

# Oboe Obsession

**ALLAN  
VOGEL**

plays  
Romantic  
and  
Virtuosic  
Works  
for Oboe



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**W**hy is it that great composers so often turn to the oboe at crucial moments? Perhaps there is something about the way we oboists produce sound — the entire stream of our breath needing to pass through that small opening between the two blades of the reed — that is emblematic of the human condition, and makes our oboe so supremely capable of expressing human feelings.

The oboe sonatas of Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) and Francis Poulenc were both written at the end of their composers' lives and reflect very different states of mind. The last note of the Saint-Saëns piece is a high D, which is also the first note of the Poulenc sonata. While the final D in Saint-Saëns' work heralds the triumph of beauty and virtuosity, the opening D for Poulenc is the reflective beginning of a deep and multi-faceted search.

**Camille Saint-Saëns** was one of the most stunning child prodigies in music history. He started composing at age three and gave his debut recital in Paris at age ten. His long career had its share of turmoil partly because composers such as Wagner and Berlioz were unsympathetic

to him. At one time he even left Paris and went to live in Egypt. However by the time he was in his eighties he seems to have achieved a wonderful serenity. This oboe sonata, Opus 166, affirms beauty and simplicity in music. If we can judge by the *Andantino*, (which means slower than *Andante*), the composer already has a vision of Paradise. The second movement, with its opening and closing *ad libitum* sections basks in tonal and melodic warmth. The *Molto Allegro* is an exuberant virtuosic romp with many exciting passages. The oboist Louis Bas, to whom the sonata is dedicated, was renowned for the excellence of his scales!

**Francis Poulenc** (1899-1963) reached the end of his days in a much more complex state of mind than his French predecessor, if one can judge from his sonata, composed the year before his death. It is written in memory of Sergei Prokofiev, but as with Mozart, it turned out that he was writing his own Requiem. It may be that he never heard it performed. The first movement is an *Elegy* which begins and ends peacefully but travels through many abruptly contrasting moods as though a person is trying to come to grips

with the reality of his own death. The *Scherzo* catapults you into the midst of Parisian nightlife. There follows a most beautiful and touching slow section, which evokes a sense of life's richness. The *Déploration* is not only a lament but also a succession of strongly contrasting moods. For me, the hushed sonorities in the first phrase of the piano are not sad, but rather express a cosmic wisdom. Many of the melodies have an upward turn as if asking eternal questions. The end is most mysterious.

**Benjamin Britten's** (1913-1976) Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Opus 49, are brilliant musical renderings of the ancient Roman writer's tales of change. During its first performance, which took place on a barge, the manuscript was blown into the water and had to be fished out. Britten provided his own short notes but a little additional commentary might be interesting.

*Pan ~ who played upon the reed pipe which was Syrinx, his beloved.*

Because almost all the melodies are step-wise, this piece could almost be played on Pan pipes (which are made from the same

bamboo-like plants from which we oboists make our reeds). This music depicts Pan's mercurial and mischievous nature.

*Phaeton ~ who rode upon the chariot of the sun for one day and was hurled into the river Padus by a thunderbolt.*

This piece is in several short sections. At first we hear the exuberance of a joy ride. With the legato passages in the high register we feel the chariot approaching the sun's warmth. We note the loss of control and the thunder, which destroys the vehicle. Finally there is the sun on the water and the last air bubble coming to the surface.

*Niobe ~ who, lamenting the death of her fourteen children, was turned into a mountain.* The poor woman grieves her way into more and more despair. The last phrase, which is marked to be played without expression, depicts her as the mountain.

*Bacchus ~ at whose feasts is heard the noise of gaggling women's tattling tongues and shouting out of boys.*

This piece describes a wine-soaked party with its protagonist becoming increasingly less steady. Britten ingeniously depicts the various utterances of the revelers.

Narcissus ~ *who fell in love with his own image and became a flower.*

We hear the upper register of the oboe mirror the lower, and can follow the merging of the two in the climactic moment of a trill. The last phrase shows the two subtly joined as the flower.

Arethusa ~ *who, flying from the love of Alpheus the river god, was turned into a fountain.*

Britten is able to suggest fountains, streams and waterfalls. What genius is employed in depicting so much with a single oboe!

Just as the Britten *Metamorphoses* is the most shining masterpiece in the literature for unaccompanied oboe, so are the Schumann Romances the clearly most outstanding Romantic period chamber music work for oboe. **Robert Schumann** (1810-1856) wrote them in 1849, one of his happiest and most productive years, and gave them to his wife Clara as a Christmas present. He considered the Romances his one-hundredth work (although they are officially Opus 94), and it is heartwarming to know that the pieces were special to the Schumann household as they will always be to our community of oboists.

Both the first and third Romances have the tempo marking *Nicht schnell* (not fast) so the musicians are thus advised to temper the intensity that the notes carry. These are, after all Romances. The second is marked *Einfach, innig*, which means "simple, ardent." *Einfach* probably refers to the peaceful outer sections, while *innig* describes the passionate middle section. With the high notes towards the end, the heavens seem to open.

A conversational aspect is most prominent in the duet for flute and oboe by **Wilhelm Friedemann Bach** (1710-1784), originally written for two flutes. Unlike those conversations that rely on mere words, both partners can speak, or in this case sing, simultaneously without fear of interrupting. Wilhelm Friedemann was the first born of his father's twenty children and was given a thorough musical education by his father. The famous two part inventions, which are also conversations, were originally written for him. In J.S. Bach's introduction to these Inventions, he advises composition students to not only create good ideas, but also to develop them well. We can be certain from this wonderfully worked out duo that his son learned this lesson. It is amazing

how eloquently the composer is able to spin out his tales. The third movement, filled with lightness and humor, is most welcome.

Obsession is an extremely apt title for this work by **Makoto Shinohara**, who was born in Osaka, Japan in 1931. The piece begins with a mysterious brooding mood as if something is emerging from the deep. There is a repressed feeling, but things do not stay repressed for long. Whatever energy was pent up is eventually expressed to the point of being frightening! At the very end, after a primal scream in the extreme high register, the creature slinks back into his cave. We can certainly hear the Japanese elements in the Shakuhachi-like utterances of the oboe, and the brittle piano chords, which evoke the mood of Japanese drama. Shinohara wrote this piece while in Paris in 1961 where he had been a student of Messaien. It was written as a test piece for the graduates of the Paris Conservatoire. Sometimes it seems that to play the oboe well one has to be quite obsessed with it; and we oboists can unfortunately come close to the difficult moods depicted in Obsession when we are having a bad reed day.

*Allan Vogel*

**Allan Vogel** is one of America's leading wind soloists and chamber musicians. Hailed as "an aristocrat of his instrument, an oboe virtuoso with few equals," (*Los Angeles Times*) and "undoubtedly one of the few world masters" (*San Diego Union*), he is solo oboist of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. He has performed concerti with orchestras throughout the country and has been featured at the Chamber Music Northwest, Marlboro, Santa Fe, Aspen, Mostly Mozart, Summerfest, Sarasota and Oregon Bach festivals.

Mr. Vogel has been guest principal oboist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra for concerts in the major European capitals, Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and the Boston Symphony Hall. He has also performed with the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and the Berlin Philharmonic. He has often been a guest with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York City and has completed three tours of Japan. Allan made his concerto debut in Lincoln Center's Tully Hall with the New York Chamber Symphony and recorded as a soloist with the Seattle Symphony. His CD, *Bach's Circle* can be heard on Delos (DE 3214).

Mr. Vogel is on the faculty of California Institute of the Arts and the University of Southern California. His former students hold many prominent orchestral and university positions throughout the country. He received a Doctorate in performance from Yale University where he studied with Robert Bloom. He also worked with Lothar Koch in Berlin on a Fullbright Fellowship and with oboists Fernand Gillet, Josef Marx and Jean de Vergie. Mr. Vogel serves on the advisory board of the American Bach Society.

Flutist **Janice Tipton** has appeared as a soloist and chamber musician across the country. Hailed as "superlative" by the *Los Angeles Times*, Ms. Tipton has performed as a soloist with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the California Chamber Symphony, and in addition with the Angeles, St. Petersburg and Prague String Quartets. Janice has also had appearances at the chamber music festivals of Santa Fe, Chamber Music Northwest, La Jolla Summerfest, Sedona, Tucson and New England Bach, as well as at the Oregon Bach Festival, where she performs as a principal in the festival orchestra. She also spent ten years as a member of the Los Angeles Opera

Orchestra. The current season includes appearances at BargeMusic in New York and at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Ms. Tipton has toured Costa Rica with the Valencia Trio and Eastern Europe with the vocal ensemble Cantori Domino. She is a member of Bach's Circle, the Valencia Trio and the Santa Clarita Chamber Players. She has recorded for Delos and Etcetera Records as well as for the Friends of Arizona Chamber Music.

**Bryan Pezzone** is the consummate crossover pianist of his generation. He has excelled in classical, contemporary, jazz, and experimental genres and is known for both his versatility and virtuosity as a performing artist, improviser and composer. He has performed with many major symphony orchestra associations, has toured widely with the jazz group "Free Flight", and is known in the Los Angeles area as one of the primary freelance pianists for film and television soundtrack recording, contemporary music premieres, and chamber music accompanying. He is often asked to give workshops on his comprehensive approach to improvisation and is a consulting editor for the well-known publication *Piano and Keyboard*.

## ALSO FEATURING ALLAN VOGEL:

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