

MEET A MUSICIAN

MELANIE WILSDEN

Expression Through Music

Considering her career as Principal Oboe with the North Carolina Symphony, friends are always surprised to learn that Melanie Wilsden had an issue with her hearing when she was a young child. A medical procedure was performed when the problem was finally diagnosed, and as a result, she gained better-than-average hearing — perfect for a musician. She began piano lessons at age 10 and loved making music immediately.

“Music became an outlet for expressing myself,” Melanie says, recalling that her piano teacher, and later her oboe teacher, pushed her to come out of her shell when she was otherwise quite shy. Plus, when she began the oboe, it gave her a unique identity: Having started on the clarinet in sixth grade, she switched instruments as she could and loved that the oboe stood out from the “sea of clarinetists.” (In fact, her first-choice instrument had been the French horn, but the band director asserted that brass instruments were “just for the boys.”)

Little did she know, there was another unique aspect that would come along with being an oboist: hand-crafting the mouth-piece to her instrument on a nearly constant basis.

“Reed making,” Melanie says with just a hint of exasperation in her voice, smiling and shaking her head. “That’s why [oboiists] are all half-crazy!”

Handmade carefully and skillfully, the oboe’s double reed is a single piece of cane — folded, tied, and scraped. It vibrates when blown into, and is almost entirely responsible for the instrument’s sound quality and responsiveness. Most oboists make their own reeds, partly because they wear out so quickly and partly because it allows for customization of such an important extension of the instrument — but only to a certain degree.

“Cane is unpredictable — it can be too brittle, hard, soft, or grainy” explains Melanie, who builds reed-making time into every practice session and typically makes between two and six per week. “And even after the arduous task of making the reed is completed, it can still crack or collapse at any time.”

Luckily, Melanie and fellow NCS oboist Sandra Posch have formed a nearly telepathic working relationship. “Sandy can sense the second that I’m having difficulty with a reed and she’ll take over my part,” she says.



Melanie works with her student Noa, 14.

After all, the oboists have been playing together in the Symphony for nearly 28 years.

After earning her bachelor’s degree in music from the Cleveland Institute of Music and her master’s degree from The Juilliard School, Melanie landed her first position at the Savannah Symphony Orchestra in her home state of Georgia (she grew up in Marietta). But she had to wait tables to make ends meet, so she continued to take every possible audition over the next four years.

“I got close so many times,” Melanie remembers. “The competition for these auditions is so fierce that a musician has to learn the art of audition taking. I almost quit because I was beat down from all the competition and stress.” Finally, she was appointed to a one-year position at the San Francisco Symphony as Associate Principal Oboe. Melanie continued to seek out auditions, and the very next one was for NCS. She won the position — and hasn’t looked back or taken another audition since.

Melanie has loved seeing the Symphony grow and evolve since she joined in 1989, and of course she has made a wealth of memories — like the time the entire orchestra continued to perform without missing a beat when the lights went out during a concert on the outskirts of Boone. “No one could see their music, but we just kept going!” she laughs.

That kind of remarkable commitment and dedication defines NCS musicians, but Melanie has had to learn how to strike a healthy balance between work and other important pieces of her life. She is a dedicated mom to her daughter, Alyssa, who just graduated college; she has a close-knit relationship with her family in Georgia; and she is married to her high school sweetheart, Stephen, with whom she reconnected in recent years. At age 38, Melanie took up ice-skating for 10 years until an injury got in her way. She’s since turned to making stained glass — and her best creations go to her family as gifts.

Melanie’s generous spirit no doubt plays a part in her teaching, which she describes as one of her greatest passions. Several of her students have continued on to study music at conservatories, and she currently has a studio of eight students and a few adults. She has taught at UNC-Chapel Hill, Meredith College, NC State, and the Cannon Music Camp in Boone, as well as giving master classes around the state.

“I like helping each student incorporate their personality and character into their musical phrasing and expression, as they mature both as people and musicians,” she says, “just like my teachers taught me to do.” 

This season, Melanie is most looking forward to playing the Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 on the *Baroque Masters* program, December 1-2. For details and tickets, visit ncsymphony.org or call 919.733.2750.

Two years ago, Melanie began taking classes in making stained glass.

