To read Cleveland Orchestra solo English horn player Robert Walter’s resume, one could easily assume that he has not had a lot of time for anything other than music. Prior to joining the Orchestra in 2004, he served as solo English horn and oboe player with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Prior to those positions, Mr. Walters performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Orchestra of St. Luke’s, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the American Symphony Orchestra, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. He also was a frequent performer with James Levine and the MET Chamber Ensemble at Carnegie Hall. As a soloist, Mr. Walters has appeared with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Bejing Radio Symphony, the New York Chamber Soloists, and the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia.

The passing down of musical traditions to young players is something that brings him great joy. He is a faculty member at the Aspen Music Festival as well as professor of oboe and English horn at the Oberlin Conservatory. But when we telephoned Mr. Walters last week to talk about his upcoming performance of Latvian composer Peteris Vasks’ English horn concerto with The Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Andrey Boreyko, we discovered that his artistic interests and talents extend far beyond the concert stage.

Mike Telin (MT): How did you discover the Vasks concerto?
Robert Walters (RW): Actually it was through Andrey Boreyko, who is conducting the concert. I was playing in Aspen a few summers ago where he was conducting. He asked me if I knew this concerto, at which point I didn’t. I heard some of it on the radio once, and I remember thinking that it was intriguing, so with his prompting, I did some research, and discovered that it has been recorded twice—which is interesting for an English horn concerto—but even more interesting is that it was recorded by the same person. It is extremely well written for the instrument, and by that I mean that the musical task is what English horns do best in my mind, which is expressing very poignant melodies. The melodies are very long, and they sort of float, suspend, turn and direct in a way that I think is exactly what the English horn does best. Most of the big orchestral solos the instrument gets have that character. So he uses that very well, but he is Latvian, and he has used a lot of folk music elements. You can hear the Baltic region in its tonalities and rhythms. I think it is a very intriguing piece of music. The cadenzas are very interesting, somewhat modal, and there is some aleatoric writing at the end where the orchestra is repeating patterns at random, and the English horn sort of floats off into this lyrical ether and just sort of dissolves, and the piece goes into nothing. It is very moving, and I think the audience will like it very much.

MT: It sounds interesting, and I must confess that I don’t know Vasks’ music at all.
RW: You know the first recording I got was on the RCA label, and it is all his music. It’s called “Message”, and it’s just gorgeous, it really is. It’s emotionally direct, and it’s a language that is familiar but also inventive. And as a listener I think you can immediately relate to it, and are haunted by it in ways that I think a lot of contemporary music doesn’t stay in the ear or the soul of the listener upon first hearing.

MT: What is the orchestration?
RW: It’s for full orchestra. There are winds, brass, and percussion — there’s a lot of inventive stuff for the percussion — and it’s beautifully orchestrated. He creates a lot of moods and misty soundscapes. The orchestral passages are very dramatic and it feels like a big symphonic work.
MT: *It sounds like it should pair very nicely with the Prokofiev Fifth Symphony, and Stravinsky’s Divertimento from The Fairy Kiss.*

RW: It will, it’s a great program.

MT: *I understand that this is the third concerto you have played with the orchestra?*

RW: Actually it’s my third scheduled. The first time I was not able to play due to an injury. So this actually the second time.

MT: *And do you enjoy playing concertos?*

RW: I absolutely love it. What drew me to the English horn, and what draws most people to the solo instruments in the orchestra, is that you are expressing melody and musical statements, and the listeners ears go to you while you are playing. So there is something compelling about playing the solo voice of any of the instruments in the orchestra. I think the English horn has a very distinctive quality, and people recognize it. And it has a peculiar name, English horn. They think brass horns, but of course it is a bigger and deeper sounding oboe. I like playing concertos, because it makes me a better soloist within the orchestra to stand in front of one occasionally. To prepare, I have been giving a lot of solo recitals, and playing chamber music, so I think the more you keep yourself fit outside of the orchestra the better equipped you are to bring a certain level of distinction to what you are doing within the orchestra.

MT: *While reading about you, I discovered that you also have a Master of Fine Arts in poetry from the writing division of Columbia University.*

RW: Yes I do.

MT: *So a couple of questions about that. First, how have your writing studies influenced your musical ideas?*

RW: You know, profoundly I would say. Most specifically, there was a teacher at Columbia named J.D. McClatchy. He now teaches at Yale and he has written a lot of opera librettos with some very famous composers, and he taught a class called “Versification”, which is essentially the verbal equivalent to musical theory. In studying that and realizing that sound in language and meter, time is organized and it moves in pattern like it does in music. I remember the first thing he had us do in class was to take the last page of the Great Gatsby, and translate it into iambic pentameter.

MT: *Wow.*

RW: I’ll tell you that it had never occurred to me that you could do something like that, and by doing it, it sort of instilled the pulse of the language, and it felt like rhythm. I would go to hear poets read, and you would catch them tapping time on their leg. And
the sound and texture, and also just modulations of volume, people raising their voice or dropping it to express certain things in the poetry. I do think that poetry is first and foremost an acoustical art. It is meant to be listened to.

MT: Secondly, I did a little more searching around and I discovered a poem you wrote called “Sibelius Dreams” for Louis Rosenblatt that was posted on the International Double Reed Society website. It’s very beautiful and I assume that the title is in reference to The Swan of Tuonela.

RW: Obviously, and of course, Louis Rosenblatt was the long time solo English horn player with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and he actually had a very profound impact on the course of my life. Not only was he an English horn player of great distinction, but when I was a student at the Curtis Institute, I began to play extra with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and primarily I sat next to him. He was a great lover of poetry as well and extremely well read. I was just starting to write, and I would show him things. After he passed away, his wife had me come to their house in Philadelphia and she gave me tons of his poetry books, and a lot of them I remembered him talking about. So I do think there is something between poetry and the English horn. For me they come from the same place.

In Memory of Louis Rosenblatt
(printed with the permission of Robert Walters)

Sibelius Dreams…

A single swan
Alone
On water

The curve of a neck ascended
Questioning
The nature of solitude

This liquid wandering
Spinning through answers
Too fluid to grasp

Yet he glides above
Quiet majestic suspended
By the thin glass sheet of the lake

It is (at least) colored glass
As the sun spills its dying
Day’s blood upon the water

Tinged with suffering orange
Tossed without thought
By cold lapping waves

A mirror of wet fire
Reflecting the swan descended
His echo an endless returning

— Robert Walters

MT: Staying with the Philadelphia Orchestra, what was it like playing in that orchestra as a student?

RW: It was amazing, and it was completely transformative. I spent a couple of years at the Curtis Institute of Music, which is a great school and where I had a great oboe teacher, Richard Woodhams, the principal oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra, but at that time I was not sure I wanted to be a professional musician. Both of my parents are academics and I grew up the only child of two PhD’s, and so the sub-culture of higher education was something that I wasn’t experiencing at that time, and I really had planned to leave after my second year to get an English degree somewhere in order to pursue an academic route. I had taken a couple of months off from playing the oboe, but then in the middle of summer I got this call from the personnel manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra, saying that they needed an extra oboe player for the Rite of Spring, and could I be there. For some reason I said yes, thinking that I would be playing fifth oboe, but then I got there and discovered that I was playing second oboe, and had to sit next to my teacher. I had never played the Rite of Spring and I had not even played the oboe for a couple of months. But, it was just mind altering to be in the middle of something that incredible. And to be sitting between Richard Woodhams and Louis Rosenblatt, and playing a piece like that! It was thrilling but it also a little discouraging, because I realized that I really did need to do this. But I did manage to sneak in my MFA, so I got the academic things taken care of along the route.

I guess it is just a happy coincidence that I end up teaching at a school like Oberlin, where the conservatory is sort of woven into the culture of a great liberal arts school. It is an environment that I feel very much at home in. For me, it is very rewarding to teach the type of students that go there.

MT: Speaking of Oberlin, on one of the Conservatory videos, you talk about the temperament of the late James Caldwell, who taught oboe there for many years. I went to Oberlin, and James Caldwell was a
very big influence on my musical education, and although I think I understand what you mean, could you please expand on this a little bit?

RW: To tell you the truth, it has a lot to do with my pursuing an MFA in poetry at Columbia. I spent a weekend at Caldwell’s house with a student of his, Willa Henigman, who now plays in the Dallas Symphony. Willa and I were at the Blossom Festival, studying with John Mack, and Willa said, I really want you to meet my teacher, and I said, of course—James Caldwell—I’d love to. He was a legend at Curtis. So we go to his house, and you know about his Bonsai garden? I had never seen anything like that, and the way he talked about Bonsai, and his Viola de Gamba collection, and his computer art, he was like this incredibly creative roaming intellect. He was a great oboist, but he also had these other interests. He was also a close friend and colleague of Louis Rosenblatt. Another thing about Rosenblatt, is that he taught himself Japanese, and he had many intellectual pursuits, as did James Caldwell. It’s strange, because the summer I met Caldwell, was the summer I started writing poetry. In fact I think I wrote my first poem at Blossom. Even funnier, is that that poem turned into a handful of poems that became a play that was actually produced Off–Off Broadway. It was that play and the poems that I submitted to Columbia, so it was a conscious decision to pursue culture and beauty beyond the oboe, and I think this was very much because of James Caldwell.

MT: I have also heard you say that you want to give your students the musical traditions that were handed to you. Again, could you say a little more?

RW: I think it is a culture of wind playing that really began at the Curtis Institute of Music with Marcel Tabuteau, and it’s a type of esthetic for expressing melody on a wind instrument that is very beautiful. You have incredible control over the beginnings and ends of notes. Control beginning from and returning to silence. It’s also very bel canto in that it’s a very pure centered singing tone, with a long musical line. There is also the sense of portamento, where you keep the air going between the notes. It is by no means the only way to play the oboe, but it is a way that I think is extremely beautiful, and it translates to all wind instruments. So, like my teacher, I am passing it down.

MT: I thought this would be the answer, and I must say that no matter how much we hated doing those Tabuteau exercises as students...

RW: Yes, but you know what? I spend more time doing them now then I did then. I do. I spend at least a half an hour a day just doing long tones. I also have this really simple book of vocal exercises that I picked up on tour, Lyricism through the Voice, and that is how I warm up. Also playing for four years at the Metropolitan Opera made me very attuned to the human voice. And that kind of expression is why I think the Vasks is so good. It is very vocal, and personal and direct in its expression. I am thrilled because the composer is coming.

MT: Great!

RW: Yes, he and his wife are coming from Latvia, and he will be at the rehearsals. He will also be giving a master class to the composition students at Oberlin.

This interview was first published on ClevelandClassical.com on February 15, 2011.