

# Mixing talent with teaching — Donald Oehler

By BETH MILLER  
Staff Writer

In a small studio in Hill Hall, programs from musical performances by former students smother a bulletin board and pictures from trips to Canada cover the side of a filing cabinet. An old clarinet stands on the lid of the grand piano. "Studios are very telling," says the clarinet's owner, Donald Oehler, an associate professor of music. Oehler is as busy as his studio looks.

"What you do is based on what you've done. I was in the Peace Corps in the '60s," Oehler said. "Everyone else was signing up for the draft, but I wanted to get out of it. I was coming out of Juilliard in '68."

The Teheran Philharmonic Orchestra needed a clarinet, and Oehler got the job through the Peace Corps. "I learned Persian for three months," he said. "When I went no one knew where I was going. I lived right next to the American Embassy."

And it's an experience he doesn't regret.

"I highly recommend the Peace Corps," Oehler said. "We were helping the local people — teaching them our trade. That was my first real job — it started me teaching. I seriously got interested in chamber music. It gave me the bug to travel. Then I came to Carolina."

The diversity of his career did not stop at Carolina. "I'm a performer — I lead a musical life," he said. But as a teacher at UNC, Oehler does much more than perform. "A whole side of my career is involved in teaching. I don't think it's unlike sports at all. You get so involved in teaching over a period of time."

Oehler works more intimately with his students than most coaches do. "You meet with each student each week one on one, and this goes on for eight semesters. The student and



Donald Oehler, associate professor of music

teacher have a lengthy relationship."

Oehler says he enjoys watching and helping his students through the transition years of college. "The commitment goes well beyond the four years." Some of his students who graduated still call him for advice. He pointed to the bulletin board, saying

that he asks his former students to send back their programs, which he displays to encourage his present students. Most professors, he says, do not keep up with their students so well.

But then most professors do not coordinate their teaching strategies

either. "The work of another studio is closely related to how my students do. It's a real teamwork effort."

As a clarinet player, Oehler said, "Rarely do you walk out on stage alone." His students learn how to play with other musicians and what to expect from them. Pausing a moment in his explanation, he listened to a trumpet playing downstairs. Referring to the trumpet professor, who was singing along with his student, Oehler said, "Sometimes we sing back and forth to each other."

Oehler said that while he instructs students, he realizes that he learns from them, too. "I have learned so much from my students over the years that I have stacks of things that I've written. Maybe someday if I'm really clever, I'll accumulate it."

Oehler's teaching and performing are directly related. "I know of few musicians who don't teach," he said. "As musicians, we look at our performances as our research. I'm constantly searching for better ways to play my instrument and to improve. You can't just stagnate. It's very difficult. You learn from your students."

Oehler also conducts the New Music Ensemble, which he says varies from semester to semester, according to who wants to play, who can play and who is needed for the specific songs. "I want to use only students with guests," he says. "I'm particularly interested in only students."

The group plays "modern contemporary, serious art music." Describing the repertoire, Oehler said, "This is what some people call weirdo music. It's thoughtful music." And in reference to the audience, he said, "They don't have to like it. If it makes them think, then we're successful." For the group, Oehler chooses songs written by great composers, who he said are "sort of the Bachs, Mozarts and

Mendelssohns of the 20th century."

Other than his work for the University, Oehler said, "I do a lot of local work. I conduct the Piedmont Youth Orchestra. It meets on Saturdays." A few weeks ago he played at a wedding, an unusual job for a clarinet player, and he also performed in a polka band for the Oktoberfest.

He visited Belgium and England a month ago. "I recorded a program of clarinet music with the Belgium Radio Orchestra (in Brussels)," he said. "That was a very serious job." In England he worked more on a project which he started a few months ago. "I wrote this course — it's called Clarinet International. The idea is to take students from around the United States and take them to study clarinet in Europe."

A traveling man, Oehler also said he goes to Canada every summer to teach at the Saskatchewan School of Arts. He became a member of the faculty there in 1976.

Oehler also teaches weekly at Elon College as a visiting professor, plays chamber music here on campus and in the area, and teaches some students at home. He says that, like most musicians, he goes from job to job continuously.

"I have a stand up desk. I don't have the time to sit down."

But, as his studio office suggests, he wouldn't have it any other way.

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