

# JANET SEE: *Traversist on Two Continents*

The revival of historically informed performance in America succeeded largely due to the influence, effort, and expertise of a small number of early innovators who sought instruction in the late 1960s and 1970s. Those who engaged with early music in later years—in the '80s, the '90s, and the early 21st century—followed a much different path to their knowledge and understanding, a path blazed by their teachers and older colleagues. In fear that the stories of those pioneering musicians, and the specifics of the obstacles and challenges they had to overcome, might be in danger of being lost, I embarked on a project to locate these innovators and to urge them to share their experiences and insights.

Janet See is clearly one of those innovators, and a friend. For over 30 years, she has been an outstanding performer on the Baroque and Classical flutes. She trained at Oberlin Conservatory and The Royal Conservatory in The Hague and went on to be principal flutist in John Eliot Gardiner's two orchestras in London and with *Philharmonia Baroque* in San Francisco. In 1998, after 13 years in Europe, she returned to the Pacific Northwest, where she continues her career as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral player. She is an avid teacher of both the flute and Alexander Technique.

## **How did you first encounter early music?**

It began before Oberlin, when as a young girl I was studying modern flute in Seattle with Adele Zeitlin. Right from the start I was drawn to Handel and Bach. After high school, I went to Oberlin to study modern flute with Robert Willoughby. In my junior year there, Willoughby went to Europe on sabbatical, and one of the reasons he went was to explore Baroque flute with Frans Vester in The Hague. He returned for my senior year bringing with him Baroque



An interview with Lee Inman



flutes he acquired for Oberlin from Friedrich von Huene. I was immediately drawn to the particular and beautiful qualities of the instrument and, basically, have never looked back.

I was often not comfortable playing a lot of the modern flute repertoire. It just didn't say much to me, and I felt that often the music demanded that the instrument be "overplayed." It was Prof. Willoughby's own curiosity during his sabbatical year that completely altered and shaped the course of my career. This is a good thing to remember. One of the keyboard students at the time, James David Christie, was a good friend. Sometime before my senior recital—on which I played recorder, Baroque flute, and modern flute—James organized a student performance of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 using period instruments, and that was a first at Oberlin. The summer after that, I served as Jimmy Caldwell's assistant at the Baroque Performance Institute, which gave more momentum to my love of Baroque music on "old" instruments. After I graduated from Oberlin, I decided to go to The Hague and study with Vester at the Royal Conservatory.

### **How did that decision come to you?**

Given my love of the Baroque flute and its music, and Willoughby's year with Vester, this seemed like the logical next step. I also knew that Holland at the time was considered the "epicenter" of early music. It was an exciting prospect. My year of study with Vester was a wonderful experience. He was a very inspiring teacher and was one of the first in Holland to play the Baroque flute. He had just made a recording of the Mozart flute concerti, and the day I bought the recording, I ran into him in a

pub and asked him to sign it for me. What he wrote was, "Dear Janet: I hope and expect that you'll do better than this." I remember being floored that he would say this to a student of his!

### **I am curious as to whether your contemporaries, your colleagues at Oberlin and the players of modern instruments in Europe, supported you. How did they regard someone who was doing this very specialized kind of music? Was it important to you how they regarded this pursuit?**

It wasn't important to me. I don't remember having modern-instrument colleagues in Holland. But at Oberlin...honestly, I didn't think about it. I was totally convinced of the beauty of the instrument. For me, it was not, and never has been, an historical exercise. For me, the Baroque flute is a contemporary, living instrument, with a

### **For me, it was never has been, an historical exercise. For me, the Baroque flute is a contemporary, living instrument, with a "direct line" to the composer.**

"direct line" to the composer writing for it. In my experience, the instrument coupled with its music has tremendous expressiveness and beauty, and really does appeal to the sensibilities of most audiences.

After that year in Holland, I moved to San Francisco and married a percussionist with whom I had a group called Kotekan—three percussionists, modern flute, soprano, and double bass! I think I'd realized that I couldn't just play

Baroque flute and earn a living. So I picked up the modern flute again. At the same time I had an ensemble with Bill Pepper, a harpsichordist. Bill and I played recitals in The Blue Noodle Lounge at the Old Spaghetti Factory—a lot of fun and very atmospheric! After that, in the late '70s, I helped form the San Francisco Baroque Ensemble. Audiences clearly loved hearing 18th-century music played on period instruments. I think those experiences contributed to my feeling that I was doing the right thing and that I should continue to pursue it. Invariably I heard comments like, "I find the Baroque flute so much more satisfying to listen to than the modern flute." From the start, there was always very positive feedback about the quality of the Baroque flute sound.

### **How did you find an instrument at the time that you could work with?**

My first instrument was a flute by Hans Coolsma. In 1976, I met Rod Cameron in San Francisco, who was very encouraged that I was playing concerts on Baroque flute. He was just starting to make one-keyed, wooden flutes, so he started making instruments for me. I would get students; they would need instruments and order them from Rod. Rod and I are still very close, and for decades he has been one of the preeminent makers.

In 1987, a hurricane in England knocked down a lot of old trees on Box Hill. My dad was over and went out to Box Hill and purchased some boxwood logs, brought them back, cut them into billets, and for decades they sat curing in his workshop in Spokane. Just last May, I took the billets down to Rod, and asked him to make me a flute from the wood. I'd hoped to be able to play the flute for my dad, but he passed away in October. It will be good to play a concert in his memory on this flute.

### **Did you move to Europe because you thought opportunities were greater there than in the U.S.?**

Yes. I was playing with Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra at the time, but there was little work for flutes in the orchestra. I was aware that there was much more going on in Europe. So I decided to pack

## Robert Willoughby, Noted Traverso Teacher, Fêted at Oberlin



SIDEBAR PHOTOS: HARVEY WOJESON

While at Oberlin in the mid-seventies, **Janet See** studied with the legendary flute pedagogue **Robert Willoughby**, whose 90th birthday was celebrated at the Conservatory last October. After service in World War II as a B-24 pilot, Willoughby, who studied with Joseph Mariano at Eastman and Boston Symphony principal flutist George Laurent at the New England Conservatory (in a line that included Philippe Gaubert [see page 21] and Paul Taffanel), became assistant principal flute of the Cleveland Orchestra. Willoughby's students at Oberlin, where he began teaching while still with the Cleveland Orchestra, include a number of prominent players in American symphony orchestras as well as many in the first crop of American Baroque flutists. "What a God-awful instrument," was Willoughby's first impression, but a sabbatical in 1970 took him to Holland where he studied with Frans Vester and Frans Brüggen. Thereafter, he encouraged his flute students to explore the instrument, and graduates from that era, in addition to See, include **Eileen Grycky**, who plays with Brandywine Baroque, **Greer Ellison**, former principal flute of the Portland Baroque Orchestra, **Wendy Rolfe**, who performs with the Handel and Haydn Society and Boston Baroque, **Courtney Wescott**, flutist with the Seattle Baroque Orchestra, and **Jed Wentz**, who teaches now at the Amsterdam Conservatory. Willoughby played with the Oberlin Baroque Ensemble and taught at Oberlin's Baroque Performance Institute; his teaching continues at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA.



*Left, Robert Willoughby at his 90th birthday celebration at Oberlin. Above, from left, Greer Ellison, Catharina Meints, and Wendy Rolfe (with harpsichordist Webb Wiggins) serenade him with the Bach G major trio sonata, BWV 1039.*

a suitcase and see what I could do. From my perspective today, it seems like an incredibly wild thing to have done. And I wasn't so young either!

There was a kind of blind optimism, the kind that can get you into situations you otherwise wouldn't find yourself in if you gave it a bit more thought.

### So you were in England?

First, I freelanced in Paris for a year and a half, and then I lived in London for 12 years. I was very fortunate to get the job of principal flute with John Eliot Gardiner's two orchestras—English Baroque Soloists and L'Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique. I was now playing both Baroque and the six-keyed Classical flute. This was an incredibly exciting and rewarding job. We toured often through Europe and to Japan, and made a world tour as well. We performed and recorded the complete Beethoven symphonies, all the Mozart operas and so much more incredible repertoire. One had to be at the very top of one's abilities on the instruments—and stay there. He was a very inspiring conductor and also very demanding.

### What brought you back to the States?

The idea to return home came after I had my son. I felt like I'd had many years of really, really good music-making—orchestral playing and recording at the very highest level. But I wanted to raise my son in the U.S.—in the Northwest. My husband is Irish and was keen to come to America. And I knew I wasn't destined to be a permanent ex-patriot. Some people don't mind the idea, but I did. The years with Gardiner in the U.K. were invaluable to me as a flutist, as a musician, and I made wonderful and lasting friendships, but I wanted to return home with my family.

### What makes a performance memorable for you?

I think what makes a performance memorable for me is when, as an instrumentalist, I don't get in the way. I play music I love, and I feel I can just sing in the slow movements and play with the spirit of the quick movements. It's then that I feel as if I can really convey the beauty and spirit of the music to an audience. Another aspect of a memorable performance happens when you

share a very similar musical language with colleagues. Words are barely necessary and preparing the music for performance is not a struggle, but a pleasure.

### A lot of younger performers graduate these days as superb musicians. But their musical training has given them few clues about how to exploit what they know to make a living. Did that same situation apply to you?

Oh, yes. I had no training in how to market what I'd been spending all my life learning how to do, except learning orchestral excerpts for auditions.

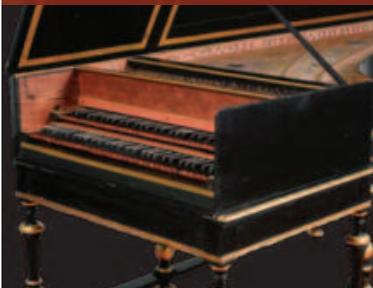
My experience has been that the discipline and sensitivity it takes to become a really skilled musician has little to do with skills necessary for actually making a living at it. Frequently, one hears of really wonderful musicians who have a difficult time "making it," and they end up doing something else—computers, perhaps. And then there are people who aren't particularly skilled as musicians but who are really good at selling themselves! Sometimes you find the

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## JANET SEE

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happy marriage of the two skills in one person!

### Do you prefer chamber music to orchestral playing, or vice-versa?

I like to play both. Each requires different skills. These days, most orchestral playing is on the Classical flute, and chamber music is on the Baroque flute. Moving to orchestral playing on a six-keyed flute was an interesting transition from years of Baroque flute. The flute's role changed from being the mid-range, lyrical voice to riding on top of the orchestral sound but then returning to being a lyrical voice. As a flutist in a Classical orchestra, one has to be very versatile, one minute pounding out high As, then playing a sweet melody.

### What are your current projects?

My biggest project for the next couple of years is to make several solo recordings. I've done a lot of orchestral recording, but not so much solo. I'm looking forward to this and think it's a good time now to do it—to in a sense document my life's work of the past few decades. I also trained as an Alexander Technique teacher in London, and that continues to be a source of well-being and interest.

### Do you teach Alexander Technique?

Since I trained, I've always taught the technique in conjunction with teaching flute. I'm just now starting to teach AT apart from flute or music.

For me, the Alexander Technique has been the means for "getting out of the way" in playing an instrument. You learn to use your body in the most minimal way. You learn not to inadvertently, habitually pull more tension into your way of playing. Tension invariably leads to a lack of fluidity, a more strained sound with less air. Alexander Technique has been absolutely key in creating my best performances.

### What are the two things you'd like to tell young musicians to do that would help them become better managers of the art they're pursuing?

If the person wants to embark on a

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career on Baroque flute, I'd advise them to have more than one arrow in their quiver, so to speak, and especially now. Budgets are being cut for orchestras, and often the repertoire has been reduced to strings only. You really cannot count on having a substantial orchestral career as a Baroque flute player. I was very lucky to be in on the ground floor, when the early music movement was really blossoming and budgets were healthier.

So whether it's teaching modern flute, teaching Baroque interpretation to modern flute players, having another skill such as Alexander Technique, or being a modern flutist in addition to being a Baroque flutist—it's important to have more going on than just Baroque flute.

Secondly, I feel it's really important to just go out and play for people and not wait for the concert hall to beckon. Play in nursing homes, schools, wherever.

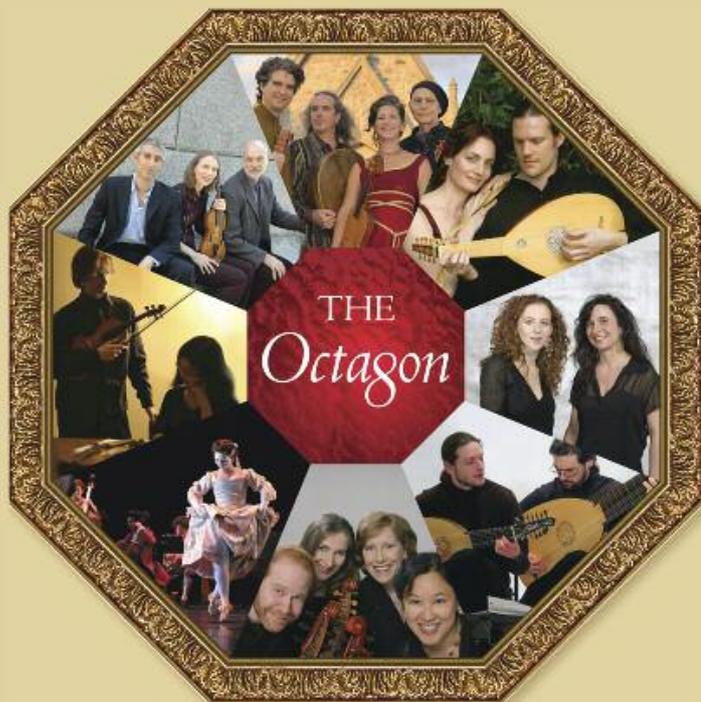
**Having a life with an instrument that is pretty much devoid of any technology except one's own technique ...is an unusual and wonderful thing.**

There are a lot of places where people need to hear good, live music. Play often—and outside of concert halls.

**Is there anything we haven't yet talked about that is important to you or that you feel might be important to others?**

As I get older, I am more and more grateful for having had music as the focus of my life. Even though the move now is towards fabulously intricate technological possibilities, I think having a life with an instrument that is pretty much devoid of any technology except one's own technique, which you work on almost every day of your life, is an unusual and wonderful thing. For sure it is not easy or terribly secure, but it is a very special focus for a life. ♣

Lee Inman is active in Seattle as a freelance performer, teacher, composer, lecturer, and ensemble coach. He has appeared in concert with Baroque orchestras in Seattle and Portland and currently performs regularly with the Portland Viol Consort.



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