

Olivier Stankiewicz and friends

Bohuslav Martinů 1890-1959

Oboe Quartet H 315 Written in 1947

Moderato poco allegro

Adagio, Andante poco Moderato – poco Allegro

Martinů was a Czechoslovakian composer who was for a time a student at the Prague Conservatory. Composition was more important to him than his violin studies and he did not take to the rigours of the general curriculum and was eventually dismissed for “ incorrigible negligence” ! In the 1930s having moved to Paris Martinů wrote in the Neoclassical style and was influenced strongly by Stravinsky’s angular and rhythmic sound-world. Martinů drew on his Bohemian and Moravian traditional folk melodies and has thus been compared with Prokofiev and Bartók.

Martinů and his family fled Europe for the USA in 1940 and this oboe quartet was written in New York in a period of turbulent personal life. Martinů finally returned to Europe and died in Switzerland.

The quartet is a light piece which is rarely performed. It has two short movements. Martinů’s angular and quirky instrumental writing is evident and the strong rhythmical character and close imitation of phrases between the four players is immediately clear. The oboe is not seen here as the lead or solo player but is in balance with the other instruments.

The first movement has a genial mood and uncomplicated structure. The second movement is in three sections. The opening chords set up the dance style that reflects Martinů’s Czechoslovakian origins and sound-world. The quartet is rounded off with a short allegro that culminates in a straightforward cadence.

Poulenc 1899-1963

Sonata for Oboe and Piano 1962

Elégie (Paisiblement, sans presser)

Scherzo (Très animé)

Déploration (Très calme)

Francis Poulenc was born in Paris into a prosperous and well educated family. His mother taught him the piano from a young age. As a student he met Milhaud and Satie and others who encouraged him to compose. He travelled to Vienna and met Schoenberg. Composition training was not successful and Ravel could get nowhere with this most individual musician. Poulenc wrote many pieces of chamber music and much was influenced by Jazz.

Roger Nichols Poulenc's biographer tells us that "Poulenc's style and the French Aesthetic...are defined by their elegance, lightness of touch and humour but with the ability to move one deeply" For some commentators Poulenc's music is seen as slight, inconsequential and not worthy of serious consideration, but Nichols' view is more positive and understanding of a very complex personality writing music from his own conviction rather than received education and composition training.

This sonata for oboe and piano was dedicated to the memory of Prokofiev. It is from a group of three woodwind sonatas written in the last year of his life. The first movement is in three distinct sections. The Piano keeps the pulse while the oboe weaves around using its wide register in a variety of moods. The Scherzo is a lively three part movement with a slower middle area and more rhythmic outer sections. The final movement echoes the Chorale of Bach's time 200 years earlier. This movement is melancholic and has many references to Poulenc's own earlier music. The harmonic language of his choral pieces and Organ Concerto for example is reflected here.

Roger Nichols in The New Grove Dictionary of Music.

Sergey Prokofiev 1891-1953

Quintet Op 39 in G Minor. 1924

Tema con variazioni, Andante energico, Allegro sostenuto, ma con brio,

Adagio pesante, Allegro precipitato, ma non troppo presto, Andantino

Prokofiev was born in Ukraine. His mother was a pianist and a very strong musical influence over her only child. He was precocious and at eleven years old began to take lessons from Glier in harmony, form and orchestration. In 1905 Prokofiev joined the St Petersburg Conservatory. This was an uncertain and disruptive time as the arts suffered in the build-up to the Revolution. In 1918 Prokofiev travelled to the USA where he made a name as an opera composer, but he was dissatisfied and moved on in 1922, this time to Paris to join his mother who was already there. He married a singer and settled into a family life with their two sons. At this time there were no plans for the family to return to Russia.

This Quintet is closely related to Prokofiev's ballet *Trapèze* and is based on life in the circus. It reflects Prokofiev's characteristically ironic and unconventional musical world. The six movements demonstrate spikey angular lines and contrasting smoother melodies. It is playful and energetic and the circus is not far away. In the first movement the two contrasting variations are formed from the oboe's opening theme. The second movement features the double bass whose theme is taken up by the other instruments in turn. The third movement evokes the circus as the uneven rhythmical patterns in 5/4 time threaten to destabilise the listeners. The original ballet dancers found this particularly challenging too ! The *Adagio pesante* has a drone played by the double bass. This underpins a somewhat eerie sound above with the oboe and violin playing near the bridge. The fifth movement is as its title suggests very energetic and there are strong accents, rushing scales and pizzicato attacks. Finally a minuet and trio with instruments working in pairs. After the trio the minuet returns and the whole piece is brought to its end with a short dissonant passage and a rush to the finish which is led by the viola and double bass. Circus life indeed !

Helen Simpson