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Program Notes
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Carl Nielsen (1865-1931): Two Fantasy Pieces, Op. 2: Romanze and Humoresque (1889)

The *Two Fantasy Pieces*, by Nielsen, along with *Three Romances for Oboe and Piano*, by Robert Schumann, are probably the most well-known and frequently performed works for oboe and piano from the Romantic period. They highlight the shift towards using the piano as a true second voice, creating an equanimous duo between the featured instrument and its accompaniment. In the previous Classical period, the accompaniment was more often orchestral – or a reduction of this, written for a keyboard instrument – while in the still earlier Baroque, accompaniment was in the form of continuo: harpsichord and other instruments.

These two fantasy pieces, composed early in his career (only his second opus), are representative of the composer's earlier style – uncomplicated, straightforward. One easily hears the natural, singing quality in the oboe line as it repeats, many times throughout the movement, the pensive descending fifth D-G. Indeed, in a note to Emil Holm in 1922 Nielsen himself admits he composed the melody with the oboe's characteristics in mind:

“The two oboe pieces are a very early opus. The first (slow) piece gives the oboe the opportunity to sing out its notes quite as beautifully as this instrument can.”

Despite being an early opus, Nielsen's ability to put forth a convincing composition did not go unnoticed. The first public performance given by oboist Olivo Krause (to whom this work is dedicated) and pianist Victor Bendix on March 16, 1891, in Copenhagen at a Royal Danish Orchestra Soirée received an excellent review:

As for new pieces, what was on offer last night was Carl Nielsen's Fantasy Pieces for Oboe and Piano. In this, the young talented composer has revealed no [average] knowledge of the peculiarities of the oboe as well as great technical skill in the structure of the composition. It is not ordinary, hackneyed motifs that Mr. Carl Nielsen uses; calmly and steadily he goes his own way. For that reason one can safely pin great hopes on the future of the young artist. Mr. Olivo Krause performed the not entirely easy oboe part with a full, beautiful tone, and Mr. Victor Bendix played the piano part tastefully and finely.

Sonata for Oboe and Piano (1962) **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)**

Sonata for Oboe and Piano

The sonata for Oboe and Piano, dedicated to Sergei Prokofiev, is the the final work composed by Poulenc in the last full year of his life, in 1962 with his death following in January 1963. For the listener, perhaps the most striking aspect of this piece is that it doesn't align itself with the usual fast-slow-fast layout of movements used in almost every oboe sonata or concerto-type piece composed up to that point. Instead, it follows a slow-fast-slow framework for the three movements, with the third movement ending in a pianississimo (ppp) chord sustained by the piano and oboe in harmony. If one thinks of some of the famous oboe sonatas or concerti (by Saint-Saëns, Strauss, Mozart, Haydn, etc.) or even Poulenc's own Trio for Bassoon, Oboe and Piano, all of these end with full volume at a relatively fast tempo. This incongruity with the standard – or a composer's own - style certainly brings to mind the way Tchaikovsky departed from his usual triumphant flourishes and ended his final work - his sixth

symphony - with its ponderous, pulsating chords, marked by advancing and receding dissonances.

Poulenc also had a penchant for self-quotation, the extent to which Pamela Poulin outlined in her 1985 dissertation *Three stylistic traits in Poulenc's chamber works for wind instruments*. She found twenty-one instances where the Oboe Sonata borrows material, either from his Flute Sonata, or his Clarinet Sonata. These are directly quoted, or slightly modified. Rather than creating a sense of repetitiveness, the re-appearance of thematic material and overlap instead creates unity throughout the totality of his compositional life – each piece is just a continuation of an idea, with different instruments telling the story.

Sonata for Oboe and Piano (1921),
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 - 1921)

The *Sonate pour Hautbois et Piano*, along the oboe sonata by Poulenc, and oboe concerto by Richard Strauss, share the distinction of being composed in the final year before the composers' death. One might wonder why this is so: did the composers feel more at ease conjuring up bigger projects, like symphonies, first? Or maybe writing for more traditional solo instruments first, like the violin or piano? Did the oboe slip their minds? Is it a “harder” instrument for which one can convincingly write? In Saint-Saëns' case, he began to favour composing with a more intimate texture. Sabina Teller Ratner writes:

“Towards the end of his life, he developed an austere style comparable to Fauré's. Throughout his career his art was one of amalgamation and adaptation rather than that of pursuing new and original paths; and this led Debussy to epitomize him as 'the musician of tradition'. Saint-Saëns himself suggested: 'I am an eclectic spirit. It may be a great defect, but I cannot change it: one cannot make over one's personality'”

In the first movement one can hear this simplicity and austerity in the interplay between oboe and piano. The first movement opens and closes with complete straightforwardness: a simple call and response theme where the piano plays the first beat, and the oboe responds on beats two and three, create the thematic framework for the entire movement. Like Poulenc, Saint-Saëns takes this simple material, and modulates it through different keys, elongating and shortening phrases to provide intensity and dissonance. The second movement again uses a type of call-and-response structure, but this time much freer, *ad libitum*, with the oboe performing horn-call arpeggios over sustained chords in the piano, at the beginning and ending of the movement. In between these two *ad libitum* sections, we are reminded of Beethoven's 6th symphony with its lilting bass in 12/8, with melody in the upper winds, when Saint-Saëns writes a similar pastorale-like dance section. Finally, the player and audience enjoy the frenetic energy in the third movement with rapid upward passages and large leaping intervals which allow the performer to best display his or her technical ability on the instrument.

Trio Sonata for Two Oboes and Continuo, in G Major, HWV 384
Georg Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Although this work is conveniently ordered in a set of six trio sonatas for two oboes under the number HWV 380-385, it is doubtful that Handel himself actually wrote any of these. They are often taken to be some of his earliest works, supposedly written when he was just 10 years old. On the original manuscript, it is written on the first oboe part, by the flautist Weidemann:

“The first Compositions Mr Handel made in 3 Parts, when a School Boy, about Ten Years of Age, before he had any Instructions and then playd on the Hautboye, besides the Harpsichord”.

Perhaps the misattribution of authorship arose when Lord Polwarth, who obtained this original manuscript while on tour in Germany, (sometime between 1724-1740), gave it to his teacher, Weidemann, claiming he had shown them to Handel. Handel is purported to have said:

“I used to write like the devil in those days, and chiefly for the hautbois, which was my favourite instrument.”

Despite this third-party assertion by Handel, further cross-analysis of Handel's other works by several scholars casts doubt as to the works authenticity. Terence Best, writing for *Early Music* in 1985 asserts:

“Anthony Hicks and Stanley Sadie, writing in the Musical Times,⁵ first expressed doubts about their authenticity. Sadie pointed out that they have 'not a hint of a Handelian fingerprint' and that Handel never borrowed from them later as was his custom with his early works. Their stylistic unity is unquestionable; they must all be the work of one composer.”

So, while these pieces may not be authentically Handel, they are definitely representative of the style of that period. The lush dissonance-resolutions played by the oboes in the first movement, to the dance-like second movement indicate to the listener that it truly is Baroque music, whoever composed it.

Trio for Bassoon, Oboe and Piano (1926) **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)**

Trio for Bassoon, Oboe and Piano – dedicated to Manuel de Falla

Composers can often write most convincingly for the instruments they themselves play at a professional level - in Poulenc's case, the piano. Throughout all Poulenc's works involving piano, a listener can easily detect the fluidity in the piano writing, allowing it to completely meld with the other instruments – it truly becomes an equally present and active voice instead of just the accompaniment. Poulenc himself premiered the trio, along with oboist Roland Lamorlette and bassoonist Gustave Dhérin on May 2, 1926, at the Salle des Agriculteurs in Paris. Given the composer's participation in this premiere, it is highly likely that he made modifications afterwards. Indeed, musicians of later generations are blessed with his directives, written in French, such as *“très tendre – le son très clair”*, *“avec charme”*, *“très doux et mélancolique”* - to name a few.

Throughout the three movements we can hear Poulenc's aforementioned borrowing again, and he freely admits to it in this response to critics implying his lack of formal structure:

“For those who believe that I don't care about matters of form, I don't hesitate to unmask my secrets here: the first movement follows the plan of an allegro by Haydn, and the Rondo finale is carved out of the scherzo of the Second Concerto for Piano and Orchestra by Saint-Saëns.”

Although the three movements are sketched from the formal structures of other composers, Pamela Poulin remarks that the realization of the work presents itself more as “witty parody.” In the third movement, *Rondo*, she notes how instead of the usual classical phrasing, in which a four-measure antecedent phrase is followed by a four-measure consequent phrase, Poulenc, in one example, shortens the phrase to 3+4, followed by 2+2+2. It is this ability to borrow, quote, and self-quote, while maintaining musical cohesion that makes Poulenc's music truly distinctive.

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