

Pioneer American Oboe Soloist Humbert Lucarelli: An Interview by Nora Post

New York University Double Reed Day
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Photo by Ken Cro-Ken

Matt Sullivan awards Humbert Lucarelli *The Steinhardt Award For A Lifetime Dedicated To Excellence In Music*. Sonia Muniz de Carvalho, director of *Il Festival Eleazar de Carvalho* in Fortaleza, Brazil, presents Lucarelli with an award in recognition of his contributions on behalf of Brazilian musicians and oboists in particular.

Humbert Lucarelli, cited by *The New York Times* as “America’s leading oboe recitalist,” has appeared extensively as soloist with internationally known orchestras and chamber music groups throughout the United States, South America, Europe, Australia and Asia. In 2002, Mr. Lucarelli was the first American oboist to be invited to perform and teach at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China. He also has performed and recorded with some of the world’s leading conductors, including Leonard Bernstein, Kiril Kondrashin, Josef Krips, James Levine, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Artur Rodzinsky, Sir Georg Solti, Leopold Stokowski and Igor Stravinsky. He has recorded for Koch International, Vox, BMG Classics, Lyrichord Discs, MCA Classics, Well-Tempered, Stradivari and Special Music. Among the many recordings to his credit is the *Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra* written for him by John Corigliano. Mr. Lucarelli is the recipient of a Solo Recitalist Fellowship, Consortium Commissioning and Music Recording Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition, he is Professor of Oboe at The Hartt School in West Hartford, Connecticut, The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University, and a faculty member of the Yale School of Music Chamber Music Festival in Norfolk, Connecticut. Mr. Lucarelli is an Honorary Member of the International Double Reed Society.

Introduction by Matt Sullivan Director of Double Reed Studies, New York University

Matt Sullivan (MS): *Welcome, everyone! It’s become a tradition over the years that Nora has interviewed our guests at the New York University Double Reed Day. We have had some*

Humbert Lucarelli at the Parthenon



major All-Stars, including **Ray Still**, **Loren Glickman**, and the late **Bernard Garfield**. Today we are honoring **Humbert Lucarelli**. I have an amazing three-page biography of Mr. Lucarelli in my hand, but I think most of you already know so much about this wonderful man who has extended his warmth and talent all over the world. So, I am going to turn the program over to my dear friend and long-time associate—a force in her own right in the oboe world—**Nora Post**.

Nora Post (NP): *Thank you so much, Matt. It's a privilege to be here with all of you tonight, and such a special honor to be asked to interview Bert Lucarelli, whose oboe playing I have known since I was about ten years old.*

MS: *Me, too!*

NP: *But before we get started, I wanted to thank Dan Stolper, the oboe editor of the International Double Reed Society. Dan could not be with us today, but was so very positive about having this interview of his dear friend Bert Lucarelli published by the International Double Reed Society. This is the third of the interviews at New York University that have been published by the International Double Reed Society, and I am so grateful for their support and encouragement. Thank you!*

Bert, I wanted to start out with your early years. At the age of nineteen you were already freelancing with the Chicago Symphony and the Chicago Lyric Opera. I wanted to ask you a bit about how all this happened. I know you studied with Robert Mayer, the English horn player in the Chicago Symphony during high school. Ray Still joined the orchestra in 1953, and you started studying with him a year later at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Can you tell me about how all of that happened?

Humbert Lucarelli (HL): I went from high school in Chicago to the University of Illinois, and stayed for one year. I came from a very small, tight knit immigrant family, and to go to a big state university was completely disorienting for me. It was one of the worst years of my life. It got so bad that I couldn't play at all. I first started playing the oboe at fourteen, and was a natural. I started out as a baseball pitcher; I had a very good record in the state of Illinois. But then I was in a car accident, and couldn't walk for a year and a half. My father said that since I was not going to be able to pitch, I was going to have to find something else to do. He said: "Why don't you learn to play the *oboe*?" I asked him what an oboe was, and he told me I was a smart punk, and I could go find out. So I went to ask our band director. He showed me a mildewy, rancid old oboe, but I knew at that moment that my life had changed. I had a natural talent, a natural sound, but had to develop facility, so I worked very hard. When I got to the University of Illinois, I was so scared that every time I picked up the oboe I had a temperature of 104. I went to see a therapist about it, and he said it was really simple. I should stop playing the oboe. But I couldn't do *that!* The oboe was my real link to *something*. So he said OK, if you aren't going to stop playing the oboe, just *stop* what you are doing! That was it, and it all stopped. So brilliant of him—so much better than analyzing what was wrong with my father, my mother, the neighbors—forget about it. So I left the University of Illinois, went back to Chicago and auditioned for Roosevelt University and Northwestern. I was admitted to both, but Northwestern would not give me any scholarship money, and Roosevelt offered me a full scholarship, which was great. Of course I wanted to go to Northwestern, but my father, being the wise man that he was, said: "Look, I can't print it. So you'll have to go to Roosevelt." So I went to Roosevelt, but I told them I needed to study with Ray Still. So they hired him to teach me, which was amazing. I studied with him and he got me into the Chicago Civic Orchestra, which was the training orchestra for the Chicago Symphony. There was a three-hour sectional rehearsal each week with Still,

and I was the only oboe player. Between that and my lessons, I spent five hours a week with him. So he suggested that instead of a three-hour rehearsal, why not spend one hour a day together five days a week? I would have to have been made of stone not to learn how to play with that kind of direction. Still loved to analyze things, to take them apart, look at the problems, fix them and then put it all back together and make it work. I have been sending some of my students to him—he's ninety-three now. He mentioned to one of them that he studied engineering before he became a professional oboe player. Suddenly I understood why he was so analytical. So, as I have jokingly said, he put Humpty Dumpty back together again. I could play again. So, by the time I was nineteen, I was subbing in Chicago Lyric Opera and the Chicago Symphony.

NP: *It must have been quite an experience! What was it like subbing in those two groups at the age of nineteen?*

HL: My very first orchestral experience was with Fritz Reiner! He was very severe, and he knew that I had never played in a professional orchestra before. He was incredible to work with, though.

NP: *Yes, you have played for so many great conductors. Some of them include Bernstein, Mitropoulos, Reiner of course, Solti and Stravinsky. This is quite a list. Can you tell me if any of them jump out at you as particularly inspiring, or particularly negative? I was thinking of your experience with Stokowski here.*

HL: Well, I think everyone was so different. I call art the celebration of the individual. Each one of these men did what they did better than anybody else. I think that's a big part of success. You have to find yourself, you have to be really strong; people will understand and they will come to you. Reiner was very severe, but he was also very kind at the same time. He could be so mean. One man left a Reiner rehearsal and committed suicide. But the only reason Reiner was ever really mean was when he felt someone didn't care about what they were doing. Then he would come after you with an ax, and I saw it happen a couple times. You could make mistakes, and he could even make fun of you, but if he felt you didn't really care, then he was incredibly upset.

Solti was so dramatic all the time. Every little oboe solo had to be like a concerto! Then there was Mitropoulos and his unbelievable memory. He was the first conductor I worked with at Lyric Opera. He could say "Fourth horn, it's a D sharp," and it was all from memory. He was very warm. Bernstein was so nice. I remember once I played for him and the rehearsal went just fine. Then I got water in a tone hole during the concert and it was just one big gurgle. He started laughing! He didn't get angry or anything. Afterward I went up to him and apologized. He asked me why did these things always happen in the concerts and never in the rehearsals!

I played English horn for three years for Stokowski. I was so grateful to get the job. Oh, I have to tell you about the audition! It was my first big audition in New York, it was on Fifth Avenue, I got there, and suddenly I realized that I had forgotten to bring my reeds. Stokowski walked out of the room he was in and told me that I was next. I told him I had done something terribly stupid, and had left my reeds at home. "Well," he said, "Have you thought about going to get them?"

I ran home, came back, but was so exhausted, scared and frazzled that I did not play well. Then about a week later a friend in the orchestra suggested I schedule another audition with him. "What do you mean?" I asked. I had just played for him! But my friend said that Stokowski would not even remember me. So, I went for a second audition. I was relaxed, I think I played well, and the next day he hired me. During those three years, he kept asking me to play louder and louder and louder. I couldn't stand it. I had gotten a lot



Photo by Ken Cro-Ken

Humbert Lucarelli and NYU oboist Carolyn Johnston

of other work by that time, and I really didn't need that job. I was just honking, and finally I told **Robert Bloom** about it. He had also played English horn for Stokowski in Philadelphia where he had had the same problem, and he told me not to worry about it, to just play the way I normally played. Then one Sunday afternoon I had a big solo. I played it so pretty, so sweet. But Stokowski was like "More, more, more!" I just kept playing normally, but I felt bad about it, and went to see him after the concert. I told him that I wasn't comfortable playing the way he wanted me to play, and despite my enormous respect for him, I thought it would be best for me to leave the orchestra. But Stokowski said he could teach me what he wanted. I replied that if the composer really wanted the English horn part that loud, it would have been written for a trombone! That did it, and then he said, "Yes, young man, I think we should part ways."

The coda to this story is that a year later I got a call from **Loren Glickman**—who was interviewed here at New York University exactly one year ago. Loren was the most important contractor in the city. He put together *all* the important orchestras in the city. He told me he had a record date for me with Columbia Records, and that I would be able to sight read it fine. It was just Bach—some transcriptions of organ pieces. Well, Stokowski was famous for doing this, so I asked if it was with Stokowski. "Yes, yes," he said: "How did you guess?" Well, I told him the whole story, telling him I couldn't do the job because Stokowski would throw me out. Loren told me not to worry about it, telling me that Stokowski wouldn't even remember me. I was incredulous. I asked Loren what he meant, since I had played for Stokowski for three *years*. He told me not to worry, because if you weren't important, Stokowski never remembered you. I went to Columbia Studios, and Stokowski looked at me like he was

looking through a piece of glass. He was actually very nice, and it went well. Years later I saw a copy of that recording autographed for me by Stokowski for ten cents at the Salvation Army. Wow, so I was already a “has been”!

NP: *Since your two major teachers were Ray Still and Robert Bloom, I wanted to touch on your years with Bloom. You studied with Bloom for six years, starting when you first arrived in New York in 1961. You said that he was your mentor, philosopher and father all rolled into one. What was it like playing second oboe to Bob Bloom in the Bach Aria Group for ten years?*

Along those lines, I have to interject that you once told the wonderful story of a New York music critic who put you down by writing that your playing was somewhere between Robert Bloom and Ray Still. I would have thought I had died and gone to heaven if someone ever said that about me! Instead of criticism, what a fabulous review! But anyway, can you tell me about having Bloom as a teacher and a colleague?

HL: You know, so often with the teacher and student relationship, it never changes. The student is the student and they never become a colleague or a friend. You never become colleagues. But Bloom was the opposite of that. After I had studied with him for about six years, one day he told me that it was enough of Mr. Bloom, and how it was going to be Bob. I couldn't believe it. It was very difficult for me to take that in after all those years. He replied that he didn't want me calling him Mr. Bloom the way everyone called Ray Still *Mister Still*. “That scares me!” Bloom said. He really became a second father to me. He taught me for all those years and never took any money because I didn't have any. I paid him \$10 for the first lesson, but he realized I could not afford it, so everything was free after that. I try to do that myself when I can—it's my way of paying him back. The lessons were so profound—so much more than just about music. One of my favorites was one time he kept telling me that my playing of something was too convoluted, too complex, that I was making things much too difficult. He said it was not so complicated; it was just very, very difficult. “Like life?” I asked.

NP: *I'd like to change the subject completely and ask you about all the pieces you have commissioned and premiered in your career. It's no secret that players are remembered by the works they commissioned and premiered, not usually by their playing. Long after a particular style of playing has gone out of favor, the pieces that a person commissioned or premiered are often what he or she is remembered by. Louis Krasner went down in history because he had the brains and the insight to commission the Berg Violin Concerto. That put him on the map. Goossens was certainly the rock star of mid-20th century oboe playing, but if we hear his recordings now, our reaction is something along the lines of “Oh, how quaint.” At this point in time, he is known because of all the pieces he commissioned. Pierlot was the top dog of the French oboe players, but if you turn that stuff on now, you probably will want to turn it off! Heinz Holliger used to tell me that one of his biggest regrets was that while so many great composers who fled the Nazis before and during World War II ended up in the United States, no one here had the vision to commission any of them for oboe pieces. Three perfect examples are Arnold Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek and Edgard Varese. Imagine if someone had asked Schoenberg for an oboe concerto! God, what a loss, and Varese was living right here in New York! Schoenberg was completely broke, teaching part-time at the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Southern California. It was Holliger who commissioned the Elliott Carter Oboe Concerto. Why didn't an American do that?*

But I wanted to ask which of the pieces you have commissioned you believe have the best chance of enduring. One of your most important contributions to the oboe world has certainly been commissioning the Corigliano Concerto for Oboe and Orches-

Humbert Lucarelli



Photo by Michael Fiedler

tra. *Can you tell me a bit about how all of this came about? This was 1974, when you received a commissioning grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. The premiere was in 1975 with the American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. Do you consider this your most important commission?*

HL: Yes, I do think the Corigliano concerto is the most famous work I commissioned. I can tell you how that came about. I was playing in a wind quintet, and the clarinet player, Art Bloom, worked for the New York State Council on the Arts. He called me one day and told me the New York State Council had some money for individual players to commission pieces. Was I interested? Well, of course. They gave me \$10,000 to commission a composer. John Corigliano was not well known at the time, but he was a good friend and I had gotten him an apartment in my building. He agreed to write a piece and actually studied oboe with me for six months. He took it very seriously. The premiere was at Carnegie Hall with the American Symphony Orchestra. I needed a dark suit for the premiere, and didn't have one. I also couldn't afford one at the time. I asked John if he would give me \$100 out of his commission fee to buy a suit for the premiere.

NP: *I take it he gave you the hundred?*

HL: Yes, he did. We got a standing ovation at the first performance. The head of RCA Records was in the audience, and he asked if we could record the piece. He told us that he didn't have enough money to pay the orchestra, so we would have to raise the money. He thought we would need about \$20,000. I talked to John Corigliano, and it turned out that Alice Tully was a good friend of his. But he was embarrassed to ask her for the money. At some point, though, he told her the whole story without asking her for the money. She said she would like to give a party, I would play at the party, and each of her friends could give \$1,000 each. So she gave the party. Everyone gave between \$500 and \$1,000, but we only raised \$10,000. So I went back to the New York State Council on the Arts. I talked to Leonard Altman (who was one of the people who saved Carnegie Hall, along with Jackie Kennedy and Isaac Stern). I explained to him that the Arts Council had already put \$10,000 into the piece, we had raised \$10,000 more, but we needed another \$10,000. Could he help? He was sitting at his desk, mumbling into the phone. Then he wrote something on a piece of paper, and told me to go to that address to pick up a check for \$10,000. I would love to know more people like that! There are people like that, and we certainly need a lot more of them in the world of the arts.

So, we recorded the piece, and it won an award as one of the twenty-five most important recordings of contemporary music since World War II. I was stunned. It's amazing how things can happen if you stay engaged and keep fighting for what is important to you.

NP: *You once said that concerned parents often ask you if their child will be able to make a living in music. How would you respond to this question today, with so many young musicians and their parents in our audience? In what ways (if any) has your response changed over the years? When Loren Glickman was here last year, he said the freelance world he lived in is just gone. And that's how you made your living.*

HL: Well, I earned a total of \$300 the first year I was in New York.

NP: *Yes, but you aren't telling us that you made \$40,000 in Chicago the year before!*

HL: True. The only way I could feed myself in New York was Kraft Macaroni and Cheese for ten cents a box. But I stuck it out and after a while things turned around. Freelance work did exist then. I was playing as many as three or four concerts a week, doing record dates, I had my quintet, we were doing Young Audiences, plus the Bach Aria Group. OK, so what do we do now? It's a very different world. The change is very interesting. The pace

of change is scaring everyone. Some of my individual recordings, for example, have come out in five different formats in forty years—cassettes, 8-track, CDs, and everything else including iTunes.¹ That amount of change in the industry is actually quite frightening. I don't mean to sound lofty, but I think you have to believe in the quality of your work and hope that people will recognize it.

NP: *If you had to do it all over again, what changes would you make, since this market for the arts is so completely different from what it was when you got established in your career?*

HL: Well, I think I probably would have done most things the same. "Making it" is a mindset, and it means you just aren't going to give up. You have to be stubborn, and you have to find ways to make it happen. For example, we never had iTunes or YouTube. Someone can take advantage of all of this, and can put absolutely everything out there on YouTube. And some people are going to say yes to you. I thank God for all the people who said yes to me.

NP: *In finishing up, I wanted to ask you something about your chamber music activities, since that has been the bulk of your activity. Most people can only dream of the chamber music career you had. How did you do it?*

HL: I think that in order to be successful in chamber music, you have to be entrepreneurial. But in our profession that is sometimes looked down upon. People assume that if *you* have to go out there and make things happen, you can't be that talented. People should simply be asking you to play. But that's not realistic. I often laugh that Barbra Streisand only appears in movies that she produces. She would never work for anyone else. She has absolute control over everything from the script to the cameraman, but if a musician does that, they think he or she is not talented. Isn't that silly? It's such a pity in a way. But I was unfazed by all of that. No one ever asked me to play the Mozart *Oboe Quartet*. I had to make that happen. I'm embarrassed by that now, and in those days you hid behind the skirts of your manager, but the truth is *you* have to make it happen. I got a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to do a recording for oboe and string orchestra. Knowing what they were looking for—they were looking to back American composers—I found American pieces I wanted to record, and got the grant in a second. You have to know what is going on, use your brain and be creative. It was no different for Holliger. He made all that happen. Think of Leonard Bernstein, that great iconic figure. Well, he had an office staff of twenty-eight people running his career. We see these people performing, but we don't realize there is a production company behind every one of them.

NP: *I think what you are saying is that in your case, there was a real challenge in marrying the artistic and the entrepreneurial, since it would not have happened any other way. And what I am hearing is that you enjoyed both parts of it very much.*

HL: Yes, you are right. When I was young, most solo oboe recordings were being made by Europeans—Leon Goossens, Pierre Pierlot, Lothar Koch, Andre Lardot and others. So I thought to myself, "Well, maybe *I'll* do it!"

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¹ As a case in point, Lyricord Discs has just remastered and reissued the first three long-playing records Lucarelli made with that label over thirty years ago, and will be issuing a 3-cd box set soon as well. These albums include the oboe sonatas of Poulenc, Hindemith, and Saint-Saens, the Britten *Oboe Phantasy Quartet* and *Six Metamorphoses*, Nielsen's *Wind Quintet* and other works (please see Lyricord.com for further details).