

Oboe Archive - Harold Gomberg (1916 -1985)

A tribute to a voice of unmistakable originality by Elaine Douvas

After 47 years as Principal Oboist of the Metropolitan Opera, Elaine Douvas is now a full-time teacher at The Juilliard School, the Mannes School of Music, and Bard College Conservatory, where she has trained many of the country's top oboists since 1982.

Although she never studied with Harold Gomberg, her primary teacher, John Mack, was a student of Gomberg at Juilliard prior to his studies at Curtis with Marcel Tabuteau, and Gomberg is thus her "grand-teacher."



These are the recordings I worshipped as a junior high student. In my small town, Port Huron, Michigan, it was hard to find classical music anywhere; I checked out LPs from the Public Library and struggled to tune into a Detroit radio station. By some miracle, there was another really serious classical oboist in Port Huron named James Arthur Gardner, then a college student, now a conductor and piano teacher in the San Francisco area, who was an important mentor of my precollege years. He introduced me to the "American" oboe tone, and I learned that "dark" was a desirable quality for oboists. He loaned me his Harold Gomberg recordings as the example to which I should aspire.

At first I was overawed by this new oboe sound, but in my student years I didn't know how to listen - if I heard one thing I didn't like, I was immune to all of the good things I should have tried to understand. I came to regard his tone as murky or downcast, lacking the qualities I associate with stable reeds. Rediscovering the beauty of Gomberg's playing as a mature oboist has been an ear-opening experience. I feel the whole journey that began with the wonder of his captivating sound, along with the pull of influences over the years, this way and that, trying to understand the wishes of conductors - often confusing and upsetting.

As an oboe teacher in 2025, I am struck by how little students know of the past. I am embarrassed to recall my own "arrogance of youth", the missed opportunities to interview and learn from older musicians who knew Poulenc, or who played under Stokowski. As a member of the Atlanta Symphony under Robert Shaw, I should have attended his chorus rehearsals to see how he worked his magic. Sometimes, I knew I was in midst of something epic (playing under Carlos Kleiber, Karl Bohm, or James Levine), but not always. I never heard Tabuteau, and I am told his recordings do not show his full glory. This article is my tribute to Harold Gomberg, whose recordings represent, for me, the original American oboe tone.

Harold Gomberg's playing is instantly recognizable to players of my generation for his tone, his huge range of colors, dynamics, and his vocal quality. I met him once at a dinner in New York, along with his Principal Oboe successor in the NY Philharmonic, Joseph Robinson. Gomberg wanted to peep and crow our reeds, which he pronounced "too tight" with their stable sounds at the pitch of "C". We were astonished by the pitch of "B flat" coming from his reeds. I expect this pitch was also the secret to his extreme color variety, soft texture, flexibility, and power.

There is much to learn in these recordings, not just respect for the past, although that may be a sentiment in short supply these days! I was surprised and inspired to find sincerity as a prominent musical quality in Gomberg's interpretations. I hope American oboists of the present and the future will investigate their roots and find, as I personally experienced, that this is gripping playing that makes you pull your car over to the shoulder, stop, and listen with undivided attention.

1 **Telemann Sonata in C minor (7:54)**
Affetuoso - Andante - Largo - Allegro - Grave - Allegro cantabile

The Telemann tracks were recorded in 1952 (when Gomberg was 36) with Jean Chiasson. He recorded them again in 1965 with Igor Kipnis, the album entitled "The Baroque Oboe".

The first striking thing is the honest simplicity of Gomberg's musicality. There are no ornaments, no adornments, just his vibrant, luminous, many-layered tone, shimmering with inner life. What is unique is the combination of depth, like peering down a mysterious well, and the tonal brilliance. The subtle shadings of mood and dynamic are elegant and forthright, going straight to the heart. His poetic, speech-like attacks and tapered phrase endings, spinning the tone to a single thread, are wondrous.

I don't know how I ever thought this tone sounded like a hard reed (maybe compared with the buzzy little store-bought reeds of junior high); it sounds so easily produced, spacious, rich, and ringing. I would not use the popular term "dark", because for many this term has come to mean something dull, covered, stiff, shrouded, evasive, or "denatured". Gomberg has so many different voices, so many different personalities, like a mezzo-soprano singer: sweet, flexible, soft-textured, suddenly ghosting a phrase, then firm, rhythmic, powerful, and insistent. Most of all, it sounds alive and comforting, both in its sweetness and its reassuring confidence.

2 **Telemann Partita No. 5 in E minor (7:29)**
*Andante - Aria I, Vivace - Aria II, Presto - Aria III, Vivace -
Aria IV, Siciliana - Aria V, Vivace - Aria VI, Presto*

In this Partita each note hits the bull's-eye of excellent pitch and center - nothing ambiguous. The *Andante* is vocal, with its word-like repeated pitches and varied-consonant attacks. I can't say enough about the speech-like detail Gomberg employs; I feel I am hearing a human voice. The *Aria I* is acrobatic and bursting with energy. In the *Aria III*, the fast, short tonguing sounds too pressured, as my ears have been trained to reject anything that is not "vocal". The *Siciliana* is charming and stays magically off the ground: buoyant and flowing. The abundant dance quality and strength of purpose is most satisfying.

Mozart Oboe Quartet in F, K370 (recorded 1952)

- 3 I: *Allegro* (6:41)
- 4 II: *Adagio* (3:50)
- 5 III: *Rondeau: Allegro* (4:34)

The rhythmic style, the sturdy pulse, and the overall vitality show that one doesn't have to play everything fast or everything long. The shades of meaning, drama, and dynamics are intriguing throughout. The spirit, the honesty, and the variety are refreshing - this is not a show-off interpretation. The articulated passages sometimes are too percussive, in my opinion, but I admire that there are notes of every length, not all the same. The slow movement is extremely slow, but instead of dismissing this, as I would have in the old days - "not my taste" - I decided to enter his world and embrace the tragedy he portrays. It has been said that everything Mozart wrote is a little opera. The ebullient, yet poised first movement, the deeply moving second movement, and the witty, good-humored third movement combine to make the familiar Mozart Quartet sound almost Shakespearean in its panorama of life.

6 **Britten Fantasy for oboe & strings, Op. 2** (recorded 1951; 13:34)

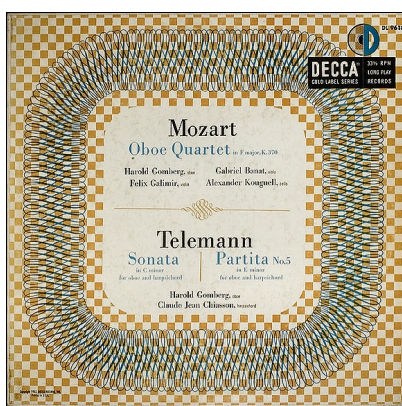
Andante alla marcia - Allegro giusto - Andante -

Animato - Molto più lento - Più agitato - Tempo primo

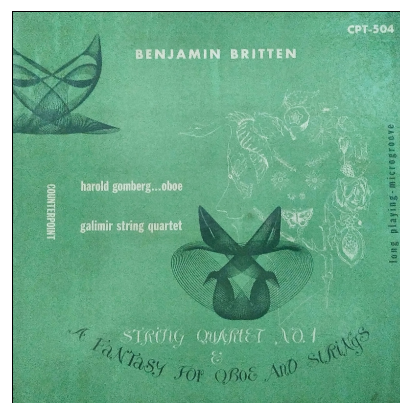
Gomberg and the excellent string players bring stately dignity and elevation to the first page - very British. His low register at 2:50 is powerful, yet soft-textured, and the upward scales at 3:25 are joyous and optimistic. The dreamy high note passages (from 5:32) are very alluring. The string interlude is very well paced and dramatic, songful and probing, building steadily to a violent climax. The oboe fantasy from 8:30 is full of mystery, and ends in a whirlwind of virtuosity. The march is full-out victorious on the last page, the string pizzicato is a perfect contrast to the singing oboe line. The work is so satisfying in its symmetry, and Gomberg shows the full range of the 18-year-old Britten's ingenious writing for the oboe.

Total time 44:02

Online, 'Gomberg 1916' will bring up these tracks.



Cleaned and enhanced from LPs
by Malcolm McMillan
(mcsworks37@googlemail.com):
Telemann and Mozart
from Decca DL9618 (1952),
Britten from
Esoteric Records CPT-504 (1951).



The mono recordings have had the sound stage widened for improved listening, especially on headphones.

