

# November 2024

by Rebecca Winzenried

## **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) Sonata for Oboe and Piano in D Major, Op. 166 (1921)**

In 1921, at the age of 86, Camille Saint-Saëns set himself a new challenge: to compose a series of works for wind instruments that were neglected in the solo repertoire. He began with three sonatas – for oboe, clarinet, and bassoon – each dedicated to a famed musician of the instrument.

His first effort, the Sonata for Oboe and Piano, was inspired by Louis Bas (1863–1944), principal oboe of the Paris Opera, and Société des concerts. Saint-Saëns was perfectly comfortable with the piano writing for the sonata; he had been performing piano recitals since his public debut at age ten, and he had gone on to become a renowned organist, serving at the Church of the Madeline from 1858 to 1877. Less familiar with writing for winds, he consulted Bas to learn the strengths and subtleties of the oboe, with happy results. He wrote to his publisher in June of 1921: “Mr. Bas came to try out my Sonata and it worked like a charm.”

Light-hearted in character, the Oboe Sonata emphasizes the instrument’s tonal and expressive qualities in three movements that progress in tempo from the gentle Andantino to virtuosic scales of the Molto allegro. The second movement allows the soloist freedom of tempo in Ad libitum sections bookending a dancing Allegretto.

It’s no surprise that Saint-Saëns would choose to tackle the capabilities of wind instruments so late in his career. His life was marked by a curiosity that led him to explore wide-ranging subjects – mathematics, astronomy, Classical languages, archeology, botany, zoology. He acknowledged as much, writing: “I am an eclectic spirit. It may be a great defect, but I cannot change it; one cannot makeover one’s personality.” He was also drawn to developments being made in brass and woodwind design and manufacturing during the latter half of the 1800s, a time when new instruments like the saxophone vied for prominence.

Following the first three sonatas of 1921, Saint-Saëns intended to continue with compositions for flute and cor anglais. It seemed an entirely possible task, given that he was leading an active life traveling between Paris and Algiers, where he had a residence. His playing at a piano recital that November in Paris was said to be vivid and precise. It was not to be, however. Saint-Saëns died of a heart attack in December, 1921, a month after the three sonatas were published.

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## **Edwin York Bowen (1884-1961)** **Viola Sonata No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 18 (1905)**

Although he was acclaimed as a pianist, York Bowen was also a champion of the viola, that stepchild of the string repertoire. He aimed to broaden its solo appeal by composing a number of works for the instrument he believed was superior in tone to its flashier kin, the violin, including a concerto and two sonatas. All were premiered by Lionel Tertis (1876-1975), a leading violist at the turn of the century, who drew Bowen into his personal crusade to build up the instrument's profile. Tertis was used to being told that the viola could never be a solo instrument. He wrote, "I gave lots of recitals but the prejudice I came up against was extraordinary. Everybody seemed to be up in arms at my daring to play solos on the viola."

The sonatas came first, written in 1905 and 1906, when Bowen was a student at the Royal Academy of Music, where Tertis was a professor. In the Sonata No. 1, Bowen's first composition for solo instrument, Tertis encouraged him to consider virtuosic techniques common to violin writing – high-register work, extended double stops, scale-like passages – but not usually considered for viola. Bowen dedicated the sonata to Tertis, who described it as "vivacious," and the duo performed its premiere on May 19, 1905 in London. It was their first performance together, and the first by Tertis in a solo role. Bowen was just 21.

Sonata No. 1 is quite vivacious in its lush textures and emotive, Romantic character. A repeated "sighing" viola line in the first movement is underscored by a richly written piano part – a reminder of the characterization of Bowen as an English Rachmaninoff. The lyrical central movement brings out the viola's singing quality while the energetic concluding Presto movement showcases a player's technical prowess.

Bowen enjoyed a lengthy, productive career as a pianist, composer, conductor, and Royal Academy professor. He premiered his four piano concerts, his violin works were performed by the likes of Fritz Kreisler and Efrem Zimbalist, and his orchestral music was performed at the BBC Proms. His influence waned as his Romantic style fell out of favor, but Bowen's efforts to elevate the viola worked, as his sonatas have become ensconced in the repertoire.

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## Niloufar Nourbakhsh (b. 1992) *Veiled* (2019)

Described by *The New York Times* as “lyrical yet aggrieved,” *Veiled* conveys a sense of barely contained emotion in the pleading sounds of viola combined with live electronics and recorded voice. It references protests by Iranian women against mandatory veiling and other restrictions, and it comes from a very personal place for the composer. Niloufar Nourbakhsh has written of the courage required to stand up:

“As an Iranian woman, I carry a lot of anger with me. Anger that comes from witnessing things happen to the women in my personal life, to a larger scale, growing up in a country that actively veils women’s presence through compulsory hijab or banning solo female singers from pursuing a professional career. For me, it’s important to transform this anger into a collective force that is both beautiful and resilient. *Veiled* is a tribute to those Iranian women who made such transformations possible.”

Nourbakhsh grew up in Karaj, outside of Tehran, where she was immersed in Persian classical music along with Western classical, pop, rock, and hip hop. After some years of piano study, she gravitated toward composition in her teens, but her efforts were discouraged. She set her sights on music programs in the U.S., earning a degree from Goucher College in Baltimore and going on to graduate and doctoral studies at Stony Brook University in New York.

During those years Nourbakhsh began to discover the works of contemporary women composers and to find a sense of community therein. Through social media, she connected with other Iranian women composers in the U.S., and co-founded the Iranian Female Composers Association in 2017. The group now has a registry of more than 70 names worldwide, including several in Iran.

Nourbakhsh’s works reflect concerns with human rights, political and social justice movements, in titles such as *No One Is Born Hating Another Person*, *We the Innumerable*, and *An Aria for the Executive Order*, the latter a reaction to U.S. travel bans imposed in 2017.

Electronics and fixed media are a regular part of her work. In *Veiled*, the soloist plays over the recorded vocals of a woman, and live electronics render the viola part in reverse. *Veiled* was originally written for cellist Amanda Gookin in 2019, and was revised the same year for Iranian violist Kimia Hesabi. In notes for Hesabi’s recording, Nourbakhsh points to covered hair as a metaphor for women’s presence in society: “I used the meaning and concept of ‘veiled’ in creating sounds from the instrument that ‘dissolve’ or are ‘covered’ in various ways.”

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## Helen Grime (b. 1981) *Two Birthday Fragments for Solo Oboe (2022)*

*Two Birthday Fragments* is indeed a tidy work – of two parts lasting about two minutes. Scottish composer Helen Grime wrote it as one of the nearly dozen “birthday cards” for Nicholas Daniel Oboe Day at Wigmore Hall, London, on April 20, 2022. The occasion marked the celebrated oboist’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and the “cards” came in the form of contributions from composers including Thea Musgrave, Huw Watkins, Hannah Kendall, and Colin Matthews. Daniel was the soloist for *Two Birthday Fragments*, and he performs it here for the first time since that occasion, in his role as Camerata Pacifica’s Principal Oboe.

Composer Helen Grime, who grew up outside of Aberdeen, knows her way around the oboe. It was her primary instrument as a student, when she played in the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland, and she continued with performance and composition studies at the Royal College of Music in London. She first drew attention by winning a British Composer Award in 2003 for her Oboe Concerto. Grime was the soloist in its premiere at the Meadows Chamber Orchestra in Edinburgh, which had commissioned the work.

Other pieces for the instrument include her Oboe Quartet (2011), *Three Miniatures for oboe and piano and the solo Arachne*, both from 2013.

Her music has been performed by major orchestras, chamber ensembles, and soloists around the world. In this country, her *Meditations on Joy* had its world premiere by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in February 2023. Although she is perhaps best known for her association with British music institutions. She was associate composer of the Hallé Orchestra from 2011 to 2015 and composer in association at Wigmore Hall from 2016 to 2018.

This work’s dedicatee, meanwhile, has helped broaden the oboe repertoire over the course of his career, commissioning and performing numerous new pieces. Daniel played the world premiere of Grime’s *Arachne* at the Gregynog Festival in Wales in 2013, and with the Britten Sinfonia (of which he is a founder and principal oboe) played the Country Premiere of her Oboe Quartet that same year at Wigmore Hall.

*Two Birthday Fragments* is structured in two sections, the rhapsodic *Freely*, *Dreamlike* and the contrasting *After Fernand Gillet*, a name known to oboists far and wide for the French-American musician’s textbook *Exercices sur les Gammes, les Intervalles et le Staccato*.

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## Thomas Oboe Lee (b. 1945) *Parodia Schumanniana* (2019)

You know the *Parodia Schumanniana*, right? It's that type of cactus that's small and roundish, armored with vertical rows of dangerous-looking spines, and occasionally topped with bright yellow blooms. A succulent-loving co-worker may have brought you one for your desk. You just never knew the name.

This isn't that *Parodia Schumanniana*. True, composer Thomas Oboe Lee took the botanical name for his trio for oboe, viola, and piano, but mostly for its whisper of a reference to Robert Schumann. He'd been asked to write a work for the Ensemble Schumann (violinist Steve Larson, oboist Tom Gallant, and pianist Sally Pinkas) and was looking for ways to take off from the composer name they, in turn, had adopted.

Lee's sense of humor is apparent (his most popular work is titled *Morango ... Almost a Tango*, written for the Kronos Quartet). He has long been known for eclectic music that draws from wide-ranging sources and genres. It's reflective, in part, of his own background and roundabout journey to classical composition. He was born in Beijing to parents who were nightclub musicians with a penchant for American jazz and pop music.

They left for Hong Kong after the Communist Party was installed in 1949, but migrated after a while to Brazil. Lee spent his teens there soaking in the bossa nova craze, learning to play flute, and performing in jazz bands.

He continued playing jazz gigs during college in the U.S., heading to New England Conservatory for graduate studies. There he turned toward composition after being immersed in the language of symphonic music and 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, even as he continued to play jazz gigs.

The accumulated experiences inform his compositions. He has commented, "The first thing people say after hearing my music is, 'Your stuff is all over the place. I hear jazz, I hear samba, I hear neoclassical and romantic things.'" The results are inventive works like this trio in four movements.

At first, *Parodia Schumanniana* seems as anxious and prickly as its namesake with a sparking viola line threading through the first movement Presto. It settles into a sure-handed interplay of instruments in the central movements – haunting spareness in the Largo and a sweetly melancholic Adagio. Yet, after a brief Schuman-esque Interlude, it returns to spiky urgency. Like its composer, *Parodia Schumanniana* can't exactly be pigeonholed, but it is a delight from start to finish.

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Rebecca Winzenried regularly contributes program notes to the New York Philharmonic and other ensembles, and is editor of program books for *The 92 Street Y* in New York City and *Washington National Opera* in Washington, D.C.