

First Love

by David Nabb



A serious accident silenced young flutist Edit van der Burg-Mayer—but only temporarily. First, she re-learned to walk, talk, and eat. Next, with the help of a specially designed one-handed flute, she got back to her true love: the flute.



Edit van der Burg-Mayer

In 2003, Edit van der Burg-Mayer (her first name is pronounced like the verb “edit”) won first prize in the 20th Dutch National Flute contest in the category for players ages 17–33 years. The competition is for nonprofessional flutists from Belgium and the Netherlands.

The competition included able-bodied participants playing on conventional flutes. But Edit won this competition playing on a one-handed flute.

Born in Hungary, Edit van der Burg-Mayer began her musical life at age 9, beginning on a recorder, then a piccolo, and then the flute. An outstanding admission exam gained her premature entry, at age 13, into the lower Conservatory of Music in Szeged, Hungary. A year later, she moved up to Szeged’s Conservatory of Music, where she became among the best, perhaps the best, of her class.

On April 14, 1989, a terrible blow on the head changed Edit’s life. Brain surgery preceded a two-week coma. Although she survived the blow, she was no longer able to walk, sit, eat, speak—or play the flute. She was paralyzed on one side.

Gradually, van der Burg-Mayer learned to talk, walk, and eat. On January 8, 1990, a second brain operation further aided her rehabilitation.

Seventeen years after her injury, and three years after she won first prize, I met with Edit, then 33, and her husband, Theo, in Holland, where they live. We discussed her injury, the special flute designed for her by Maarten Visser of Amsterdam, and her continued love affair, despite all setbacks, with the flute.



Edit van der Burg-Mayer playing the one-handed flute designed for her.

DN: You played the piccolo before you played the flute?

EDIT: Yes.

DN: Is that often done in Hungary?

EDIT: Yes, because the piccolo is small and children have small hands.

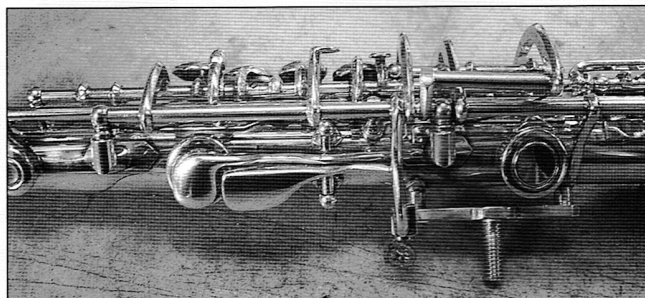
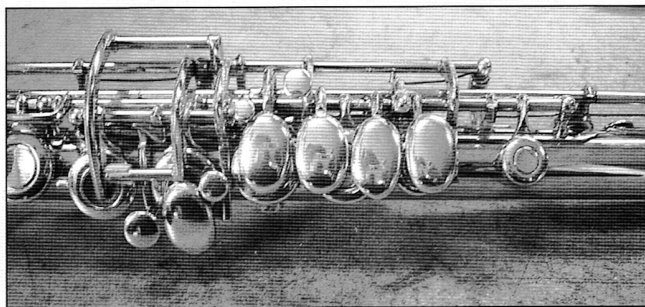
DN: Can you tell me how your head injury happened?

THEO: When Edit was 16 years old, she was a very promising flutist. She was the best of her class. I spoke with members of her class from that time, and they all said that Edit was an example to her peers. But shortly before she went to Belgium to play with her school orchestra and as a soloist, Edit was walking in the street in Szeged where she studied, when two men attacked her, and one of them hit her hard on the head.

EDIT: For a week I had a headache. When I went home to Cegléd, I could not speak. My father was at home, but I could not speak, and my right arm would not move.

THEO: Blood vessels in her brain were broken, there was continued bleeding, and Edit was unable to tell anyone what had happened. If it had been a normal accident, she would have been treated right away. But no one knew what had happened. So it took about a week before she went to the hospital, and then things moved very quickly.

EDIT: At first, one doctor thought I might be on drugs or alcohol.



Above: close-up view of the flute's left hand mechanism. Below: close-up view of the flute's thumb area.

THEO: When they finally knew what was the matter, it was too late. She had surgery then, to open the head and relieve the pressure from the bleeding, and the surgeon very quickly closed as many broken blood vessels as he could find. This had to go very quickly because the head cannot be open for too long. And then about a year later, she had another surgery, when the doctor could take his time and look very carefully.

DN: What was your first musical experience, the first music you remember from your life?

EDIT: Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise," and Enesco.

DN: Was your family musical?

EDIT: Yes, my mother played violin, and my father played trumpet. My sister also played violin and is a good singer.

DN: How did you pick the flute as your instrument?

EDIT: I don't really know, I guess I just really love it. When I was very young my parents got a letter from the music school saying I could study music. My parents hid that letter from me, because they thought music school would be too expensive. But a year later, the music school sent a letter addressed to me, and this time I saw the letter before my parents could hide it. That is when I knew I would study music.

DN: Can you tell me about the musical activities you are involved in today?

EDIT: I hope to play my flute as much as possible. Now, I play in a 60-person concert band, and in a smaller flute choir.



The flute was built for van der Burg-Mayer by Maarten Visser.

“Normally, Edit is a little bit shy. But she is not at all shy when she is making music; she knows exactly what she wants and what she is doing.”

DN: Whose idea was it to build a one-handed flute?

THEO: Someone told us about Maarten Visser in Amsterdam, who had already built a number of adaptive musical instruments. I told Edit that she should have a one-handed flute. Edit was at first reluctant, and Maarten initially thought it was impossible. But I continued to want to try. I felt that even if Edit was only

able to eventually play some simple hymns in church, it would be a success and worth the trouble. But with this flute, it took only one week for Edit to learn that much.

DN: Did you have any models or other ideas to work from for the one-handed flute design?

THEO: No, but Maarten Visser had already built a number of instruments for people with disabilities, and so he already knew a little bit about what to do. He had to put all of his ideas into this one flute, and it is his masterpiece. When he has to show only one instrument, this is the one he shows, and Edit has to come and demonstrate it. The new flute that Maarten is building now for Edit will be even better.

DN: Are you familiar with the one-handed recorders that are available?

THEO: Yes, Maarten makes them, too.

DN: Visser, and Dolmetsch and Mollenhauer too, I think.

THEO: We are also familiar with a case in the 1830s or so: there was a very good one-handed flute player—

DN: Count Rebsomen? (Note: this instrument is described in Henry Macaulay Fitzgibbon's *The Story of the Flute*.)

EDIT: Yes.

THEO: He was badly wounded, and they wanted to euthanize him on the battlefield. They told him, “You will die anyway.” Count Rebsomen then said, “No. Take my arm off here, and then I won’t bleed to death.” (Note: Other one-handed flutes by Kohlert were built after World War I; photos and descriptions are

in “Flutes for One-handed Players,” by D.C. Miller, in the August 1925 issue of *The Flutist*.)

DN: How much were you personally involved with the design of your one-handed flute?

EDIT: Maarten would ask us questions about what I wanted, and we would write him back and tell him.

THEO: Edit wanted a flute that would play as well as possible, and was beautiful to look at.

DN: Can you tell me what your future aspirations are with the flute?

EDIT: I hope to perform as much as possible.

DN: It must take extraordinary courage and dedication to continue playing the flute in spite of the challenges you face. Where do you get your strength and determination?

EDIT: I only know that once I take the flute in my hands, everything is OK.

THEO: Edit gets her strength from the flute. Normally, Edit is a little bit shy. But she is not at all shy when she is making music; for example, she is not afraid to say to the piano player, “Stop...you played that note wrong.” In music, she knows exactly what she wants and what she is doing.

DN: It is so much trouble, playing the flute, given the challenges you face. Why not just quit flute playing and give it up?

THEO: For Edit, that’s like asking, “Why do you continue breathing?” A couple years ago I asked Edit, “If you had to make a choice between your flute; me, your husband; and Theodor, our son—what would you choose?” Edit was silent for a moment and then she said only, “I’m sorry...” And so I had my answer.

David Nabb is associate professor of music at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. He has a PhD in music education from the University of North Texas and BA and MA degrees in multiple woodwinds performance from Indiana University. He interviewed Edit van der Burg-Mayer and Theo van der Burg June 30, 2006, in the American Hotel in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Persons interested in learning more, or sharing information about musical instruments adapted for people with disabilities, are encouraged to visit a new discussion board administrated by Nabb at <http://onehandwinds.unk.edu/forum/index.php>.