



An Interview with Nestor Herszbaum

by Rebecca Meador

The seasoned freelance musician discusses his experiences and shares his insights after auditioning for and playing his first season as principal flutist with the Kansas City Symphony.

On May 10, 2005, Nestor Herszbaum accepted the principal flute position with the Kansas City Symphony. Although an accomplished freelance musician—he has performed with the Omaha, Lincoln, and Charleston symphonies—this is Herszbaum’s first full-time, principal flute position. He offers reflections and advice in this interview.

Beginnings

Originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Nestor Herszbaum received most of his early musical training from his flute teacher Jorge de La Vega. With de La Vega’s encouragement, Herszbaum traveled to Europe for a series of masterclasses and performances. Following the advice of a close friend, Herszbaum applied for and was accepted into the artist diploma program at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music at the end of 1992. At CCM he studied with Brad Garner and Jack Wellbaum. He later pursued additional studies with the Cincinnati Symphony’s principal flutist, Randy Bowman.

Herszbaum finished his artist diploma in 1995, and began work on a doctor of musical arts. He married fellow CCM flutist Maria Harding in 1996, and one year later the couple moved to Omaha, Nebraska, when Harding was offered the principal flute position with the Omaha Symphony. While in Omaha, Herszbaum taught at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and was an active freelance musician, playing with the symphony, presenting solo recitals, and performing in chamber groups. In 2003, he self-published a book on alternative fingerings. (Editor’s note: see also “Practical Alternative Fingerings,” by Nestor Herszbaum, in the Spring 2005 issue of *The Flutist Quarterly*.) Nestor and Maria have two children: Uri and Mila.

Preparation

When did you start auditioning for orchestral positions?

I started auditioning while I was still in Cincinnati. At first, I wanted to take auditions as a learning experience. I quickly realized how different the preparation process was from everything else. The first audition that I took was for the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra, and it was awful. I really didn’t know the excerpts, and the screen freaked me out. I didn’t know what I was doing there. The second audition was for the same ensemble a year later. I did much better. Those auditions made me realize how much I had to concentrate on the orchestral repertoire and the individual excerpts to be successful, because it was a completely different way of thinking. I had to concentrate as much on the orchestral repertoire as I had before on the solo repertoire and concerti. Also, I felt pretty thrown off by the fact that I had to play just the excerpts, because I felt that they were taken out of context. I started to listen to a lot of recordings, and study excerpts and orchestral scores. I made a tape of excerpts the second year I was at CCM, just to help me understand how they sounded with the entire orchestra. I also started to make copies of all of the scores. I think listening to and studying the entire orchestral score makes a huge difference in the way you play an audition, because you get a better sense of the whole piece, the character of the solo, and the context of the excerpt.

How many auditions have you taken?

The Kansas City Symphony was my 11th. The first six were the ones that I used to learn about the auditioning process while I still was in school. On the other half, I started getting more serious. I had a better understanding of what to do. Those 11 auditions spanned 13 years. I took a whole bunch of auditions all together at first, and then I started taking

BACKGROUND IMAGE: VICTORIA STEHL

auditions every two or three years. In retrospect, this might have been a mistake, but I was involved in teaching and raising a family, so getting an orchestral job wasn't my priority. A friend once told me that she took 50 auditions to get the job that she really wanted in a major orchestra.

You have two young children. How did you keep focused on your performance goals while raising a family?

I was playing as a freelancer and performing often with the Omaha Symphony. I was performing all the time, so I didn't feel the need to have a job of my own because I didn't miss playing in an orchestra. That changed a few years ago, when I felt I had to move on and really wanted a settled job playing principal flute in a symphony. I took two auditions, and one of those was for the Kansas City Symphony.

What was your regular practice regimen while you were freelancing in Omaha?

When I was freelancing and teaching, the teaching took most of my time—and, of course, my family life took the rest of my time and focus. My practice regimen changed a lot, and it depended on what I had going on. I practiced on a “need-to” basis. If I had to play I would practice. If I had solo recitals, I would start practicing a month before those recitals, but if not, I would not practice, or I would practice very little to keep in shape. I was lucky that I had advanced students, because I had to teach really challenging repertoire and excerpts, which also helped me keep in shape.

Did you ever think about changing the focus of your career?

I have always done many things besides music. I enjoy working with computers and I have other interests besides music, so it was not an issue.

Did you always feel that you could win an orchestral position?

I always thought that it was obtainable. But when you have to audition against 100 other players—not only do you have to play well, you have to match what the committee is looking for in terms of sound, style, and personality.

The Audition

Describe the audition process for the Kansas City Symphony.

The auditions for principal flute were among the best-run auditions I have ever taken. The personnel managers and everyone else made us feel at home. They had a pretty extensive list of required excerpts—all of the good ones. We also played the Mozart Concerto in G Major. It was very well organized because they sent a booklet containing copies of the excerpts. That way everyone played from the same editions that the Kansas City Symphony had, which is very important.

Approximately 120 people were accepted into the audition, 86 of whom attended. There was a preliminary round, and then there was a semi-final round with 13 people, and a final



Herszbaum with daughter, Mila, 2004. Opposing page: view of a canal from downtown Kansas City. Inset: Herszbaum.

round with four people. As far as I know, no one was invited to the audition, everyone had to do the preliminary round, and no one was advanced automatically. The whole audition process, even the final round, was blind. Sometimes you get to play with a group of strings or woodwinds in the final round, but the committee wanted to keep the audition anonymous. Many orchestras opt to have the whole audition process behind a screen to avoid accusations of discrimination or favoritism.

Did you feel confident throughout the audition process?

Yes, I was very comfortable playing. I think the main key to success for me was that I wasn't trying to please anyone; I just did what I believed I had to do. I played the way I wanted to play. That was a change for me, because in some previous auditions when I was less experienced, I thought, “How can I please the committee?” In this case, I just thought about playing my best. I just played the way I believe the music had to be played, and that made the audition more enjoyable for me.

Describe what happened when they announced that you had won the job? Did the committee meet you backstage?

The personnel manager announced that I was the winner, and I went backstage and met the committee, including the music director. Afterwards, I drove back to Omaha and got home around 2:00 a.m. I was falling asleep while I was driving, but I had enough adrenaline to get home. I called Maria from the road because she was in rehearsal earlier. I kept her posted on what was going on. We both were happy, but there were so many decisions we needed to make about moving the whole family. It was quite an ordeal.

The Job

Now that you are the principal flutist of a major symphony orchestra, how has your practice and preparation routine changed?

I have to practice all the time, and I am always looking ahead to upcoming music. When I have time, I try to practice my



Left to right: Jack Wellbaum, Bradley Garner, Rebecca Meador, Nestor Herszbaum, Randy Bowman; Julius Baker (center)

normal routine, which is basically scales and arpeggios. When I don't have time, I just learn the repertoire that I have to play. I use the music that I am learning as a tone exercise, a scale exercise, etc. I recommend that students learn scales and arpeggios now, because later when they have to learn a lot of repertoire it will be a nice tool.

How many services does the Kansas City Symphony have?

We usually have eight services per week. Typically, we have two full days with double rehearsals (morning and afternoon), and then we have a dress rehearsal and three concerts. We also play opera, ballet, pops, educational, and young people's concerts.

How quickly did you fit into the flute section?

The flute section and the whole woodwind section are great. It is a pleasure to be playing with such good musicians. From the very beginning, Shannon Finney (associate principal) and Diane Schick (piccolo) blended with me and matched the way I play in terms of sound and color.

What was the most difficult program for you this season?

The first was one of the most difficult. It was Symphonic Metamorphosis, *Till Eulenspiegel*, the Emperor piano concerto, and a newly commissioned piece by Zhou Long. It was difficult not only because of the caliber of the pieces, but also because it was the first chance that I had to work on a concert for the classical series with the whole orchestra. Also, it was the first concert that I played in the Lyric Theatre, an acoustically challenging place in which to perform.

Did you use any special techniques to prepare the solo for the first piece you cited, Hindemith's Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes of Carl Maria Von Weber?

I practiced the solo with the metronome and with a MIDI file that I wrote with the piano accompaniment. In perform-

ance, though, the solo is very different, since the tempo is flexible and you have to project on top of the orchestra, which requires a fuller sound and a better management of the air.

Did the job differ from your expectations?

The actual job is not different from what I expected. The amount of work surprised me. It is very intense work involving a lot of rehearsals and concerts. The first week we rehearsed four different programs and performed two of them. At first it was a shock, because I had to learn tons of music quickly, but I feel comfortable with the workload now.

Advice

What advice can you give to students currently seeking a performance degree who hope to play in an orchestra?

First of all, before delving into the orchestral repertoire, study solo sonatas and concerti, and establish a really good technical foundation. By this I mean scales, arpeggios, technical, and tone exercises. That's the basic foundation that any flute player should have. Then, for students who have decided that they want to play in an orchestra, study the orchestral repertoire—not only the flute part, but also the whole score. Spend time listening to a lot of recordings, then practice the orchestral repertoire the same way you would practice a solo concerto or sonata—memorize it, and learn the accompaniment. Try to figure out what you want to do with those solos in terms of character and style while observing the intentions of the composer.

So many students do not give dynamics enough attention. How do you approach and adjust the dynamic levels from an audition to performing with an orchestra?

Dynamics are fundamental to music making and expression. For an audition, you have to exaggerate everything, especially the dynamics. In a performance situation, those dynamics are helped or hindered by the rest of the instruments that are playing, so you may have to change the dynamics from those indicated in the score. You have to know whether you are the primary voice or the accompaniment within the orchestra to know when you have to project or when you have to blend.

What was one of the most important lessons that you learned from your earlier studies?

I learned that I am not only a flutist, but a musician. I think when I was younger I was too flute-centered; as I matured, I learned that I was first and foremost a musician. Also, I learned that I need to study the whole score for any piece of music. To present an engaging performance, one has to be aware of the whole piece, not only the flute line. I am sometimes astonished by how many people don't even know the accompaniment to the Mozart concerti. They don't know what is going on beyond the flute part. If you don't know the score, you are just playing half of the music—you are shortchanging

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the audience. You do not have to know what the other players are doing note for note, but you do need to have a general idea. Listening to music has helped me with this. Students, for the most part, don't listen to music as much as they should.

What was the biggest mistake you made while you were studying?

If I had to do it all over again, I think I would practice more. When you are in school, you have the most time to practice, and the environment allows you to learn a lot. For example, you can use school libraries to listen to recordings and consult scores. I would also focus on orchestral repertoire earlier in my studies.

What advice have you received that has been helpful to you through the years?

I have gotten so much advice that it is difficult for me to remember everything. I feel that Jorge de la Vega was very important in my development as a flutist and as a musician. He enabled me to improve and to get to the next stage. He encouraged me to study in Europe, which opened my eyes and broadened my horizons. Brad Garner, Jack Wellbaum, and Randy Bowman, through their advice and teachings, helped me get to a point where I was ultimately able to get a job in the United States. Not only did they prepare me to take auditions, but they also enabled me to grow to a certain point where I was successful in my teaching, writing my book, and everything else.

Do you have any advice for flutists auditioning for orchestral positions?

Work hard, and don't get discouraged. It can be a matter of being in the right place at the right time. You might think that you played the best audition of your life, and then nothing happens. Other times you say, "I wish I had played better," and you get the job.

Do you have any final thoughts for aspiring flutists?

To be successful in your career, you have to put something of yourself into what you do. You have to commit yourself, so what you do fulfills you and makes you happy. It is not only a matter of dedication, which is 99 percent of it, but it is also putting your personality into it. That's what you have to offer that no one has, because no one else is exactly like you. I think that makes the difference between a good student and a good performer. If you don't have anything to say through the music, I don't think you can be successful, and even if you are successful, I am not sure that it would be meaningful to you. *

Rebecca Meador is associate professor of flute at Washburn University. She performed at the 2005 International Double Reed Society and National Flute Association conventions. Her set of study arrangements, Orchestral Excerpts for Flute Ensemble, coauthored by Jean Marshall, was published in fall 2005.

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