

*Il y a quelque chose de plus sacré  
que la vie physique, c'est la vie de la musique.*

There is something more sacred than physical life:  
that is the life of music.<sup>1</sup>

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ARTICLES

*The oboe is still a mystery to me; but it has a  
unique sound, one that is always full of light.  
In this I have not changed my opinion since I  
encountered music at the age of 14.<sup>2</sup>*

## Maurice Bourgue (1939–2023): Philosopher of the Oboe

Compiled by the Oboe Editor with the generous assistance of Ombeline Challeat, editor of *La Lettre du hautboïste*, published by our affiliate organization, the Association Française du Hautbois



The French oboist Maurice Bourgue died on October 6, 2023 at the age of 83. His reputation as a virtuoso oboist and inspirational master teacher earned him an international following and he performed as a soloist with some of the world’s most distinguished orchestras.

Bourgue was born in Avignon on November 6, 1939. His father was an amateur clarinetist, a talent that had helped him to get special treatment when he was a prisoner of war in Germany. He wanted to achieve similar opportunities for his son, and assigned him to *solfège* classes from age seven, and let him choose an instrument two years later. The boy heard the oboe on radio and was immediately attracted to what he later described as its “solar radiance.” He began to learn the instrument, and could soon play alongside his father in local groups, sometimes accompanying Camargue dancers. He was invited to play in Bach’s *Magnificat*,

which inspired him to consider a career in music.

Bourgue entered the oboe class of Pierre Bajeux at the Paris Conservatoire, but as he did not hold Bajeux in high esteem, he studied in parallel with Étienne Baudo, who his father had met in Germany, and who would become Conservatoire Professor at Bajeux’s death in 1961. Bourgue also studied chamber music with Fernand Oubradous, bassoonist with the famous Trio d’Anches de Paris, and gained his premier prix on oboe in 1958, and for chamber music the following year. Military service took him to Algiers where he played regularly in the radio orchestra.

On his return to France at the age of 20, he enlisted with the CRS (Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité: a branch of the French police force) in Vaucresson, a town within the greater Parisian metropolis, and dreamed of becoming a concert artist. He entered the 1959 Geneva Competition. After initial failure, he undertook a serious reevaluation of his playing. “One

day, I went to the flea market, and saw a red disc. It was Rostropovich. I asked to listen to the beginning, and when I heard that... Ah! He, had found what I was search for. He had found freedom! That's what I wanted. Rostropovich allowed me to discover an incredible freedom in the sound," Bourgue confessed in a radio interview with Jean-Baptiste Urbain in 2019. He went on to win second prize in Geneva in 1963. (In 1959 Heinz Holliger had taken first prize. Just six months his elder, his Swiss counterpart was destined to become a long-standing colleague on the concert stage and in the recording studio.)

In 1964 he married the pianist Colette Kling, a life-long musical collaborator. The same year he joined the Orchestra of Basel, in Switzerland, but left after just one season to be solo cor anglais with the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. In 1967 Charles Münch invited him to join the newly formed Orchestre de Paris, and where he played with Jean-Claude

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## **Hélène Devilleneuve**

Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio-France\*

Monsieur Bourgue, thank you for everything you have given to the oboe, to music, and everything you have given to me. I had the chance to study with you at the CNSM [Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris] for three years when you shared the class with David Walter, then a little in Geneva, and finally for two years of advanced class shared with you and Jean-Louis Capezzali. That gave me the chance to make connections with you, and to see their evolution over several years.

I remember your demands, your intransigence, your fast wit, your mocking eye (and sometimes also your lips). From the very first day I was struck by the fact that everything you asked of us, you applied to yourself to the fifteenth power! I remember your sense of rhythm, of impulse, of breathing, I also remember your joy, your enthusiasm, and your respect for the music. I remember the first lesson at CNSM, an hour on one and a half lines from the beginning of the Saint-Saëns Sonata.

You also had high ideals of transmission and teaching, and you embraced this profession with passion!

Behind all this demand, and what some may have sometimes called harshness, I remember your tenderness, your kindness, your sense of sharing, the discussions where the masks fell. You had great modesty which masked an extraordinary sensitivity—and hence perhaps your love for your animals that you could see as a mask of modesty?

Your quest for truth has been, it seems to me, your life's path. And that came first! No compromise, you went straight to the goal, sometimes ignoring conventions and diplomacy. That what I liked about you: your musical Don Quixote side that persisted in its quest.

Thank you for sharing that with us. Thank you for leaving us with your recordings.

I will always remember your Avignon accent (the same as my mother's, it reassured me a little during the first lessons), your thunderous laugh, your mischievous look over your little glasses.

Rest in peace, I'm sure you make music with the angels, and make them laugh too!

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Malgoire (1940–2018), the English horn soloist who was appointed at the same time. Bourgue held the position for twelve years up to 1979, at the same time performing as soloist with orchestras around the world: the Berlin Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and Tokyo Symphony Orchestra under conductors such as Claudio Abbado, Daniel Barenboim, Riccardo Chailly, and John Eliot Gardiner.

Bourgue rose to prominence to British audiences in 1965 when he split the first prize with James Galway in the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra International Wind Competition and premiered the specially commissioned work, Malcolm Arnold's *Fantasy* for solo oboe. Two years later he was the second oboist to be awarded first prize at the International Music Competition sponsored by the ARD (Consortium of Federal German Broadcasting Institutions) held in Munich (1967; the same prize awarded to Holliger six years before). Prizes at music festivals in Prague (1968), and Budapest (1970) followed.

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### Jacques Tys

Oboe Solo, Opéra National de Paris\*

It is June 15, 1987. The public gradually fills the old Salle Pleyel. Here and there, I recognize many oboists; and for good reason: this evening Maurice Bourgue plays the Richard Strauss Oboe Concerto. Concertos for wind instruments are scarce in the Parisian musical season, and we impatiently await this concert.

After the opening sextet of *Capriccio*, silence falls, and Maurice returns to the stage, concentrated.

In hindsight I imagine that he had just broken ten reeds five minutes before, including the one from the dress rehearsal, and chose one almost at random: the survivor left in the box will do the trick...

He plants his two feet like a judoka. He is anchored to the ground, soon to be freed. The earth could shake, but nothing can unbalance him.

The celli whisper twice the four interrogative sixteenth notes, and the oboe phrase unfolds. This uninterrupted ribbon has something organic about it. The melody unfurls, winds, develops. It is supported by a rhythmic foundation that allows it to be free. It is expressive, elastic, and at the same time organized. The energy builds, the tension in the phrase increases, and the first solo ends like an explosion.

And then it sings! The high register is free and resonant: unless you have heard Maurice wailing in his head voice during a lesson you have no idea of the resonant capacities of a human body!

Later, at the Opera, I would hear Felicity Lott, Renée Fleming, Leonie Rysanek. In that concerto, that little oboe *Capriccio*, Maurice was all those singers at the same time. His vibrato, integrated and flexible, elevated the phrase, sublimated the sound which that evening was nothing but pure emotion.

In the *Till Eulenspiegel* passage in the first movement, his articulation is as scathing as his laughter that often erupted during lessons or in conversation. His staccato as sharp as his gaze when he stared at you during a lesson. The second movement is elegiac, the line a tracing of Japanese calligraphy. The cadenza was

heroic, and in the last movement the siciliana rhythms are worthy of the presentation of the Rosenkavalier's rose.

A great evening. A privileged moment where the freedom of play seemed unbounded, where the line stretched like an arch that never descended into affectation. Armin Jordan, the great Strauss conductor, and the Orchestre de Paris provided the ideal setting.

There would be other concerts, other lessons—oboistic, musical, as well as life lessons—ever-enriching conversations, mystical digressions, paradoxes, disagreements, respect, but as I recall that concert, it seems to me it encapsulated something foundational.

With the oboe we could now extract ourselves from the clay of sound-matter to become nothing but vibrating breath, align the planets to free ourselves from the constraints of the instrument and so be entirely at the service of the musical text.

For that intense moment, and for all the others, Maurice, I thank you. "*La musique creuse le ciel* [Music hollows out the sky]," wrote Baudelaire. The furrow that you dug there will remain deeply engraved in all of us.

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### **Jean-Yves Gicquel**

organizer of the AFH congress in Bordeaux in 2000\*

Maurice Bourgue left his mark on the 4th congress of the Association Française du Hautbois (AFH) in Bordeaux in 2000, with on the one hand, to his magnificent interpretation of the Martinů Concerto with the Bordeaux-Aquitaine National Orchestra under the direction of Hans Graff, and on the other a master-class around this same concerto. By also conducting a premiere for oboe band by Gilles Silvestrini, he shared with us all facets of his talent.

The gala concert having been "relocated" to the prestigious city of Saint-Emilion, the opportunity was perfect to solicit the Jurade<sup>3</sup> of this famous region to induct Maurice Bourgue and Bernard Delcambre, founder and at that time president of the AFH. The new Jurat [member of the brotherhood] showed his amusement with a knowing smile, listening to the speech given by the representative of the brotherhood in his red robes, who was clearly inducting a Musician Artist for the first time in his life.

Maurice Bourgue was also very interested in the *gaiita*, the traditional oboe of the Basque region and the two players who had come from Bayonne, with whom he conducted long discussions during the gala meal. His interest was not feigned, but clearly genuine and spontaneous, as several photos prove, and he demonstrated his great simplicity to share sincerely for musical and human enrichment.

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Over the course of his long career, Bourgue recorded at least twenty-eight albums. Perhaps the most famous are his collaborations with Holliger, including the two versions of the Trio Sonatas of Jan Dismas Zelenka, and Baroque concertos by Albinoni and Vivaldi. As soloist he also recorded the great twentieth-century concertos by Strauss, Vaughan Williams, and Martinů.

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## Christian Schmitt

Oboe Professor at the Musikhochschule, Stuttgart\*

Cher Maurice,

You came into my life at the age eight through LPs—it was before the advent of the CD. Dutilleux, Poulenc, Hindemith, Britten, Vivaldi, Mozart. We all wanted to play like you. You were the representative of the “New Wave” of oboe playing.<sup>4</sup> When I arrived in Basel, the older players immediately told me anecdotes of your beginnings in the orchestra, your mischievousness, your effrontery, impertinence, rebelliousness, but always compensated and rewarded by your incomparable talent. Thank you for all those intense moments at Raincy, rue de l’Angile, rue de Madrid, at Entrains sur Nohain, and of course rue Durantin. I still hold onto your copy of the book *Zen in the Chivalrous Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel as a sort of relic.<sup>5</sup> May your transition from one life to another be sweet. See you soon.

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American audiences were treated with a showcase of his talent in the Zelenka and Contemporary Music Festival at the 92nd St Y, February 21–22, 2004. In two recitals with Holliger, Klaus Thunemann and others, Bourgue played the full cycle of Zelenka trios interspersed with contemporary works. Bourgue returned to the Y with friends in 2009, playing first “La Française” from *Les Nations* by François Couperin, with violinist Jaime Laredo, and then Poulenc’s Oboe Sonata with pianist Mitsuko Uchida, which a *New York Times* reviewer Steve Smith described as a “paradoxical mix of the elegiac, the suave and the clever... bold, elegant and incisive.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to such oboe standards as the Schumann Romances, Poulenc Oboe Sonata, and Britten’s *Metamorphoses*, Bourgue championed contemporary music. He played the world premiere of Luciano Berio’s *Chemin IV* (an orchestrated arrangement of *Sequenza VII*, 1975), and made the first recording of Henri Dutilleux’s Oboe Sonata (against the composer’s wishes!). Dutilleux forgave him, and let him play in the world premiere of *Les Citations* in its expanded version at the Besançon Festival in 1991, and even the premiere of his oboe sonata in its definitive 2010 version, his last completed score. A work full of lyricism and musical resonances, *Les Citations* (1991) came to hold a special place in Bourgue’s repertoire; indeed it stands as a memorial to his legacy. Dutilleux composed the first movement for the seventy-fifth birthday of tenor Peter Pears, and cites excerpts from Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes*; in the second movement he took a theme of Jehan Alain, whose heroic demise during World War II deeply affected the composer.

From 1972, Bourgue devoted an important part of his activities to chamber music with a wind octet bearing his name. Founded as an ensemble of players from the Orchestre de Paris, the group made several recordings, notably of Gounod’s *Petite Symphonie*, and Mozart Serenades.



Maurice Bourgue after the Zelenka and Contemporary Music Festival, 92nd St Y in 2004 with (L to R) David de la Nuez, Aaron Cohen, and Shirley Mills.

### **Marc Vallon**

Bassoon Professor, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Among all the chamber coaches of the Paris Conservatoire in the 1980's, Maurice Bourgue was by far the most feared and revered. His teaching style was contrasting noticeably from our other coaches. Flutist Christian Lardé was invariably positive and kind and going to his class always felt like a window of relief from the constant pressure that was the trademark of the institution. Myron Bloom, the former Principal Horn of the Cleveland Orchestra, spent a couple of years in Paris playing with the Orchestre de Paris at the invitation of Daniel Barenboim. He was very spare in his comments and always matter of fact.

But being in a coaching session with Maurice Bourgue was a different story. He would move around the room, his oboe in one hand, gesturing wildly with the other, singing loudly and occasionally throwing one of the sharp and direct personal comments that we all dreaded. When our oboe player complained about his reeds, Bourgue would often grab the instrument, play the precarious passage in question, and then inevitably declare: "Your reed is fine, it is your air that is not working."

That was, indeed, what made Bourgue's approach to oboe playing so different from his contemporaries. He thought that the key to any good music-making starts with proper air support, an obvious concept for the twenty-first-century musician, yet quite unfamiliar in the traditional French school where tongue and finger agility were the main ingredients to a successful career. To students, he had the reputation of a guru who would utter mysterious and fascinating words such as *respiration ventrale* [abdominal breathing] and *colonne d'air* [air column], opening to us a world of discoveries to be made, even if he was not always very clear in his guidance. I remember the bewildered face of my fellow student, oboist

Bertrand Grenat, telling me about a lesson he just had with Bourgue. “I told him that my top F did not respond and he poked my stomach with his index saying, ‘Your top F is right there!’ ”

Later, I had some unique musical experiences in a group Bourgue founded, the Octuor a vent Maurice Bourgue, where I played for a couple of years. Bourgue was true to himself, permanently animated and relentlessly demanding. (I vividly remember during a rehearsal spending 20 long minutes on the first two measures of the final movement of Beethoven’s Octet until André Cazalet, our ever-wise horn player, put an end to the torment of our clarinetists in very graphic words.)

Maurice Bourgue was, for many of my generation, a maverick, someone who had access to a remote and mystical knowledge that went far beyond what our traditional musical instruction would offer. He seemed to be in a permanent state of excitement about music-making in a manner that sharply contrasted with the (possibly affected) poise of most of our professors and older colleagues. There was something of a rebel in him, and that is probably what made him so intimidating and fascinating.

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### David Walter

Professor of Oboe, Paris Conservatoire (CNSM)\*

*D’abord l’artiste : chapeau !*

First the artist: Hats off! With Heinz Holliger, the other giant of the ‘39 generation with whom he monopolized the highest international distinctions, he gave a new breath/style to the oboe, thus creating a dynamic going beyond the hitherto rather hermetic boundaries of national schools, giving an decisive impetus to what would gradually become a sort of global oboe school—excepting the Viennese oboe, and the American school. I remember my astonishment when listening to the first recording of Zelenka’s sonatas, for example...

Then the teacher: passionate, uncompromising absolutist, powerful and penetrating teaching... but—and here there *is* a but—if for those with understanding and rapid adaptability the enrichment was obvious, those who needed patience, empathy, and progressive counseling sometimes suffered cruelly from their experiences with the Master, would leave defeated with bruised ego. His dark side of which he became aware in his old age.

Personally, I am sincerely grateful to him for his transmission, his support for my appointment to the CNSM and will forever remember our harmonious collaboration in the oboe class.

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Bourgue’s passion for music extended to his teaching. He taught chamber music from 1979 at the Paris Conservatoire, and was subsequently appointed as Professor of Oboe there in 1986, a position he held for thirteen years. He held the similar position at the Geneva Conservatory up to 2011. Since that time, he continued to be invited for masterclasses around the world, from Moscow, Lausanne, Oslo, Jerusalem, London, Kyoto, and Madrid...



## Jean Claude Jaboulay

retired oboist with the Orchestre de Paris, Artistic Counsellor to Rigoutat, former member of the Octet "Maurice Bourgue"\*

*La première fois, la dernière fois.*

From first to last.

In 1968, Maurice Bourgue was looking for students. I had obtained my first prizes in oboe and chamber music at the CNSMD in Paris, Maurice Bourgue agreed to meet me together with Michel Giboureau and Yves Poucel in a bistro on Boulevard de Sébastopol so that we could plan a date for a group lesson.

Appointment made, we went to his apartment at Porte de Vincennes. There we met Colette, his wife, The class began with Michel, from 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m., then Yves, from 4 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. My turn came. Schumann's First Romance. As soon as I finish the first phrase, Maurice shouted: "Stop! Start over!"

I do so, trying to be more musical. He stops me at the same place and asks me if I have my Prix de Paris.

"Hop, come here," he said to me, and took me to a room where there was a couch, on which he asked me to lie down. He grabs a dictionary and places it on my stomach to explain abdominal breathing. Could I have been one of the first to be initiated into his method to understand breathing?

Maurice was a hard worker, a diehard. For example, after rehearsals with the Orchestre de Paris (10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 2:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.), he asked me if I could take him back to rue Durantin where he was then living. He was preparing for an international competition (he won five), and wanted me to come and listen to him, which I did quite often. I climbed to the top floor of their house. Colette at the piano, Géraldine underneath listening to her father. He played late, endlessly, as if nothing else existed. And almost every day the same.

In the mid-70s, he invited me to join him in the octet that bears his name. It was a period rich in all kinds of sensations, a wide range of shared emotions: concerts, trips, recordings...

Beyond his "philosophical-musical" genius, he was a facetious man, and I remember with pleasure his mischievous side which he knew how to radiate as we rehearsed. Even if the seriousness of our musical commitments to prepare successful concerts was our chief endeavor, there was still time for laughter and joking. Moreover, some conductors feared him for his personal choices in certain solos. For conductors, lowering their hands is out of the question. Indeed, Maurice, inventive, radiant, sure of his ideas, would sometimes ignore the conductor's baton and, following his instinct and his musical sensibility, ultimately play... to his own beat.

Before closing this eulogy, I would like to thank Maurice infinitely for his musical commitment, for his enthusiasm in all his achievements, and for everything he brought to the oboe and to music.

A few days before his death, I called him and we talked about the simple things in life, as we had done in recent years. He was peaceful and saw life with more serenity.

Adieu mon cher Maurice, et Merci.

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**Philippe Tondre**

Principal Oboe, Philadelphia Orchestra; Faculty, Curtis Institute of Music

What an artist. His singing vibrato stills resonates in me. The depth of his phrasings was endless. Everything in his voice was organic, smooth, and simple. Playing Zelenka sonatas with him will remain a highlight in my musical journey. One of Maurice's most remarkable skills as a teacher was his ability to hit the spot immediately, find the elements we urgently needed to work on and never let go of them. His obsession to push us to our limits was always with the intention of getting the best out of us.

For this, I am grateful. He unleashed so many emotions in us, opened doors to new multiple facets in music making, dominated the instrument like no other and we definitely all re-evaluated our rhythm and pacing skills! I have never heard the word "tempo" in a lesson with Maurice used often. Indeed, his time concept was admirable, everything had a heartbeat, his music making was pure, honest, and beautiful.

Memento of my first lesson with him in Sion, Switzerland: "*Mon garçon,*" his sparkling green eyes started to melt on me. "*La patience est amère mais son fruit est doux* [Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet]," he said, quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "*Embrasse cette patience, tu pourras jouer comme tu le voudras* [Embrace this patience, you will be able to play the way you want]." The tone was set.

Thank you, Maurice, for your lessons which were so energetic, so stimulating, so innovative. Your dedication to your students was incredible and matched the infinite dimension of your art. Not a single moment of boredom, not a single moment of respite either! Your pedagogy was not only about music, it was a pedagogy of life.

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**Alexandre Ouguey**

English horn with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra

When I did the masterclass with Maurice Bourgue it was the bucket of cold water I was craving for at that time. Bourgue is probably the most organic, physical, philosophical, metaphysical (you name it!) oboist, and he never thinks of technique, apart from rhythm, which is all that matters. I was seeing the first true musician playing the oboe, and that's exactly what I loved. I remember once he was, as often, completely annoyed by a student and talking in his usual crappy philosophical language ("*il faut te débarrasser de cette croûte de merde qui t'emprisonne* [you should disencumber yourself of that crust of shit that imprisons you]"), so he played the whole slow movement of Mozart quartet, by himself, no accompaniment. We were all absolutely melting. That was it!<sup>7</sup>

## Philipp Mahrenholz

Principal oboe, Zurich Opera House

I spent a deeply intense and personal period of my oboe studies with Maurice Bourgue. I first encountered him at various masterclasses, then in Paris as part of an Erasmus exchange year and finally during three years of study at the Conservatoire de Musique de Geneve, 1999–2002.

For me, Bourgue was the ideal musical mentor. He had the priceless gift of being able to pick you apart completely, to nudge you sternly and demandingly, to look deep inside you and understand you with razor-sharp precision, yet never hurt or humiliate you, and at the same time encourage you with the greatest of confidence. We students often left the classroom saying to one another, "Come on, let's go and practise, we want to put this into practice right now."

Bourgue represented a universal model of a musician, which was transferable and went beyond his enormously charismatic personality. He was able to convey the deepest passion and love for music, and simply exuded this without ever needing to preach it. In my opinion, his huge success as a teacher lay precisely in the fact that he always endeavoured to draw the maximum out of each student's own personality and musicality, not letting them become a copy of him. This sounds totally obvious and simple, but is so infinitely difficult, and yet, in my experience, masterfully achieved by him.

His remarkable focus when making music, his unbeatable ability to sing and to speak so incredibly precisely, directly, truly and immediately from the soul, to exist unconditionally with every fibre of his being in the here and now of the music, had an indescribably magical attraction.

Bourgue built bridges between the European schools of training, which were still very different at the time of his own education. He fundamentally influenced and shaped so many oboists, not only, but notably from outside his country of origin, which was an unusual achievement in his time.

An immensely fascinating, highly charismatic, and endlessly inspiring person, musician and oboist has left us. Deep in my heart, I am infinitely grateful to have been able to share this musical treasure in the broadest sense. Bourgue once said that he would probably give his life for music. I think he did just that by giving us all so much.

Thank you from my heart, Maurice, for all these wonderful years.



Bourgue supervising a lesson with Philipp Mahrenholz, 1999.

In 2010 Bourgue was awarded honorary membership of the IDRS, and served as jurist for many international competitions, including no less than three in Japan in the early 2000s, and the ARD Munich Competition in 2002 and 2007. He was also Music Director of the Sándor Végh Institute for Chamber Music of the Mozarteum in Salzburg.

## Douglas Boyd

Oboist and Conductor, Student of Bourgue  
 Founding member of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe

The most extraordinary thing about him was that he didn't seem to have any limitations. He could absolutely fill a concert hall with his sound and have this extraordinary dynamic range and incredible colour... He's one of the great instrumentalists of the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

Known as much for his *joie de vivre* as for his introspective ruminations, Bourgue was never one to hide his opinion, and as attested by his colleagues' and students' testimonials, preferred to speak the truth as he saw it—even if uncomfortable—rather than sweeping issues under a rug of politeness. He was passionate about passing on breathing techniques derived from singers, and deeply inspired by a 1960s fascination with Eastern philosophy and wisdom gleaned from martial arts. His teaching went beyond oboe technique to embrace a rawer sense of music-making that touched on the spiritual through an intellectual investigation of personal identity, and the duality of the physical and the sacred.

*Comprenez, utiliser bien la respiration, ça veut dire que lorsque vous sentez que vous êtes en surpression ou en souspression, vous changez le système, vous adapter aux besoins du corps et besoins respiratoires : donc une liberté d'action ; c'est une liberté que vous êtes donné par la technique qui vous permet de connaître votre limite et de compenser ces manques de connaissances. Ça, c'est la technique de la respiration. Mais si vous n'avez pas cette compétence—mais il y a des moments où on est musicalement en danger, c'est le moment où la phrase ne permet pas sous peine de casser quelque chose de sacré en musique—vous préférez prendre sur votre corps la dure responsabilité de supporter, de souffrir plutôt que de casser la musique—là, c'est un choix.*

Listen: using the breath well means that as soon as you feel excessive pressure or a lack of pressure, you change the system, you adapt to the needs of your body, to the need to breathe, and it becomes a free and involuntary act. That freedom that the technique of breathing gives you allows you to know your limits and to compensate for your deficiencies. That is breath technique. But if you haven't mastered that, there are moments where you are musically in danger; moments where the phrase will not yield on pain of breaking something sacred in the music. If you prefer, take the heavy responsibility on your body, bear to suffer rather than to break the music—that's your choice.

Maurice Bourgue,  
 from *La Clef des Sons*

## Thomas Indermühle

international soloist and Oboe Professor at the Hochschule für Musik Karlsruhe

“When great personalities pass through a wall, they leave a hole that corresponds exactly with their silhouette. This is, what we can keep. It is important.”

It must have been in spring 1975, when I telephoned Maurice Bourgue at his home in Paris. I was calling from Amsterdam, where I was working as first oboe in the Nederlands Kamerorkest. We planned to record the Mozart Concertante for Philips, with oboe and horn players from our group, clarinet and bassoon from the Concertgebouw Orkest. It was my first recording with an international label and after three rehearsals with the soloists, I decided, that I had to do something with my sound. I was all but happy with it....

“Bourgue!”

“Bonjour, it is Thomas, I need a lesson!”

“What do you want to play?”

“No, not about pieces, about my breathing and sound.”

“OK. Then come to my house in Paris at the end of the week.”

Metro Blanche, Rue Lepic, Rue Durantin 52.... ring-ring. Door opens and I get a warm welcome, being guided to the second floor up a spiral staircase. A studio, breathing music, breathing oboe, reeds, breathing Maurice.

I played the first page of the Martinů Concerto for him, then he stopped me, pointed at my oboe and said:

“This is no problem for you. The problem is your body, you are playing only with your head!”

Maurice made me lay down, put a heavy book on my belly and told me to feel the going up and down of the book, being initiated by the Universe, which gave me breath as a gift.

Wow!! What a shock!! This was miles away from how I had felt my body until now! He kept talking to me quite a long time, hypnotizing me with the idea of the Universe entering my body.

Without trying another note on the oboe, I left Rue Durantin 52 as a happy man, full of energy and positivism. Maurice had given me the book *Hara* by Dürckheim, but refused the F500 I wanted to give him for the lesson.<sup>9</sup>

Back to Amsterdam, rehearsal no. 4 with the soloists for the Mozart.

I really don't exaggerate when I tell you that everybody thought I had bought a new instrument in Paris. There was no way to compare my sound and playing with anything I had done before!

I was happy with my sound and started to fly with my oboe, in the direction of Mozart.

Of course I went back many times to Rue Durantin 52 and later Maurice and I played together. Trios with Alain Denis, in the Metro Châtelet, on the bateaux mouches... on television.

Words are insufficient to thank you for having lighted this fire in me! The only way to thank you, is to spread your ideas among young players, and that is, what I have been trying to do ever since.

*Au revoir, mon cher Maurice! Bon Voyage to your beloved Universe!*

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**Ivan Podyomov**

Principal Oboe, Koninklijk Concertgebouw Orkest, Amsterdam\*

I have never met such an amusing person in my life, with a slightly sarcastic and teasing humor, but still friendly. At the same time, Bourgue was a pure poet, an observer and the most sincere of gallant gentlemen. To randomly witness his daily appearances was already more exciting than any breathtaking theatrical performance. Those who heard his jokes laughed until they cried.

Those who heard him perform were immediately captivated by his cantabile, his depth of expression, and his honesty. He was one of the few who managed to go beyond the instrument and create truly breath-taking art with a tool as rudimentary as the oboe. He always played in class—and how! Sometimes he would spontaneously play an entire piece by Couperin or Bach with the harpsichordist Leonardo Garcia Alarcon, with profound depth, so much so that we students were hypnotized. And the older he got, the better he played.

He dared to say things honestly, like no one else, especially these days. Sometimes someone would take them too much to heart, but his intentions were always positive, because he really cared about students, and he wanted to warn us that music is a truly very difficult subject that requires a lot of effort and sacrifice, that it's not for everyone and that we needed to wake up... He didn't abandon students if something wasn't good enough, when another teacher would have turned a blind eye to the problem just to avoid a tense situation. We are all grateful to him for being very honest and very hard with us at times. It was virtually impossible to get a compliment from him, but when we received the smallest one, we measured its value!

For me, he represented that glorious era of musical art, when it was not just about making a career and giving as many concerts as possible, but also about artistry, craftsmanship, quality, and true beauty. He was like those virtuoso violinists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with their incredible, unparalleled passionate playing, filling every note with such meaning, character and depth, that they were capable of creating heightened experiences.

Rest in peace, my beloved teacher. You will always remain for me an example of a human being and a musician.

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**Guy Laroche**

Former Solo Oboe with Concerts Padeloup, and the Orchestre National de Lyon; Former President of the AFH\*

My first contact, at least auditory, with Maurice Bourgue dates back to my youthful beginnings with the oboe. He played a sonata with his wife, Colette Kling, as part of the Jeunesses Musicales de France. Dazzled, I immediately realized the distance that remained to be covered to obtain such mastery of the instrument.

We all felt that something was happening and that a different approach was emerging, both in playing and in teaching. During the lessons or masterclasses that he gave, we heard about breathing, phrasing, energy, Hara and a whole new

terminology intended for awareness of the body in the practice of the oboe and music in general. He had his own language that we had to try to decode and transpose to the level of the instrument. Solving technical problems was not his main motivation. It was up to the student to find the solutions. And it could hurt! As my late friend René Guillaumot (who was his student and who later held the position of Principal Oboe in the Orchestre de Paris) said, “He could be acerbic, cruel, even humiliating. Many have recovered, others less so.” For my part, I worked a lot, listening to his advice and comments, and trying to draw all the benefits from his lessons.

Subsequently, becoming a student at the CNSM in Paris in Pierre Pierlot’s class, I went to the concerts of the Orchestre de Paris of which Maurice was then the first solo oboe. *Quel leçon!!!* I will always remember the way he guided the long phrases of Schubert’s “Great” Symphony.

Later, I had the chance to meet Maurice in different circumstances, whether at the CNSM in Lyon, accompanying him in the orchestra in different concerti, on juries, as part of the AFH, etc. Different anecdotes could punctuate my remarks, but that would take too much time here.

Contact with him has always been enriching, enthusiastic, sarcastic, exciting. With Jean-Christophe Gayot, each time we would leave with a fresh challenge, and renewed energy.

To finish, a reflection that he made while practicing the Mozart Concerto and which I noted at the head of my score: “*La fin de quelque chose est toujours le début d’autre chose* [The end of something is always the beginning of something else].”

Dear Maurice, may it be the same for you now.

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Bourgue’s provocative nature led him to place the existence of a French school of oboe playing in doubt—even if he had himself trained several of the most important representatives at the Paris Conservatoire. For François Leleux, he was “the oboist who has done the most important work with pupils today—the greatest oboists of the younger generation are his pupils.”<sup>10</sup>

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### **François Leleux**

International oboe soloist; Oboe Professor Hochschule für Musik und Theater München\*

Maurice Bourgue taught me a lot. He was an incredible teacher and sometimes disconcerting. He would come up to you, very close to your face, and ask the ultimate question: “Why do you make music?” You had to choose your words carefully, otherwise you were subjected to all kinds of reprimands.

His classes, always very inspired and inspiring, were incredibly vibrant. He was always looking for vibration in the body, the reed, and the oboe. Sometimes, with a smirk, he would remonstrate against one of his reeds that he had over scraped a little and didn’t work well enough for his taste, break it, laugh out loud, and then resume his lecture.

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He had come to Munich to give a masterclass, I thanked him warmly for this gift and the joyful time that he had given us. Here is his remarkable response:

*Mon cher François,*

*Tu inverses les rôles car c'est à moi de te remercier de m'avoir fait vivre ces moments rares où le passage du savoir est, quoique toujours à découvrir, un acte d'amour qui nous grandit et enrichit notre relation au monde. L'enseignement a toujours été, de mon point de vue, l'acte humain le plus sacré de l'existence car il est générateur d'une harmonie nouvelle sans cesse en mouvement. C'est ce que j'ai compris à ma nomination au CNSM qui m'a fait découvrir que l'enseignement, bien compris, porte en lui les germes créatifs de l'évolution du monde. Ce qui est valable pour la musique l'est d'autant plus pour la vie car la musique agit dans la partie la plus secrète de l'homme : son esprit. Ce n'est pas sans raison que Platon considérait la musique comme l'art le plus haut dans l'échelle des valeurs humaines.*

*Comment ne pas te remercier d'une pareille occasion ?*

*J'ai apprécié l'esprit de ta classe qui m'a rendu très attentif aux besoins de chaque étudiant, de leur priorité la plus urgente dans ce moment vécu ensemble et j'ai trouvé le niveau général d'une belle tenue. Mais que de joies durant toutes ces heures ...*

*Alors oui, merci mon cher François de m'avoir fait goûter à l'illusion de l'éternelle jeunesse.*

*Beaucoup d'amitiés.*

*M.B.*

My dear François,

You reverse the roles, because it is up to me to thank you for allowing me to experience some rare moments where the passing of knowledge is, although still to be discovered, an act of love which nurtures us and enriches our relationship with the world. Teaching has always been, from my point of view, the most sacred human act of existence because it is the generator of a new harmony that is constantly in motion. This is what I understood when I was appointed to the CNSM, which made me discover that teaching, properly understood, carries within it the creative seeds of the evolution of the world. What is valid for music is all the more valid for life because music acts in the most secret part of humanity: the mind. It was not without reason that Plato considered music to be the highest art in the scale of human values.

How can I not thank you for such an opportunity?

I appreciated the spirit of your class which made me very attentive to the needs of each student, to their most urgent priorities in that moment lived together, and I found the overall standard to be of a fine level. What joys during all these hours!

So yes, thank you my dear François for giving me a taste of the illusion of eternal youth.

With much friendship,

MB.



## Roland Perrenoud

Former Principal Oboe of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande

Former Professor at the Haute École de Musique de Genève\*

It was in 1972, while a student at the Musikhochschule in Freiburg im Breisgau, when I met Maurice Bourgue. He sometimes came to replace my teacher, Heinz Holliger.

The arrival in class of this jolly Frenchman who seemed to take nothing seriously but spoke as an equal with our teacher (this was the time when the two friends were recording the Zelenka sonatas) left us perplexed and admiring. It must be said that Holliger demanded from his students the seriousness and absence of concessions that he imposed on himself, while Maurice was not yet the equally uncompromising master that he was to become, and still appeared a bit like a UFO in the world of double reeds.

Without really being a friend, he understood us and knew how to put himself at our level. So it was quite natural that we would visit him at his home on rue Caulaincourt in Paris, to listen to him play in the orchestra, have him test our new Rigoutats (we all played Rigoutat of course), and show him our reeds. He didn't teach yet (he dreamed of it and was impatient) and was very happy to welcome students. It was a time of sharing and friendships that many will remember.

Twenty years later, crowned with all his prestige as a professor at the CNSM, Maurice arrives at the Conservatoire Supérieur de Musique de Genève (later the Haute École de Musique) and becomes my colleague. That is the start of a true friendship. He shares everything and calculates nothing. Thanks to him I inherit magnificent students that he was unable (or unwilling) to take. His students regularly play alongside me at the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, mine go to listen to his lessons and everyone in this little world meets up for exams, before ending the evening around the fondue pot. (Ah, Maurice and fondue! He loved it and looked forward to it all day!)

One of Maurice's charms, I believe, lay in his ambiguity. His judgments could be as cutting as a razor blade (not always justified; his instinct sometimes played tricks on him) like: "*lui, il ne joue pas, il est déjà mort...* [He's not playing, he's already dead...]," or "*c'est magnifique, elle est faite pour ça...* [It's magnificent, she's made for that...]" (supreme compliment!) It was either black or white: no point in contradicting his opinion. But an hour later he could naively get bamboozled by a student who had not worked hard enough and who easily pushed him into one of his famous mystical digressions, which would end an hour or two later. He had given his lesson.

He was a passionate teacher. He could play Couperin or Strauss every day with the enthusiasm of a teenager.

After his very last exams, after the last fondue and the last glass of Fendant, when the Geneva adventure is over (he had extended it for as long as possible), and I take him to the tram, he squeezes my arm very tightly and says to me with tears in his voice, "*Qu'est-ce que je vais devenir?* [What will become of me?]" He would have liked to never stop.

What a void!

Thank you, Maurice for your time on earth. You remain a UFO, and we miss you.

**Guy Porat**

Oboe Professor, Medien und Kunst Privatuniversität der Stadt Wien (2010–15)  
Principal Oboe, Budapest Festival Orchestra (2001–9)

What was it that made Bourgue such a great teacher? The very same uncompromising musical honesty. He demanded full commitment to perfect intonation, rigorous rhythm, precise tempo, and at the same time attention to harmony and color, and expressive emotional phrasing. And he held you accountable for your actions:

"Do you know you're playing out of tune / time??!!"

"Yes"

"Ahhh, you know it—and you don't care?!"

"No"

"Ahhh, you don't even realize it—so how can you fix it???"

He was not a man of many words, but what he did say stayed with you. Rather, he was a man of action, teaching by way of demonstration and imitation. When he was nice to students, it was clear that he had given up on them, but when he was angry, it was clear that he loved them. His magical teaching led every student to feel that he was their own teacher. To feel that he cared, in a very special and personal way, as if you shared a private understanding that was yours alone and nobody else's. A teacher for life itself.

But Bourgue also carried a great secret: the secret of breathing. Hundreds of students came and went without fully grasping what enabled his magical playing. As he once confessed, after discovering the right way to breathe and blow he wanted to shout the truth out to the world! But to his amazement, no one wanted



Bourgue in 1999.

to listen. Eventually he became silent about it. "As long as he is willing to suffer, he must suffer. Only when a student is completely desperate and cries for help is he ready to accept it," he said.

His honesty related to sound as well. He did not care for the "nice, round" sound that many oboists strive to achieve, but rather for a living, colorful and flexible sound that serves musical expression. A sound that will probably die away with Heinz Holliger when his day comes. So many oboists admire the oboe playing and musicality of Holliger and Bourgue, yet when it comes to sound, none follow in their footsteps. The flexibility that they represent simply does not exist in the playing of any other oboists. Why? Because they prioritize so-called "beauty of sound" above musical expression. But sound without expression is not beautiful. It is simply dead. *Quel dommage!*

If Bourgue left us one legacy, it is that of a flexible, lively sound that serves musical expression honestly and humbly. May he rest in peace, and may the music world in general, and the oboe world in particular cherish his legacy.

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### **Emma Black**

Principal Oboe Wiener Akademie, and Balthasar Neumann Ensemble; Professor of Oboe at the Kunstuniversität Graz, Austria.

I remember, around the age of seven, I desperately wanted to learn the oboe. I had been learning the violin for a couple of years, so it was whilst listening to the Beethoven Violin Concerto that I first heard the oboe. The sound stamped me indelibly as a future oboist. I made the switch five years later. One of the first records I bought was of the six Handel Trio sonatas, played by Heinz Holliger and Maurice Bourgue. The way their sounds were almost interchangeable delighted me and I listened to it very, very often. Even though today I probably perform more on historical oboes than modern, these two oboe deities have guided and shaped me in every way.

After studying with Holliger for a few years I sensed the need to find the other half of my musical intention. I could best describe it as the search for the Yin side of the Yang. It is wonderful to realise that there is no limit in the ways a brilliant teacher can stretch and enable us to see ourselves more clearly. So it was with Maurice Bourgue. Even though I had been pushed to a high level previously, entering his class in Geneva felt like going back to the beginning of high school.

His lessons were always extraordinary. Rarely private, the whole class would inevitably be present not to miss any opportunity to listen and learn. These lessons sometimes bordered on a therapy session, your fears and weaknesses being prised open for all to see. But always with love and respect, in order to create a clear channel between yourself and the music.

A few years ago, I embarked on researching a PhD that required me to interview many oboists. Of course I asked my former professor. We met up at a Paris flea market and talked.

One of Prof Bourgue's greatest inspirations as a young man was the cellist Rostropovich. The most important gift that Maurice Bourgue gave to me was the

technique of putting aside my own ego and allowing the spirit and aesthetics of the music speak to me. In his own words,

*My musical interpretation is given by the music. I don't decide that. It is the music that tells me. As you know, in music we do not decide many things. We are in the mill of the music. And we have to obey that, to respect that, to give as purely as we receive it. That is all.*



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From the homily read by **David Gilbert** at Bourgue's funeral, at Paris, Église Saint-Roch, Paris, on October 17, 2023.\*

If we needed to find one word to summarize Maurice Bourgue's relationship with music, I would dare to propose this one: Vibration. When recounting his decision to take up the oboe, when his father made him listen to different instruments on the radio, he said that there had certainly been a very special vibration in him when he heard the sound of this instrument which he appreciated and by which he was immediately smitten. Later, after his failure during his first application for the Geneva competition, and he undertook a long and difficult solitary study of breathing, it was his own vibration that he sought, so that the oboe would truly be, for him, a means for musical expression and public enjoyment.

Maurice Bourgue was also a man of the word, of the verbal image, with a view to teaching. Recently, many of his former students and friends have spoken of his philosophical approach to music, and the oboe. It is true that every musician is an interpreter: a very strong word, which evokes work of intellect, heart, and body in the service of the work of another, in the service of the public. The performer is a mediator who mobilizes his whole being—his intelligence, freedom, emotions, imagination, and body—to create a communion that is both fleeting and yet arresting between a composer—often dead a long time, but present through his work—and a diversity of listeners.

Bourgue's demands were such that he obviously could not be content with being simply a good technical practitioner of his instrument. As he said in a style all his own, "*La médiocrité et la sécurité, je les vomis de tout mon être!* [Mediocrity and security: I vomit them out of my whole being!]" His quest, indeed, can be described as philosophical in that, as a musician, he sought freedom.

If music is great, and if it deserves devoting one's life to, it is because it is a path towards freedom, and liberty; that it is a means by which the interpreter can access the intimate truth of his existence in a constant conversation with the great masters of the past and present; and that this freedom and this truth can be shared between musicians, with the public, and in teaching, and from which beauty and purity of joy and peace are born. Thus, music *can* be philosophy, a true love of wisdom, and an unending quest that is constantly being renewed.

Some among Maurice Bourgue's friends and students go even further. His approach to music, they say, was not only philosophical, but mystical. Extraordinary word! How is it to be understood? In the Christian tradition, mystics are men and women who see the invisible, who feel the immaterial, who find the words to express the ineffable. These are people who receive a certain grace, a divine gift, not so much for themselves as for others, in order to be examples, to be guides for others. The mystic is a person intimately convinced that the greatest realities, the most real of realities, are invisible, and that the visible only exists thanks to the invisible.

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## Maurice Bourgue: A Select Discography

These original releases provide a chronology of Bourgue's recorded legacy. Most are still available on streaming services.

- Albinoni, Concerti for two oboes op. 9 and 7 with Heinz Holliger (Philips, 1966, 1968).
- Dutilleux, Poulenc, and Hindemith Sonatas, and Britten *Metamorphses* with Colette Kling, piano (EMI EMPS 553, 1968; rereleased Harmonia Mundi 30.902, 1969).
- Zelenka, Trio Sonatas with Holliger, Klaus Thunemann, Saschko Gawrioff, Lucio Bucarella, and Christiane Jacottet. (Archiv 2708027, 1973).
- Poulenc, *La Musique de chambre*, with Jacques Février, piano (EMI ESPS 553, 1973).
- Mozart, Quartet with Yehudi Menuhin, Michel Debost, and Luigi Alberto (EMI 1976).
- Strauss, Oboe Concerto (Radio performance, 1976).
- Saint-Saëns, *Intégrale des Sonates* (Calliope 1977).
- Mozart, Oboe Concerto, with Orchestre de Paris, cond. D. Barenboim (EMI 1977).

- Handel, *6 Sonates a 3 per due oboi e continuo* with Holliger, Manfred Sax, Jacottet (Philips 9500671, 1979).
- Beethoven, Trio for 2 oboes and English horn, with Holliger and Hans Elhorst (Philips 1979; rereleased on *Masters of the Oboe*, Deutsche Grammophon, 2006).
- Vivaldi, Concertos for 2 Oboes, with Holliger, I Musici (Phonogram, 1980).
- Hertel, Double Concerto for Oboe and Trumpet, with Maurice André (EMI, 1981).
- Vivaldi, Oboe Concerti with I Solisti Veneti, cond. C. Scimone (Erato, 1984).
- Vaughan Williams, Concerto with English String Orchestra, cond. R. Boughton (Nimbus, NIM 5019, 1985).
- Bach, Brandenburg Concertos, Kammerorchester “Carl Philip Emanuel Bach,” cond. P. Schrier (Philips, 1993).
- Dutilleux, *Les Citations* (Musifrance, 1994).
- Zelenka, Trio Sonatas, second version with Holliger, Thomas Zehetmair, Thunemann, Klaus Stoll, Jonathan Rubin, Jacottet (ECM 289462542-2, 1999).
- Schumann Recital*, music by Robert and Clara Schumann, with Jean-Bernard Pommier, piano (Musikè, 2000).
- Calamus Ensemble**, with Dagmar Becker, flute, Wolfgang Meyer, clarinet, Rainer Schottstädt, bassoon, and Marie Luise Neunecker, horn
- Danzi, Hindemith, Ligeti, and Reicha, Wind Quintets (Bayer Records, 100 052, 1989).
- André Caplet, Quintet for winds and piano, with Kling, piano (1989).

#### Octour (or Ensemble) à vent “Maurice Bourgue”

- Gounod, *Petite Symphonie pour 9 instruments* (Calliope, 1975).
- D’Indy, *Chansons et danses* (Calliope/Musical Heritage, 1978).
- Mozart, Opera Transcriptions for octet (Disques P. Vernay, 1987).
- Mozart, Gran’Partita (Disques P. Vernay, 1993).
- Mozart, Serenades (Indésens, 200--).

## Endnotes

\* Contributions shared through the Association Française du Hautbois. English translations by Geoffrey Burgess. The original French versions can be found in *La Lettre du hautboïste* 49 (Winter 2023–4).

- 1 *La Clef des Sons*, film by Gabriel Hirsch, 1999 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X9U5yLPd\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X9U5yLPd_I)
- 2 Quoted in Graham Salter, *Understanding the Oboe Reed* (Bearsden Music, 2018), 335.
- 3 The Jurade is an 800-year-old fraternity of enthusiasts of Saint-Émilion wines.
- 4 A reference to the Nouvelle Vague movement in 1960s French cinema which, led by directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, developed new experimental elements, and emphasized psychological probing.
- 5 Herrigel’s insightful and widely influential explanation of Zen Buddhist principles was first published in German in 1948 (*Zen in der Kunst des Bogenschießens*).
- 6 “A Concert’s Name Player Makes Room for Friends,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2009 (accessed October 12, 2023).
- 7 Reprinted from an interview with Jillian Taylor DR 29/1 (2006): 122.
- 8 Reprinted from DR 24/4 (2005).
- 9 *Hara: The Vital Center of Man* by Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1896–1988) is a classic text expounding on Eastern philosophy for a Western audience.
- 10 Reprinted from DR 24/4 (2005).