

IT IS SAID THAT OBOE PLAYERS ARE CRAZY. Just ask an oboist—they're the ones who say it most often. And the source of their craziness is their obsession with their reeds.

"It's like splitting diamonds," says Bobby Taylor, associate professor of oboe. "A really good oboe reed tip is thinner than three hundredths of a millimeter. Research has been done that compares the reeds of some famous oboe players, and every one of them uses reeds that have tips measuring one hundredth of a millimeter. A reed that thin produces a very warm sound with smooth tonal qual-

ity. But making a reed that thin is really hard to do. The next step beyond one hundredth of a millimeter is zero, so as you finish scraping a reed, you are very close to ruining it. On the other hand, if you stop too soon, you make a reed that functions, but does not have the right sound. This may explain our obsession with reeds."

In an effort to understand more about the sound they want from their oboes, their reeds, and to better know the cane used to make reeds, Taylor and four of his students—Somerville Aston, '01, Kristin Cameron, '02, Robert Boxie, '02, and Jennifer Bernard, '03—traveled to France last summer for 17 days to work with John DeLancie and Wayne Rapiere, two oboists known for their playing and their association with Marcel Tabuteau, the "father" of American oboe playing.

"Tabuteau was a real innovator in oboe playing," says Taylor. "He came here from France to play with the Philadelphia Orchestra with ideas of his own and started experimenting with a different way to make reeds. Now almost every American oboe player, with very few exceptions, is either a student of Tabuteau or a student of one of his students."

"The quality of the oboe sound is comprised of several things," says Taylor. "The way the reed is made, how much of the reed is in your mouth when you play, and how much lip pressure or biting is applied to the reed. The idea is never to force the sound. You want it to sing. A free, unencumbered sound with the oboe is a beautiful thing; it's what we're all striving for."

While helping the younger oboists prepare for orchestral auditions



# The Mystery of the REED

By BONNIE ARANT ERTELT

"One of the growers there, Madame Duchin, said that the cane has to suffer," Taylor explains. "She says it's better if it doesn't get quite enough rain or it's subjected to the mistral wind that blows from the Mediterranean. But every piece of cane is different."

The process of reedmaking for oboists is complicated and involves equipment with names like gougers, splitters, planers, shapers and guillotines. In order to both make the reed and later to play it, the cane first has to be soaked. Taylor starts with a segment of tube cane. At this point, it's not very far from having just been cut from the field.

"You take a piece of tube cane and split it into three pieces with the splitter, which is like an arrowhead," explains Taylor. "Then you cut it to a very precise length on the guillotine. After that you plane it to change it from a curved piece to one that's absolutely flat on top."

"Next, you take the shaper and shape it by folding it in half, then put it on the shaper tip and carve it down with a razor blade so that it has a tapered shape." After shaping, the reed is tied on to a silver tube with nylon string, and fitted into the oboe with an airtight seal of cork.

"When you tie on the reed, you also have to make a good airtight seal, because if the reed leaks, you can't use it. It's too unpredictable."

Taylor estimates that he makes about four or five reeds every week, tailoring each reed to the demands of the pieces he's scheduled to play. At this point in his career, he thinks he spends more time making reeds than actually practicing.

"It's such a tricky process," he says, "but if you have a good reed, life is good." ▼

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Oboist Bobby Taylor planes a piece of cane, one step in creating a reed.

PHOTOS BY NEIL BRAME