CLASSICAL SAX

CONVERSATION WITH PAUL BRODIE

by David W. Roe

Paul Brodie was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1934. He has performed over 2,000 concerts in Canada, the United States, Australia, Mexico, and Europe as a soloist and with the Paul Brodie Saxophone Quartet. With twenty-five albums, he is considered the most recorded concert saxophonist in the history of the instrument. His playing was featured on the sound track of the film *Heaven Can Wait* and he appeared in the film *A Circle of Two* with his quartet. Brodie founded the World Saxophone Congress in 1969. He has appeared as a soloist with most of the leading orchestras in Canada and is author of *A Student's Guide to the Saxophone.* Brodie is a consultant/artist for the Selmer Company of the United States and Canada. He will complete an eight-week tour of Southeast Asia this month that includes sixty concerts in India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and other countries.

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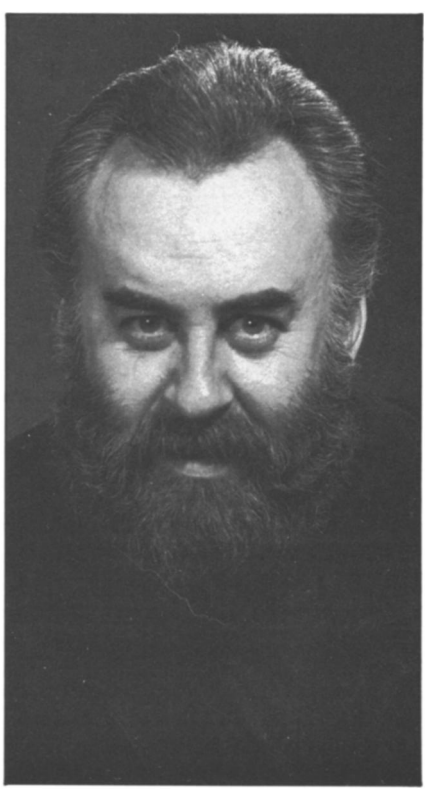
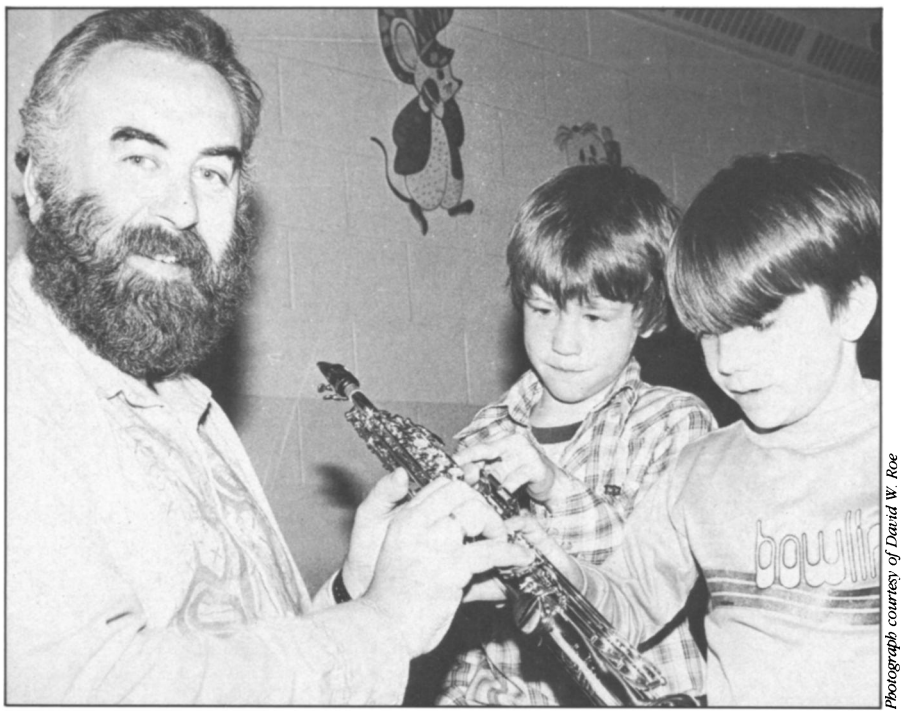


Roe: What steps did you take to prepare yourself for a career as a concert saxophonist?

Brodie: I realized I wanted to make music my career when I was in high school in Regina, Saskatchewan. At that time, there were no good saxophone teachers available to me, so I was self-taught for the first few years. I would suggest that this is not the right way to begin. I would have been better off taking saxophone lessons from a good clarinetist or a fine flute player than to try to fumble away on my own. When I enrolled as a student of Larry Teal at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, I found that I was very ill prepared, since I was very much lacking in a good background. I strongly believe that a serious music student should have, in addition to a good teacher, a strong background in theory and harmony.

Roe: What were some of the important lessons you learned from Larry Teal?

Brodie: The most important thing I learned from Larry was a sense of



Photograph courtesy of David W. Roe

Paul Brodie, who performs on alto, soprano, and sopranino saxophones, here gives students a close-up look. Brodie has recorded educational albums for the Music Minus One and Golden Crest recording companies.

self-discipline. The first 500 times a student plays a particular exercise is the introduction; the second 500 times is the repetition. To a student who likes to flip from one thing to the next without perfecting anything, this is a shock. A musician must learn to take a piece of music apart. This takes great patience and much time. Larry was a terrific technical teacher who demanded perfection. He had a plan for each student, a well-organized progression from one skill to another. He was a real pedagogue and certainly my experience with him was one of the greatest experiences I had in my entire education.

Roe: Later on you went to Paris, where you studied with Marcel Mule. How did his teaching methods differ from those of Larry Teal?

Brodie: I certainly think the most important teacher I had was Larry Teal because he taught me how to play, how to read, how to count, and how to develop myself as a musician. But when I went to study with Marcel Mule, I met an artist, probably the greatest artist that the saxophone has had in this century. Hearing him play was a lesson in itself in sound and interpretation. Therefore, the skills we worked on were primarily interpretive and artistic.

Roe: What is the basic difference in the playing methods and sound of the French saxophonist as compared to the Canadian or American saxophonist?

Brodie: Today there is less difference than in previous years because so many students in recent years have had the opportunity to study with Marcel Mule, Larry Teal, or one of their students. But basically, the French sound is a very pure sound compared to the reediness of the American sound. The "jazzier" American sound is naturally a product of the development of jazz in the United States. In addition, the vibrato in France is much quicker, a little tighter, and more regulated than the slower American vibrato. Vibrato is an aspect of performance that has changed and is changing for all wind instruments throughout the decades.

Roe: What do you think about mixing styles of playing—classical, jazz, rock, and so on? Can one be equally proficient in all styles?

Brodie: I think that it is very important to learn how to play different styles of music. However, I don't think a jazz player will ever interpret the classics absolutely correctly because it just isn't his nature. Similarly, a classical performer, no matter how much he works on a piece of jazz, will never sound entirely convincing. In my programming I find I am mixing styles more and more. It is interesting that outstanding classical performers such as James Galway and Itzhak Perlman are playing ragtime music and pop music and Jean-Pierre Rampal has experimented with jazz.

Roe: Are today's music schools, conservatories, colleges, and universities preparing young students for the "real" world of music?

Brodie: Although many of our schools have tremendous programs for teaching students how to play their instruments and how to play in an ensemble, they do not prepare musicians and artists generally to survive in the real world. Very little effort is made to teach students the public relations and the realities of the music business. Consequently, many people who have aspirations to build careers as concert performers are unsuccessful. A young artist should learn how to use a typewriter, how to write a proper business letter, how to keep proper business books, how to speak effectively in public, how to present himself or herself on stage, and how to manage a career. There are definite basic skills that should be learned.

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Roe: In performing works for the concert stage, how important is it to understand the structure of a work, the compositional processes and devices used by the composer, the musical syntax used, and so on to be able to perform the work successfully?

Brodie: It is completely necessary to understand the structure of the piece you are playing and the intent of the composer. It is always a great advantage to have the composer there so that he can elaborate on the work. I believe a performer should stay as close to what the composer wanted as possible.

Roe: Of all the works originally written for saxophone, which works have you enjoyed playing most?

Brodie: There are thousands of works written for the saxophone. Unfortunately, a lot of them in my estimation are not great pieces. If we only had a [Johannes] Brahms sonata or a [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart concerto, we would be very fortunate. Consequently, my favorite pieces were not originally written for the saxophone, but are transcriptions. However, some of our best orchestral works with saxophone would include a *Concerto* by Alexander Glazounov, written in the mid-1930s, *Concertino da Camera* by French composer Jacques Ibert, a *Sonata* by Paul Creston, and a *Sonata* by Bernard Heiden written in the late thirties.

Roe: What would you look for in a piece of an earlier period to consider it suitable for transcribing for the saxophone?

Brodie: I must be happy with the melodic and harmonic content of a work and the style of the piece. A few years ago I performed the *Six Metamorphoses* of Benjamin Britten, which were originally written for solo oboe, and found them exceptionally suitable for the soprano saxophone. I think the range is also important although if a piece is written out of the range of the instrument, it can be readily accommodated by changing octaves.

Roe: Have you published any of the transciptions you perform?

Brodie: I am in the process of writing three books of solos for Frederick Harris Music Company in Toronto and these will be available internationally in the near future.

Roe: Many music educators begin a student on the clarinet and then switch the student to the saxophone after a proper embouchure is developed. What do you think of this practice?

Brodie: This was once a popular practice among music educators. However, I do not believe it is widely followed today. The saxophone embouchure is not the same as that of the clarinet. The saxophone embouchure should be circular with equal pressure on all sides. This of course is not true of the clarinet.

Roe: How important is a good and proper mouthpiece to achieving a good saxophone sound?

Brodie: The mouthpiece is 85 percent of what one will get out of the instrument. If one uses a cheap mouthpiece on a good instrument, one will diminish the potential of the instrument to produce a good sound. Therefore, even if one has a good student instrument and puts on a professional mouthpiece such as a Selmer square-chamber mouthpiece, a Couf, or a Vandoren, one will improve greatly the potential of the instrument.

Roe: Most wind performers attest to the fact that correct breathing is one of the most important (if not *the* most important) aspects of playing. Do you agree with this view?

Brodie: Breathing is the first link in the chain because the proper way to breathe is the basis of a good sound. However, there are many other links in the chain, including the open throat, the correct embouchure, the correct mouthpiece, the correct reed, the correct way to put the reed on the mouthpiece, where the tongue should go, how to develop the embouchure, and so on. But certainly, correct breathing is very crucial for playing any wind instrument.

Roe: How do you teach tonguing to your saxophone students?

Brodie: I try to describe to a student the series of events that takes place. First you place the mouthpiece in the mouth. Then you put the tongue up against the reed (not the tip of the tongue; the tip of the tongue is curved down toward the inside of the lower teeth and the tongue is pushed forward so that it has an arch). The tip of the reed then touches slightly back on the tongue. Then you build up the air pressure. The tongue is released and the air goes into the mouthpiece. In order to stop the tone, you can either put the tongue back or merely stop blowing. I stress in addition that it is important that the student not move the jaw up and down when tonguing because that distorts the pitch. I teach first the legato tongue, joining one note smoothly to another. From that I teach the staccato tongue. The tongue does not change its position from one to the other.

Roe: What things do you consider in making up a concert program? Do you perform a completely different program for school groups than you do for the professional concert stage?

Brodie: The first consideration I have when I give a recital is that it be an entertaining program including a variety of styles and periods. If I play for a group of kindergarten students, I will probably play a few tunes such as "Yakety Sax," "The Pink Panther," "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," and little classical themes that the students will know, to try to make the presentation both educational and entertaining. In other words, I don't try to play "above" my audience. If I were playing at a World Saxophone Congress, I would perform repertoire that would be suitable for that type of audience. I try to select music that will leave the audience with a good feeling about the saxophone and music.