



CODETTA: **TUNING TO THE OBOE**

And the oboe it is clearly understood
Is an ill wind that no one blows good.

– *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1947)

Countless concertgoers have heard it, just there, just before the performance, the oboe's clear and penetrating tuning note, an A, 440 hertz, or 440 cycles of a sound wave per second. To ask the reasonable question – why does the oboe tune the modern orchestra – is to wade headlong into one of the most hotly debated topics among orchestra's esoterics. Several arguments supposedly validate the instrument's authoritative A. Most popular among them: the challenge of tuning an oboe in the first place. While every wind instrumentalist tweaks tone via the embouchure (the lips and facial muscles), most players can also yank on a tuning slide or adjustable mouthpiece for an equal and long-lasting fix. Only double-reeds lack a shortcut, and so the orchestra tunes to the highest instrument least capable of changing on the spot.

This reason, though logically sound, seems archaic in an age in which computers can tune any instrument to a specific hertz with surgical precision. The Symphony's own giver of the A, principal oboe Melanie Wilsden, offers up the next best option: "I'm sure that this is tradition." The oboe's predecessors entered the orchestra in the mid-17th century. The earliest reference to the instrument tuning a large ensemble is an obscure and dubious citation in a book by oboist Geoffrey Burgess: the 1802 letter of a Paris Opera oboist huffy at this new assignment. Hector Berlioz referenced the practice in print sixty years later, though he sought to make it obsolete with an A-note organ pipe installed in every concert hall. As ever, tradition barely outpaces controversy.

Wilsden, for one, benefited from Berlioz's failure. "I actually like having this responsibility," she says. "I also joke that if I had gotten a dollar for every A I have given all my life that I would be a very wealthy woman."

– *Arthur Ryel-Lindsey*