

by Sarah Merrow

Lighthearted Flourishes

Richard Degel marries technique with artistry in his Boston hand-engraving shop.

The first cuts are the most difficult. Hand-engraver Richard Degel leans into his engraving block, and begins with a shallow cut. The work—whether a gold ring, a sterling bowl, or, in this case, the mouthpiece of my silver flute—is held firmly in the jaws of the block, a spherical clamp about the size of a cantaloupe. He manipulates it closely, like a sorcerer at his divining ball. Silver chips jump from the surface as he cuts and repositions the work with fluid ease. The man, the block, and his handheld cutter, or “graver,” beset objects of sterling, gold, or platinum, without computers or power tools. The shapes he handles reflect light every which way; their curving surfaces can feel hard or soft, brittle, smooth, or sticky under his graver. The block isn’t even anchored to the bench; it’s nested in a doughnut-shaped piece of leather, perched insouciantly on the edge of the bench. He says simply, “It takes a lot of practice.”

Of the dozens of jewelry engravers who advertise in Massachusetts, only a few know how to engrave by hand. And of that number, it’s hard to find one who’s proficient at this increasingly rare art. I’ve come to Richard Degel’s engraving workshop, 15 miles north of Boston, because I play a fine, silver instrument, made by one of Boston’s best flute makers, and I want the engraving to be beautiful. Degel has been adorning flutes for 28 years. Among the local companies that produce handcrafted instruments—over the years he’s worked for 10—Degel’s reputation spread via word-of-mouth recommendations. It’s a niche he appreciates.

“They’re working with their hands,” he says, “and they understand. A lot of people just want it quickly, and don’t care how it’s done. Flute makers understand what it takes to have a piece engraved.”

Beginnings in Art

Growing up in Reading, Massachusetts, where he still lives and works at RFD Ltd. Engraving, he spent long hours drawing with his father, a graphic designer and watercolorist, and took art lessons throughout high school. Drawn to lettering, he considered a career as a sign painter. But then, in his first job at Long’s Jewelers in Boston, he saw his first piece engraved and fell in love.



Degel at his work table; the engraver’s block sits in front of him.

“It was a sterling charm. When you take a plain piece of silver and you watch the engraver draw [the design] on by hand, and then start cutting, with tools he made by hand, and see the beautiful finished product, well, it’s very rewarding and satisfying,” says Degel.

To learn how to lay out and engrave the old script, block letters, and numerals on, for example, a flute’s barrel joint, Degel first dedicated a year of lunch hours at the jewelry store. He watched Long’s engraver work, and drew oval after oval in practice assignments. He then enrolled in an engraving course at Gem City College in Illinois, and after graduating,



The author's engraved headjoint: delicate as a watercolor, brilliant as a gemstone.

found an apprenticeship in St. Louis. His mentor's name was Kenneth Floro, and Degel calls him "the finest engraver I've ever met." Days, Degel worked on an engraving machine to earn his keep, and at home in the evenings he practiced his lettering craft. Four years after his lunch-hour lessons, he was finally allowed to engrave the signet rings, locket, and charms that were the mainstay of Floro's work for local jewelry stores. In 1977, well-prepared but terrified, he opened his own business in Boston's famous Jewelers Building at 333 Washington Street.

Like the engravers of western Europe who preceded him, Degel engraves traditional and original monograms, coats of arms, seals and crests into the plates, tankards, and flatware of modern-day families and clans. From this perspective, it seems appropriate that high-end flutes are still engraved by hand today with the maker's, and sometimes the owner's, personal markings. In his friendly presence, I sense a quality every artist nurtures, one of quiet concentration. His workshop is located in a private home in Reading, where he carves metal six to eight hours a day, five or six days per week.

Tools of the Trade

The workbench is neatly organized and dominated by the engraving block, front and center. Corralled next to it are his flock of cutting gravers. Their four-inch blades are held in well-worn, mushroom-shaped handles that nestle comfortably in the palm, and against which he pushes with the full strength of his upper body.

"Working with dull tools, you're liable to slip. It's important to begin each job with sharp tools," Degel says, as he selects three from the bunch to use on my lip plate. First, the square graver, used for script and fine monogram work; the second one, called a lining tool, comes in different widths and cuts six parallel lines at once. He'll finish with the round-bottomed bent graver that cuts deep outlines to withstand years of buffing and polishing.

"This," he says, "is a good tool."

Every hand and arm is different, and an engraver makes his

or her own tools after learning the craft; thus, long-practiced habits of muscle and sinew determine individual angles for the top, sides, and bottom of each cutter. With his sharpener, a handheld, chrome-plated knot of thumb screws, angle dials, and clamps, Degel refines a precise edge after about five or six back-and-forth pushes of the fist.

Tools ready, he turns and politely asks me, "Do you have a design in mind?"

Well, something intricate, flowing, and of course, beautiful. Can he show me some samples of lip-plate engraving he has done? I expect him to open a file drawer or boot up a computer.

But Degel's archive—his patterns, templates, and ideas, original art and traditional designs developed and referenced for decades—is a cardboard box about four inches by eight inches, stuffed with small envelopes, open at the ends. Their flaps wag like tongues proclaiming the heritage of a dying art. From this well-fingered file he selects the scripts and serifs, monograms and scrolls for the watches, wedding bands, trophy cups and other hollow-ware he engraves around the year. For the floods of seasonal work—graduation gifts, and the racks of flute mouthpieces that come to him before every trade show. For rose-ornamented name plates, like the one he created for James Galway's instrument case. Designs for "chasing" the keywork when asked to engrave a flute from top to bottom; chasing is a technique of tapping the metal, that forms a shaded background against which the scrollwork can stand out in relief. Just the right size, shape, and style for each customer.

From one of these envelopes he unfolds several neatly pressed squares of white or yellowed paper, each with distinctly penciled, inked, or photo-copied flourishes of sweeping lines that resemble the shape of my flute's blandly blank embouchure. With some difficulty and a feeling of surrender—they're all elegant, classical, and beautiful—I choose one.

A New Creation

Degel brushes on "Chinese white," an oily coating in which pencil marks leave an impression, and lays out the design, using compass, pencil, template, and carbon paper. Then, he swaths every inch of exposed silver head joint in layer upon protective layer of masking tape, clamps the soul of my flute into his engraving block, and dons the headgear used by jewelers, flute makers, and engravers everywhere, a safety visor-and-magnifier-in-one.

Degel has always used a magnifying visor while engraving, but it's an even more essential tool these days. In June 2004, he suffered a detached retina in his right eye, and has been working since then with sight in only the left. "A bump in the road of life," is what he says, but he has endured four surgeries on the eye, and anticipates needing one more. He remains optimistic and expects to recover. Meanwhile, he is working a little bit slower, adjusting to the change in depth perception, and waiting for the wall of his injured retina to heal.

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His hands work in concert, thumbs overlapped. Degel's left hand turns the block, setting up the perfect angle for the graver, wielded by his right, to enter the work. The sharp tool, tight spacing, and sheer force required to cut metal by hand lead me to ask the whereabouts of the nearest first aid kit. He laughs and explains that the thumbs provide safety for both metal and flesh: their linked sensations are a kind of early warning system if a slip is imminent. Then, he apologizes that he can't chat while cutting because he's holding his stomach muscles tight. With back straight and feet planted squarely on the floor, he concentrates every muscle on the emerging line.

Soon he can rub off the Chinese white, revealing the gleaming trail of his first pass. To bring a three-dimensional look to the design, he broadens the curves, cutting parallel grooves with the lining tool. "Laying over," as engravers say, he twists his wrist, while at the same time digging forward and rotating the work. The effect is a thickening and thinning of the cut. The hallmark of an engraver's work is the quality of his or her "bright cut," the appearance of reflected light in the deepening grooves. Light plays in the channels as Degel takes the last tool, the round-bottomed graver, and, thumbs clasped, patiently

applies his finishing cuts, making each outline deeper and more refined.

After almost an hour of painstaking work, Degel removes the headjoint from its swaddling tape, polishes up the embouchure with a little saliva and terry cloth, and hands it to me.

I'm stunned. It's delicate as a watercolor and brilliant as a gemstone. I like the feeling of an engraved lip plate on my chin; it helps position the embouchure instantly, and reduces slippage when the performance heats up. But beyond utility, there's a beauty in these hand-wrought proportions that makes machine engraving seem dull by comparison. Engraver Richard Degel, rooted in the traditions of Boston's jewelry and flute-making communities, sends another lighthearted flourish into the world of music makers.

Sarah Merrow plays and repairs fine flutes in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Editor's note: This article is the first in a series of technology-related articles for The Flutist Quarterly.

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