

Musique pour hautbois et piano Program Notes

Despite its former popularity as a solo instrument amongst composers of the eighteenth century, very few solo works for the oboe emerged over the next hundred years, as it came to be considered a primarily orchestral instrument. From this period, only Robert Schumann's *Three Romances* (1849) has earned a permanent place in the oboist's standard solo repertoire. Throughout the twentieth century, however, the oboist gradually emerged from within the orchestra and made his way back to the concert stage, thanks in no small part to the efforts of French composers and the *Concours* of the Paris Conservatoire. The *Concours* was the annual public student examination to conclude the academic year that would determine who was ready to graduate and pursue a professional musical career. A desire to pose modern technical challenges to the student and to develop a new wind repertoire led, starting in 1898, to the practice of commissioning composers to write new solo works for the *Concours*. Three of the works on this program were written for the *Concours* (those by Dutilleux, Sancan and Bozza), and each explored the soloistic capabilities of the newly developed modern oboe and stretched the boundaries of instrumental technique. Proving capable of meeting the technical and interpretive demands of the modern French composer, the oboe has since reestablished its status as a popular solo instrument with composers of all nationalities and renown.

Having just passed away earlier this year at the age of 97, **Henri Dutilleux** was one of the preeminent French composers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dutilleux rejected the common notion that French music was essentially frivolous and charming, but also felt uncomfortable with the absence of a tonal hierarchy in the music of the emerging reactionary serialists. As such, in his music he eschewed any particular school and explored the realm between modern compositional extremes. Dutilleux came to despise his early works, bemoaning their manipulation of an unoriginal musical language that was too derivative of Ravel. He thus disowned nearly every work he wrote before 1948. Dutilleux called the *Piano Sonata* from 1948 his Opus 1, finding it more representative of his true "aesthetic orientation." Written for the Paris Conservatoire *Concours* in 1947, Dutilleux's **Sonata for oboe and piano** falls into this category of discarded works. Referring to it as "rather utilitarian in intention," Dutilleux's main criticism concerns the haste with which it was written and the "too light nature of the last movement." While the first two thirds of the sonata certainly allude to the composer's more mature modernist works, it is my opinion that the third movement, which Dutilleux so detested, offers a necessary sonorous reprieve from the intensity and oppressive darkness of the preceding movements.

Gilles Silvestrini is a French oboist, teacher and composer. Born in 1961, he studied oboe at the National Conservatory of Music and Dance in Paris, winning first prize in 1985, and from 1986 to 1988 studied composition at the *École Normale de*

Musique. He has performed with orchestras throughout France, and since 2007, has been the oboe professor at the Conservatoire Erik Satie in Paris. Silvestrini wrote his virtuoso **6 Études pour hautbois** in 1984-5, of which two I will perform today. Dedicated to his teacher, Pierre Pierlot, Silvestrini's six études serve as short character pieces, with each depicting a famous French Impressionist painting. *Potager et arbres en fleurs, Printemps, Pointoise* (Gardens and flowering trees, Spring, Pontoise) is a 1877 painting by Camille Pissaro, and Silvestrini's musical portrait consists of two alternating sections reflecting the dual aspects of spring. The persistently rhythmic opening section, representing the fresh, emerging frenetic activity of spring contrasts with the slower, more curious section that follows, bringing to mind the subtle though persistent stirrings in the nighttime. The Spanish influences are immediately clear in Silvestrini's rendering of the 1862 Edouard Mame painting, *Le Ballet Espagnol* (The Spanish Ballet). Bookended by quasi-cadential passages, there's no mistaking the middle section as anything but an embellished Sequedille.

Though he was an important figure on the French musical scene during the mid-twentieth century, **Pierre Sancan** is relatively unknown outside of his native country. He was principally a performer and teacher, holding a position on the Paris Conservatoire's piano faculty from 1956 to 1985. Though Sancan's oeuvre is rather small and unfamiliar beyond France, his *Sonatina for flute and piano* (1946) is a popular recital piece. Sancan wrote the **Sonatina for oboe and piano** in 1957 for the annual Paris Conservatoire Concours. This mischievous, and at times petulant, three-movement work is full of metric trickery, and it showcases Sancan's combination of contemporary performance techniques with the harmonic language of Debussy.

Marcel Bitsch was chiefly regarded as a great pedagogue, serving as professor of counterpoint at the Paris Conservatoire starting in 1956. He is the author of several textbooks on harmony, counterpoint and fugue, and in his later years he turned his attention to analyzing and teaching the music of Bach. Bitsch's academic interests are very much on display in his **Suite Française** of 1964, subtitled "Sur thèmes du XVIIe siècle." Using court dances and themes from the seventeenth century, the work is a four-movement dance suite in the French Renaissance tradition. While its influences are clear, touches of French modernism keep the piece grounded in the present. With an overall intermovement key structure of G-C-C-D, each dance of the suite generally conforms to the traditional models. It may be of interest to note that only the cheerful, concluding Rigaudon originated in France, while the other dances are of Italian and British heritage.

Another titan of the twentieth century French avant garde was **Darius Milhaud**, an incessantly prolific composer whose music often drew inspiration from the Provençal landscapes and popular musics of his youth. Though coming of age during the reign of French Impressionism, Milhaud resisted its call, finding the "affectation...insurmountably repugnant." Instead he was a composer of vast contrasts, combining fixed elements with aleatory, writing simultaneous lines with

differing tempos, employing polymodalities, and contrasting lyricism with complex harmonies. In the 1920s, he was particularly drawn to the complex rhythmic vitality of Harlem jazz, noting how the “melodic lines criss-crossed in a breathless pattern of broken and twisted rhythms.” Milhaud’s music was often highly contrapuntal and melody-based, and he regarded his polymodal musical language as the Latin solution to the decay of tonality (as opposed to the serialism adopted by the Second Viennese School). These attributes are all very much on display in his jubilant **Sonatina for oboe and piano** from 1954. At the time of writing his Opus 337, Milhaud juggled teaching posts on the composition faculties of Mills College (in the U.S.) and the Paris Conservatoire, all while battling severe bouts of rheumatoid arthritis that left him wheelchair-bound.

Eugène Bozza is known internationally for his substantial body of wind chamber works. Born in 1905, he came of musical age between the wars and lived through almost the entire century. An accomplished conductor and educator, Bozza led the Ópera Comique in Paris from 1938-48, and was appointed director of the École Normale de Musique in 1951, a post he retained until his retirement in 1975. Having resisted the many musical –isms of the twentieth century, Bozza’s works are noted for their structural elegance, melodic fluency, brilliant sonorities, and technical demands on the performer. Bozza composed his **Fantaisie Pastorale for oboe and piano**, Opus 37, in 1939 for the Paris Conservatoire Concours. Reminiscent of the typical structure of nineteenth-century contest solos, the work exists as a single movement with three linked contrasting sections. The exotic, quasi-cadential passages of the opening give way to the soaring lyricism on display in the pastoral middle section. The piece ends with a sprightly, quirky melody in 3/8, featuring cascading runs in the oboe that continue relatively unabated until its rousing conclusion.