

Noël Devos: An Interview

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When I was eighteen I heard something which made an impression on me. It was a piece by the Brazilian composer José Siqueira, Etude No. 2, and a chorinho by Pixinguinha played by a French bassoonist who lived in Rio de Janeiro. At that moment I understood that the bassoon could be played just like a saxophone, clarinet or violoncello and can play all styles of music. Traditionally used for chamber and orchestral music, his instrument made me discover a different way of expressing the deepest of emotions. And as I have never experienced in my country, this great musician showed me a different way of thinking about my career as a bassoonist. He had a definite influence on me. I looked for other recordings by him and later sought to get to know him personally.

The day I met him for the first time I was truly moved and was very pleasantly surprised. This man, whom I considered to be a virtuoso, received me at his home with generosity, tenderness and friendliness. That day I had the greatest lesson in humility I could have hoped for. Noël Devos is one of the greatest musicians of our time, but what is more important is that he is one of the most beautiful persons of our time, and I am sure that his virtuosity and expressivity on the bassoon are consequences of the greatness of his spirit ...

AM: Maestro Devos, when and how did you begin your bassoon studies? Do you have good memories of your student days in Paris?

ND: I am originally from Calais, close to Dunkirk and Belgium and very close to England. I was eleven when France was invaded by the German army in 1940. So, leaving the city was out of the question for five years! My father, an excellent amateur musician (he played the tuba very well), could play all the instruments a little. He encouraged all his five children to study music. His rules were to learn a lucrative profession (I became an architectural draftsman), consider a musical career only after the age of eighteen and specialize in an instrument only after three or four years of theory!

So, we began *solfège* very early and little by little began trying different things. For me it was



the violoncello and piano. My brothers who played gave me some lessons. I then discovered an old saxophone in the back of a closet. Realizing that this wind instrument had a certain attraction for me, my father sent me to take lessons with a neighbor, a former oboe and bassoon teacher. He was also the civil defense chief of the neighborhood. He would help the poor people who were bombed. His studio (or shelter) was protected by sandbags. So, it was in this rather unusual atmosphere (looking back on it today) of sirens, airplane machine guns and the whistling of bombs, that I seriously began playing a wind instrument. The students of my old teacher also studied the bassoon, and that's how I began ...

It must also be said that we were completely isolated. The German soldiers prohibited us from listening to the radio, we had no recordings and curfew was at 9 p.m. I was astonished and full of enthusiasm for this instrument, for its deep low notes, its sweet and veiled middle range, its sad high register and above all for its original and distinctive shape.

In 1943, when I decided to ask permission to study this instrument, Adolf Hitler, who had a

great fear of an English invasion at Calais, evacuated the population of the city. That's how my family found ourselves refugees in Albi, the city of Toulouse-Lautrec. No more thinking about the bassoon! There were more pressing concerns! However, I *would* think about it again.

Each Sunday we would attend the great Gregorian mass. We could count on a beautiful concert with a great organ, dominated by angels playing instruments. There was a very beautiful one playing the bassoon. There is was; the idea took over again. I asked a music teacher where I could study the bassoon. He referred me to a friend, a bassoon teacher in Toulouse. I only had to wait for classes to resume at the end of the year. I was thinking about it seriously when, all of a sudden, Calais was liberated and we returned to northern France.

As soon as I returned I enrolled in the music school. After a year I had my first prize in bassoon and, after an audition, began playing at the theater in Calais. At the same time I had a jazz band that played every week at the YMCA, the English officer's club, and we had a great time during their passage through Calais. I also worked as a draftsman as there was a lot of reconstruction going on.

When I was eighteen I proposed to my father that I audition for the Paris Conservatory. My brother, an excellent bass player who studied there (and then joined the Orchestre de Paris), advised by father that I should really prepare myself well so as not to have any problems in Paris. He suggested that I go take some lessons with the flute professor in Calais, M. Julien Clouet, who was trained in Paris. He had been a disciple of Taffanel and his former colleague Marcel Moyse had enormous respect for him. He considered him to be a great pedagogue. When I objected to my brother and father that he wasn't a bassoonist, they responded, "That doesn't matter, he knows how to judge the sound of the bassoon and he'll give you lessons in interpretation!"

This professor was also the director of the municipal band where my father played the tuba! He respected my father a lot for his artistic qualities and his devotion. That made things go smoothly and I began my private lessons with him at 10 p.m.! I had to walk through the snow to get there, all the while the north wind was gusting ... but I went joyfully.

At the beginning I realized that I was technically and artistically quite "provincial." For the first four months he made me play a C major scale in tune ... He told me, "You play in

tune, but it's not in tune artistically!" Little by little he had me penetrating the mysteries of interpretation. I sometimes succeeded in getting him excited about a phrase, which was very difficult to do. We would sometimes spend an hour looking for the exact sound of a note of a certain tonality! Time didn't exist. I could have stayed all night, him too!

When he discovered that sometimes I had certain problems understanding a particular interpretation, he recited poetry to me, he would explain the musical construction with the aid of architecture (which I knew well), and he would loan me books about which he would then ask me questions. And when I played a piece artistically and he approved of the interpretation he would ask me why I played it in that manner. There always had to be a logic about it. Logic first, then intuition. He always said that one should be Cartesian, a reference to the famous philosophy of Descartes. But I believe that his big secret was to keep the intuition in reserve and to show it off at the proper moment. Personality and artistic instinct should always be stronger, based upon a logical foundation. This qualitative teaching has guided me ever since. But in speaking of all these literary and artistic matters he hardly concerned himself with my technical problems, and I had some!

Most of all, the bassoon which was lent to me by the city was not really in tune and it was quite difficult to get the notes out. What mattered was that one listen. He advised me to do research and create my own technique. So when, after a year, I auditioned for the Paris Conservatory, I was accepted with the highest score. My fellow students noticed right away that I had a different way of playing the bassoon, but Gustave Dhérin, the professor, responded, "That's true, but it's artistic; you should be inspired by it." Dhérin was serious but very good, and he tried to preserve the best of what his students already had. The exam juries liked my interpretations during the year and that was how, at the end of the year, I was lucky enough to pass directly on to the prize competition. The composer of the concerto was present and, having decided that I had found the right interpretation, the jury awarded me the unanimous first prize. (Translator's note: This would have been in 1951, and the solo piece written for the competition that year was *Récitatif et Final*, by Jules Semler-Collery, pub. Eschig).

AM: Why did you come to Brazil?

ND: From the beginning I didn't want to leave

my native city, Calais. To go to Paris I needed the prodding of my teacher of interpretation, Julien Clouet, who found that Paris would give me the stimulation to study the bassoon, but above all would open new horizons for me from a cultural point of view. I also thought that once my studies were finished I would come back to Calais, where my old teacher hoped that I would succeed him as conductor of the orchestra.

After I received my first prize, various contracts were proposed to me, the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra in Switzerland among others. But that didn't excite me. A Brazilian conductor, Eleazar de Carvalho, came to Paris looking for French woodwind players. He was a disciple of Serge Koussevitsky and wanted to transmit the tradition of the Boston Symphony Orchestra to the Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira in Rio de Janeiro, to which he had just been named music director. He approached Claude Delvincourt, the director of the conservatory who, having heard me when I received my prize, recommended me. The words "Rio de Janeiro" have for me, like for many French people, always had a great attraction. I found these words very beautiful and felt that they evoked a tropical paradise. I ended up by agreeing to come for two years.

I began therefore in 1952 to be part of this Brazilian ensemble in which my colleagues were very nice and the conductors were of the first order. That's how I played under the baton of Erich Kleiber, Markevitch, Bernstein, Van Beinum and other great conductors, and I also began to get to know the great Villa-Lobos. It was a golden age. And I met my future wife, Ana, a 'cellist in the orchestra. At the same time I was forging links with Brazil I was still thinking about returning to France. We were married in Natal, where I met her large and beautiful family from northern Brazil. After surviving some political troubles I decided to come back to France with my wife. I applied for a teaching position in a provincial city while waiting for a future audition in one of the big Paris orchestras. But I was already too used to the Brazilian ambiance. I gave it all up and came back to Rio ...

That was in 1955. Politics in Brazil made life more and more difficult. But I was already used to difficulties: I was born in the year of the crash of 1929, then came suffering and deprivations

during the war, and finally the hard life of a student. My wife, who was very cultivated and of a greatness of spirit, sustained me morally and her family was very nice.



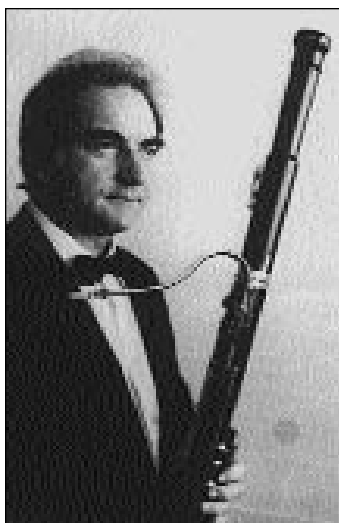
I was interested in Brazilian music and above all in Villa-Lobos. To motivate myself I participated in the Geneva Competition in 1957, where I received the second prize. That was just when Villa-Lobos passed away. I studied his works with my colleagues and encouraged my students to do the same. Mme. Villa-Lobos recognized my enthusiasm for and understanding of the works of her husband and entrusted me with the task of giving courses to explain the works of the great composer and others, such as Mignone, Guerra-Peixe and Siqueira.

That is how for a decade I gave courses sponsored by the Ministry of Education. My Brazilian colleagues were quite astonished that I had the responsibility of helping others understand Brazilian music, which is very special, and me being a foreigner! ... But I always tried to analyze these works just like I did for the works of every other composer from other countries, from an international point of view, leaving the vision of nationalism to the Brazilians. That always gave me a certain respect. At the same time I learned with these students about national taste and interpretation.

AM: Of these Brazilian musicians, which impressed you the most? Did you know Villa-Lobos? What were your relationships with him like?

ND: The music of Brazil is part of the life of a Brazilian. The worker or peasant often relaxes after his work day by singing and playing the guitar. They are self-taught. But quite often they are capable of discussing chords or harmonization without realizing it, and effortlessly! The folklore is rich in melody, harmony and rhythm, which means that popular music is beautiful and has a lot of personality. The composers of "serious" music have been subject to all this influence, which has led to the rise of good composers such as Camargo Guarnieri, Francisco Mignone, José Siqueira, Vieira Brandao and others, not forgetting Villa-Lobos.

Villa-Lobos is a special case, as I have said already; during the ten years in which I taught the Maestro's music, I felt that there was always some-



thing deeper in him. The structure of his compositions can barely be analyzed in a classical manner but rather must be viewed in his own unique way. His creativity and inventiveness are continually renewed with the profundity and vitality which dominate his

personality. One discovers little by little, therefore, that there isn't simply a "Villa-Lobosian" technique, but rather techniques continually reinvented.

You can understand why Villa-Lobos dared to say that *he* was Brazilian folklore.

Living in Brazil gave me a chance to understand this maestro better. From my arrival in Brazil in 1952 until today I have been impressed and ever more enthusiastic about his works. Every year during November Villa-Lobos would come to conduct some of his pieces with the O.S.B. Sometimes he conducted absorbed by his music, forgetting the orchestra, and that become somewhat recreational for certain musicians. He knew how to be severe but was also appreciative of serious players. He wanted the musicians to be artists. As soon as he arrived on the podium he would ask, "Is Devos here?" ... He called my wife Nany, who sat near him in the orchestra, "Madame *Fagote*." (*Fagote* is Portuguese for "bassoon"). He demanded a powerful sound from the celli. One day, when a 'cellist had left a cleaning cloth near the bridge of the instrument, Villa-Lobos said, "Remove your bra."

On another occasion, an impossible bassoon passage appeared which wasn't bassoonistic, technically-speaking. I explained that to Villa-Lobos during the rehearsal. He answered, "Yes, I wrote it, it's doable, figure it out!" I spent the rest of the day trying to find a solution. Finally I found it. The next day Villa-Lobos had me play the same passage and it came out well. So he stopped, looked me in the eye and said, "So you see, I was right, there's no problem!" I immediately tried to explain the technique I had to invent, but he cut me off, "I don't want to

know about it." That's the kind of anecdote reminiscent of Segovia that every guitarist has heard.

The first time I met Villa-Lobos was after my arrival in Rio. We were studying the *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 6* (the flutist Odette Ernst had been hired at the same time as I) and we went to visit him to show him our interpretation. (When you're young you have no fear! ...) He was very nice, and after we played, he made this observation, "Well, you know, if you want to play it in Paris, be careful of your technique; you know how demanding the Parisians are. As for me, you would make me happy by thinking that you are going to play a serenade under my window!" So in just a few words he made us understand his concept.

AM: What do you think of Brazilian music and Brazilian writing for the bassoon?

ND: Instruments like the flute, clarinet and bombardino were used a lot in the past in the small popular groups which played the *chorinhos*. This instrumentation has been preserved for chamber music, with the bassoon substituting for the bombardino. That was the origin of the widespread use of the bassoon in Brazilian serious music. On top of that, the very nature of the bassoon serves marvelously to recreate and sing the popular expressions of the people. In particular, I'll mention the ironic, joyous and mischievous side of the low register, the nonchalance and suavity of the middle tessitura and the sad and plaintive character of the high notes. All the elements of Brazilian popular expression are always underlined by a certain modesty and elegance, qualities which have to be sought out in the technique of the bassoon. It's this interpretive technique which has to be uncovered in order to play Villa-Lobos, Guerra-Peixe or Siqueira. If one touches on the burlesque sometimes, it's always an elegant burlesque ...

Composers have used the bassoon frequently in thinking of all these resources. Mignone went even further: he expanded the expressive qualities of the bassoon in asking it to think of other instruments, as in his waltzes. These expressive qualities are multiplied by four in his bassoon quartets, in which he asked that each player keep his own particularities: legato tone, staccato, etc. ... I should add that Mignone is a great orchestrator and he does endless research into new orchestration procedures. Even today, young Brazilian composers are interested in writing works for bassoon and, above all, chamber music including the bassoon which is

always rich in melodic, harmonic and rhythmic invention.

AM: How do you see Brazilian musicians, and bassoonists in particular?

ND: The Brazilian musician, as I have already mentioned, is naturally quite musical. Very often one finds virtuosi among the young musicians who dedicate themselves to the bassoon. When I disembarked in Brazil, there were few bassoonists (because there were few professional orchestras) and they were mostly foreigners. Since that time a school has been created, stimulated by the founding of orchestras throughout the country and, above all, by the appearance of a repertoire written by Brazilian composers, of whom the most prolific has surely been maestro Francisco Mignone. He has written many works which have been dedicated to me. Osvaldo Lacerda, a composer from Sao Paulo and former disciple of Camargo Guarnieri, has also written a lot for the bassoon.

There are still some bassoonists who play the French bassoon, but most play the German system instrument. France doesn't make it easy to ship French instruments, whereas the Goethe Institute makes donations of instruments manufactured in Germany more or less all over Brazil. When I joined the O.S.B. there was already a German second bassoonist imported from Munich. During the ten years he stayed in the orchestra I made reeds for him. That is how I learned how to make German reeds, and I also became familiar with the German technique. But I have always played the Buffet bassoon. It's clear that in order to play in the orchestra it is necessary to have reeds which allow one to adapt to the German sonority. Furthermore, conductors have never had to complain to me about it. They ask that bassoonists play with a bassoon sound, in tune, musical and blending with others.

That's the orientation of my teaching, which has always been that of my former teacher of interpretation. What is important is that one listen. Clearly the two instruments have different characteristics, but that can be evened out by techniques specifically appropriated as necessary. These problems exist especially in terms of working in the orchestra. For solo and chamber music playing one can identify instruments by maker. In addition, there are different schools of playing instruments made by the same maker. There is a wide range of makers for certain instruments such as flute, oboe and

clarinet. But it's undoubtedly the bassoon which varies the most, from one country to another and even from one region to another. I find that this is a source of richness that should not be lost, especially in our era of standardization and homogenization.

One can hardly demand a work ethic of the Brazilian and South American students equal to that of Europeans. Conditions are different, especially in terms of climate. There is also less competition, so there is therefore less to choose from. More than fifty bassoonists may show up for an orchestra audition in Europe. Here it would be difficult to get ten. But among those ten there may be a talent on the level of the best of those fifty in France!

AM: You are a man who has played a lot. How is your life today now that you are over sixty?

ND: I began playing very young in orchestras in France. For 42 years I have played in the Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira and that always brings me a lot of pleasure. Many of my colleagues, mostly in France, have already retired. I believe that I now have even more work, primarily in terms of teaching, since now I'm coaching bassoon and chamber music at the Federal University in Rio as well as giving private lessons and classes in other cities in Brazil and abroad. There is also chamber music from time to time, with the "Airton Barbosa" quartet among others, and recitals sometimes. I'm 65 now and I still have enough breath to play the bassoon, but I'm also happy if my former pupils will be able to replace me when it becomes necessary and can continue to publicize our instrument.

When I think of everything I've done up to now, I don't think I have anything to regret. I could regret that when I was young I didn't have the opportunity to audition for one of the major orchestras in Paris. But I think sincerely that I've had a more positive life than if I had stayed in France. And if I had it to do all over again, I would take the same path!

Night falls on Buenos Aires and Noël looks tired but contented. The long day of bassoon and chamber music classes is over and we await twenty students at the house to dine on empanadas argentinas. The evening will surely be a chance to tell long stories and amusing anecdotes. Surrounded by young musicians who admire and love him, one gets the impression that he should live like this forever, and it is like this that I will see him in my memories when he is far away and I miss him.

Discography

1979 Francisco Mignone: Concertino para Fagote e Orquestra, "Documentos da Música Brasileira", MMB.79003, Promemus-Funarte.

1979 Francisco Mignone: "Bienal de Música Brasileira Contemporânea", Invenção para tres fagotes, MMB-84.043, Produção Funarte (Promemus).

1982 Francisco Mignone: "16 Valsas para Fagote Solo", MMB 82.026, Produção Funarte (Promemus)

1979 Francisco Mignone: Sonata para dois fagotes (Noël Devos - Airton Barbosa), 310-063422708, Produção EMI-Odeon, Patrocinio: Funarte.

H. Villa Lobos; "Ciranda das sete notas" para fagote e orquestra de cordas, 60042, Orquestra de radio MEC, Gravação Columbia.

1977 H. Villa Lobos: "Ciranda das sete notas" para fagote e orquestra de cordas, LLB 1106, Orquestra "Os Camaristas", Gravação London-EMI-Odeon, Funarte.

1987 Orquestra de Camera de Blumenau, Guerra Peixe "Roda de Amigos", H. Villa Lobos "Ciranda de sete notas" para fagote e orquestra de cordas, Disco Poligram-Promoção BASF.

Orquestra de Camera Brasileira (Direção Bessler), LDC 278 1087, H. Villa Lobos "Ciranda das sete notas" para fagote e orquestra de Cordas, Edição Kuarup, (Le Chant du Monde).

1979 Orquestra do Sindicato dos Músicos Profissionais de Rio de Janeiro, 31c-061 421206, Guerra Peixe "Roda de Amigos", Disco EMI-Odeon.

1976 "Recital" - Duo fagot e piano ND-01, (Noël Devos-Maria Lucia Pinho), Disco Independente Gravação de Frank Acker.

Quinteto de Sopro da Radio Mec, Mozart, Hindemith, Villa Lobos, Breno Blauth, Edição Radio, Mec.

Quinteto de Sopro da Radio Mec, PRA-2-1005, Villa Lobos, Mignone, L. Fernandez, J. Claudio das Neves, Edição Radio, Mec.

1968 Villa Lobos - "Duos", Duo oboe e fagote (P. Nardi-N. Devos), RSCL.4008, Bachiana brasileira n°6 flauta e fagote, (J.N. Saghaard-N. Devos), Gravação "Rio Som"-Disco "Classic"

Villa Lobos-"Trios", MVL-001-B/ST, Trio para oboe, clarinete e fagote, Produção Philotsom-Promoção Museum V. Lobos.

1971 Villa Lobos - "Musica da Camera" MEC/MVLL 004, Quatuor para flauta, oboe, clarinete e fagote, Discos Caravelle-Promoção do Museum Villa Lobos.

1975 Villa Lobos - "Concurso Internacional de Regencia 1975", MEC/DAC/MVL-104, Noneto, Produção Tapeçar - Promoção do Museum Villa Lobos.

1977 Villa Lobos - "Chordo de Camera", N°3 (Picapau), N°7 (Setimino), Promoção do Banco do Brasil-Produção Kuarup.

1967 Música Moderna Brasileira, 3CBX 422, *Elsa Cameu* (Cidade Nova-Dialogos ao luar para clarinete e fagote), *Villa Lobos* Duo para oboe e fagote, *Lorenzo Fernandez* - Tres Invenções Seresteiras para clarinete e fagote, Disco Angel.

1967 Villa Lobos, ECL 001, "Fantasia concertante" para clarinete fagote e piano, "Chôro n°7Æ (Setimino), "Chôro n°3" (Picapau), Produção Discos Enir-Promoção M. Villa Lobos.

1972 Concurso Internacional de Conjuntos Instrumentais (Premio Villa Lobos: "Sexteto do Rio"), MEC/MVL 007, "Guerra Peixe" Duo para clarinete e fagote, "Villa Lobos" Fantasia concertante para

clarinete fagote e piano, Produção CID - Promoção M. Villa Lobos.

1962 Osvaldo Lacerda, Duo para clarinete e fagote, MMB 82027, Produção Pro Memus / Funarte

-5° Festival de Música de Curitiba e 5° Concurso Internacional de Música do Parana (Promoção da Secretaria de Educação e Cultura do Paraná), E. Mahle: Quarteto para sopros.

-8° Festival de Curitiba y 5° Curso Internacional de Música do Parana, Enrique de Curitiba: "Estudo Aberto" para flauta, clarinete e fagote.

1981 "Quarteto de Fagotes Airton Barbosa", Disco "Independente" - Produção Nany Devos.

1988 "Quarteto de Fagotes Airton Barbosa", Disco "Independente" - Produção Nany Devos.

Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira (Villa Lobos-Bachianas Brasileiras), Bachiana Brasileira n°6 para flauta e fagote (Norton Morozowicz e Noël Devos).

1976 Conjunto Ars Barroca, CBS-160236, M. Corrette: Sonata Op. 20 n°2 em Rem Gravação CBS.

Jose Siqueira: Edição Especial em Homengem ao Compositor Gravação Corcovado

- 3 Estudos para Fagote e Piano

- 5 Invenções para 2 Fagotes

- Concertino para Fagote e Orquestra de Camera

- Cantigas Folklóricas do Brasil para Coral e

Quarteto de

Sopro: Primera Suite

Segunda Suite

Terceira Suite

- 3 Invenções para Clarinete, Oboe e Fagote

- 1° Divertimento para Quinteto de Sopros

- 2° Divertimento para Quinteto de Sopros

- Tres Invenções para Flauta, Oboe e Fagote

- Tres Invenções para Quarteto de Sopros

- Duas Invenções para Flauta e Fagote

- Duas Invenções para Oboe e Fagote

- Duas Invenções para Clarinete e Fagote

- Tres Invenções para Oboe, Clarinete e Fagote

Recommended Reading:

David P. Appleby: *The Music of Brazil* (University of Texas Press, 1983).

Chris McGowan and Ricardo Pessanha: *The Brazilian Sound* (Billboard Books, 1991).

Claus Schreiner: *Música Brasileira* (Marion Boyars, 1993).

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Philip Gottling lived in Paris from 1982 to 1985, where he studied the French bassoon with Maurice Allard and played the German bassoon with the Orchestre de Paris and the Ensemble InterContemporain. He now plays with the Honolulu Symphony and at the Spoleto Festival in Italy.

