in Delaware, usually with one or two students on her roster at a time, as the oboe, she admits, isn't exactly an instrument that is high in demand. Despite that, she enjoys passing along her love of music to the next generation, and she has realized she can learn a lot from teaching, as well.

Throughout the course of a half hour lesson with Sommer Bedford, a ninth-grader at Caesar Rodney High School who started playing the oboe about two months ago, they went over etudes and scales, with Limpert telling her how to hit the right notes and slur them along to create a more legato sound.

"When you teach the music, in a way it's helping you codify your own musical ideas and you have to express what you know intrinsically verbally to someone else and explain it to them," she says. "It helps me in a way to know my own techniques better and know the music better."

"Dude, I think I got the job"

When Limpert looks up from sharpening knives and crafting reeds at her desk, she sees a sketch of a giraffe wearing a necktie and smoking a cigarette with the caption, "Dude, I think I got the job."

It was drawn by her sister and it was something she thought was cute and funny, earning a coveted spot on the oboe room wall. Rarely do musicians walk out of high pressured auditions



This sketch of a giraffe wearing a tie and smoking a cigarette was drawn by Dana Limpert's sister. It hangs in her oboe room with the caption, "Dude, I think I got the job." STAFF PHOTO BY JON BLEIWEIS

thinking they get the job, she says, and she's hoping she can get that feeling.

On Limpert's horizon is the principal oboist position at the MSO, as the previous principal recently left for California. She'll be auditioning for the spot in April.

The principal spot appeals to her because she believes it's more artistically challenging — and it would provide her with solos and more exposed parts. The role of the second oboist — who also plays English horn in the MSO — deals with the challenge of playing the register of the oboe softly that doesn't want to play softly. She said to excel as the second oboist, one has to be good at matching pitch, intonation and blending.

"It's not that playing second is bad in any way," she says. "You have to develop a different set of skills."

Limpert says she has never won an audition before, but the giraffe is something she strives for.

"You've got to let that stuff go and let things be and be chill about it," she says. "He really is kind of the goal. Otherwise, you can really lose your mind."

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ONLINE
Watch a video of Dana Limpert and her oboe at DelmarvaNow.com