March 2022

by Derek Katz

Chamber Music for Winds

John Harbison, whose 1978 Quintet for Winds will conclude this program, highlighted the comparison between the scope of the repertoires for strings and for winds in his notes for the first recording of his Quintet. "Ever since Marsyas, a flute-playing satyr engaged in competition with the string player Apollo, was flayed alive for being unable to sing and play at the same time, wind players have been sentenced to forage in a sparse and undernourished musical literature. Now things are changing. Wind players, forced to be part of the musical present, are shaping a future for themselves through their energy and advocacy of new compositions." This program will offer examples of ways in which wind players have enlarged their repertoire through both transcriptions and commissions, while also demonstrating that the older literature is richer and more nutritious than Harbison suggested.

Edouard Destenay (1850-1925), Trio in B minor for Oboe, Clarinet and Piano, Op. 27 (published 1906)
II. Andante non troppo

The first half of the program is made up of music for two winds and piano that is beloved by players, despite being composed by musicians who are not exactly household names. In fact, our first composer, Edouard Destenay, is almost completely obscure (this is the rare pairing in which Carl Reinecke gets to be the famous one). You are not going to get much biographical information about Destenay, because very little is known about him. He was born in Algiers to a family of French military officers and also made a career in the army, primarily as an administrator and as a teacher at a military school. At some point (probably in his late twenties or in his thirties) he seems to have studied music in Paris, and he made a small, part-time career as a musician in Paris between his retirement from the military in 1903 and the beginning of World War I.

The Trio for Oboe, Clarinet and Piano is dedicated to the oboist Louis Bleuzet, who was a professor at the Paris Conservatoire and principal oboe of the Paris opera, and the clarinetist Émile Stiévenard, another first prize winner from the Conservatory who was principal of the Concerts Lamoureux orchestra and played for the Paris Opéra comique (and later came to America, where he played bass clarinet in the Boston Symphony after the War).

Both players are remembered today for pedagogical works (etudes for Bleuzet, scales for Stiévenard). The dedication describes the piece as an "homage and cordial souvenir," suggesting both that Destenay was moving in fairly lofty musical circles in Paris and also that he might have played with Bleuzet and Stiévenard, presumably as a pianist.

Judging by this Trio, the two wind players must have been quite accomplished, and it easy to imagine a friendly reading of the work by them with the composer at the piano. The middle movement of the Trio is operatic in style. After a brief, recitative-like introduction with the oboe as singer and the pianist providing an accompaniment that sounds like an orchestral reduction (complete with timpani strokes in the left hand), the clarinet enters with the first in a series of melodies that would fit right into the opera houses where Bleuzet and Stiévenard were employed. A second idea is contributed by the oboe, with the piano now imitating a harp, and the two instruments remain together on stage for the remainder of the movement.

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Carl Reinecke (1824-1910), Trio in A minor for Oboe, Horn and Piano, Op. 188 (1887)

The "sparse and undernourished musical literature" for winds lamented by Harbison is not equally distributed across instruments and eras. One of the notably arid intersections is that of 19th century music for oboe. This was not due to a lack of proficient professional players. In addition to the oboists employed in opera orchestras (like Bleuzet) and in the increasingly common professional civic orchestras of the 19th century, virtuoso soloists like Antonio Pasculli composed staggeringly difficult fantasias on opera themes for their own use. What was missing was a critical mass of amateur oboists to provide a market for chamber works including the oboe. This was partly due to the inherent difficulties of mastering double reed instruments, partially due to the tonal qualities of period oboes, which didn't blend easily with other instruments, and (perhaps most importantly) also a result of the lack of mass-produced, affordable oboes. In this context, the 1887 Trio for Oboe, Horn and Piano by Carl Reinecke is not only a lovely piece in its own right, but also a rare and valuable specimen of Romantic oboe music.

Carl Reinecke was one of the most important figures in German musical life in the second half of the 19th century, albeit much more as a teacher and administrator than as a composer. Reinecke began teaching at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1860, eventually becoming director in 1897, and also conducted the orchestra of the Leipzig Gewandhaus from 1860 until 1895. By all accounts, Reinecke was an excellent orchestra builder and leader, bringing the Gewandhaus Orchestra to a very high standard, and also significantly elevated the status of the Leipzig Conservatory during his time as director. For all of his impact on the musical culture of Leipzig, Reinecke failed to establish himself as a composer as he would have liked to. Letters from Reinecke to the directorate of the Gewandhaus complain about his onerous duties, which, in addition to daily hours of rehearsal and teaching, included everything from ordering instruments and music to arranging transportation and luggage storage for visiting soloists and vacation time for his orchestra players, leaving little time for his creative work. Further letters to the directorate complain about the infrequency with which his works appeared on Gewandhaus programs, despite contractual obligations. For all that Reinecke would have liked his works to have been heard more often in Leipzig, he was touchingly humble about his status as a composer, writing in his autobiography that he "didn't indulge in the false hope that his works would endure," and in a letter about one work that he had "no brilliant or original inventions" to offer.

In all three realms of his musical life, Reinecke was a staunch adherent to the more conservative trends in in German musical culture. As a conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, he was a great advocate of Johannes Brahms. As a composer, he was widely considered an epigone of Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, and, as a conservatory director, he hired professors who shared his aesthetic inclinations. In this way, Reinecke was simultaneously preserving the Leipzig legacies of Mendelssohn and Schuman and establishing Leipzig as musical culture resistant to the trends exemplified by Liszt and Wagner. Not surprisingly, the Trio sounds very much like a work that could have been written by Robert Schumann (perhaps with some assistance from Brahms). It is not known why Reinecke composed the Trio (he doesn't mention the work in his autobiography), but it seems reasonable to assume that he wrote it to play with colleagues from the Gewandhaus Orchestra at one of the chamber music recitals at the Gewandhaus. When the Trio was published, it was issued with alternate parts for violin and cello, on the no doubt correct assumption that not many copies would be sold to amateur wind players.

In general, the Trio is a lyrical and melodic work in which the piano plays a largely subsidiary role. This may reflect professional deference from Reinecke to his wind playing colleagues, or, perhaps, his own preferences as a player. Reviews of the young Reinecke as a pianist suggest that he was better suited to chamber music than to a career as a soloist. The oboe part lies very low on the instrument, frequently descending to low B. This was the lowest note on almost all oboes at the time, and below the range of some instruments. In addition to these particularly low notes, the part tends to sit in the lower register, below the ranges usually used for orchestral solos (and lower than the oboe part in the Destenay, which is both generally higher and also rises to the very top of the oboe's range).

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The horn writing is more idiomatic, taking advantage of the instrument's ability to produce soft, low pedal tones, and including some distinctive fanfare figures.

The first movement is in a very standard sonata-allegro form. It starts with a legato cushion of arpeggios from the piano, supporting an oboe theme, that while soft and smooth, does have a march-like dotted rhythmic figure. The contrasting second theme is a noble (Brahmsian?) melody first heard in the horn. The movement is expressive throughout, but Reinecke creates variety by subtly altering the rhythmic pulse in the piano part. The piano breaks into slow triplets for the transition between the first and second themes (one of the rare passages where the piano comes to the fore), and the return of the main theme in the recapitulation repeats the oboe melody as heard before, but over rippling, rapid triplets in the piano. After the predominantly legato first movement, the light and lively scherzo is an effective contrast. The movement opens with a chain of short, repeated notes, all on the same pitch, but tossed back and forth between oboe and horn. This leads to a bouncy theme, which is balanced both by an expressive answer from the piano, and, on a larger scale, with a passionate trio section in the middle of the movement. For all of his humility, Reinecke did have a knack for a good tune, and the theme of the slow movement is an excellent example of his craft. Reinecke cleverly delays its full appearance, first presenting what sounds like the opening of a theme in the piano, and then in the oboe, before revealing the actual melody in the horn. The final movement neatly ties the work together by recalling material from earlier movements. The main theme is sort of a major mode version of the first movement's opening theme, with the march rhythms smoothed out, and the glorious horn melody from the slow movement makes a welcome surprise reappearance in the middle of the movement.

Reinecke may not have been a strikingly original composer, but this Trio is a typically well-crafted work that is very satisfying for both players and listeners. For most of us – and certainly for oboists and horn players – the existence of more music in the idioms of Schumann and Brahms is something to be grateful for and enjoy.

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Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso for Violin and Orchestra (1863)
Arranged for Flute and Piano by Jasmine Choi

Another way in which wind players have expanded their repertoire is by transcribing works originally intended for other instruments. The Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso by Camille Saint-Saëns was originally intended to be the final movement of his first violin concerto and was composed for the brilliant Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate, who was still a teenager in 1863. All transcribers face the challenge of adapting music to fit the ranges and technical possibilities of the instruments that will play the new version. Transcribers of virtuoso pieces confront the additional hurdle of finding idiomatic equivalents for the tricks and gimmicks that made the original works impressive in the first place. It's not enough to play the notes, but also necessary to find something on your instrument that will create the same effect of technical difficulty produced by the original version. As it happens, the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, even though composed for the great virtuoso violinist of its time, has relatively few passages that can only be played on a string instrument. It is attractive because of its infectious melodies and sexy rhythms, rather than relying on double stops, harmonics, plucked notes or other specifically violinistic effects.

The relatively straight-faced introduction can be played by the flute pretty much as written, with the exception of a few places that drop below the range of the flute. In one passage where in the original Saint-Saëns presents a lively idea and then repeats it on the violin's lowest string, Choi clever raises the answer up two octaves, providing the same kind of contrast, but taking advantage of the flute's upper register instead of trying to mimic a violin. The ensuing Rondo is in a Spanish style, both flattering Sarasate's origins (and compositional style) and reminding us that Iberian touches were exotic and fashionable in Paris well before Bizet's Carmen. This, too, is mostly in single notes, and in comfortable ranges for the flute. Choi makes many subtle alterations, but most would only be noticed by violinists. There is one extended passage in double stops, for which Choi finds the practical and effective solution of having her collaborator at the piano play the lower line. There is also a short, cadenza-like passage in triple stops near the end of the Rondo. Here, the triple stops become rapid, bravura arpeggios. Although flute articulations are very different than violin bow strokes, lightning-fast passage work is equally breath-taking on either instrument.

John Harbison (1938-), Quintet for Winds (1978)

As quoted in the opening paragraph of these notes, John Harbison generously places his Quintet for Winds in a larger trend of wind players creating repertoire for themselves by performing and advocating for works from the later 20th century. Harbison's Quintet has certainly benefitted from this kind of support from players, especially the Aulos Wind Quintet, for whom the Quintet was commissioned, and the Emmanuel Wind Quintet, who gave the first New York performance, and performed the Quintet over 40 times in the 1980s. It is also the case that the Quintet is very closely tied to the Naumburg Foundation, which commissioned the work, and which awarded competition prizes to both the Aulos and Emmanuel ensembles. The Naumburg Foundation, established in 1925 by an enthusiastic amateur cellist who grew up with family chamber music parties, is just one example of the ways in which the musical cultures of the United States have been shaped behind the scenes by individual patronage. Harbison has also described writing for wind quintet as being more challenging than composing for a more "naturally felicitous combination of instruments," like the string quartet. Leaving the compositional implications aside for a moment, perhaps the more important comparison between wind quintets and string quartets is that string quartets have existed as full-time professional ensembles since the late 19th century, while the professional wind quintet is a 20th century phenomenon, and, even today, usually a group that is only part of the professional life of the players, who either have their primary employment in an orchestra, or are piecing together a living from multiple gigs.

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Harbison does seem to have very consciously written a work that runs contrary to the established priorities of the string quartet genre. While string chamber music has historically been received as conversational, with the different instruments creating individual identities and entering into dialogue with each other, the Harbison Quintet is about blending instrumental sounds, and subsuming players into ever-shifting group identities. As Haribson writes, "I determined to deal in mixtures rather than counterpoints, and to strive for a classical simplicity of surface – to maximize what I felt to be the great strength of the combination, the ability to present things clearly."

This emphasis on mixtures is immediately obvious in the opening Intrada. Here, a theme is presented by horn and bassoon in unison, creating a timbre that sounds like neither instrument, while containing elements of both. This theme is supported by a second texture created by the upper winds, with a tremolo in the flute mixing with sustained notes from the oboe and clarinet. This process of creating new timbres by having multiple instruments play in unison continues as the music becomes louder and more assertive, eventually leading to the entire quintet playing themes in exact unison. Harbison also describes the Quintet as "extremely challenging to play," and one of the (many) difficulties of the work is that finding pitches that can be played by all five instruments frequently bring both the horn and bassoon parts into their extreme upper registers. Both parts are cruelly high, and not only require producing these pitches, but doing so quietly, with control, and while blending with other instruments in their (relatively weak) lower registers.

The Intermezzo that follows is lilting, with a near-constant flow of even eighth notes. It seems as if it has the potential to swing into a waltz-like dance feel, but the shifting measures of five and seven beats keep the sway from becoming too regular. A middle section provides more examples of instrumental mixtures, with the flute and oboe either playing together or rapidly alternating two-note figures, again creating a distinctively new sound.

The middle movement is a Romanza, which starts off deceptively calmly. A languid melody in the oboe keeps falling slightly before or after the main pulses, giving an impression of either anticipation or hesitancy. This is answered by new set of mixtures with a wide-ranging melody for flute + clarinet supported by horn + bassoon. The accompaniments to these melodies develop increasingly elaborate embellishments, leading to a louder and more rhythmically active middle section. This section seems to realize some of the dance potential of the preceding movement, finally falling into a consistent three-beat meter.

The challenge of the Scherzo is obvious. It's really fast, and has outer sections filled with perpetual motion running figures passed between all of the woodwinds (the horn is at least spared this particular trial). There is a brief moment of repose in a slower middle section before the perpetual motion machine erupts again.

The Finale starts with a slow introduction. After the complex textures of the earlier movements, the stark block chords of the opening, starting very soft before being interrupted by forceful interjections, provide a striking contrast. The main section of the finale is marked Alla marcia and opens with motoric short notes from the oboe and muted horn. This supports a brash clarinet solo (marked "coarse") with swinging rhythms and some flutter tonguing, perhaps suggesting a touch of Benny Goodman or Artie Shaw. The swinging rhythms (and the flutter tonguing) move to the rest of the quintet, sometimes playing individual solos, and sometimes in unison mixtures. This element is frequently interrupted by repeated, very wide leaps of two notes. The melodic element wins out, and the movement builds to a whirlwind conclusion.