

# Taming the Impossible

## An interview–review with Alex Klein

Omar Zoboli  
Zurich, Switzerland

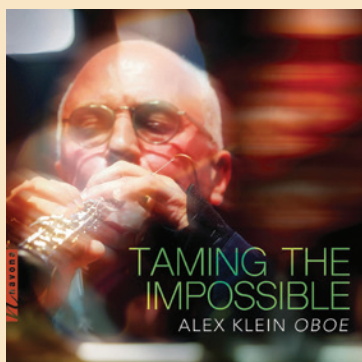
**Omar Zoboli (OZ):** *Alex, how can one not admire, be moved, and touched by your magnificent achievement? But even more, I am fascinated by the strength, mysterious beyond words, that guides you!*

*In this interview–review I aim to dialogue with you posing questions that I invite you to comment on, followed by further thoughts, questions, and reflections.*

*I start with a Klein-Pasculli parallel. Thirty-five, the age you were when you began your progress toward previously unheard-of technical goals, coincides with Antonino Pasculli's age when he withdrew from concert life after the doctor told him (more or less): "If you continue playing the oboe like this, you will go blind!"*

*Unfortunately, we do not have recordings of Pasculli, who from that point on, while continuing to play occasionally, mainly taught the oboe, and began working with a symphonic band and composing and arranging. Something in Pasculli as in you, having reached a life-climax, suddenly imposed a change.*

*Before I ask you questions about interpretation and arrangements, I would like to start from your introductory notes—your thoughts on your approach to the 32nd notes in the "Le Api" and how you reworked them, allowing you to reach supersonic speeds. I imagine Pasculli thought just like you, with the difference that he had a lighter and faster instrument in hand. Your approach resonates with me as a description of one of the essential aspects of improvisation: thinking in harmonies, colors, tones, rhythms, and filling the spaces with notes that make your listeners' mirror neurons dance. Thus, reading and syllabifying "before understanding the speech," giving the brain a task to execute fast 32nd notes, seems to be the opposite of a tone-based methodology of instrumental practice and teaching.*



### **Taming the Impossible** Track List

**Antonino Pasculli** – *Three Characteristic Studies*  
"Le Api," "Studio sullo Staccato," "Galopade"

**Niccolò Paganini** – *Moto Perpetuo; 12 Caprices*, arr. Klein

**Fritz Kreisler** – *Praeludium and Allegro*, arr. Klein

**François Schubert** – *L'Abeille*, arr. Klein

**Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov** – "Flight of the Bumble Bee"  
from *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*

**Grigoraș Dinicu** – *Hora Staccato*, arr. Klein

**Ernesto Nazareth** – *Tico-Tico no Fubá*  
(A Sparrow on the Conmeal) arr. Klein

*We now know from numerous historical sources that practically all of the musicians-instrumentalists of the past—including Pasculli who, incidentally, was also a remarkable pianist—began with improvisation, and only afterward notated what they had improvised in order to retain it. This means they set their brains at a different level to the music. This entirely calls into question the modern approach to instrumental study that creates orchestral musicians who are “buttons to press to produce notes without errors.”*

**Alex Klein (AK):** Thank you Omar for your detailed questions. I will attempt to explain certain principles that guide me through this repertory, and also through my working around focal dystonia.

I believe there are three main techniques. At first, we learn “Note Technique”: absorbing where fingers go, what the embouchure does, and getting through slow repertory. Note Technique is safe, predictable, and reliable, but it only takes us so far into the repertory. Since a wide swath of the orchestral repertory has slow passages for oboe, most orchestral oboists don’t fully engage in the other two techniques, or feel the need for them, save for rare occasions. This distancing also makes it difficult to fathom the benefits of other techniques, giving those of us who do it an aura of superiority, which is undeserved and impractical.

Before I go on with the other two techniques, I need to mention the “thought unit” and the strategy of working with the brain. One way of looking at it, even if a bit creative, is to consider that we may not be consciously playing the oboe. Our act of playing relies on far too many facets for all of them to be dealt with consciously. It’s not only the fingers, the precise position of the 40-or-so protagonist and antagonist muscles necessary to play a single note, but other areas, such as pitch, tone color, lip control, blowing, and support. There are just too many areas of concern to be dealt with in a conscious way. Thus, the sub-conscious (or some other better neurological description) coordinates the myriad details that need to be brought together in order to perform. Note technique is the closest approach we have to conscious playing, because the variables are significantly reduced. In Note Technique “one note = one thought unit,” and in that unit of thought contains all the neurological information required to play a single note.

As we advance in the repertory to the concertos by Strauss, Vaughan Williams, Mozart and Haydn, and the early 19th-century masterpieces by Vogt, Verroust, and others, we find ourselves unable to cope with the technical demands by thinking of every note. We then use “Group Technique” which allows us to play two to six notes (or so) as one thought unit. It is as if we still draw on the same information about the 40-or-so muscles used to play a single note, but then add just a few lines of code to permit us to stretch the thought so it includes nearby notes forming a recognizable pattern.

The third option is “Reflex Technique”: our ability to perform a large number of notes seemingly automatically, with little or no input from us. The most common example of Reflex Technique is the very end of the Saint-Saëns Sonata, where we need to play a D-major scale, two octaves, in a split second, giving us no time to understand it note-by-note, or to divide it into groups. When we use Reflex Technique we know the notes are there, we can hear them, but the act of playing them is automatic, seemingly out of our control. “Seemingly” because in fact we are in control—just not completely consciously so. My favorite example of reflex is when we accidentally touch a hot surface. Before we are even conscious of having touched something hot, our arm has somehow moved away at an incredible speed. Think

of it from the neurological point of view. Muscles don't move by themselves. There must be a command sent from the brain through nerves affecting tendons and muscles so that our arm will pull away from the hot surface. That reflex is an existing "program" in our brain, developed since the earliest stages of life. That existing set of instructions can—and needs to—be used on the oboe if we are to face the works by Pasculli and others requiring extreme speed. Just as it happens in the scale in Saint-Saëns, it also happens in "Le Api" with an E-minor arpeggio—and from there the idea develops further.

*Allr. Conservatorio di Musica di Palermo*

## LE API

Studio caratteristico

ANTONINO PASCULLI

OBOE

$\text{♩} = 126$   
**ALLEGRO VIVACISSIMO**

*ppp*  
*pianissimo simile al ronzio delle Api*

3 *ppp*

6 *ppp*

11 *ppp e senza mai rallentare*

14 *ppp*

17 *ppp*

20 *ppp*

23 *ppp*

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Also, regarding the brain, and the way our sub-conscious (by which I mean that part of our brain that organizes and deals with physical and mental issues out of our immediate, conscious control) contributes to our playing, particularly in extreme repertory, is the issue of “imagination.” This relates to what you were saying about improvisation. We “imagine” a piece of music, and then compose it. We “imagine” a beautiful phrase and then produce it. Imagination is imperative for the performance of top-level technical repertory. However, one must remember that it is not just fingers that need to be considered, but also how long they stay on the keys. This means the ever-important concept of slow practice needs to be understood in a different light.

I practiced “Le Api” for two years, doing common practice strategies, slow-to-fast, rhythm variants, pushing the metronome ever faster, and sometimes doing this for several hours a day. After two years, the fastest I could play was about quarter note = 96. However, Pasculli’s tempo is an insane 126! It seemed an impossible gap to cover. I then tried something different, toying with my brain. I stopped practicing it for two weeks, and instead only listened to a computer recording at 126 and 132. I listened to it 50 times a day. At the end of two weeks I returned to practicing, and within an hour certain passages (specifically the C-major part just prior to the recapitulation) reached the speed of 144. How was this possible?

Well, for two years I had instructed my brain as to what fingers needed to be used and in what order, but at no point did I establish how long each finger need to be at the key; that is, I didn’t practice the actual speed. Under these conditions, of course I would never play at 126. I was only able to cross the barrier to Pasculli’s tempo once it became clear what parameters needed to be established in my brain to make it viable. From then on, I never practiced below 110. I also divided the score into very small sections that could be played and cleaned up at very high speeds, in a unique practicing strategy that I have never used for anything else. This way, I could train my brain to understand the patterns used in the reflexes, and establish safe landmarks where I could consciously enter the process in order to keep myself in tempo and organized.

Going back to the idea of thought units, in Reflex Technique we don’t think about what our fingers are doing for a sequence of the 32nd notes. They become, in fact, a single thought unit, which includes “exceptions” to the pattern, such as the low B and the middle C (in case of the first two measures). When I think of “Le Api” in terms of thought units instead of notes, I am able to keep my mind at rest and contemplate the next landmark. This means my mind is no busier playing “Le Api” when playing a Mozart Concerto or a Brahms Symphony. I hope that makes sense.

**OZ:** *Your words resonate deeply with me, as I hope they do with anyone who engages with the mental processes connected to studying “extreme” pieces.*

*In my opinion, one of the general themes in Pasculli’s work is the execution of extreme dynamics—**ppp** to **fff**. During my years of study, I often asked Holliger about his approach to staccato and dynamics, referring also to Berio’s Sequenza VII, Castiglioni’s Aleph, Elliott Carter’s Concerto, Penderecki’s Capriccio, etc.—all pieces where the dynamic challenge is very significant.*

*Holliger explained that for each piece, you need to research the appropriate staccato, study the score in parallel to decide what kind of sound impact you want stylistically, and*

*adapt the reed accordingly. From there, you develop a special embouchure and air support—essentially, a technique tailored to each piece.*

*In your recordings of the other two Pasculli studies—“Galopade” and “Studio sullo staccato”— what fascinated me was the lightness and precision of your staccato which is never forced. What is your advice to young players who want to play Pasculli’s studies? How should they approach his etudes and transcription of the 15 Capricci after Rode?*



**AK:** I agree with you and Holliger about staccato, that every piece, particularly if extreme, requires a different approach to articulation that will permit easy and musical performance. My understanding is that Pasculli did not double tongue. I argue that if he did, he would have marked “Galopade,” “Studio dul staccato,” and several of the Rode *Capricci* at higher metronome markings. Also, he would have added staccato variations in his concertos. Surprisingly they are lacking. I also sense that Pasculli’s reeds were extremely soft, arguably bright-sounding, and incapable of playing high notes. The few times notes above D appear, they are reached by way of swift scales of the kind that today we can throw up to a high A, regardless of how that high A sounds! It is a gesture, not a melody. This seems typical of very soft reeds that require less air. This makes sense when we consider the extent of the *Three Characteristic Studies*—the 11 pages of “Le Api,” and the lack of breathing places in the “Galopade,” and “Studio sullo Staccato.” Thus, in order to perform these pieces, I use a very VERY soft reed, which must also be stable and slightly on the sharp side so as to minimize the work of my embouchure.

**OZ:** *Yet in his Rode Capricci 9 and 11, Pasculli felt the need to extend the range, using high A flat perhaps for the first time. But let me ask you about your strategies for extreme tempi.*

**AK:** I had to play at Pasculli’s speeds because that was what I recorded the orchestra at. I was due to record these pieces in 2001, but was beginning to feel the symptoms of focal dystonia, causing me to slow down the learning process. When the recording day arrived, the orchestra was there, but I was not yet able to play my part. We recorded the orchestra alone against a click-track and a computer playing cadenzas and other *ritardandos* so the musicians would know where to play, with the understanding that a few months later I would be able to play the pieces and record on top of the orchestra.

That was the plan, but in reality it took me many years to finally do it. I recorded “Le Api” five years later (2006) but was not completely happy with it. “Galopade” and “Studio” were recorded in 2018 or so, and I recorded “Le Api” a second time in 2020. It took me time to find the “key” to performing these pieces. In the case of “Le Api,” the solution, as I explained before, was to “imagine” the proper speed and thus make it possible to be played. It took me longer to learn “Galopade” and “Staccato.”





Figure 1. “Galopade,” ms 37–46, showing continuous pattern of articulation (Milan: Ricordi, 1917).

For “Galopade,” the “key” was to realize that we slow down when playing slurs. We are trained to blow through slurs, to phrase, to play legato, and to concentrate on slurs so as to avoid finger blurbs and noises. This takes enough time that it prevents us from going to extreme speeds with the articulation pattern given by Pasculli—two notes articulated followed by two slurred (fig. 1). Every time I would practice it “as written” I would fail to achieve the tempo of quarter note = 144, and the culprits were the two slurred notes. I needed to find a way to expedite the two slurred notes, and prevent my mind reverting to what I had learned about slurs. The key was to re-write the music, replacing the four notes per beat with three and adding a grace note to the third note—provided, of course, that the speed of that grace note be equal to the speed of a 16th note at 144 (fig. 2). As far as my brain was concerned, I needed to play only three notes per beat instead of four, reducing the effort by 25%. This immediately catapulted my playing to 144 and beyond. Playing three notes per beat at 144 is quite easy, with the added grace note pushing them closer together but also giving some micro-relief to the tongue. This approach makes it not only possible for us to play “Galopade” at 144 but also quite delightful to do it, just as “Le Api” is fun to play once you understand what Pasculli was trying to teach us. I argue that Pasculli’s strategy was similar and, like “Le Api,” the pedagogical part of these pieces is directed towards teaching how to play what is written by way of an imaginative set of solutions.

My solution for “Staccato” was similar. I also re-wrote the piece according to the way my brain was more easily able to produce it. Like Pasculli, I do not double-tongue. OK, I “know” how to, and in rare occasions I do double tongue, but I prefer not to. I did not use it in “Staccato,” “Galopade,” or any piece on this CD—not even on *Hora Staccato* which is probably the fastest articulation in the entire CD. It is all single-tongued. In “Staccato,” Pasculli wrote small slurs at somewhat regular intervals. For those of us who single tongue, these slurs are a god sent because they allow the tongue to rest a bit. This is the first strategy



Figure 2. Opening of “Galopade” in Pasculli’s original notation, and the triplet etude that allowed Alex to reach the printed speed of 144. It also exemplifies how we can take the liberty to rewrite music so that the eyes and brain can better grasp it.

in “Staccato”: to use the “ricochet-like” single staccato to rapidly articulate several notes until I got a little bit tired, and then count on the short slurs to rejuvenate my tongue. The same strategy can be used in orchestral excerpts like Rossini’s *La Scala di Seta*, and Mendelsohn’s Third Symphony.

Still, this solution is not sufficient for the entire “Staccato” piece (fig. 3a). The second theme which is in D major presents another problem. Here slurs are rare, and you have to jump between notes (fig. 3b). The tongue can puff a small amount of air as it recoils after playing. Let’s consider that as a “half” double-tonguing. Instead of TA-KA-TA-KA of double-tonguing I used something like Ta-t-Ta-t, with the second note being produced by the recoil. The result is a second note that is softer, tucked-in and—most importantly—musically viable, and available at higher speeds, because the nature of the phrase is such that permits, and even welcomes, that second note being softer and weaker.

With regard to Pasculli’s *15 Capricci* after Rode, the learning occurs not only with fingers and tongue, but by observing Pasculli’s instruction on how to get things done. You can never have speed without efficiency. If you are used to harsh staccatos, you will use a lot of movement from the tongue and exert too much effort. This is the opposite of what is needed for fast staccato. You can opt to double tongue, but in spite of rare occasions when people do it really well, double tonguing tends to be uneven, distracting and with questionable intonation owing to the difference in air pressure between the TA and KA notes. Again, I have heard a *few* oboists do it quite well, and as smooth as single tonguing, but they are rare and far between. In order to play with fast staccato, particularly using single tonguing, we need to work on efficiency: the easiest, cleanest, and most effortless way we can play the note. This means using reeds that permit strong vibration and reasonable projection with a minimum of air quantity and strength: “strength” being the “punch” that the little amount of air comes into the reed with. As a comparison, the air-effort I use for one page of “Staccato” is similar to what I use for one phrase of a Brahms symphony. We sometimes figuratively say that soft reeds are those we can play with our nose. In reality that isn’t so, but a reed’s softness, combined with its ability to produce a viable sound, is imperative for the efficiency I am referring to, and which makes the performance of a piece like “Studio sullo Staccato” possible at the composer’s prescribed tempo.

It is true that one needs to think outside the box if one wants to play music from outside the box. Regular techniques and approaches are often not sufficient to play works by Pasculli, Paganini, Kreisler and others. While I used some new approaches in several of these pieces, I felt that every piece needed a new way of thinking in order to make it playable.

Figure 3a



Figure 3b



Figure 3. Pasculli, "Studio sullo Staccato," (Milan: Lucca, c. 1875). a) First theme, showing mixture of staccato and slurred notes; b) Second theme in D major.

I often wondered what Pasculli meant with the *ppp* and *fff*. Did he really want these extreme dynamics? Or, was he pushing for a level of performance that was uncommon at the time? Perhaps oboists were not applying great dynamic differences in their playing, so Pasculli felt the need to exaggerate. I am a proponent of dynamic range, and love exploring what the oboe can do with them. Unfortunately, recordings are very limiting in this regard. Over the years I have been disappointed that my CDs fail to disclose the actual dynamic levels I produced in the recording sessions; *pp* sounds "flakey," and *ff* just bright. I decided to use different reeds for recordings, but at most this strategy affects sound quality, making it more pleasant and less harsh, but the dynamic level is still disappointing. "Le Api" is marked *ppp*, with some *fff* points. I swear to you I went for it, starting with a real *ppp*,



but all the microphones could give me is a lovely covered sound, seemingly at a *piano* to *mezzo piano* level. Oh well....

**OZ:** *Your arrangements of the Paganini Caprices are astounding, overwhelming, inspiring: I am deeply touched by the strength of the motivation that drove you to scale 8,000 new oboistic challenges, and the inspiration you give to everyone to extend the range of the instrument while maintaining the register of its beauty!*

*Listening to the CD, two questions come to mind: What kind of editing was necessary to achieve the level of perfection in your recording? and How much “truth” do you think there should be in a recording, compared to a concert?*

*Your approach to working in the recording studio in successive phases closely resembles Glenn Gould’s who also used the studio, not the concert hall, to express the full extent of his interpretive intent.*

**AK:** Glen Gould may also have had (undiagnosed) focal dystonia and neuro-divergence. I guess we both came to the conclusion that under the circumstances, the best way to convey our musical ideas was through recordings, rather than performances. Focal dystonia, therefore, has been a great incentive for me to look to recordings as one of the main venues for presenting my art, and as a result I have so far released over 30 CDs with solo and chamber music repertory.

As for how much “truth” there is in a recording, it is not a live performance. In a recording studio we usually play the work (complete or in pieces) several times. We commonly say that every five minutes of music needs about a half-hour of recording time, and that creates a problem for oboists. Our reeds change over that time; we become tired, and eventually do not make our breathing targets. It is inadvisable to play through an entire piece repeatedly, that will negatively affect the end product. A tired oboist may play sharper, the reed will close, low notes will not vibrate as much, and all of that can severely affect the quality of the recording. I usually play a piece once or twice through so the recording engineer will have an idea of how it flows, and be able to edit based on that flow. Beyond that, I record in sections lasting an average of 30–45 seconds.

Regarding the style of editing, I don’t recall anything out of the ordinary. I edited many of the pieces myself, sometimes over long airplane trips. A recording is a “document” like a book. We revise it, make edits, rethink, sometimes re-record (as I did with “Le Api”), and eventually use filters to provide a musical experience worthy of repeated listening. Live performance, on the other hand, is an “experience.” It is something that happens only once; all the emotion that can be captured by hearing a recording 20 times needs to be broadcast to the public on only one run.

Recordings that are taken from live experiences can also be good, but the sound is often degraded. There might be public coughing, loud page turns, and other unwelcome distractions. Live performances tend to be more expressive, have more “reality,” dynamics, human connection, and occasional inconsistencies. These inconsistencies can be annoying when you listen to a live recording several times, and always encounter the same issues at the same places. They create barriers to musical flow and deny a proper experience. For example, I recorded the Mozart Concerto live with the Chicago Symphony in 1998. It was done at an outdoor venue, and there are birds singing during the performance. While that

can be cute during a few hearings, it eventually becomes disruptive. You begin to predict when the bird will sing instead of focusing on the musical lines.

Therefore, I make a big difference between live performances and recordings. I play differently, I phrase differently, I use different reeds, and of course, go through a different preparation process. This also applies to the Paganini *Caprices* that I have both performed and recorded.

As for “truth” coming from the performer, inevitably we must know how to play what we record. We can’t edit note by note, and I draw the line at aids, such as pitch and speed adjustment. Music performance is what it is, and we must still perform for a microphone to reveal the full glory of the piece—it’s transitions, high notes, and technical demands—even if, for the sake of the recording process, we do it in sections.

**OZ:** *These pieces are extremely difficult. Have you performed them—partially or complete—in concert? How was it physically?*

**AK:** With proper preparation, all of these pieces are perfectly playable in public, as I have shown numerous times over the last 40 years, and continue to do so. Even back in school auditions I played Paganini *Caprices*, and the 2nd Caprice at the finals of the New York International Oboe Competition in 1986. I’ve played the Kreisler numerous times, also recently.

Regarding the physical experience, the *Caprices* are not too demanding. They are usually 3 or 4 minutes long and, with the proper reed, oboe, fingerings, and preparation, can easily be played in recitals, or as encores to concerto performances. As oboists we are fortunate in that we can create our own sound, range, and effort through changes in the reed. The reeds I use for Paganini *Caprices* cannot be used for “Le Api,” and “Le Api” reeds cannot be played in an orchestra. Reeds for “Le Api,” *Perpetual Motion*, the 6th and 12th *Caprices*, *L’Abeille* by François Schubert, and *Tico-Tico* by Ernesto Nazareth must be extremely soft, stable and slightly on the sharp side so as to limit how much work the embouchure has to do, as it can easily tire in these pieces.

Every *Caprice* has a different focus, just like Paganini envisioned them for the violin. The 1st Caprice is about arpeggios. The 2nd engages with the technique of opening and closing the throat to achieve precise register jumps. I usually perform the 3rd Caprice singing and playing but was unhappy with how the microphone picked it up, so I decided to go with voice only at the beginning and end. The 5th Caprice is often heard as a hideous “machine gun” on violin and other instruments. I preferred to bring to it an oboistic point of view, with phrasing, punctuation, and breathing. Caprice 6 is the “Le Api” of the *Caprices*, intended to be played continuously with only one opportunity to relieve lip tension (in *Moto Perpetuo* I added two)... and so on.

In pieces like *Caprices* 2, 18, and 23, where there are many high notes, you need a reed that will respond over an extreme range. This can render the reed unstable, and call for more embouchure assistance. Oboists have that flexibility and should take advantage of it.

Of course, we need an oboe that plays those high notes, and be familiar with reliable fingerings. As indicated in the CD information, I play Lorée oboes and for the extent of this project, I used three main instruments: an oboe with low-A, a model 125, and an “Étoile.”

**OZ:** *What do you want to convey to us beyond your prodigious technique? Is there anything else that you particularly want us to receive from your interpretation?*

**AK:** This CD is very personal for me, in the sense that it exposes my search for answers and solutions when my life fell apart. Instead of giving up the oboe, as many musicians with dystonia do, I decided to reinvent myself and reinvent the oboe, and move on.

What do I want others to receive from it? Firstly, that we need to think higher, forward, towards the future, and open new avenues of playing, instead of being dragged into the old, comfortable ways. I write this as a proponent of the North American style of oboe playing which is fast becoming a past-looking niche, much like the Viennese style. It has beauty, it has its value, and to perform within its specific geographical terrain, one must play in that style. However, we don't see the Viennese oboe represented in top international competitions, nor the North American style. I may have been the last major prize winner using a long-scraper reed, and that was in Geneva in 1988!

These oboe niches are good and acceptable where they exist, but they do not offer competitive solutions and innovation at a global level. Sadly, this is also reflected on the kind of new music being written for players in these niches which, like their players, tends to look back to the past for musical beauty, further detaching itself from innovation and daring to open the oboe to more advances. In my new concerto commissions—especially those from Marco Aurélio Yano, James Stephenson, David Stock and (soon) Stacy Garrop—I aimed at countering this trend by provoking change and advance for the oboe. More importantly, if I may be privileged to be heard in this fashion, my message is that, with a clean mind, imagination, creativity, and a fair amount of hard work, we can overcome barriers and create something different and special. *Taming the Impossible* is not only about my finding a way to corner focal dystonia, but an exercise in realizing new possibilities that can allow us to reimagine our humble instrument and grant it new powers—and I say this as a performer in the North American–long-scraper reed style.

**OZ:** *The fortunate thing today is that we have technical tools and information that make this sort of exploration easier. I like what you do because it's personal, it frees your energy, achieves systematic coherence, and can serve as a model. How successful a style can be, how it may emerge in a winning historical moment, depends on the context, who is listening, the fashion, who is judging, and who holds the power to decide who will win a competition. So, I believe that your composers will likely write something perfect for you, as Berio did for Holliger with Sequenza VII.*

*Alex, thank you for opening up your inner worlds to us! I am sending you, as a conclusion, my thoughts.*

*Reading about your experiences, I find myself retracing many themes that parallel my own journey with the oboe. From early on, like you, I have made distinctions in reed-making: I often used reeds with a long scraper, sometimes hybrid, for challenging pieces. While I have changed styles often, you have consistently and systematically held to the American reed style to explore various models for a diversity of uses.*

*You met Walter Bianchi. For me, by luck, during my studies, I came into contact with an American student, a Harold Gomberg pupil, who immediately fascinated me with his homogeneous and sweet sound. I also met a Dutch student who played effortlessly on wide reeds and short staples. Until then, I didn't know that such easy and naturally playable reeds existed. I started collecting information to copy them as a self-taught maker, because, apart from colleagues who were equally inexperienced, no one could help me. Then came the Baroque*

oboe, with the “American” sound of Bruce Haynes, which added variety to the world of new possibilities. I am convinced that a reed that requires too much embouchure generates a sound and an interpretation aesthetic that is necessarily forced, because the body has to strain. It also often generates teaching systems where effort is seen as “normal,” even for children.

Holding pressure when playing in an orchestra is not an insurmountable problem, but if you play that way as a soloist, and don’t know any other way, it’s easy to suffer a lot (and make your listeners suffer too!).

Tico-tico, L’Abeille, “Flight of the Bumble-Bee,” and Fritz Kreisler: in these pieces your deep, but happy light soul has freed itself from dark and looming thoughts, and transmits to us a music free from technical problems or superhuman challenges. To me, Tico-Tico seems is your signature; its lightness shows that you have reached catharsis, and Tamed the Impossible!

**AK:** Omar, thank you so much for allowing me to express myself freely. On many occasions I have encountered difficulties talking to oboists about these techniques because people may not feel the need to understand them as they are not every-day techniques for everyone. As you know, in North America there are many oboists who are interested primarily in orchestral playing. In this context the Mozart Quartet is about the fastest music we will ever play, and I have had no option but to keep these extended techniques to myself. Even my students find it difficult to understand why I embrace these extreme techniques, after all their objective is also to stay focused in orchestra auditions. With you, I feel I can write openly about all of these details, most of which you already know. For all of that, Grazie mille!



Omar Zoboli, born in Nonantola (Modena), studied with Sergio Possidoni, Heinz Holliger, and Paul Dombrecht; with decisive encounters with Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Frans Brüggen. As well as holding posts as first oboe with the RAI Orchestra of Naples, Radio Orchestra of the Svizzera Italiana, the St. Gallen Symphony Orchestra, and Basel Chamber Orchestra, he has performed as a soloist in prestigious festivals in Europe, America, Czech Republic, Portugal, China, and South America. From 1988 to 2019, he taught oboe and chamber music at

Musikhochschule, Basel; 2008-19 chamber music at the Geneva-Neuchâtel Conservatory; and since 2008 given seminars in chamber music methodology and practice at the Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano.