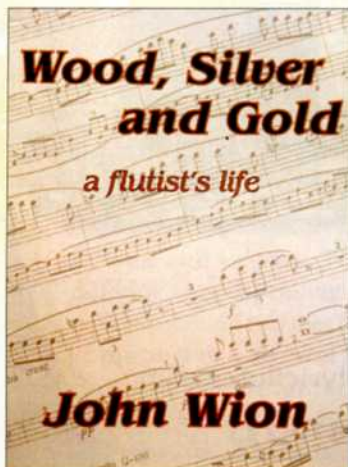


# REVIEWS

## Reviews of flute-related recordings, books, and other items of interest

### Books



**Wood, Silver and Gold:**  
A flutist's life  
by John Wion  
John Wion, 2007

**I**dare you! This book cannot easily be put aside.

Autobiographies may not be at the top of everyone's lists for entertaining reading. Nevertheless, there are those who cannot wait to get their hands on the next book written by or for a giant of stage,

screen, or television. Even for such enthusiastic readers, many autobiographies contain details which, while germane to the subject, don't keep eyes glued to the page. Not so, with John Wion's immediately engaging and very personal autobiography. Be prepared to settle in with a thermos of coffee, and be shocked to later glance at your watch and wonder how time flew by so silently. Wion's account of his extraordinary career as a flutist (and even as an elevator operator at New York's famed Waldorf Astoria), is more than most readers can dream of experiencing in a single lifetime. His writing is compelling, enormously funny, touching, and especially revealing in its honesty. It is also a thumbnail travelogue of fascinating world destinations. He shares hilarious accounts of performances, personal relationships, and the quirky events shaping his life that would appeal to anyone seeking a hearty laugh. In his many years with the New York City Opera, freelance orchestras, and as an active recital and chamber musician, he worked with some of the leading artists in the classical music world. These encounters had their moments of great inspiration, incredible frustration, and painful failures.

Wion is disarmingly honest about what went well, and what was not successful. His musical training in Australia led to a number of notable successes. Armed with that confidence—by his own admission somewhat misplaced, and realizing more was needed to become a first-rate musician—he came to New York. His career there did not begin with a Hollywood-like meteor ride to stardom. Enter his employment as an elevator operator. He was soon promoted to delivering packages to residents at the Waldorf Towers. Even that employment had its gifts though: During its tenure, he met President Hoover, General McArthur, U.N. Ambassador Lodge, and even some

South American dictators. In 1960, he played piccolo in a band concert on a Staten Island ferry. He notes, "The intonation was so dreadful that the concert was half over before I realized that my part was for piccolo in D-flat. I didn't go back to Staten Island." With one-liners like that, he easily could have had a career as a standup comic.

He writes of his first encounters with Julius Baker on the phone and in person. Intimidation doesn't begin to describe his reactions. An honest account discusses what was learned from Baker—but also what was not gained. Claude Monteux and William Kincaid helped provide the foundation he needed, both tonally and technically. The names that ripple off the pages of this book will no doubt catch the attention of every reader even modestly aware of the classical music scene in this country during the last 40 years of the 20th century.

For readers who encounter daily challenges with hand injuries and the resulting difficulty they present in performance, there is much here to both inform and inspire. Recording sessions are not always as glamorous as many imagine. Wion's tale of participating in the 1984 recording by RCA of Philip Glass' *Satyagraha* is as close to a living nightmare for a musician as one can get. His description seems the antithesis of how a work should be presented. In his words, "The playback [during the recording] was sensational, impossibly perfect. Could have been a machine. Should have been a machine." It is this honesty, laced with humor, that makes his autobiography so readable and interesting.

His brief narrative of serving as president and later program chair of the NFA is revealing. He writes of the need to help strengthen *The Flutist Quarterly*, after it had been converted from a newsletter format during the leadership of his predecessor, Erv Monroe. The personal sensitivity with which he served as program chair a couple of years later reflects the learning curve typical of everyone who has served in a leadership position, and provides a model of how one can respond to the needs of many.

The autobiography is filled with wonderful vignettes of his family, countless glimpses of his geographical world, and photographs of many who helped shape his life. The reader comes away from his writing believing John Wion to be a close personal friend. His sharing is filled with passion, enormous insight into human nature, a deep personal warmth, a conviction to be honest in his reflections, and a joy that spills over into the lives of all who read it. Care for a warm-up on that coffee?

—Brooks de Wetter-Smith