



THE Masters
COLLECTION

Kalmen Opperman:

A LEGACY OF EXCELLENCE

“Passing on the Flame”

A Biography by DENISE A. GAINES

CARL FISCHER®

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Sample

“The dream begins with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called “truth.”

—*Dan Rather*

“Everyone discovers their own way of destroying themselves, and some people choose the clarinet.”

—*Kalmen Opperman*

“Practice and hope, but never *hope* more than you practice.”

—*Kalmen Opperman*

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-4911-5098-6

Carl Fischer is a privately owned music publisher founded in 1872.

CEO: Sonya Kim

Vice President, Instrumental Music: Larry Clark

Art Director: Andy Dowty

Managing Editor: Nicholas Hopkins

Carl Fischer, LLC

www.carlfischer.com

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Foreword

By Richard Stoltzman

“If it weren’t for Louise, I’d be dead already.”

Louise Opperman, Kalmen Opperman’s most passionate and loyal lover, fervent believer, disciple, saint, true partner and keeper of the flame. Our phone conversation came, as it very often did with Kal, late in the night. “Denise wants you to write a forward for her book and the deadline is next week!” I scrambled for a pencil and scrap of paper near my bed to write down her number so that I could try to connect the next day.

Six in the morning I’m startled awake by the loudest, most insistent and resonant bird song bursting outside my window. “While you’re sleeping other people are practicing.” Kal’s early morning Manhattan walks to feed the birds, Kal’s lecture at the first Clarinet Summit alluding to the mastery of memory and sophistication of accurate repetition from the tiny brain of the mockingbird, and posing the question, “So what are we doing with our supposedly higher brains?”

Kal possessed true gut level, hands on understanding and wisdom based on hard manual labor, respect and admiration for nature straight from the farm. When I came down from New Haven for my first lessons, he insisted on taking me to John’s Coffee Shop on Broadway for a hearty breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, coffee, and juice before putting in “a day’s work.”

The dogs, cats, and birds that he cared for in his apartment were always spoken to and treated with dignity and respect. I’ll never forget his lesson on pure tone quality and projection of resonant overtones. As he blew a note through his clarinet, it elicited an approving cry from his cocker spaniel, Cindy, out in the kitchen. Then, inviting me to play the same note, I could not solicit even the slightest comment from my canine judge.

Kal was a force of nature and he paid due respect to and believed in this fundamental power. Each day he confronted the struggle to master a piece of cane, a hard rubber mouthpiece, a wood barrel, a chromatic scale, a legato interval. He created a universe of words of wisdom, manuals of technique, music emotive and challenging, and a legion of students who studied at the college of Kalmen Opperman, a towering university from which none of us ever graduated, but all of us now realize was most precious and worthy of emulation to this day.

—*Richard Stoltzman*



Kal teaching Richard Stoltzman.
Manhattan, NY. circa 1980. Credit, Louise Opperman.

Introduction

Kalmen Opperman's work has been a significant part of clarinet pedagogy for more than eighty years. Powerful testimonies to Mr. Opperman's achievement can be seen in his successful and accomplished students who are performing and teaching all over the world, his many technique books (including the *Modern Daily Studies for Clarinet*, the four volume *Velocity Studies for Clarinet*, *Master Studies for the Clarinet*, *Chordal Sequences for the Clarinet*, *Chordal Sequences for the Saxophone*, *The Chromatic Machine*, etc.), the wealth of articles published in *The Clarinet* and other music journals, and his work in the field of reed making (*Handbook for Making and Adjusting Single Reeds*), and mouthpiece and barrel research and development. In addition, he also wrote and arranged music for the clarinet and clarinet choir and other instruments, and compiled extensive research on existing literature of the clarinet (*Repertory of the Clarinet*). During the course of his career, Opperman studied and worked with some of the most influential teachers and performers of the twentieth century, most notably Ralph McLane and Simeon Bellison. His varied experiences in the field of reed making, mouthpiece and barrel research and development, and technique pedagogy have provided many valuable resources for working clarinetists. This book sheds some light on an influential man who inspired many, and whose legacy will continue to shape the development of clarinetists around the world.

Life Lessons

There comes a time in the life of every serious student when she meets a teacher who truly challenges her, pushes her past what she thought was possible; Kal Opperman was that teacher for me. I went to Kal out of an initial desire to research additional methods for use in teaching the students in my college studio (as part of a DMA project). Through the years that I studied and taught clarinet, I heard repeated testimonies about the unusual and highly successful methods used by Kal Opperman. However, when I began researching the literature on Mr. Opperman in university libraries and on the internet, I discovered that in spite of his legendary reputation among clarinetists, there was a dearth of information on both him and his work. As a result, I initially planned to interview Mr. Opperman concerning his pedagogical methodologies, but after speaking with him several times (and from his own encouragement), I realized that I could never understand his unique approach with any depth

without personally experiencing it. This resulted in my beginning private study with him during the spring of 2001, and continuing until his death in 2010. The results were literally life changing. My doctoral monograph became the seed for this much more in-depth look at Mr. Opperman's life and work. I continued my research on Opperman's pedagogy, taking a Sabbatical leave to focus on writing the book, traveling to New Jersey several times to work closely with Louise Opperman, Opperman's widow, along with countless phone and email conversations. I also interviewed by phone and traveled to New York to meet with and interview many of Opperman's long-time students and his children, gaining a great deal more insight into Opperman's holistic approach to the teaching of the clarinet and the student- not just its technique. I met again with Richard Stoltzman to update the interview that we had done several years earlier, including the updated version in the book because of its importance in sharing Stoltzman's perspective of Opperman as a clarinetist, a teacher, and a man. Approximately thirty percent of the doctoral monograph is included in this book, including the introduction (outlining my initial work with Opperman), part of Opperman's biography, part of the interview done with Richard Stoltzman (updated for the publication of this book with an additional interview), and I included several of the pertinent appendices from the monograph. However, even the previous material used has been broadened with previously used material.

For our first meeting, Kal instructed me to meet him at his Manhattan apartment, and insisted that I take a cab rather than the subway, as he knew that this was my first experience in New York City. He met me at the curb by his apartment, and I was immediately struck by his incredible presence. Once in the apartment he introduced me to his wife, Louise, who was always at his side, whether he was teaching, writing, or creating barrels and mouthpieces. He asked if I had eaten, and decided that we should all go to breakfast before beginning the lesson. Unbeknownst to me, this actually was the beginning of the session, as the Oppermans asked me many questions about my life and background, and they also shared things about themselves. A recurring theme was Mr. Opperman's statement that only a very few were meant to study clarinet at the level at which he taught, and that he would determine if I met his criteria.

The formal lesson began as Kal watched me assemble my instrument and quickly showed displeasure at the way I placed the reed on the mouthpiece: "You can't even put the reed on right!" He demonstrated what he wanted me to do, making it quite evident that everything done in relation to the clarinet be executed with the utmost care

and respect, from the time the case was opened and throughout the lesson until the instrument was put away. Kal sat in a chair across from me with a bright light directed at me in the dim apartment, as he carefully scrutinized every aspect of my playing. The mood was intense, and this intensity did not abate, even during the frequent resting periods. The first thing he asked me to play was a one-octave chromatic scale. He was immediately frustrated by my lack of proper hand position, and asked me to make several corrections. Proper hand position, to Opperman, is the basis for building a sound technical foundation; without it, he assured me, I would not be able to improve technically on the instrument. He asked me to practice very slowly in front of a mirror until I could maintain the proper hand position at faster tempos. I had been made aware of these issues in the past; however, this was the first time that the paramount importance of this to my success as a player was stressed in such a clear and intense manner.

Subsequent lessons began to have somewhat of a regular routine as he continued to identify my weaknesses and devise methods for me to overcome them. He did not want me to play before a lesson as teachers traditionally do, but wanted to see what I could do “cold.” He would begin by asking me to play three notes (throat tone G, A, and clarion B) slowly and perfectly connected. Once he was satisfied with that, we moved on to chromatic staccato studies, etudes, and exercises that he would devise and call out to me. Although we were always working on technique, there was never a time when tone and musicality were not an issue that he stressed. When I did something to please him, he would give a small smile or slight nod. When I was unable to demonstrate the skills that he asked, he exhibited great displeasure, almost as if he took my shortcomings personally. As Richard Stoltzman had related to me in an earlier interview, this was the time when Kal would determine my aptitude and ability level for the clarinet, as well as my respect for the instrument and for him. This was a challenging and at times painful period for me, as he broke down every aspect of my playing, as well as my preconceived ideas about the clarinet. That he was simultaneously assessing my level of playing and abilities made the situation even more stressful. At the end of my first week of study with him, Kal put his finger in my face and told me, “You don’t know a damn thing about the clarinet...not a damn thing. You need to start from scratch and work like hell.” These were difficult words to hear for someone at the end of doctoral program and having had several years of college teaching experience. However, it proved to be a first instance of many in which Kal cared enough about the student to say the difficult things.

The study of staccato was an essential aspect of Opperman's teachings; therefore a great deal of time was devoted to it both in lessons and in practice sessions. In my lessons, staccato study was based on the chromatic scale, all the while focusing on maintaining proper hand position. Mr. Opperman's consummate understanding of the physical aspects of articulation (the tongue musculature, air speed, and embouchure) enabled him to quickly assess and improve the speed and clarity of my articulation. To my utter surprise, in only twenty minutes he demonstrated this to me by increasing the speed of my staccato playing in a one-octave chromatic scale in sixteenth notes from quarter note equals 132 to quarter note equals 208. He did this by having me repeat the scale as he constantly moved the tempo up and down on the metronome (without showing it to me until I had reached 208), while reminding me about the necessity of a consistent column of air and the importance of remaining relaxed. Opperman stressed that this technique should not be attempted on my own, but only in accordance with his guidance. As with every other aspect of playing, he stressed frequent rest periods in the study of staccato.

Between my visits to New York, Mr. Opperman consistently remained in contact with me, dedicated to monitoring my progress over the telephone. He would scold me for not calling him often enough with questions, and when I told him that I did not want to bother him, he emphatically stated, "You are not bothering me—my students are very important to me!" His deep concern for, and belief in, each of his students was evident—even for a new student such as myself. The intensity that he brought to each lesson was a result of his unshakeable belief that his way was the only true way to be a successful clarinetist. His approach would be very difficult to carry out in its purest form at the college level due to time constraints of both students and faculty, which is one of the reasons that Opperman held very little regard for academia. He insisted on complete devotion to the instrument at all times, considering it to be a way of life, encompassing every aspect of the total person. He warned me that if I wanted to be successful, I would have to learn to make more sacrifices, and that my "previous life had no relation" to the level to which he expected me to attain.

These intense sessions with Kal lasted from four to six hours with periods of rest interspersed and a lunch break. During the break, he would tell me about his experiences and his students, show me some of the equipment that he had made, and play recordings of his students. During my initial visits to study with Opperman, he introduced me to as much material as possible, giving explicit instructions on how to practice it, since I would not be able to

see him as often as he would prefer. The amount of information covered, as well as the intensity in which it was presented, was quite overwhelming. At one point during our third session I began to cry out of frustration with myself. Immediately, Opperman's demeanor changed from harsh taskmaster to one of a compassionate parent. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," he said. "I am giving you five years worth of information in a very short amount of time—you are doing just fine! All you have to do is hours, that's all. That is the only difference between you and the great players—hours."

Throughout the course of my lessons, Mr. Opperman would periodically have me experiment with his barrels and mouthpieces. The difference between his equipment and mine was startling and undeniable. The barrels and mouthpieces enabled me to achieve a much more fluid tone throughout the registers of the instrument. Over the years that I studied with him, he made several barrels and mouthpieces for me that have been the best I have ever played. He listened carefully when students tried the equipment, matching the sound that he heard in his mind's sound model that he had received from Ralph McLane and Simeon Bellison. Opperman also adjusted my instrument, and personally took me to a repairman that he trusted to bend keys that he no longer had the hand strength to bend.

Sometimes, the focus of my lesson would be observing Kal as he worked with another one of his students, many of whom came from around the world to study with him. I heard amazing things from those students who truly followed the Opperman method; effortless technique, beautiful tone, and a solid determination to please Kal. Just one small smile from him for a job well done always felt as if the sun had come out. I was able to bring several of my students on different occasions to observe my own lessons, and many of them returned from these trips deeply affected by what they had seen in the cramped apartment on West 67th Street: a level of focus and dedication rarely found in any arena.

Opperman always encouraged me to find a way to see him more frequently, possibly taking a leave of absence from my university teaching position to study with him for a semester or more, so that I would really see the benefits of his teaching. He stated that he did not like to teach in a "foreign correspondence" style, but wanted to be able to oversee all aspects of his students' development closely. Nevertheless, he was kind enough to continue to work with me given the constraints of my teaching responsibilities. I would often get an envelope from New York in my school mail, and enclosed would be a hand-written exercise just for me with the inscription, "To Denise,

Have fun! Kal.” He was always thinking of his students and what he could do to help each one improve. What other teacher today is not only able to teach the student, but can write the exercises and music that they play, can design and create their mouthpieces and barrels, adjust their instruments, can literally write the book on reed making and adjustment, and has the professional performing background that many only dream of? My experiences with Kal and Louise Opperman were truly life-changing in regards to the clarinet, my personal life, and my methodology. Kal did not just teach the clarinet—he taught the person, and cared deeply about each of his students, in and out of the lesson environment.

Mr. Opperman’s students, such as virtuoso Richard Stoltzman, provide a testament to the great impact that Opperman had on their careers as clarinetists. Through his innate understanding of the clarinet in all its facets, he instilled within them the ability to reach past their own perceived limitations as players. He had the ability to inspire a dedication to the instrument that is extraordinary—a life-long passion for excellence in artistry. Being one of his students allowed me to personally experience his teaching and to weigh the claims and testimonies about his work as a pedagogue. As someone devoted to the instrument, I can only express my gratitude and appreciation of his past contributions, and what he was still able to give to his students until his death at the age of 90.

Kal Opperman’s dedication to the clarinet was all-encompassing, which was apparent throughout his life. From his beginnings as a relatively self-taught player in his youth, he learned the importance of a disciplined approach to practicing the clarinet, which he was committed to instilling in his students. From early on he treated the instrument as the most important part of his life—certainly not as a hobby or even an occupation. His wife and partner of many years, Louise, stated, “He has always been faithful to his first love—the clarinet.” He proved this dedication by a career filled with high caliber performances in a wide arena of playing venues, continued development of pedagogical materials, continued research into the physical aspects of the instrument—mouthpieces, barrels, instrument making and adjustments, and a large number of distinguished students.

Mr. Opperman was always quick to acknowledge his own teachers and the tradition they represented. He considered Ralph McLane to have been the greatest influence on his approach to playing and teaching. He studied with McLane for almost six years, despite McLane’s not wanting to take students. Opperman’s knowledge and skill in reed making interested McLane, to the point that he

agreed to work with him as a student. Opperman openly credited McLane for helping to shape his own approach to teaching, saying that he proportioned time to students the way it was given to him by McLane. Lessons with Kal typically lasted several hours, interspersed with important periods of rest, during which time he would talk about his experiences performing, play recordings of his students or the Kalmen Opperman Clarinet Choir, or adjust the student's equipment. Mr. Opperman also expressed a deep gratitude to Simeon Bellison, his first major teacher and a person he considered to be a fine musician.

Opperman's pedagogical philosophy is well reflected in his many method books, each mapping out a vigorous plan for developing proper hand and body positions, as well as building strong finger technique, agility, digital independence, and proper breathing, with each study focusing on one or more of the essential techniques needed to play the instrument with mastery. Opperman often emphasized that his studies were designed, not simply composed, with many exercises based on certain Broadway shows in which he had performed, in order to help him master technically challenging passages. The books reflect his belief that a clarinetist must be able to play the instrument throughout its entire range with a facile technique, and as Kal said, "If you cannot manage to cover the instrument, you're not going to get a job these days."



Kal with the author in 2001. Manhattan, NY.
Photo credit, Louise Opperman.