

An Interview with Bette Eilers: A Trumpet Pioneer

By Michael Goode

In June 2006, the 5th International Women's Brass Conference bestowed upon Bette Eilers its Pioneer Award in recognition of her groundbreaking career. She was one of a few professional women trumpeters in the United States at a time when the obstacles were many for any woman brass player wishing to have a professional career in music. We are fortunate today to have her with us for an interview for the International Women's Brass Conference Newsletter.

Michael: How did you start on the trumpet?

Bette: There was music all around me while growing up. My oldest brother Mike was already playing the trumpet until high school when he switched to baritone. A neighbor across the street was a band director. My other neighbor, Nancy Steiner, who later became my colleague, played violin in high school, then switched to viola. She has been a life-long musical influence.

When I went to orchestra in grade school, it was a woman director who asked me what instrument I had at home, not what I wanted to play. My older brother was like a parental figure to me; being younger, I followed him. He is the one who played trumpet and since that was the instrument in the house, I played that.

Michael: That's funny, because my brother started first on the trumpet, and I ended up playing it. But you ended up really liking it?

Bette: Yes. This reminds me of the story of Gareth, from King Arthur's roundtable, who thought you should "perform your dream." This is what gets you up in the morning. For me it was very healthy to play an instrument; it was very good self-discipline. I needed that since there was very little self-discipline in my family.

Michael: How old were you when you started playing?

Bette: I was about nine years old when I started playing the trumpet, and I was making beautiful sounds (at least to me!) as a kid. Since the family was used to [my middle brother] Jay's more subtle piano playing, they had a little trouble adjusting to the loudness of the trumpet when I played it.

Michael: What were your first school experiences with the trumpet like?

Bette: Mr. Burkhardt let me into the Irving School band in Berwyn when I was ten, but I was shocked when an older kid, Ronald Kloss, who was thirteen, was better than me. I thought I was doing pretty well. He ended up studying with Re-nold Schilke. Being next to Ronald in that band was great for me to get perspective and work harder. Later on, my next band director, Frank Boker, put me ahead of all the other boys!

Michael: That's great. You made those boys work harder! What were some of your teachers like growing up?



Bette Eilers

Bette: I had good teachers growing up. One was Robert Grube, a trumpet [player] who was in the Civic Orchestra of Chicago. Charlotte Erhardt, the orchestra director at Irving, gave me lessons. George Shula also taught me. He was my teacher at the Berwyn Conservatory after Charlotte left. Once Charlotte left there was no more orchestra, only band. She had been very supportive. George Shula was business partners with John Kossman, and they would switch off teaching me and work me through the St. Jacome and Arban methods and Amsden's duets. When Kossman died, that was a blow. Bob Grube then showed up and he was great; he gave me transposition exercises and orchestral excerpts when I was in eighth grade.

Michael: Wow, you were far along in eighth grade; what happened in high school?

Bette: I had a world-class band director, Louis Blaha, at Morton high school (now Morton East) in Cicero. At first I was not in the orchestra. My first assignment in lessons was Wagner excerpts, then Strauss tone poems, and all the excerpts from the Bertold orchestral excerpts, all while in high school. There is a lot of good in studying and playing excerpts; these teach you how to make real music, how to make art.

The Civic orchestra auditions came up

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when I was 17 and Sam Krauss, solo and section trumpet of the Philadelphia Orchestra at the time, told me to go see [Adolph “Bud”] Herseth in Chicago. I also saw Saul Caston (former principal trumpet of Philly) at that time. The only way to get to study with Bud was to be in the Civic, so I auditioned and won the principal position. I eventually got lessons from Herseth by the second year. Schilke got me to play bigger instead of with the more “circus sound” that I had at that time. I got to play with Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony as an extra in the offstage band on Verdi’s *Requiem*. Then, after that, I got to play on *Les Troyens* by Berlioz with a French conductor with the CSO, also at Ravinia. Then I got a lead part on Khachaturian’s *Third Symphony* (with fifteen trumpets) which we recorded with Stokowski and the CSO at Medinah temple. On the Mahler 6th Symphony, John Cvejanovich and I got to play with the CSO on that as well. I also worked with the Lyric Opera as extra trumpet.

I was hired to play third trumpet for the Lyric Opera as a permanent member, but Rodzinski, who came to the Lyric after being fired by the CSO, hated Helen Kotas, the principal horn. In a fit, Rodzinski fired Helen and all the woman brass players in the Lyric Opera, including me. Nobody liked him. Phyllis Bleck, another trumpeter, played one summer at Ravinia with me. She was also in Civic and a very strong player. She got a D.M. in music. I never had a music degree; only a B.A. from the University of Chicago in sociology. Phyllis was great competition for me. She was a great player, and had spent 10 years with Vince Cichowicz. She couldn’t get any work because of her [gender] when she got back from finishing her D.M. degree. Since she couldn’t get any work in music, she ended up getting an M.D. and became a thoracic surgeon. She also studied with Arnold Jacobs.

Michael: [Eventually] you married and had children, which is always a balancing act. What gigs did you have after you had children?

Bette: We lived in northwest Indiana. My husband [was] a physician. I was playing in the Gary Symphony which eventually became the Northwest Indiana Symphony. Joe Zawistowski, an Eastman grad, played principal trumpet and became a longtime colleague. I went through a divorce and came back to Oak Park with a new baby. The marriage didn’t work out, but I continued to be supported by my ex-husband, who eventually went off to Mexico. At this point, all my time was being spent with the baby; I got away from the horn for six months. This was 1964; post-Kennedy, early Vietnam War. Actually, my playing got better with the time off!

Michael: Who helped you out once you got back to playing again?

Bette: Bob Rushford, principal trumpet of the Lyric Opera, really helped me out. He set me up with great musical habits and got me work. His taste was exceptional in music. Rushford did a lot to help musicians. Bob impressed me tremendously as somebody who worked well with people. Another person, Hans Kelter, from high school, had helped me get my first connection to the jobbing world and got me started at the Lyric Opera.

Michael: Who did you play with of note?

Bette: Besides Herseth and Rushford in the summers, there were a lot of people from the Minneapolis Symphony (now the Minnesota Orchestra), that I played with on jobs like Dorothy Katz (first horn with the Indianapolis Symphony) and Ethel Merker (horn with the Chicago Symphony). These women were great role models. Ethel had to major in piano at Northwestern, because the horn teacher at the time wouldn’t teach her when she first got her music degree!

Michael: Bette, you’ve played a long time with some amazing players; I always think that you are just one of the most musical players around. Do you have any tips for younger players?

Bette: First of all, it takes a lot of discipline to play musically and you have to have good
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Bette (on the right) at Wrigley Stadium in Chicago helping to celebrate Ryne Sandberg's jersey retirement on August 28, 2005

Bette Eilers' Work

Bette Eilers has an in-depth list of experience and performances. We have opted to list the most notable of them.

ENSEMBLES

- Chicago Symphony, extra trumpet. Fritz Reiner, Leopold Stowkowski, Pierre Boulez, Antal Dorati, conductors (See recordings below)
- Lyric Opera of Chicago, third trumpet. Artur Rodzinski, conductor
- Lyric Opera of Chicago, extra trumpet
- Nutcracker Ballet Orchestra, Arie Crown Theatre, Chicago
- Civic Orchestra of Chicago, principal trumpet. Walter Hendel, conductor

DISCOGRAPHY

With the Chicago Symphony Orchestra:

- Hector Berlioz, *Les Troyens*, at Ravinia. James Levine, conductor
- Aram Khachaturian, *Third Symphony*, Leopold Stokowski, conductor
- Gustav Mahler *6th Symphony*, Antal Dorati, conductor
- Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird suite* (1919 version), Pierre Boulez, conductor
- Giuseppe Verdi, *Requiem*, James Levine, conductor, at Ravinia

Movie Soundtracks:

- *The Wedding*
- *Lucas*

Radio Broadcasts:

- Benjamin Britten, *The Dark Tower*, soloist, U.S. Premiere

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musical models. I was lucky to get to play with Herseth, Rushford, Arnold Jacobs, Will Scarlett, Helen Kotas, Gladys Elliot (Lyric oboist) and Emily Wolf (bass clarinetist in Lyric). One Russian guest conductor at Lyric said Emily was the "premiere bass clarinet in the world" at the time. So I was really fortunate to have those kinds of colleagues. Playing at that level with these kinds of players, regardless of instrument teaches you so much, things that you could never learn anywhere else but on the job. I fear today we are focusing too much on the technical side of things and not enough on the music-making and artistic side of things. I used to love to hear Arnold Jacobs play and was fortunate enough to take lessons with him.

Michael: How do you get the discipline necessary to play at a high level?

Bette: Playing excerpts always really helps. There are things that you will encounter in orchestral excerpts and literature that you won't find anywhere else. It takes good musical models and artistic sensitivity. You also need to be able to dis-

cipline yourself to know what the right artistic decision is depending on what the music is telling you to do. I know you could just play through the excerpts but that is not what I am talking about. It's about musical taste, which I was fortunate enough to learn from some amazing colleagues.

Michael: Are there any other models that you looked up to?

Bette: There was Lillian Poenisch, clarinetist in the Grant Park Symphony. She was a conductor of bands in Chicago as well. Also, there was Fanny Hassler, a conductor who was lucky enough to be able to do trust fund concerts for the union. Both these women worked strongly for women players and enabled women to play in their groups. And I can't forget about Marshelle Coffman, principal trumpet of the Stockholm Philharmonic, who I learned a lot from. She taught me a lot, even though we both had different styles. Hers was like her teacher, Louis Davidson, former principal trumpet of the Cleveland Orchestra for many years. She was a wonderful artist; it was a privilege to take lessons with her. She graduated from Indiana University and had studied with Dokshitzer at the Moscow [Conservatory], so I got some of that into my playing as well. Susan Slaughter, principal of the St. Louis Symphony, was another huge role model for me.

Michael: What was it like as a woman player to try to make it in those days?

Bette: A classic example of what it was like was when Marshelle (Coffman), who I just spoke about, came to the U.S. to play and raise a family. She was discouraged at every

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turn from playing in a major orchestra here although she had been a very fine and well-

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respected player in Europe. It was always a problem for women to get into major symphonies here (USA).

Michael: What other highlights have you had in your career?

Bette: Playing at 17 with Reiner and the CSO and at 16 with the Lyric.

Michael: What did you enjoy most of all?

Bette: Playing with all these great people, and Bob Rushford's example.

Michael: What about players' sounds in those days? A lot of those players, like Herseth and Rushford, had a very rich and beautiful sound. I can always hear Bud's sound playing the opening to Pictures at an Exhibition in my mind. What are your thoughts on this?

Bette: The technical aspect can be controlled better if you know how to manage your lip to get the most vibrant sound possible. The sound concept will make it work, it gives you a goal. It also helps to hear great people do it next to you. Encouragement from great players always helps to get a great sound. I remember one time I got some really good encouragement from Bud Herseth when I played some European-style legato tonguing for him for the first time. That meant a lot.

Michael: Did anybody else influence you?

Bette: Terry Schwartz at Wheaton (Illinois) helped me correct flaws in my playing. Eddie Carroll, who studied with Gerry Schwartz, former principal trumpet of the New York Philharmonic, also showed me a few things. You would think some of the subtleties would not matter, but their musical comments really opened me up, and kept me from getting "locked in," as Herseth would say. I also remember working on the Arutunian (Concerto) with Louis Davidson at Indiana. John Cvejanovich helped me with the social aspects of networking and getting along and how to be helpful on the job. He would say, "Out of twenty people, you would get the job because you know how to work with people."

Michael: Any final thoughts?

Bette: I have taught a lot of students over the years. I always tried to give them, just like the King Arthur story says, their last chance to have their dream on the trumpet or whatever their dream may be. I do want to tell you, Michael, that you really saved the day for me by having me in the Chicago Reading Orchestra, taking on a 60-ish trumpet player in your section! My health hadn't been so good, and you inspired me to get back to that artistic place with a great mindset. Thank you!

Michael: You are welcome. It was an honor to have you in the orchestra and an honor to do this interview. You've taught me a lot.

Michael Goode is a trumpeter, author, lecturer and stage-fright consultant, as well as a columnist for Overture, the American Federation of Musicians' Local 47 monthly newspaper in Los Angeles. He has authored a book published in September 2003, entitled Stage Fright and Music Performance and Its Relationship to the Unconscious, now in its second printing. The book is being used as a music school text nationwide and is based on his graduate research at the University of Chicago. An active performer, Michael has served as Principal Trumpet of the Bismarck/Mandan Symphony for three years, and as Assistant Principal and Section Trumpet of the Ravinia Festival Orchestra with members of the Chicago Symphony. He has played under Leonard Slatkin, Eric Kunzel, and David Alan Miller. He recently returned from Canada where he served as Artist Mentor for the National Academy Orchestra of Canada under Boris Brott. For more information about Mr. Goode and his book, or to request a workshop or a consultation, you may contact him via www.trumpetworkspress.com.

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