

An Interview with David Sherr

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The extraordinary Los Angeles musician David Sherr plays the instruments of the oboe family as well as flutes, clarinets, and saxophones, and it was my good fortune to meet him recently due to our common musical interests. I have been tremendously impressed and inspired while learning something about his life story and his impressive musical career. If, before I had gotten to know David, someone had told me that a musician had performed the Luciano Berio flute, oboe, and clarinet Sequenzas on the same concert on several occasions, and also recorded them on one CD, I am not sure I would have believed them. Yet, David has indeed accomplished those amazing feats along with many others throughout his extensive career as a successful jazz, studio, and concert artist. Learning about David's life has been an education in how boundaries and limitations can be not just overcome but erased.

Jacqueline Leclair (JL): David, you were born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1941. Your family moved to Chicago soon thereafter and settled in Los Angeles California in 1947. What was your start in music like as a kid?

David Sherr (DS): I took violin lessons from about the second grade. I had no aptitude. I was the one who arranged to get the instrument and the lessons (not my parents) but I didn't practice. My second-grade teacher, Susan Ponder, had a roommate who was a violin teacher, Winifred Ballard, who had played concerts in the early twentieth century and had started a career, but somehow wound up walking around to kids' houses in my neighborhood giving violin lessons.

I don't know what I was thinking regarding playing the violin, but you know... second graders, right? The violin lessons cost \$1.50 each which probably strained our budget. My father was a shoe salesman at a Sears department store.

After lessons with Ms. Ballard, I graduated to taking lessons with the former head of the violin department at USC, Ms. Ballard's teacher, Davol Sanders.

Starting in the third grade, I played violin in the school orchestra, but as I didn't practice, I didn't learn much. I had begun to "study" with a teacher named Frederick Frank Fickas, who had an annual violin recital for younger and older students with two violin choirs, thirty or so students in each one. I was always in the rear of the junior violin choir. I was interested in music, but violin just really was not my thing.

Luckily, just before I went into the tenth grade, I heard a Benny Goodman record long, long after the end of the swing era, and I decided I was going to be a jazz clarinet player, completely oblivious to the fact that there was no such thing at that point in history. From that point on, I was on my path. That was around 1955, so I would have been 14 or so.

JL: So, jazz clarinet wasn't a thing anymore?

DS: Oh, no. Jimmy Hamilton (1917–94), a beautiful clarinetist, was playing with Duke Ellington (1899–1974) and Buddy DeFranco (1923–2014) was in Los Angeles doing



Figure 1. David Sherr.

studio work mostly for the American arranger, composer, band leader, and orchestrator Nelson Riddle (1921–85), but the era of the jazz clarinet had come to an end. Years later, I was Nelson Riddle’s clarinet player, and I was worried that he might start trying to compare me to Buddy DeFranco (laughs). The relationship lasted, so I guess he didn’t (laughs).

In high school, I took clarinet lessons from a guy that drove around the neighborhood. He grew up in a small town in Iowa, playing in the Omaha Symphony when he was in high school. Then he went to the military service where he was in an orchestra. He was a good musician and a good clarinetist. By the mid-1950s he was in California, and in 1959 moved to Las Vegas to play at the MGM Grand Hotel. I didn’t really get the fundamentals from him, though.

Later, I studied oboe with Bill (William) Criss (1921–84), and I remember him saying that [Marcel] Tabuteau told him to, “...place the notes on the wind.” That’s a whole lot of lesson right in that one sentence! I never learned about “the wind” from that guy [who drove around my neighborhood].

After graduating from high school in 1958, I went to Los Angeles City College, which had just a tiny music department, but was brimming with wonderful musicians. There was Michelle Zukovsky [clarinetist with the L. A. Philharmonic from when she was 18 years old in 1961 until her retirement in 2015, the longest-serving female in that orchestra’s history]. She was Michelle Bloch in those days, and if there’s ever been a better clarinet player, I don’t think I’ve heard them. There was also Dave Breidenthal, who was an incredible bassoonist [and played with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for over forty years until his retirement in 2009], and the jazz pianist Les McCann (1935–).

A number of other people [with me at LA City College] also went on to be very successful musicians: Harold Budd (1936–2020) “the father of ambient music,” for example, was a friend of mine. He was about five years older and had flunked out of high school, but he was brilliant and wound up with a master’s degree. In California, in those days at age 18, you could go to community college whether you had a high school diploma or not. So, he went and eventually got a master’s degree from the University of Southern California. His bachelor’s degree may have come from Cal State Northridge or somewhere like that. He got scholarships, and he went on to invent a new kind of music, “ambient music.” He was a real interesting guy. When he was in school, he worked briefly as a janitor for a film company, and the owner hired him to write a film score. It was a masterpiece for a six-piece ensemble. But the owner of the film company had a son who was also a composer, so the son replaced Hal; but Hal went on to teach at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] and to tour.

I wasn’t making much progress at college, so I dropped out after three semesters to join Ronnie Bartley’s band, at that point based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I joined them in January 1960 at age 18. It had been a 12-piece band originally but had shrunk to nine musicians when I joined, and then kept shrinking. Ronnie couldn’t afford to replace the musicians who left. I played tenor saxophone and clarinet. I sent for my alto saxophone so I could practice, and

I had bought a flute by then, and I practiced that too. We worked Wednesday nights at the Tulsa Over-Twenty-Nine Dance Club at the Cimarron Ballroom, went on the road on the weekends, and then back to Tulsa. I practiced at the ballroom when we were in town and drove the manager nuts. He complained about my practicing to the owner, a bandleader named Leon McAuliffe who replied, “I wish the boys in *my* band would do some practicing!”

Incidentally, William Leon McAuliffe (1917–88) was an American western swing guitarist who was a member of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys during the 1930s. He was posthumously inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as a member of that band and was also a member of the Steel Guitar Hall of Fame. Leon was a nice guy and there was a rumor he had wanted to offer me a job but was afraid I wouldn’t want to play in a Country band. I would have accepted because anything would have been an improvement for me. But I’m glad things worked out the way they did.

The Ronnie Bartley Band ran out of work in April 1960 because the Roseland Ballroom gig in New York City had fallen through. Ronnie was scrambling for work, and then let us leave if we wanted to—no notice, we just had to tell him if we were leaving. While Ronnie tried to find bookings, I wasn’t getting my \$75 weekly salary; we got just \$20 per gig, so things were not looking so good. One day when I went to the ballroom to practice, a combo was rehearsing. I had no idea who they were, but later found out they were part of the Ernie Fields Band. The following day, the whole band was there, and I introduced myself to Ernie Fields (1904–97). I saw him there again, about a week later, and he asked me to audition for him. He offered me a job saying something along the lines of, “I like to think I’m big enough to hire a man ‘cause I like the way he plays, but sometimes it’s hard to get something to eat out there on the road, and you can help with that, too.” Ernie and the rest of the musicians were Black and I’m White. We received daily reminders of the second-class status of Blacks in Tulsa, and on the road.

That night I told Ronnie Bartley I was leaving to join Ernie Fields’ band. He made a racist remark and ordered me and my belongings off the bus. It was about midnight, and I wound up leaving the bus carrying my four instruments and a huge suitcase, with sheets and blankets around my neck. I found a crummy hotel room for \$1.25 that night.

The next day, carrying all that same stuff, I took the bus to my flute lesson at Tulsa University. Max Waits was the flute teacher who’d agreed to give me lessons. There was a note on his door that flute lessons were canceled due to a faculty meeting. So, I walked to a bus stop, trying to figure out how to get to Ernie’s house. I was supposed to be there by 6 pm and I only had his address—no directions. Luckily, Ernie had gone to Ronnie Bartley’s bus looking for me, and someone had told him where I had gone. So, he found me at the bus stop and drove me and my stuff to his house. I had dinner with his family, and we left for Chicago that night.

That’s how I transitioned to a famous band, a rhythm and blues band that was well known in those days: Ernie Fields and his World Famous Orchestra. The band was at least thirty years old at that time, but had had its only hit record the year before. I got that job May 11, 1960, and my first gig with them was May 13 at the Regal Theater in Chicago.

Well, it was a real education from a lot of standpoints. I was a White teenager, and they were Black adults, and I got to experience segregation from their side of the equation. Maybe “equation” isn’t quite the right word.

One of my two roommates in the band, John Cameron, a guy about my parents' age, really showed me a lot about how to practice, just by doing it. Apparently, he didn't need to sleep. We'd hang out going to jam sessions, get home at four in the morning, and at 8 o'clock he'd be up practicing his tenor saxophone. He showed me, with few words, just by example, how to extract things in the music and work on them individually. My other roommate, Billy Davenport (1931–99), was the drummer in the band. He was the next youngest to me, about 28, and he's in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as a member of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. They were both great friends, great musicians, and great roommates.

Anyway, I played with the Ernie Fields Orchestra for three or four months. But then I got sick and wound up in a Denver hospital. I think I was probably just completely exhausted from lack of sleep, immaturity, and traveling with the bands. I had been on the road with the two bands for about eight months altogether.

When I got out of the hospital I went home to Los Angeles in late 1960. I spent two more semesters at L.A. City College and then went to UCLA where there was no jazz at all. I had heard about a terrific teacher named Bob MacDonald who taught at another community college, the Los Angeles Valley College. I auditioned for him and got into the band that rehearsed twice a week. At the end of the first semester, he replaced (for different reasons) the other four saxophonists and brought in four new ones, including Sheridan Stokes (1935–2022), who was back from the service, trying to get established as a doubler. We hit it off immediately. He was in my corner from the beginning, and it was Sheridan who eventually suggested I take up the oboe. Sheridan became a hugely successful studio musician throughout his career and was a National Flute Association Lifetime Achievement Award winner in 2005, a great artist, an impeccable flutist, and an innovator. His performances of the Berio flute *Sequenza* were the best I've ever heard. He had this enormous dynamic range and pinpoint control. But at the time, he was trying to learn how to be a doubler at community college with me. We would get together with the idea of trading lessons. Almost from the beginning, he was encouraging, and he got me work, sent me on jobs sometimes just to push me, you know, a trial-by-fire kind of thing.

In 1964, when Sheridan took me to a recording session of flute ensemble pieces, he had me sit in, and I met Buddy Collette (1921–2010). It was an informal session for the Los Angeles Flute Club, and Buddy asked if I played other instruments. We did the same thing a week later, but this time I was formally invited; and after that one, Buddy asked me if I would be interested in joining him and some colleagues in what he called "a little self-improvement project." I was very enthusiastic!

He introduced me to Plas Johnson (1931–), Bill Green (1925–96) who was another very successful musician, and Jewell Grant (1921–65), who had been active in record sessions since the 1940s. He played alto saxophone on Charles Mingus's first session as a leader. Jewell died soon thereafter, but the rest of us rehearsed together about once a week for a couple of years. Boy, it was hard to plan anything around Plas Johnson's schedule because the guy could have worked 24 hours a day if he wanted to! We played flute quartets, saxophone quartets, and clarinet quartets, I don't think we mixed the instruments. They were all seasoned jazz and studio musicians but were also interested in new (as in different, not *avant-garde*) music, so we all made time for these reading sessions. It was a wonderful



Figure 2. Buddy Collette (second from the left) and David Sherr (second from the right) during an annual American Civil Liberties Union fundraising event in Los Angeles c. 1990.

education, and the guys were so *nice* to me! We read contemporary classical music, but nothing *avant-garde*. Those guys were all very important to my career.

Anyway, during my early career, it was like Buddy, Bill Green, Plas, Sheridan, and another guy, Jackie Kelso (1922–2012), were all on a mission to get me work, even to the point where Plas eventually engineered for me to take his job on *The Carol Burnett Show*.

I first started doing studio work in 1965 when I was about 23 or 24 years old, playing cartoon sessions, record dates, TV shows, and even a movie Sheridan got me when they needed a flutist at the last moment. I still get one penny a year residual from that movie which was called *Head* [a 1968 American satirical musical adventure film written and produced by Jack Nicholson and Bob Rafelson].

By 1968, I was doing a combination of studio work and live gigs and playing contemporary music whenever the opportunity presented itself. I still do some of that these days. I played a concert with the New York Composers Circle just before the COVID pandemic, and one with a chamber ensemble organized by Joel Thome a year before that. I have been interested in new music since forever, I guess. Wild music or relatively conventional, it doesn't matter to me.

JL: *What is the L.A. scene like these days?*

DS: You know I've been away from it for quite a while. The synthesizer thing and foreign competition have decimated the studio business, but there's still some work, apparently. There are still jazz musicians playing jazz, but nobody seems to be making a living at it.

Speaking of synthesized music: I worked for a guy in the '70s who surreptitiously recorded us playing scales during sessions and sold the recordings to a sample library which was a new thing at the time, and part of what puts musicians out of work. Nice, huh?

JL: *Oh, dear.*

DS: So, you know, when you're up against competition like that—artificial music, the industry takes a hit. I had long periods of time in my career where I worked every day doing studio work earning a good living. I don't think anyone is able to do that anymore.

JL: *I'm curious, how did you balance playing the TV shows, studio work, and new music concerts?*

DS: There was a certain amount of bouncing back and forth. On one occasion in the 1970s, I got a last-minute (Saturday morning) call to replace an indisposed colleague on a Monday Evening Concert. I worked all day Monday and into the evening on the show *Dinah!*, and then ran to the hall, a few blocks away, to perform *Sequenza VII*.

And at the 1978 IDRS conference in Los Angeles [the 7th IDRS annual conference, held at Occidental College hosted by Don Christlieb and Earle Dumler], I played George Rochberg's *La bocca della verità* (1959), and then ran to play Dinah's TV show at the time, *Dinah!* By the way, I think the Rochberg was the only contemporary piece on that particular IDRS Conference. Zita Carno was the pianist. She was a brilliant pianist [with the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 1979–2000].

JL: *What other TV shows did you play?*

DS: I started with cartoon shows in the middle '60s for Hanna-Barbera, *The Flintstones* and others. I was on a summer replacement for *The Carol Burnett Show*, hosted by Jimmy Rodgers who was a pop/folk singer. [James Rodgers (1931–2021) had a run of hit songs in the 1950s and 1960s.] He was a very nice guy. Oh, and remember when I said I had a lot of good luck? Well, I was living in an apartment in West Los Angeles when Jimmy and his wife decided to get a divorce. By chance, he came to live in my apartment building with one of his managers, and he heard me practicing and recommended me for the gig on *The Jimmie Rodgers Show*. So, you know that thing about how you make your own luck? It's not always true.

JL: *That fell in your lap.*

DS: Yeah, and when I got to the job, he was real cool, you know. You wouldn't have known we knew each other until one day after he had rehearsed something with the band, he looked at me and said, "Kid, you know how many places I could have lived?" (laughing)

That show was contracted by a big contractor, Bobby Helfer, who never showed up. He sent subs. But the arranger, Frank Comstock (1922–2013), a really nice guy and an awesome



Figure 3. David Sherr working on the show *Dinah's Place* which ran from 1970 to 1974, playing English horn, alto saxophone, flute, oboe, and clarinet. The photo is autographed by Ms. Shore (1916–94).

arranger/composer, asked Helfer to call me for his *Dragnet* and *Adam 12* shows. I had to turn him down the first few times he called me, but he was a real pro. He kept calling, and when I finally was able to do one of the jobs, he started to call me regularly.

JL: *Nice, those were huge shows back then.*

DS: Oh, a half-hour TV cop show, they'd have a 40-piece orchestra. It's unbelievable.

JL: *Amazing, I don't think I knew that. Wow!*

DS: Over the course of my career, the TV show orchestras got smaller and smaller, until toward the end, you would have five or six musicians, three synthesizers, and that would be it.

JL: *What year would that have been, you're talking about from when to when?*

DS: Oh, well, the *Dragnet* and *Adam 12* was 1968 or 1969. I continued 'til I quit doing studio work in 2006 and moved to New York.

JL: *So, tell me about how you got into playing oboe.*

DS: For a while I kind of dismissed the idea of picking up oboe. Plas and I had gone to a baseball game in 1965, and afterward we were sitting around someplace, and he said, "You should play the oboe. You can always give it up if you don't like it." I dismissed it. But the following February I looked at the classified ads in the *Los Angeles Times* for the first time ever. There was an ad from somebody selling an oboe, so I figured that was an omen. He lived in Hermosa Beach, a little town south of me. He was a nice guy and let me take the oboe. I called up an oboe player named Gordon Schoneberg (1919–94) who tried it, and declared it an oboe. It was a Lym, with three cracks repaired using bands. [Bill Lym (1895–1964) oboe and English horn with the Cleveland Orchestra 1921–24, studio musician in Los Angeles starting in the mid-1920s, made custom instruments and tools in a studio outside of L.A.] Have you heard of those oboes?

JL: *I don't think so.*

DS: He made about 200 oboes, two English horns, and two oboe... [pause] what's the plural of "oboe d'amore?" "Oboes d'amore?"

JL: *Sure, like "attorneys general."*

DS: An oboist in the L.A. Philharmonic, Bert Gassman (1911–2004), used one for a while, and someone in the New York Philharmonic did, too. They had a nice sound and a good scale but were very resistant. Someone told me if you took it back to Lym, he would change something to reduce the amount of resistance, but it would affect the sound and the intonation. Incidentally, John Ellis was Lym's apprentice for a time.

Anyway, I went back to pay the guy for the oboe, and I knew he had an alto flute for sale, so Sheridan came along with me and tried it for me. That was in February of 1966, and I played my first studio job on the oboe about four months later.

I called oboist John Ellis (1943–2015), a terrific studio player, and asked him for lessons. That would have been in February or March 1966. I only had four lessons with him. Then I went to Schoneberg for lessons. I just sort of took to the oboe naturally.

JL: *Oh, I met John Ellis, he used to teach at North Carolina School for the Arts.*

DS: Yeah, he left L.A. He was a huge success! At our first lesson, he told me what I'm sure every oboe teacher tells every first-time student, "Put the reed where your lips meet, roll your reed and the lips into your mouth, and play on the tip of the reed." Incredibly, I misunderstood that. Instead of putting the reed where my lips met, I put the reed below my bottom lip and rolled it in, and the whole tip of the reed was covered. Immediately, the

“snake charmer” sound was gone. It killed all that nasty part of the sound that you spend all your time trying to get your students not to do. So, something like four months later, I played oboe in a cartoon session for the Hanna-Barbera Company.

JL: *What did you do for reeds when you started learning oboe?*

DS: From the beginning, I only used my own reeds, such as they were. I’m pretty stubborn. Of course, I bought the first several reeds, but I dove right in at the start making reeds. Gordon Schoneberg was considered an expert in the subject and showed me a few things. I had one lesson on reeds with John Ellis (long after my four lessons at the beginning); but for the most part, it has just been trial-and-error, mostly error (you knew I was going to say that, didn’t you?). I have two gouging machines, four shaper tips running from RDG -1 to a wide shaper (it’s the one I use), and cane from different places.

JL: *Did you study oboe with anyone else?*

DS: In September 1970, I went to the ballet, and I heard Bill Criss, the first time I had ever heard him. And that experience made me determined to be a classical oboe player. I knew he didn’t like to teach doublers, so I just went home and practiced. I was working in the studios every day, and practiced oboe every spare minute I could, even on jobs, like on a 10-minute break I would practice oboe. I felt as though I had really become an oboe player at that point. I was genuinely motivated and dedicated to improving on the oboe. Then I went to hear the Bach Aria Group in the early 1970s.

JL: *Oh, with Robert Bloom?*

DS: Yes, I bought tickets the first day they were available. After the concert, I went backstage with no thought of anything but observing, and I saw Bill Criss standing near Bob Bloom. There was a crowd around each of them. I wasn’t going to talk to Bloom. I’m a little bit shy, and I don’t like to do that. But when the crowd around Bill dissipated, I approached him and said, “I would like to take some lessons,” and he looked surprised, and said, “From me?!” (laughs) I said, “Yeah,” and he said, “Call me tomorrow.” So, I called him the next day, and boy, his attitude was way different. He said, “Are you the guy from last night?” And I said, “Yeah,” and he said, “Do you already play the oboe?” And I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Who’s your teacher?” I told him I had studied with Gordon Schoneberg. He said, “Why don’t you go back to him?” I replied, “He told me I didn’t need any more lessons.” And he said, “Okay, I said I’d teach you, so I’ll teach you.” He gave me directions to his house and when I got there, I heard playing. When it stopped, I walked in and there was a doubler taking a lesson from him, so I guess it wasn’t a completely inflexible rule he had [against teaching doublers].

He asked me to tell him about myself, and mostly what I told him about was having heard him at the ballet. It was a long oboe solo in a piece by Arthur Sullivan (of Gilbert & Sullivan), and he didn’t remember it, which kind of surprised me.

I don’t remember if I knew at the time or found out later that another doubler had gone to him for lessons, and when he said, “Play something,” the guy played transcriptions of Charlie Parker solos, and Bill was not impressed. Anyway, when he asked me to play something, I played the slow movement of a Vivaldi concerto and boy! His eyes opened real wide, and for a minute it was like he was auditioning for me. He said, “You like Baroque music?” and I said, “Yeah,” and he said, “You know I can teach you things that will get you through any commercial job.” I said, “You know, I already do studio work. I want to sound like you.

I want to play like you.” His sound was unlike anything I had ever heard, and there was a kind of motion in the music that I later found out was called “phrasing.”

Every lesson with Bill Criss contained many references to Marcel Tabuteau, [Robert] Bloom, and Harold Gomberg. And Bill said that when they were students at Curtis, Ralph Gomberg (Harold’s brother) was the one who had the most beautiful oboe sound.

I told him I had never heard a sound like his, and he said, “Thanks, but Tabuteau had the best sound.” And I said, “Can you recommend a recording?” He said, “No, he didn’t sound good on records.” He said you had to have heard Tabuteau in person.

JL: *So, at this point, how much were you doubling and how much were you playing just oboe?*

DS: I was still doubling, but I was listed in the recording musicians’ directory under “Oboe, Woodwinds, and Saxes,” and that’s kind of it. It’s nice that some of the different people I worked for didn’t even know I played some of the other instruments. I was, to some people, just their oboe or clarinet player.

JL: *That’s impressive.*

DS: In addition to studio work, I played a lot of concerts, primarily as an oboe and English horn player, but occasionally on saxophone, clarinet, or flute. I gave various premier performances of works by Gilbert Amy, Luciano Berio, Harrison Birtwistle, Harold Budd (written for me!), Paul Chihara, Paul-Heinz Dittrich, Tom Flaherty (written for Mark Hill, a fantastic oboe player), Ernst Krenek, Alexina Louie, Leonard Rosenman, Gerhard Samuel, Robert Saxon, Iannis Xenakis, and others. I worked on a recording with Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft as well. And, it’s not exactly chamber music, but I am the oboe soloist on Ray Charles’s recording of “Eleanor Rigby.”

One happy memory that just came to me is the first time I met the marvelous musician, Allan Vogel. I think it was 1972, and he was playing first oboe d’amore on J.S. Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* and I was playing second. Later on, I played the first oboe d’amore part with another excellent oboist, Mike Vogel (no relation to Allan). And I played the oratorio again with a wonderful oboist, Lise Glaser, who eventually went to the Tulsa Symphony. What a joy it is to perform that music!

But I have always enjoyed many kinds of music. I had played contemporary music before I played the oboe. I played first clarinet at the Cabrillo Music Festival which in those days did music from all eras. My first Monday Evening Concert was music by Ralph Shapey (I played saxophone) and Easley Blackwood (for that, I played bass clarinet). I was always very enthusiastic about contemporary music.

One day I was browsing in a music store, and I saw the score to *Sequenza VII* (1969). I wonder what you thought the first time you saw it. It looked like a joke to me but was inexpensive, so I bought it. I took it home and put it on a shelf someplace. Sometime later, I was browsing in a record store and saw Holliger’s 1970 record of it and bought that. Once I heard it, the piece made sense to me.

I learned *Sequenza VII* in 1974 and first performed it that same year at a recital at UCLA on a series devoted to contemporary music. The concert was six weeks away and I only looked at the music the day they called to invite me to play the recital. I got right to work on it, and I remember wondering if six weeks was enough time. It was going pretty well and when a colleague who was teaching a summer school class asked me to do my recital program one week before the UCLA one, I felt confident, and both performances went fine.



Figure 4. David Sherr's licence plate.

JL: *Your performance at UCLA must have been the California premiere of Sequenza VII! Humbert Lucarelli played the U.S. premiere in New York City's Alice Tully Hall in 1971; and Nora Post performed Sequenza VII in a Town Hall recital also in NYC and in 1974 a few months before your performance. None of that is surprising, of course, since Bert Lucarelli and Nora*

Post were distinguished oboe soloists at the time, often specializing in the performance of contemporary music. But for you to have performed what was probably the third U.S. performance and the California premiere of Berio Sequenza VII is so cool! Most oboists absolutely shrink from the piece's technical requirements. But you, a multi-instrumentalist L.A. studio musician working across many genres and playing for Dinah Shore's television show almost full-time, you jumped right in, learned Sequenza VII, and performed it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

DS: Thanks, I guess so! The rest of the program was George Rochberg (1918-2005) *La bocca della verità*, a Handel concerto (with piano) that I managed to sneak in, and one other piece, perhaps the Benjamin Britten *Metamorphoses*. (I can't find the program.) So, I guess it took a little less than five weeks to learn *Sequenza VII*. I played it many times over the next twenty-five years, including twice for Monday Evening Concerts at the L.A. County Museum of Art.

One of the people at that UCLA concert in 1974 was Dorrance Stalvey (1930-2005), the director of the Monday Evening Concerts, a terrific series that has been going on for a long time. The series was started in a private home by Peter Yates in 1939, then moved to West Hollywood Park, and then to Plummer Park, which was where I was a stagehand at those concerts when I was in college in the late 1950s.

A few months after the UCLA concert, there was a last-minute emergency at Monday Evening Concerts and Dorrance called and asked if I still had *Sequenza VII* under my fingers. I did, and I played it two nights later. I hadn't played the piece in ten weeks at that point. But all that practice apparently paid off, and I played it fine for the concert. It was a harrowing couple of days, though.

Incidentally, I consider your recording of *Sequenza* the most imaginative. It is my favorite; I have two by Holliger and I like those, too.

JL: *Thank you! I really love your recording; it is very clear, dynamic, and expressive.*

DS: Well, thanks!

So, those sorts of new-music concerts kind of got me into being the new-music oboe player in Los Angeles. John Ellis was the best at that, but he wasn't really interested in it, I don't think. And in 1980 he left. He bought a farm but that didn't work out, and he began teaching at the North Carolina School of the Arts. He had left [L.A.] before he turned 40, and would come back and work to keep his insurance up, but after a while I guess that got difficult. He was a great oboe player! Somebody gave me a recording of *Angela's Ashes* [a 1999 film with musical score composed by John Williams], and he plays some solos on it that are just stunning.

In 1996, I went to a concert of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble, and I heard Philharmonic principals play the flute and clarinet *Sequenzas*. It occurred to me that if I could learn those two pieces and play them along with *Sequenza VII*, and then do related jazz pieces, it might be interesting. At the time, I would occasionally read articles in music journals that openly dismissed jazz as an art form and considered classical music the most “legitimate” music. I felt inspired to make a case for the equivalency of jazz and classical music with this CD project. The next day I called around to some L.A. music stores but none of them had either piece. I knew about Eble Music in Iowa. They had both of them, and I ordered the scores.

I spoke to a pianist–composer friend, explained what I had in mind, and he agreed to write companion jazz pieces to the three *Sequenzas*. We planned two concerts for the following year, in January and February of 1997. I can’t recall how long it took to learn *Sequenza I* and *Sequenza IXa*, but I did some little recitals of just the three *Sequenzas* in a bookstore, a community college noon-time concert, and an art gallery a few weeks prior to the concerts. The full concerts when I performed all three of the *Sequenzas* (on the three different instruments: flute, oboe, and clarinet) along with the jazz pieces were at the Pasadena Library and Mount St. Mary’s College in 1997.

The idea to record the CD happened as we were preparing for those concerts. After planning the whole CD, I recorded the three *Sequenzas*. Each one took a full day with some patching up later. That took place over several weeks with a lot of practicing in between. The composer friend dropped out of the project after the concerts, so I decided to write the jazz companion pieces myself. I devised a process and was off and running on my new passion. The two bebop pieces (*In the Pockets* and *Sax Lines and Audio Tape*) were both done in three hours. The longer ensemble piece (I have come to hate the name) took two two-hour sessions, one for the written part and one for the improvised part. I wrote an accompaniment for *Sequenza VII*, the piece called *Palimpsest*, but when I heard what Harvey Newmark did with his improvised bass part, I decided to go with that for most of the piece. What he did was pure genius. The first section of the piece has me improvising a flute part, Scott Higgins (vibes) and Cindy [Cynthia] Fogg (viola) playing what I wrote, and Amy Wilkins (harp) playing the notes Berio left out of *Sequenza VII* (B3, C4, F4, B5, and D6), placing them where she thought they should go.

I finally submitted the CD to the American Composers Forum and paid for its release in 2000.

JL: *It’s a great CD! And I remember you mentioned that shortly after releasing that CD and then retiring from L.A. work in 2006, you moved to New York. What did you do there?*

DS: Well, I didn’t so much retire as get phased out. Hey, it happens! I went to New York to study composition and wound up staying there for eight years. I enrolled in The New School and studied with Joel Thome (1939–). He was the conductor of an orchestra called The Orchestra of Our Time, very adventurous. Nothing is too wild for Joel. He had conducted some Monday Evening Concerts that I played on years earlier. We did [Messiaen’s] *Exotic Birds*.

JL: *Yeah, Oiseaux Exotiques.*

DS: I was going to spare you my pronouncing that in French (*laughs*), and the Henze guitar concerto on a different program. I sent them a copy of [my CD] *Otherworld Music*

as part of my audition to get into The New School. I was there with undergrads, 18-to-22-year-olds, some of whom are still friends. A lot of interesting, accomplished young people. Nobody there wanted to teach me. So, they sent me over to Joel. Terrific teacher. He told me, “Nobody can teach you how to write music,” which, of course, is true. He was very understated, and yet I learned something from him in every lesson. I studied with him for a year, a little over a year, and then I just stayed there writing and experiencing New York, which is a pretty interesting place.

Toward the end of my eight years in New York, I started playing again and joined a couple of community bands. But, boy, it was tough coming back. I don’t have a whole lot of talent, and when you don’t practice for a long time it’s kind of rough getting back into shape.

My formal composition lessons with Joel Thome through The New School were over after a year, but I did spend a lot of time with him afterward. We enjoyed a nice friendship, and we still stay in touch. I learned a lot from him. The rest of the time, I spent trying to write music every day. I kept my house in Santa Monica, along the western edge of L.A., where I

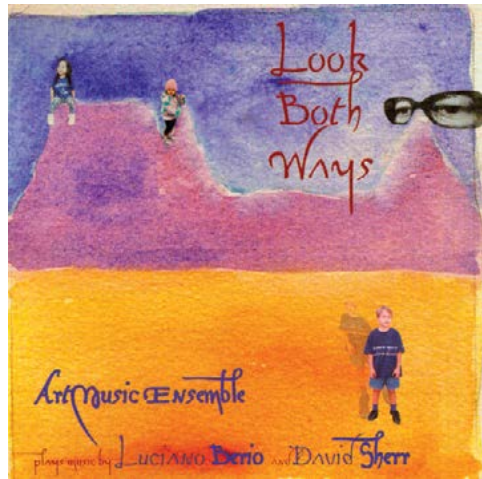


Figure 5. *Look Both Ways*: Art Music Ensemble plays music by Luciano Berio and David Sherr (Innova 541).



Figure 6. Playing an improv. concert in Munich, Germany in 2011 with Carsten Radtke (guitar) and Udo Schindler (bass clarinet and cornet).

had lived since 1977. I went back twice a year to check on the house, my mother, and other things. I lived in an apartment in Lynbrook, Long Island and had no intention of moving back to L.A, but a new tenant moved into the apartment below mine, who was very noisy. So, even though I had been planning to stay in the New York area, I moved back to L.A. in 2014. It's probably all for the best, I think I am making more progress, musically, *now* than I think at any other time in my life. I mean, I've got a whole daily routine.

JL: *Amazing! And what instruments do you own at this point?*

DS: Let's see, I have a musette (little oboe in E-flat), oboe, oboe d'amore, English horn, bass oboe, piccolo, A-flat piccolo, C flute, alto flute, bass flute, E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, A clarinet, bass clarinet, contra alto clarinet, and soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones.

JL: *Wow, that is impressive! Are you focused on oboe in terms of practicing, or do you double still?*

DS: I practice saxophone with a computer program that does a rhythm section. I practice the flute, oboe, and clarinet. And I work on reeds.

David Sherr's website contains a vast collection of stories and other resources: www.belairjazz.org. For more information on David, see Jennifer Paull's book about Luciano Berio's first wife, Cathy Berberian (1925–83), Cathy Berberian and Music's Muses (Vouvray, Switzerland: Amoris, 2007), which includes an entire chapter about David and his recordings.



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