

# Flute Talk

October 1984



Robert Willoughby

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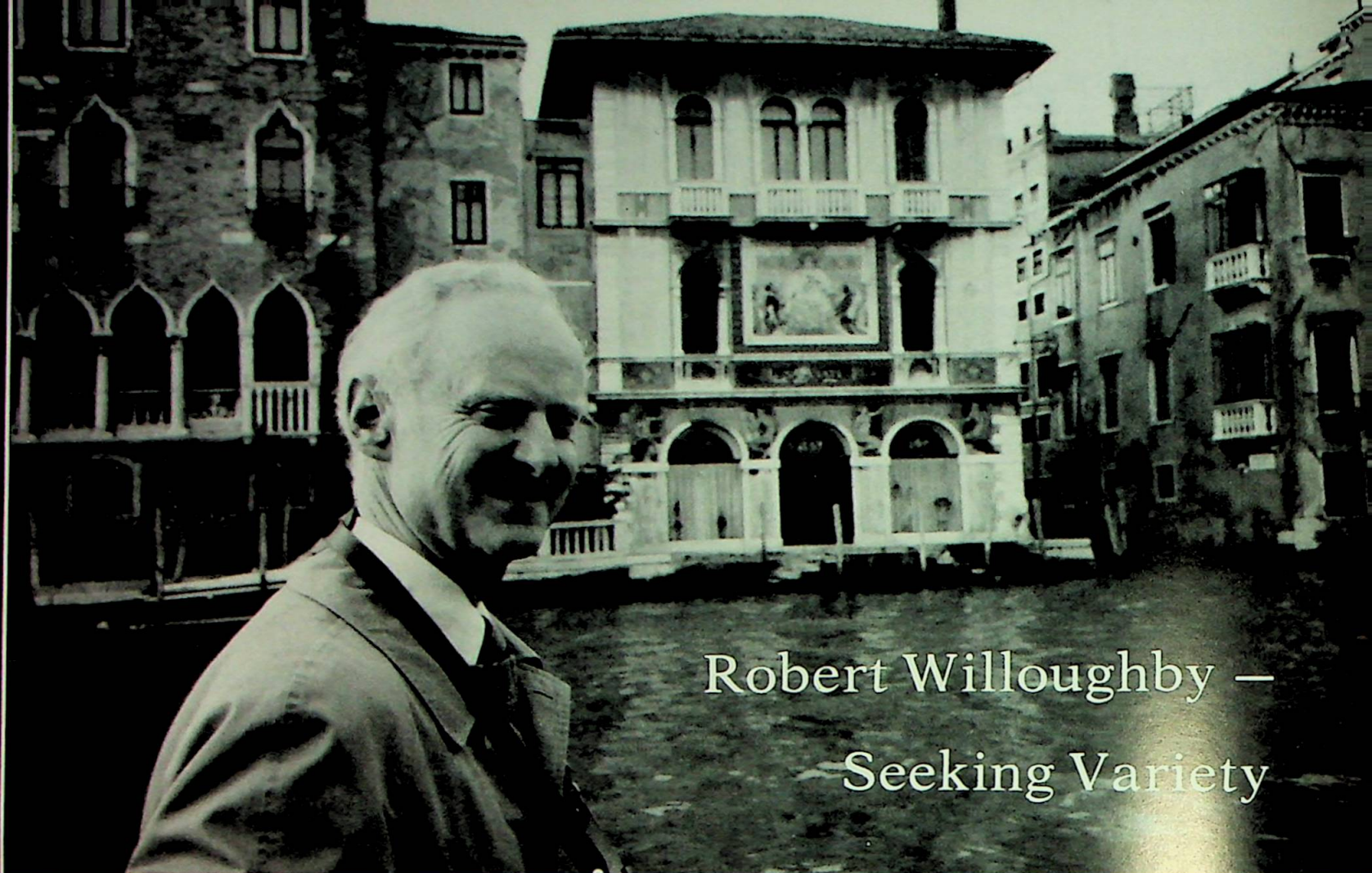


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## Robert Willoughby — Seeking Variety

William Montgomery

*Robert Willoughby is professor of flute at Oberlin, a member of the Oberlin Baroque Ensemble and the Oberlin Woodwind Quintet, and on the faculty of the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute. He has recorded for Vox, Gaspara, CRI, and Coronet. He was formerly assistant first flute with the Cleveland Orchestra and principal flutist with the Cincinnati Symphony and with the Dartmouth Congregation of the Arts. He studied flute with Joseph Mariano, Georges Laurent, and William Kincaid, and attended the Eastman School of Music and the New England Conservatory.*

*Each year you listen to about 100 flute players who would like to enter Oberlin Conservatory. They probably represent the best high school flutists in the country. What do you think are the best qualities of these players?*

The really good ones have good technique, and they generally have a pretty good sound, but I think what sets the exceptional person apart from the others is a sense of pacing, a sort of charisma in their playing.

*Can you further define the pacing and charisma you look for?*

I'm not sure I can. It's just that when somebody plays a phrase, it really soars and everything is right. They speed up the proper amount or slow down, or do whatever might be necessary to make the phrase go. They make the right *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, and it's not necessarily what the composer has written. There may be no expression marks at all, or it may be marked *piano*. Obviously a *piano* is just a general indication and beyond that one does *crescendo* or *diminuendo*. It's the same thing with tempo. Our teachers at first tell us to play a passage in time according to the beat. Then the really imaginative person goes beyond that and says, "I'm going to speed up here; I'm going to slow down there." Maybe over a span of two or four bars one will end up in the same place, but within that time one has not just plodded along. Well, that sort of thing is what I look for, because I think that person has a real future: not the one who can just play all the right notes or have a love-

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*William Montgomery is Consulting Editor for Flute Talk. He is professor of flute at the University of Maryland and a past president of the National Flute Association. He is also principal flutist with the National Gallery of Art Orchestra and a member of the Theatre Chamber Players in residence at the Kennedy Center.*

ly sound, but the one who will vary the intensity of what they're doing. I've heard some pretty good flute players (I don't mean just prospective students, but professionals, too) who have absolutely gorgeous sounds, but they play everything with the same intensity. It's always beautiful; it's like cherry pie for three meals a day. That bores me. I'd rather have more variety of intensity and tone color.

I can remember being quite impressed with William Bennett when I heard him, because he used a lot of different tone colors and intensities. It's the sort of business of "do anything you want, but don't bore me." In other words, try to make the phrase interesting. Maybe I'll disagree with what you do, or think it's terrible or in poor taste; but I'd rather have that than somebody who just plows along, plays everything in strict time, and is just dull. That's not for me.

*Is this imaginative playing what you find the strongest aspect of many young flutists, because they usually present correct technique, intonation*

Well, not necessarily intonation. Recently I heard a boy who played in a very dynamic and exciting way; but he had terrible intonation. He had a screwed-up embouchure, and had not been taught to listen for pitch that much; but you can fix that. He was obviously so talented.

*So the music and the charisma were there.*

Yes. The imagination and music making were there. It was exciting, so I didn't mind that he played out of tune. However, I am very reluctant to accept a person with a nanny-goat vibrato from a night throat. Fixing that is a long process; it can even take a couple of years to correct. That's sort of a nightmare, and I try to avoid it whenever possible.

*You seem to have already answered my question: What is the biggest problem area you hear among flute students today?*

That's it. They have this "he-he-he-he" sort of vibrato that can be murder, although not always. Once in a while you find a student who can cope with it. Obviously what I do is get these flutists to play without any vibrato at all. You have to get them to free up the throat (which is usually tight), open up, and simply play without vibrato.

*Then you have them start all over again?*

In a sense, yes. Another interesting thing is when you ask flutists who don't have that problem to play without vibrato. The first thing they do is to play like a wooden stick. They don't realize that you don't need vibrato to be expressive. Then I say, "What would you do if you were a clarinetist? Would you still play that way?" It's really a crutch for them; they cannot be expressive without using vibrato.

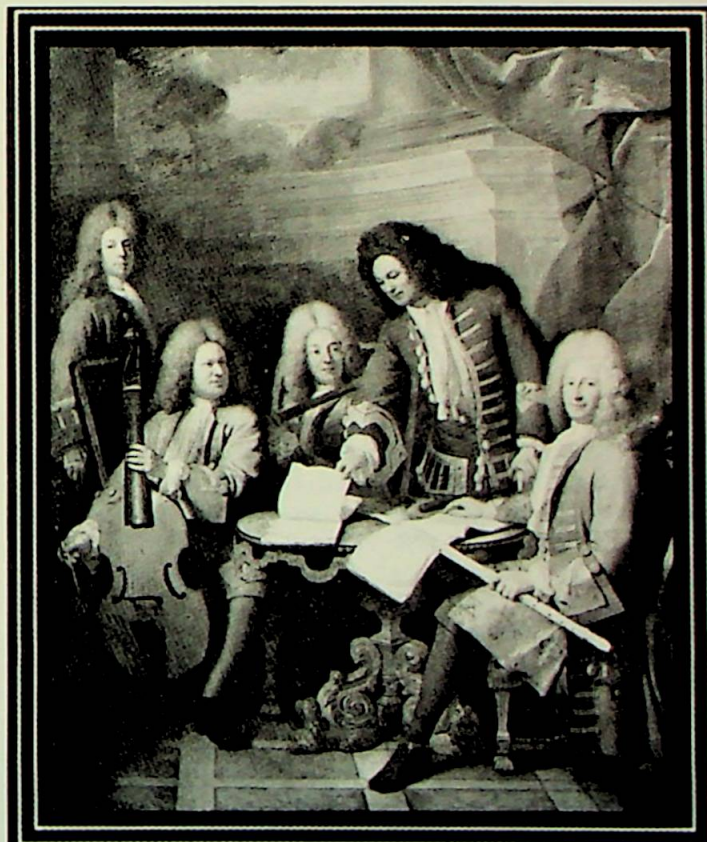
*Do you find that your work on the Baroque flute*

*has helped you to be more expressive without the excessive use of vibrato?*

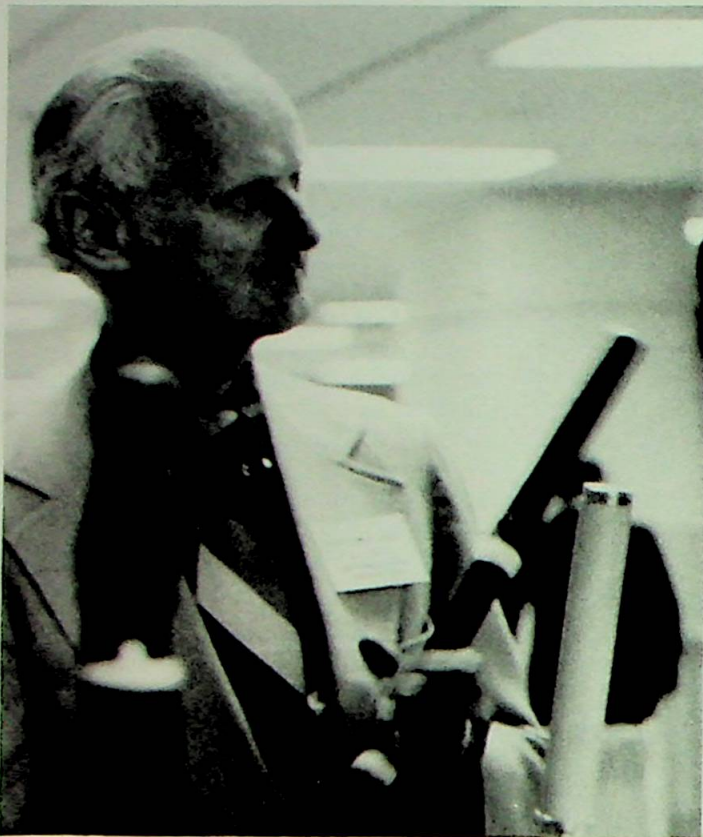
I think so, and it's made me much more conscious of a greater range of vibrato and the use of it. I think I use a lot of these same ideas on modern flute; there's a certain consistency of ideas that applies to all music. I taught flying at one stage of my life, and I was interested in how similar the techniques of teaching are. Basically it is a matter of getting students to learn to think and to analyze what they are doing. You try to get them to think on their own. I ask many questions, and sometimes they'll stand there for a minute trying to think of something to say. I won't coach them; I'll just let them sweat awhile and try to think, because that's one thing they have to learn to do. They can't be spoon-fed all their lives. Maybe we tend to do too much of that in this country. When students teach, they learn to think for themselves very quickly, because their students will ask questions which require thought to answer. It's a wonderful way for them to learn.

*During the 15 to 20 years you've been listening to young flutists audition, have you noticed any trends — in preparation, musicality, technique, tone control?*

The most striking thing is the absolutely incredible technique some of these kids come in with. I think they're playing pieces that 20 or 30 years ago



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I wouldn't have dreamed of playing. And some of these things they play quite well. They may not always do it that musically, and they may play out of tune; but they can play like the wind, absolutely unbelievably. There is one person in each of my classes who can almost play me under the table technically. They can play anything; there's nothing that will stop them.

*Do you have any idea why this is?*

I really don't know, but it's absolutely astounding what some students can do technically. Nothing phases them; but I think they're not always playing wisely. They're playing far more sophisticated pieces than they used to. It makes me a little sad to have students come in who have played the Prokofiev *Sonata* and all the so-called big pieces. They have nothing left, and they don't do it that well always. They miss the subtleties, play out of tune, and don't get the variety of tonal color and vibrato. In a way I wish their teachers had them wait a little longer until they were able to handle the big pieces musically. There's plenty of other repertoire. I suppose in some cases it's all right; maybe I shouldn't make too much of it.

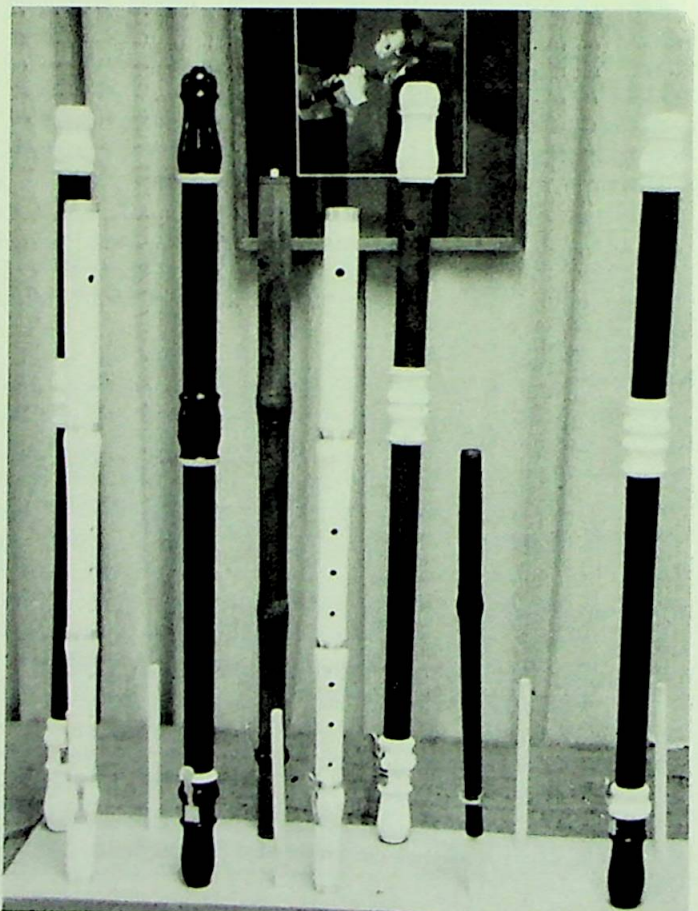
*Tell us a bit about your own background and training.*

My first decent instructor was a woodwind specialist at what is now called Northern Iowa University at Cedar Falls. He actually was an oboist, but he was really quite good. I can remember his going through the same process we talked about — having me start over again and get rid of my vibrato, which evidently was lousy. In my junior

year of high school I had to play in a contest and I couldn't vibrate, so he had me use a jaw vibrato — a kind of funny "wa-wa." It was better than nothing and we both knew it was temporary.

I was originally going to be a lawyer, and had no intention of going into music, although I enjoyed it. My high school band director talked me into going to Interlochen. While I was there, Larry Torno, who was the first flutist in St. Louis at the time, asked me if I would play for Howard Hanson, who was coming through to conduct the orchestra. I did, and before I knew it I had a scholarship to the Eastman School of Music. I didn't decide until about a week before school began that I would go. Both my father and my brother were lawyers and they wanted me to go into law. My father said, "Well, why don't you try it out and see how you like it; you don't have to commit yourself for life." I was there all of a week before I decided it was great. I decided if they want to pay me to do this, that's for me, because I love music, I love teaching, and I love playing. I think you and I are both lucky because we're doing something we really enjoy, and we're getting paid for it. What more can you ask out of life, professionally?

At Eastman I studied with Joseph Mariano. At the end of my sophomore and junior years I went to Tanglewood and studied with Georges Laurent. Then I flew airplanes for two or three years in the service, and when I came out went to the New England Conservatory and studied with Georges Laurent again and got a masters degree. After that I spent nine years as assistant first flutist in the



*Flutes by Rod Cameron*

Cleveland Symphony. After the first three years in Cleveland I started at Oberlin, teaching as much as 15 hours a week in addition to playing in the Cleveland Orchestra. After awhile this got a bit harried, so I finally quit the orchestra and went to Oberlin full-time in 1955. I took a leave in 1959, played solo flute in Cincinnati and was really tempted to stay; I must say I thoroughly enjoyed it. Max Rudolph was the conductor. We got along really famously; he was a very good conductor and such a nice guy. I finally decided I wanted to go back to Oberlin, and have been there ever since.

I have had numerous sabbaticals, which I love to spend in England, because my wife and I are Anglophiles. About 10 years ago I got interested in playing old instruments. I'd been in a Baroque ensemble for a number of years, but I played on a modern instrument. During one sabbatical I had time to learn to play the Baroque flute. It does take time; I don't think you can do it immediately. Gradually everyone in the ensemble changed over

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from the modern instruments to old instruments, and we've been playing them for the last 11 or 12 years as a group.

*What has this taught you?*

I have learned something about how to play old music — short phrases, modifying vibrato and using it sparingly as an ornament — but not necessarily because I'm playing on a Baroque flute. I remember talking to [Gustav] Leonhardt about old instruments, and he said, "You know, the fact that you play on an old instrument doesn't mean that you're going to play in the old style." Of course, that's obvious, but it was a good point.

*Can you transfer the old style to the modern instrument?*

Oh yes. I believe you can transfer most techniques of the Baroque flute onto the modern flute when you're playing old music. However, one of my good colleagues (a very fine teacher who's not at Oberlin) believes that it's completely different and that once you go to a modern instrument, you start playing like Brahms again. I couldn't disagree more heartily with this point of view.

*What do you believe is the best way, if there is any*

## Italian-ology

There are two parts to this month's puzzle. First, see if you can identify these familiar themes and their composers. Then match the following tempo markings with the works. Each term can be used only once and all the terms are used. (Answers in next month's issue.)

*Allegro malinconico*  
*Moderato*  
*Allegretto grazioso*  
*Vivace*

*Andantino languido*  
*Andantino*  
*Larghetto*  
*Andante sostenuto*

## Odic Ovals Answers

(See page 13 of the September issue for game.) The complete phrase is from the adagio theme from Camille Saint-Saens' *Airs de Ballet D'Ascanio*.



*such best way, for a high school flutist to practice?*

That's difficult. One of the problems is that every teacher has a personal approach. The teacher has to work with the student in a way that works. In college you might have one student who has to do something different every week. You might have another student who works better doing the same exercise weeks on end. I try to have students do something new every week no matter what. But every person is an individual. You can't have a formula that works for everybody. Obviously they should spend some time working on tone. I think a lot of flutists are likely to spend more time working on playing technical things, so I would have these students do some pieces where they can actually think about the sound. Also they should do scales or the vocalise that we used to get from Kincaid. I have students play the Kincaid vocalise as a tonal exercise. I think too often they just play it as a finger exercise, and they forget about the sound. And so I say "play this vocalise with tone, and try to get a decent sound. Don't just play the fingerings; that's not the purpose of it." I try to stress the fact that students must have a beautiful sound, not with vibrato all the time. I would definitely insist that part of the time they play without any vibrato whatsoever, particularly in technical passages. I can't abide the person who plays scales with a continual vibrato. I really loathe that.

*How do you describe the ideal flute sound?*

I don't think there is such a thing as an ideal flute sound; I think that will vary with every individual. I can tell you what I like for me: a tone that is basically free, with a vibrato that is free and natural. Some vibratos seem to be forced. I want to be able to listen to a piece of music and not be

aware of the vibrato. It's a little bit like, let's say, when you see a beautiful woman. If you think, "oh, she has a nice shade of lipstick, or she has rouge, or she has this or that," that's bad. You should just be aware that you're looking at a beautiful woman; but if you're aware of the individual parts, then she has not succeeded. I think the same thing is true when you hear a performance and you think, "oh, that's a nice vibrato," or you can pick apart the individual elements. Then the person is not succeeding, because you should just think "that's a beautiful performance." Not that you shouldn't analyze, but you certainly shouldn't think "vibrato."

*What are some of the most important things you learned from Laurent and Mariano?*

That's a tough one, to think of particular things. Georges Laurent made me work my head off. He was never satisfied with anything less than what he considered to be perfection, and he was a strict taskmaster. I think you need a teacher who demands a lot. At least I do, and most people do. I remember studying the Enesco *Cantabile et Presto*; we must have spent 20 minutes on the first line. He absolutely would not go on until he thought I had captured the essence of what the music was all about, how it should be played, the tonal quality, the intensity, and all of those things.

Joseph Mariano had me open up a lot tonally from what I was doing. One of the things he did best was something like *Night Soliloquy*. I think he had a wonderful sense of the feeling of a piece like that — imagination, a feeling of freedom, and rubato.

*Who else did you study with?*

William Kincaid was my next teacher. I worked with him for maybe 3 or 4 summers up in Maine, and he was very interesting. His approach was perhaps the most analytical and intellectual of the three.

*What did you learn after you left your teachers?*

I came to the conclusion that in the long run you don't imitate anybody. You take and distill what different people have given you, and you come up with what is your own. It may not be like anybody else, and I don't think it really should be. It's better if you are an individualist. I guess I also became aware of certain areas where some of my teachers were stronger or weaker. I don't think that hurts either; nobody's perfect, and we all have certain weaknesses. Then you try to go about seeing if you can avoid those things. In a sense it's a negative approach, but it's one way you can learn something. I guess one of the things I want as much as anything else is to get a variety in what I'm doing.

