

# January 2022

by Derek Katz

## Clarice Assad (b. 1978), *Synchronous*, for Oboe and String Quartet (2015)

This evening's program begins with two works for oboe and string quartet. In addition to being widely separated in their dates of composition, they represent very different assumptions about the relationships between players and audiences, and between different musical traditions. The Arthur Bliss Quintet was created for players and audiences specifically devoted to new music in the Western art tradition, and was initially only heard in festivals aimed at this very particular (and very small) community. Clarice Assad, however, both as a composer and as a performing artist, honors no boundaries between genres or locations and reaches out to many disparate and overlapping constituencies. Born in Brazil, resident in France and the United States; composer, pianist, singer; fluent in multiple languages and traditions, Assad draws generously from a rich and flexible repertoire of sounds, techniques and approaches.

*Synchronous*, from 2015, was commissioned by the La Jolla Chamber Music Society for the oboist Liang Wang. In her program note for the piece, Assad explains that the work has two movements, each lasting about five minutes. The idea is that although we will hear the two movements sequentially, they are actually happening the same time (that is, they are synchronous). This same stretch of time is experienced in very different ways in the two movements. The first movement, "Sunrise Reverie," takes place in a single location, during an "overwhelmingly beautiful" sunrise. Meanwhile (literally), the second movement, "News Feed," fills the same time period with different events from different places, as experienced through a social media news feed.

The two movements suggest many stark contrasts. The natural world is set against one mediated through technology, one location is juxtaposed with many disparate places, and the cyclical process of the movement of the earth around the sun sits beside the temporal specificity of the here-and-now news feed events. The first movement, in particular, suggests many precedents for musical sunrises, with famous examples from Haydn, Debussy and Ravel.

All of these contrasts encourage us to compare the ways in which we experience time in each movement, and, perhaps, to come away with a heightened awareness of the ways in which we are currently having our perceptions shaped by the media through which we encounter information.

On a specifically compositional level, the two movements represent deeply different ways of creating musical structures. "Sunrise Reverie" not only evokes the natural world, but is also the kind of music that is traditionally described with metaphors from that world. We might say that it develops organically, or that it grows from germinal ideas. We experience the musical flow as a continuous process. "News Feed," on the other hand, is all about contrast. Material that stretches from the 14th century to the present, and that seems to come from all over the globe (including Brazil) sits next to each other in distinct chunks, with well-defined beginnings and endings. This movement is built from blocks, instead of gradually evolving.

Camerata Pacifica audiences can look forward to two more new works by Assad in the coming seasons, both commissioned by Camerata Pacifica. The first, to be premiered next season with Clarice as pianist, is a chamber concerto for Piano, String Quintet & percussion. The second, is a work for accordion, clarinet, cello & percussion.

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## Arthur Bliss (1891-1975), Quintet for Oboe and String Quartet (1927)

Arthur Bliss belonged to a cohort of British composers difficult to pin down in terms of style or aesthetic goals. About the same age as Ivor Gurney, Arthur Benjamin, Herbert Howells and Eugene Goossens, all of whom were classmates at the Royal College of Music, Bliss was almost twenty years younger than Vaughan Williams and Holst. Bliss neither deployed and assimilated folk song in the manner of the latter two composers nor followed international trends with any notable rigor. Nor, for that matter, was he greatly marked by his year at the Royal College of Music, where he had unsatisfying tutelage with Charles Villier Stanford, who apparently found Bliss's work more bizarre than beautiful. In any case, Bliss's studies were abruptly curtailed by his army service in World War I, in which he fought from the trenches, was gassed, and lost a brother. The post-War years found Bliss gravitating slightly towards the lightness and irreverence of the young composers of Paris, and he made his mark with some notably cheeky works, including the quintet *Conversations* (1922). This features both a "Committee Meeting" in which a droning violin fails to bring the rest of the ensemble to order and a riotous romp through a London Tube stop.

Although it may not be directly relevant to the Oboe Quintet, I assume that Southern California audiences will be interested that Bliss spent much of 1923 to 1925 in Santa Barbara. Bliss's father, who was originally from Western Massachusetts, retired in 1923 and moved the entire Bliss household to California, purchasing a house in Montecito. Bliss had already been introduced to local audiences with a performance of some songs by the Los Angeles Chamber Music Society, and he quickly became involved in high-profile professional music making in the area, receiving further performances from the Los Angeles Chamber Music Society, and conducting the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra in a movement of his own "Colour" Symphony (1922). Bliss, who was financially independent, was also a vigorous and eager participant in the activities of the Santa Barbara Community Arts Association (the predecessor to the current CAMA). Bliss directed a choir for the CAA, and also presented concerts with a piano trio that included his brother Howard as cellist. In addition, Bliss contributed incidental music for CAA theatrical productions, and even acted in the

first play presented at the newly opened Lobero Theatre in 1924 (the part called for an actor who could play the piano). Starring with him in that production was young Trudy Hoffmann of Carpinteria, daughter of the director of the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum. She and Bliss were married in the Santa Barbara Mission in 1925. One can only assume that had Camerata Pacifica existed in 1924, Bliss would have collaborated with it.

The Oboe Quintet was composed in 1927 for the oboist Leon Goossens, the leading English player of his day, and amongst the most notable players internationally. In addition to his deft and expressive playing (heard on many solo, chamber and orchestral recordings still in circulation), Goossens also did much to expand the oboe repertoire, commissioning and premiering works from many British composers. Bliss was delighted to compose the Quintet for Goossens, writing in his autobiography "[i]t is always a joy to write with a superlative artist in mind, and besides the sound of the oboe with strings is exquisite."

While Goossens gave the first performances of the Bliss Quintet, it was neither commissioned by him nor dedicated to him. Instead, both the existence and early performance history of the Quintet were entirely due to the great American patron of chamber music Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Coolidge, herself an accomplished pianist and amateur composer, played an enormous role in supporting musicians and composers in both the United States and Europe in the first half of the 20th century. The Bliss Quintet gives a small, but typical, window into her involvement and importance. Bliss first met Coolidge during his time in America. Bliss, who, admittedly was consistently tactful and gracious in his autobiography, seems to have been impressed, describing her as being unique amongst patrons of music in "actually knowing a great deal about it, being able to play it, and in recognizing what an artist stands for, and so treating him as a friendly colleague." Coolidge not only commissioned the Oboe Quintet, but featured it in concerts in Venice and Berlin as part of a 1927 series of European contemporary music festivals. These concerts featured other works commissioned by Coolidge including the third string quartets of Frank Bridge (a particular favorite of

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Coolidge's) and Arnold Schoenberg (an afterthought as a sop to Berlin audiences). The Berlin performance was given by Goossens in collaboration with the Kolisch String Quartet, one of many ensembles supported by Coolidge. The Kolisch Quartet also performed the Quintet at Coolidge's behest in London in 1928 and Vienna in 1932. Given how difficult it is for contemporary works to receive second performances, Coolidge's commitment not only to commissioning new works, but creating the circumstances under which they could be performed, supporting the performers in question over long stretches of time, and encouraging subsequent renditions is an extraordinary model.

The Quintet is typical of Bliss's output in sounding very much like Bliss, but not connecting in immediate ways other compositional trends of the time. A 1932 Vienna reviewer was reminded of Debussy, but this only seems plausible in a very general sense. By 1927, Bliss had shed his "fashionable joker" persona of the earlier 1920s, and was writing more in a lyrical, pastoral mode.

While the three movements vaguely follow a familiar pattern with a slow middle movement and a lively finale, the first two movements are more notable for constantly shifting tempo and character than for establishing a mood and sticking with it. Bliss makes excellent use of the ensemble's potential for a variety of sound colors and sonic weights, with an emphasis on the viola as a solo voice to respond to the oboe. A cadenza-like passage at the very end of the second movement sounds a bit like a jig in slow motion, and the final movement pays off that suggestion with the use of an actual Irish jig ("Connelly's Jig," published in 1909 as "Connolly's Jig," and not to be confused with the Scottish "Father Connelly's Jig"). Perhaps not coincidentally, the 1922 Oboe Quintet of Arnold Bax, also composed for Goossens, also ends with an Irish Jig. The tune for the Bliss Quintet seems to have been suggested by an English critic. Feel free to ask the Artistic Director if the presence of the Irish element had any influence on the programming of this work.

## Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), String Quintet no. 2 in G major, Op. 111 (1890)

A quick scan of the Brahms literature would suggest that it is near-obligatory to describe his late works as "autumnal." Whether referring to the last piano works, many (but not all) of which are short and calm, the frequent wistfulness of the clarinet sonatas, or to the Biblical texts dealing with death used for the Four Serious Songs, it seems an irresistible temptation to link the special musical qualities of these works with Brahms's life and to assume a kind of artistic stepping back.

The String Quintet no. 2 in G major seems as if it should be one of those putatively autumnal works (and has, indeed, often been described that way). Brahms claimed that it would be his final work. The summer that he wrote the Quintet he wrote to friend that composition had become difficult, and that he just wasn't going to do it anymore. A year later, he sent the Quintet to his publisher, telling him, "with this scrap bid farewell to notes of mine - because it really is time to stop." There are, indeed, some reasons to think of the Quintet as having elements of nostalgia, both personal and historical. Like many Brahms works,

the Quintet may have some musical messages that would have been intelligible to his closest friends, but are opaque or ambiguous to outsiders and to posterity. The second movement theme outlines the pitches F-A-E, a cipher (in German) for "Free, But Lonely." This much is certain, as it was a sort of motto for the violinist Joseph Joachim, and Brahms had already contributed to a collaborative violin sonata for Joachim based on those pitches. But is the F-A-E cipher interwoven with another one, symbolizing the woman to whom Joachim had been engaged (and who left him free and lonely)? Is there a reference to the final number in Bach's St. Matthew Passion in the third movement, and, if so, is there a connection? Joachim must have known, but we probably never will.

Biographical speculation aside, the Quintet largely seems far from autumnal, and, in fact seems full of vitality, motion and exuberance. Upon first hearing the very opening of the Quintet, Brahms's friend (and first biographer) Max Kalbeck is reported to exclaimed "Brahms in the Prater!".

# January 2022

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The same story has Brahms replying “and all the pretty girls there, eh?” The Prater is a large public park in Vienna that was a favorite location for Brahms to walk, listen to popular and dance music, and, yes, probably look at women. However this may strike current sensibilities, it does not sound like an artist resigned to a coming metaphorical winter, but rather one who still felt pretty vigorous. Brahms, after all, had just turned 57 when he composed the Quintet. If the ebullient opening of the Quintet is a frisky Brahms walking through the Prater, perhaps the more intimate second theme, first heard as a viola duet, is more akin to the dance music that he might have heard there, with a bit of a waltz feel. There is more dance music in the third movement, a kind of peasant Ländler reflected in a worn and cracked mirror, both subdued in dynamics and with the accompaniment constantly stumbling behind the melody. The Quintet ends with another possible reference to the outdoor music of the Prater, a high-spirited final romp in Brahms’s beloved Hungarian style, yet another kind of music that he could have heard played there.

Another mark of the Quintet’s energy and ambition is the sheer volume of sound sometimes produced by the five instruments. The very opening, in particular, calls for a grand and glorious ensemble sonority. According to Kalbeck, Brahms originally intended this material for a prospective fifth symphony, and it is easy to image the passage sung out by a full orchestra (and many a cellist would be grateful for some section mates to help compete with the lower strings). Finally, the Quintet is late enough in the 19th century that it has moved out of the realm of domestic chamber music accessible to amateurs into a world of professional ensembles. The Quintet was requested by Joachim for his quartet (hence, perhaps, the possible references to him in the piece). Joachim did play the work, but the very first performances were given by the quartet of Arnold Rosé.

Rosé, concertmaster of the Vienna Court Opera orchestra (and, therefore, of the Vienna Philharmonic) and future brother-in-law of Gustav Mahler led the first performances of many notable works with his quartet, including the first two Schoenberg quartets. This both provides a nice link to the first half of the program, if we remember that the next Schoenberg quartet was premiered alongside the Bliss Oboe Quintet, and also an opportunity to think about the changing circumstances under which new chamber works are produced. Brahms wrote for the musicians who were his friends, Bliss wrote for an individual patron, and today composers like Clarice Assad are likely to be commissioned by ensembles like Camerata Pacifica.