

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) Andante & Allegro for oboe & string trio (c.1878)

This short work is one of the earliest pieces that Elgar wrote. After leaving school at 15, and teaching himself the violin, he earned a living in Worcester taking piano and violin pupils and playing the violin in concerts. He started to conduct, and from about the time this piece was written, he held a post at the local lunatic asylum composing dances for the gallimaufry of instruments in the staff band, which he conducted. This piece however may have been written for performance at the Worcester Glee Club which met at the Crown Hotel. It has only recently been published, liberated from an oddments folder in the British Museum, its minimal markings enriched to make it playable. The only title is the seasonal inscription 'Xmas music' on the oboe part.

Elisabeth Lutyens (1906-1983) Oboe Quartet Op 81, 'Driving Out the Death' (1971)

Carrying out of Winter – Pantomimos - Carrying out of Summer – Euché - Driving out the Death - Dithyrambos

Financially, Elisabeth Lutyens' most successful music was her film scores for Hammer Horror and its rival Amicus; known as the 'Horror Queen', she was said to sport green finger nails. Forced into such commercial composing by the need to support children and a husband without a secure income, she was also extremely efficient at producing music for documentaries and plays. Her apophthegm '*Do you want it good, or do you want it Wednesday?*' describes how she felt about this side of her musical personality. Her musical heart lay in the expressive rigours of her own brand of Schoenbergian serialism about which she was uncompromising. Widespread recognition of her serious music was slow in coming. In the 1970's, as the musical avant-garde moved on from the Schoenberg revolution, her style mellowed somewhat allowing her lyrical talents to be more fully expressed.

Shortly before writing this oboe quartet, Lutyens had composed the opera 'Isis and Osiris'. Like that opera, the oboe quartet is concerned with the seasonal ritual of life and death from Greek legend. The six sections are played continuously, each based on an oboe motif. The central section Euché (prayer) is very still; the final section is a hymn to Dionysus.

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W. A. Mozart (1756-1791) Adagio for Cor Anglais & String Trio K580a (1789)

Mozart's manuscript of this piece is just a fragment. He specified that the upper part should be played by the cor anglais, but we do not know what he intended for the other three parts. Alfred Einstein's 1937 edition of Köchel's catalogue suggests 2 violins and cello, but the authors of the 1964 edition revise this, for technical reasons, to 2 horns (or basset horns) and bassoon. Consequently, numerous different arrangements have appeared in print. The theme is beautiful – if it reminds you of something, it could be the opening of his famous motet '*Ave verum corpus*' which he wrote two years later.

The cor anglais bears the same relation to the oboe as the viola does to the violin, larger and sounding a fifth lower. But why 'cor anglais' when it is neither English nor a horn? The instrument was invented in Silesia around 1720. Its predecessor, the oboe de caccia (hunting), with its curved body and flared bell, looked like the horns apparently played by

mediaeval angels. The Middle German word *engellisch* can mean either angelic or English, so perhaps the meanings got muddled.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Phantasy for oboe and string trio in F minor Op. 2 (1932)

Andante alla marcia - Allegro giusto - Con Fuoco - Andante alla marcia

Around 1900, the composition of English chamber music was not flourishing; audiences subscribed to the Vaughan Williams 'cigar theory' – that music was a luxury that should be imported. Walter Willson Cobbett was determined to make it home grown. Amongst many other effective activities, he instituted a competition for new chamber music. The first competition in 1905 required a 'Phantasy' String Quartet. A Phantasy was Cobbett's reinvention of the Fancies and Fantasias of Purcell, Byrd and Gibbons. It was to be short (<12 mins), treating the instruments equally, played continuously and with contrasting sections. That, Cobbett thought would appeal to the 'untrained listener'.

Frank Bridge, who later taught the young Benjamin Britten, came second to William Hurlstone in the 1905 competition, but won the 1907 competition for a Phantasy Piano Trio, and in 1910 was commissioned by Cobbett to write a Phantasy Piano Quartet. So Britten would have been familiar with the Phantasy form both from Bridge and from his own admiration of Purcell. In 1932, the year that he completed his Phantasy oboe quartet, Britten himself won the Cobbett prize for his Phantasy in F minor for string quintet. Though the oboe quartet is a mere Op 2, it follows over a hundred schoolboy compositions, some of which had impressed Bridge to take on the 14-year-old Britten. Bridge instilled into the young Britten a strict technical discipline, which brings a satisfying structure to the free form of the Phantasy.

Britten writes ingeniously for the strings in combination with the oboe. The piece starts with a barely perceptible solo cello gradually approaching, introducing a march (illustrated) somewhat reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* (which had had its London premier in 1927). The march turns into a lively *Allegro giusto* (strict) with contrasting episodes for solo strings and then an oboe cadenza before the march returns and the solo cello leads us away into the distance.



Oliver Knussen (b. 1952) Cantata for oboe and string trio (1977)

Oliver Knussen sprang to prominence aged 15, when he stepped in to replace István Kertész conducting the premier of his own first symphony. Since then he has both composed and conducted a wide variety of music with distinction. He writes: 'Cantata was begun at Tanglewood, Massachusetts, in July 1975 and completed in London in October 1977. During this long period I was trying to as it were define my musical space – a time of considerable frustration and little completed work – exploring the harmonic areas I had stumbled upon when composing the first part of my Third Symphony (1973-79). [Of] the three pieces which eventually emerged... Cantata is consciously more relaxed and lyrical, but also quite compact – a single movement playing for about ten minutes.

'The title was arrived at after noticing that the relationships between the various episodes reminded me of the interdependence of recitatives and more-or-less self-contained numbers in some 18th-century solo cantatas, an impression reinforced by the

predominance of the oboe. A slow introductory section proceeds, via a sequence of quasi-developmental episodes, towards a wild climactic passage featuring an elaborately ornamented (almost oriental) oboe line over manic violin and cello pizzicati. There follows an extended coda, in which the opening oboe melody reappears in altered form over a gently rocking repeated figure in the strings. Although essentially abstract, the work is certainly subjective, which fact may encourage the listener to let the music evoke whatever personal imagery it may contain.'

Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989) String Trio Op. 19 (1943)

Moderato

Adagio

Allegro

In his mid-twenties Lennox Berkeley studied with Nadia Boulanger and Maurice Ravel in Paris where he also met Poulenc, Stravinsky, Milhaud and Honegger. French music was to have a lasting influence on him. In his early thirties he met the 10-year younger Britten in Spain. They became close friends and for a while shared the Old Mill in Snape. Their friendship endured and Britten became godfather to Lennox's son Michael, himself a distinguished composer.

The string trio was first performed at the Wigmore Hall in 1944 by the dedicatees Frederick Grinke, Watson Forbes and James Phillips. Each of the work's movements uses a different classical form: sonata, ternary and rondo respectively. They show in James Rushton's words *'a bitter-sweet, most approachable lyricism whilst maintaining with unfailing clarity rich contrapuntal interest.'*

W. A. Mozart (1756-1791) Oboe Quartet in F K.370 (1781)

Allegro

Adagio

Rondo: Allegro

In 1777 Mozart had been impressed with the playing of the oboist of the Mannheim court orchestra, *'whose name I have forgotten but who plays very well, and has a delightfully pure tone. I have made him a present of my oboe concerto [K.314] and the fellow is quite crazy with delight'* (Mozart's letter to his father from Mannheim 1777). The oboist in question, Friedrich Ramm, was indeed delighted with it and performed the concerto five times in the space of two weeks. Three years later Mozart was commissioned to write an opera seria (*Idomeneo*) for the Munich 1781 Carnival season of the court opera. Mozart met up with Ramm again who was still playing in the court orchestra and wrote an Oboe Quartet for him. Ramm, who had been appointed to the court orchestra when aged only 14, must have been a formidable player, for Mozart's quartet tests even today's oboists on their technically much more sophisticated instruments.

The piece is a showcase for the range of expression of the instrument, from the exuberance and virtuosity of the outer movements to the soulful aria-like slow movement.

Although thematically the piece is impressively economical, with the opening theme doing double service in the first movement and then metamorphosing into the *Rondo* theme, Mozart does not economise



on the technical demands made of the player: melodic leaps across almost the whole range of the instrument, isolated *piano* top Fs (the highest note on the classical instrument) and blisteringly fast passage work. The *Rondo* in particular requires extraordinary nimbleness. Its 6/8 semiquavers seem fast enough, but halfway through the movement the oboe leaves the strings chugging along in 6/8 quavers while it heads off in 2/2 cut time, squashing 16 semiquavers into bars that previously only held 12. After this breathtaking episode, the oboe has to navigate some tricky fast semiquaver octave leaps before cheekily bowing out on yet another quiet top F.