March 2026

by Derek Katz

Madeleine Dring (1923-1977)
Trio for Flute, Oboe and Piano (1968)

A very versatile musician and artist, Madeleine Dring studied violin, piano, composition, drama and mime at London's Royal College of Music, starting with violin classes in the Junior Division at the age of ten. She was involved with various forms of theater from an early age, including annual Christmas plays for children put on by the RCM, for which the young Madeleine both acted and composed incidental music. These experiences led to a later career in which Dring provided music for all kinds of dramatic productions, from movies, radio and television to stage plays and ballets. Her stylistic range was corresponding large, with her songs, in particular stretching from art songs for concert use to witty songs for musical revues and cabarets, frequently dipping into jazz or Latin dance styles.

Dring's list of instrumental concert works is shorter, but her marriage to the oboist Roger Lord (eventually the long-time principal of the London Symphony Orchestra) resulted in a high percentage of them featuring the oboe. Lord added to the Dring oboe canon by transcribing other pieces for oboe. The 1968 Trio for Flute, Oboe and Piano is one of the pieces for Lord, commissioned by a chamber group that he was a member of. Lord performed the Trio both in England and in the United States, where the first American performances were given with André Previn at the piano. The Trio is compact and witty, efficiently showcasing multiple aspects of Dring's music.

The first movement seems to come from the world of musical theater, with the piano providing a driving rhythmic accompaniment, and the winds in close cooperation playing slinky lines that shift between major and minor in a bluesy way. The apparently rhythmically square accompaniment figures quickly shift to unexpected odd meters. A middle section allows for a little more independence for each of the three players while maintaining the bouncy and difficult-to-predict meter changes. The opening material returns, and the movement fades away at the end with an evaporating flourish from the winds and fragments of the piano accompaniment. The cheekiness of the first movement gives way to sincerity in the slow movement, which features a melody that is flat-out gorgeous. Dring gifts most of the melody to her husband, supported by gentle and simple chords in the piano. The flute briefly echoes part of the melody, with the effect heightened by a sudden shift to a distant key, before the oboe pulls the music back to the home key. A more turbulent middle section, with the winds again mostly working together, leads to a return of the main melody, this time enhanced with decorative winding lines from the flute. Dring moves to a more satirical mode for the final movement, which seems to be a bit of a parody of nineteenth century instrumental showpieces, with both oboe and flute attempting to break into stock melodic and virtuoso figures, while getting tangled up in apparently wrong notes and harmonies. The two wind players succeed in taking over the proceedings with an extended duet cadenza before the pianist, having had enough, interrupts and drags the soloists back to the ensemble and a scramble to the finish.

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Note from the composer

David Bruce
Natural Light

The British artist Brian Clarke creates art using the unusual medium of stained glass. Traditionally associated with religious buildings, stained glass invokes the divine through its fragile beauty and ephemeral light. Clarke's innovation was to reimagine this spiritual quality outside of religious contexts. So although his work is sometimes found in churches and mosques it is equally found in shopping centres, airports, and homes. The materials are the same, but their effect—what Clarke calls transillumination, the light shining through—is no less profound.

After hearing a performance of Duruflé's Requiem, where Gregorian chant melodies are bathed in impressionistic harmony, I was struck by how old musical forms could resonate in new ways. This inspired me to try placing medieval materials "in a new light." Just as Clarke extends the language of sacred art into secular spaces, I wanted to draw on the expressive power of ancient melodies to evoke a sense of spirituality that is not confined to religion. The resulting work, natural light, consists of five movements. Each engages with fragments of medieval music, but recontextualises them in different ways. The odd-numbered movements lean toward the spiritual and reflective, while the even ones are more exuberant or playful.

A solo clarinet acts as the thread running through the piece—capable of both wild exuberance in the energetic even-numbered movements and the hushed delicacy and introspection of the more spiritual odd-numbered ones. Its ability to inhabit such contrasting emotional worlds gives the work a unifying voice, one that can sing, dance, or quietly illuminate, depending on the light it finds itself in.

I. Floating

A single Gregorian melody refracts across the quintet, creating the impression of multiple colours within a single line—like the different colour wavelengths hidden in white light.

II. Bursting

A sombre, chant-like melody forms a backdrop, from which joyful bursts of dancing, carnival-esque, clarinet-led grooves erupt, violently colourful against a dark background.

III. Passing

Evening light sways softly, evoking repose, reflection, or remembrance. The movement opens with a solitary clarinet call, before another chant melody is surrounded by gently blurred harmonies and delicate arpeggios.

IV. Intersecting

A doleful version of an anonymous 13th-century melody is repeatedly fragmented and interrupted by wonky rhythmic bursts of colour, two very different colours that are forced into dialogue.

V. Transilluminating (Homage to Brian Clarke)

This last movement is dedicated to Brian Clarke, who died very shortly after the completion of this piece. Another ancient melody, this time by the composer Pérotin, is played in barely perceptible tones—glimpsed from afar, as if through mist or soft, shifting light. The music hovers on the edge of audibility, still and suspended. There is a sense of fragile ephemerality—of time, meaning, and light.

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by Derek Katz

Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944)
***Thème varié* for Piano, Op. 89 (pub. 1898)**

Cécile Chaminade was one the most famous and successful composer-performers of her time, publishing hundreds of works, touring internationally as a pianist, and hobnobbing with royalty and politicians. In her twenties, she composed in a broad variety of genres, writing chamber music, orchestral music, an opera and ballet. After 1890, however, she concentrated almost exclusively on short piano pieces and songs, and it was for these types of music that she was known and rewarded. This move reflected both the expectations for women musicians at the time, associating Chaminade with the female realms of the salon and of the domestic amateur musician, and also the types of music that were most marketable and lucrative for publishers. By the turn of the century, she was an international celebrity, especially in England, where her character pieces were fixtures in the same Victorian homes that had been so hospitable to Felix Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, and where she was a favorite of Queen Victoria herself. Chaminade was also wildly popular in the United States, where hundreds of Chaminade Clubs had sprung up. She was planning an American tour already in 1898, but eventually came to this country in 1908, making a 12-city tour, earning the equivalent of millions of dollars in today's money, and being received by President Theodore Roosevelt. Chaminade's triumphs were almost completely confined to spaces dominated by women. It was primarily a community of female amateurs that purchased the sheet music for her compositions and that sang her songs, and the American Chaminade Clubs were also formed by women, as part of a larger national movement of women's music clubs. Chaminade provided a model and much needed inspiration for American women seeking musical training and spaces to perform but was also generally dismissed by a male-dominated critical establishment that found her music insubstantial and sentimental.

Chaminade's *Thème varié* ("Varied Theme") is not one of the short character pieces once so beloved of amateur players, but a flashier and more technically ambitious work suited for concert performance. As suggested by the title, it is not a formal theme and variation set, but rather a theme followed by two decorated repetitions. The theme itself seems a little stylized and self-consciously old fashioned in comparison to Chaminade's more typical works. The theme is particularly effective in its deployment of different registers of the piano, beginning in the upper middle, dramatically introducing the low register at the end of its first half, and saving a fuller texture using most of the keyboard for the second half. The two varied statements of the theme that follow both shift to a darker minor mode at their beginnings and become increasingly assertive and bravura. It is easy to imagine Chaminade wowing her fans with this impressive, but modestly scaled, piece on her concert tours.

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by Derek Katz

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) – arr. David Jolley (b. 1948)
Quintet in A major for Piano and Strings, Op. 81, arr. for Piano and Wind Quintet (1887)

By 1887, Antonín Dvořák was internationally famous and financially secure. Dvořák composed relatively little around this time, instead returning to early works and revising them for sale to Simrock. One work in this backlog was a quintet for piano and strings in A major, composed in 1872. Dvořák worked on revising the quintet for around five months, but, apparently still unsatisfied with the piece, set it aside and rapidly composed a new work for the same instruments in the same key. This new quintet quickly became one of his best known and loved works. It is extraordinarily tuneful, even by Dvořák's unusually high standards in this regard, and makes particularly telling use of the expressive juxtaposition of major and minor modes. Czech scholars often refer to this period of Dvořák's life, before he left for America, as a "second national period," pointing to works like the second set of Slavonic Dances or his song cycle "In Folk Tone" (both from 1886). Similarly, the Piano Quintet shows some traits of a national style.

The Piano Quintet will be performed in an arrangement by the distinguished horn player David Jolley in which the four string parts are transcribed for wind quintet. Jolley, a frequent horn soloist and principal of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra is also a member of the Windscape wind quintet, for which he has transcribed a number of works, including a Dvořák string quartet. Turning the Quintet into a Sextet creates greater timbral variety than Dvořák's original, as the five wind players have a wider range of tone colors than the essentially similar strings. Adding an additional player is less of an issue than it seems, as Dvořák frequently asks the strings to play double stops, so there are plenty of notes to go around.

The Piano Quintet is largely devoted to the full presentation of characterful melodies, rather than with their development. The luscious main theme of the first movement, for instance, is given a leisurely presentation by the horn (cello in the original), then shortly returns in a partial statement from the piano, and another full version from the flute in a high register (first violin). Satisfyingly large chunks of this melody also feature in the following development section, where we might otherwise expect it to be broken down into motives. The second movement is a *dumka*, alternating slow, minor laments with lively, dance-like sections. A *duma* (*dumka* is the diminutive) is a kind of Ukrainian lament, but there doesn't seem to be any connection between Dvořák's *dumky* and any folk precedents. More importantly, both the mournful and vigorous sections sounds as if they *ought* to be derived from folk culture. Here, the poignant melody of the slow sections, originally given to Dvořák's own instrument, the viola, is played by the bassoon. Similarly, the scherzo is subtitled "furiant." This a Czech dance (albeit one that urban, middle-class Czechs would have known as a social dance, not as a folk dance), but the quintet movement does not have the distinctive rhythmic patterns that typify the dance. No matter; it's an attractive and vigorous dance. The middle section is exceptionally based on a slower version of the primary theme, rather than presenting wholly new material. The finale is again lively, blending the world of Dvořák's Slavonic Dances with a chamber music style.