

The Early Flute Recordings 1910-1950

An Inspirational Journey into the Past

It all started when I was premiering the concerto by Robert Simpson at the Malvern Festival. As if this wasn't enough excitement for one day, I was talking to a close friend of Bob, called Dick Edwards, after the concert and he mentioned that he had a large collection of 78 recordings, including some flute players, and would I like some copied on to cassette? "Well, yes please" I quickly replied "perhaps you could send me a list of what you have" thinking of those marvellous early recordings of Gaubert and Rene Le Roy. And so some time later I received the list. It was *very* long and included flute players from all over the world, not just France, most of whom I recognised from anecdotes and stories I had been told over the years, but I had never actually heard any recordings of them. This list being so long, I really did not know where to start and as I was very busy during this time, and also felt that in a way there were too many I would have liked and what an imposition to ask this very kind gentleman to copy them, I let it drift and did nothing about it, apart from writing to explain the situation, for more than three years.

One day while blitzing through my papers, I came across the list, carefully filed so long ago and I felt compelled to phone Mr. Edwards again. He seemed pleased to hear from me and when I tentatively asked if the offer of copying some of his 78's was still open, he told me he had recently retired and was selling them. Would I like to see the list!? Well yes! The outcome was that I bought the entire collection. I drove down to Colchester to collect them, had a marvellous time talking to Mr. Edwards, who is very knowledgeable, and then returned home with what I had come to suspect was quite a treasure. This was indeed true, as the collection not only included a wide spectrum of flute players from the first half of this century, but was in immaculate condition. The next question was how to listen to them. My mother had an old 78 player, but I felt very protective towards my cargo and decided to do some research. I was soon talking to Peter Furner, Recording Technician and Peter Copeland, Conservation Manager of the National Sound Archive, who gave me very good advice and put me in touch with Philip Farlow who is one of the best specialists in transferring 78 to tape or CD in the country. So off I went to listen to some of my records on Phillip's special equipment—and how wonderful that was! I was listening to flute players who were born at the end of the last century - the Taffanel/Gaubert period. The style and sound were sometimes very different from our perception of flute playing today, but the virtuosity and musicality were nothing short of inspirational - fascinating - and educational. I felt very humble listening to these impeccable performances, made with no editing, no surround sound or added ambience, no knobs to twiddle or tricks to enhance-just absolutely honest performing.

Now it began to emerge in my mind that every flute player who is interested in the history of flute playing ought to have access to these. There are many young players now who have never heard a 78 recording and who have probably never heard of flute players from this early generation, apart from those famous French celebrities. And so I decided to look into the possibility of putting my collection on to CD. After some investigation into the logistics I decided to go ahead. Philip transferred all the 78's in their raw state to CD's with his special equipment and his tremendous skill and judgement. Then I was able to listen to and select the material. This was followed by a visit to Sound Recording Technology in Cambridge where with the very sophisticated technology now available, restoration has taken place. I wanted to be sure that the records were restored and checked for pitch, so I have directed the whole procedure all along the line, as it were.

With the engineer I decided basically how *little* surface and crackle noise to take off the original recordings. This in a way was the most vital decision, as taking too much hiss away also detracts from the higher frequencies and alters the tone of the flute - so one has to be careful not to throw the baby away with the bath water (to quote Philip). Many of the longer recordings needed editing as the performances were stopped and restarted to allow for turning the record over. This required careful editing and checking for pitch and speed changes. Some very old 78 records run slow or fast - more often fast - making the player sound like Mickey Mouse. Some gather speed as they play and consequently become sharper and sharper. All this had to be monitored, so while they were being transferred and restored I took my flute with me and checked it all out. With the technology now available, we can get much, much closer to how these players actually sounded and can prevent their performances being spoiled by pitch changes or faults on the original 78. I had to research some of the repertoire to find out which key it was in ,so I have acquired some new pieces along the way! I was glad I checked them out, as some works were running almost a semitone flat, making the tone dull and strange.

Of course, many people, especially the younger ones, may think that I am completely mad when they hear the quality of the sound, or perhaps one should say the *type* of sound, especially if they have not heard 78's before. One has to bypass the difference in style and the difference in instruments (the Cooper scale wasn't around then!) and the fact that on many of these recordings the performers were huddled around a large horn and were limited to 4 -5 minutes of music per side. When one has become accustomed to the old fashioned sound accompanied by a certain amount of surface noise, one hears what marvellous players they were. The human ear is *so* good at adapting. It only takes a few minutes to slip back to the 1920's. At the end of each CD I have included a track as it was in its raw state, without restoration, so that the listener has some idea how they sounded originally.

From the start, the project seemed to have its own momentum as if all those forgotten flute players were standing behind me saying “ come on, it's time people knew that we could play like this! “. After listening to so many great masters of the flute from the first half of the century, I became more and more fascinated by the difference in their tone and style. Many of us have worked with great French players such as Marcel Moyse and Jean Pierre Rampal and so are familiar with the French tonality, but the playing of Amadio from Australia and Murchie from England, Jespersen from Denmark and Wummer from America are so beautiful and so interesting – and so different. Today there is a kind of universal sound and style, with a few personal variations. The variety of instruments, styles and tone from this period is for me very exciting and interesting.

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