Virtuosic Commissioning: The Creation of a Canonized Oboe Repertoire

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On November 2nd, 2008, I performed a recital in partial fulfillment of the degree Master of Music at Ball State University. The recital consisted of three works, each of which presented a unique variety of challenges. Through this paper, I will examine how each of the works came into existence, and the difficulties that they present to the performer. Due to the fact that this paper serves as an accompaniment to the recital, I will discuss the works in the order in which I performed them.

Dutilleux’s Sonata for Oboe and Piano was commissioned to select the student skilled enough to deserve a diploma from the Paris Conservatory in 1947. Mozart’s Quartet for Oboe and Strings was written for a specific virtuosic oboe player, in order to show that player’s specific skills. Lachner’s Concertino, though not written expressly as a competition piece, was chosen to select the best player in the Fernand Gillet competition. Each of these pieces significantly expanded the limits of what was expected of the player, both in terms of technical aptitude and in the use of the extreme upper range of the instrument. Although the purposes for which they were composed varied greatly, they serve as benchmarks of virtuosity for oboe players and often as obstacles in competitions.

**Sonata for Oboe and Piano by Henri Dutilleux**

The limited oboe repertoire has been supplemented significantly by commissions for competitions. Henri Dutilleux composed his Sonata for Oboe and Piano in 1947 for the *concours* at the Paris Conservatory. This competition was held annually and determined which students were ready to graduate from the institution. Each year, the school would select one piece of music for the students from a particular studio to study. This was often a new piece, commissioned specifically for the *concours*. This ensured that the piece would challenge the students in a variety of ways and that no student would have an
unfair advantage. The students were responsible for preparing the work without the help of their instructors. They would each perform the work and be judged against a predetermined standard. If a winner was selected, he or she would have the honor of graduating from the Conservatoire, while the others could return the next year for more study, or leave the school without a diploma.

Henri Dutilleux was born in Angers, France in 1916 to a family with a strong artistic background; one grandfather was a composer and organist, as well as a good friend of Gabriel Faure. Dutilleux was raised in Douai and studied harmony, counterpoint, and piano at the local conservatory until the age of 17, when he moved to Paris. While in Paris, Dutilleux studied at the Paris Conservatory. He won the Prix de Rome on his third attempt, in 1938, but only remained in Rome for four months, as the outbreak of World War II required him to return to France. He served as a stretcher carrier in the war for one year before taking the position of chef de chant with the Paris Opera for a few months. Dutilleux began working as director of music productions for French radio in 1945. Over the next few years, he would write a series of woodwind test pieces. However, he would disown nearly all of the music that he wrote before his Piano Sonata (1946-1948), which he referred to as his opus 1. His Sonata for Oboe and Piano was commissioned by Claude Delvincourt, administrator of the Paris Conservatory. During his tenure, Delvincourt

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commissioned concours competition pieces by other such great composers as Messiaen and Jolivet\(^3\).

The first movement presents a wide variety of challenges for the performer; it requires variety of tone color and extreme dynamic range, with few opportunities for breaths. The first entrance is marked piano and occurs in the lower range of the instrument. In addition to entering quietly, the soloist must create a diffuse, ethereal quality through his or her tone. The oboe line requires great smoothness and legato as it moves into the upper register. The section that begins approaching rehearsal number 2 should be extremely powerful, and necessitates large volumes of air and impeccable pitch placement in the third octave. The final articulated section, with its foray into the lower range, is particularly difficult after having played for an extended period in the extreme upper range of the instrument\(^4\).

The challenges of the second movement differ starkly from those of the first. The opening is a minefield of mixed meters, and requires very careful subdivision. The motive that occurs at the beginning of the movement and is repeated in successively higher keys is very awkward for the fingers and demands careful practice to be played cleanly and accurately. The portion from five measures after rehearsal number 7 to five measures before rehearsal number 10 is also particularly challenging. The awkward fingerings, mixed fast articulations, and lack of sufficient opportunities for breaths would be more than enough for the performer to have to worry about. But Dutilleux further complicates the section by incorporating changes in meter and a relationship between the

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oboe and piano parts that makes it difficult for one collaborator to grasp onto the other if one slips up. The last significant challenge of the second movement is to create a weightless, floating character in the upper register after playing the intensely taxing driving, complicated rhythmic section. The juxtaposition of these two ideas can create a stunning contrast when performed effectively.\(^5\)

The third movement of the Sonata incorporates some of the challenges of each of the preceding movements. As in portions of both of the earlier movements, a significant difficulty of this movement is that it also requires a floating, ongoing character, which is very difficult to portray after having played two extremely taxing movements. The opening section contains large leaps in register and downward slurs, as well as occasional articulated runs. The segment from rehearsal number 12 to number 13 appears deceivingly simple; however, the \textit{pianissimo} dynamic marking and sustained notes require a great deal of control. After two measures of respite, the oboist must begin another technically challenging section. Between rehearsal numbers 13 and 16, the oboe line extends into the extreme upper and lower registers, spans dynamically between \textit{pianissimo} and \textit{forte}, and integrates syncopation, complex rhythms, and rapid articulation. The final portion of the Sonata, from rehearsal number 16 to the end, finds a return to the first theme of the third movement. However, in this statement of it, Dutilleux incorporates more articulated lines and extremes in register, even including a wild, jumping passage that spans from a high F to a low Bb, on which the piece finishes.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Dutilleux.
\(^6\) Ibid.
Quartet for Oboe and Strings in F Major by W.A. Mozart

Mozart composed his Quartet for Oboe and Strings (K. 370) for the German oboe virtuoso Friedrich Ramm (1741-1813). He had first become acquainted with Ramm in 1777 during a visit to Mannheim, a city which was revered for its virtuosic wind players. At the time of this meeting, Ramm was a soloist in the orchestra at Mannheim, and Mozart had recently completed his oboe concerto (K. 314). Ramm became well-known for performing the work, and the two would collaborate several times, as Mozart wrote a number of pieces for Ramm (the quartet being the best-known of these). In 1778, the orchestra of Mannheim moved to Munich with the Elector Carl Theodor. Upon arrival, he found that he possessed two great orchestras and decided to combine them. Mozart worked with the orchestra when he produced his opera Idomeneo in 1780-1781. It is most commonly believed that Mozart composed the quartet during the same period, although the work bears no original date; the writing on the manuscript that indicates the date belongs to an unknown person and was likely added later. The oboe quartet became the instrument’s main chamber music solo medium during the 1770s, replacing the solo sonata. Approximately 100 works of this genre were written, the most famous of which was Mozart’s.  

The modern oboe has very different difficulties than the Classical-era oboe, for which the Quartet was written. The Classical oboe lacked the keywork present on a modern oboe, instead having only two keys typically. Players covered holes drilled in the bore with their fingers and often developed their own utilitarian fingerings. They used a

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7 Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes, The Oboe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 90.
8 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Jaroslav Pohanka, and Brian Jeffery, Quartet in F Major for Oboe, Violin, Viola and Violoncello (Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1987).
number of forked fingerings, which made playing in some keys extremely easy, and others quite difficult. With such a vast discrepancy between the ease of playing in the different keys, it was especially important for composers to consider the instrument’s limitations when choosing a key for a new piece. F major, the key of the Quartet, was a key commonly used for oboe pieces in the Classical period because it was one of the friendlier keys in terms of fingerings. The forked fingerings of the Classical oboe allowed for maximal speed and fluidity, but resulted in extreme inconsistency in tone, as the forked fingerings often caused a “stuffy” tone color. While F major is not one of the most difficult keys in which to play on a modern Conservatory system oboe, it can be somewhat awkward. This is because, although the forked F fingering is often the simplest to maneuver around, it provides a tone color that is inconsistent with the notes surrounding it. As a result, oboists must choose between the standard and left-hand F fingerings, often having to slide or trade fingers to find the most convenient transitions.

The reed used on this type of instrument was also much less resistant. This made fast articulation easier, as well as significantly less taxing. The majority of the Quartet’s oboe line resides in the middle to upper register of the instrument. This makes it especially important for the soloist to have a reed that is “up to pitch” enough, otherwise he or she will have to use a great deal of extra muscular control and will become fatigued rather quickly.

The Quartet begins with a cheery sonata-allegro form movement, in which the oboe and violin playfully toss the melody back and forth. In order to be most effective, it

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9 Burgess and Haynes, 106-8.
10 Ibid., 98-9.
must be played with a lightness and joviality even though it presents a number of technical challenges. The oboist may experience a great deal of fatigue in the embouchure musculature if playing on a reed that lacks stable pitch placement. This is because most of the oboe line lies in the upper range of the instrument. On average, the range of the oboe line of the Quartet is roughly a major third above that of Bach’s oboe solos. Typically, the notes that lie outside the middle to upper range are at the beginnings of the ascending articulated runs (measures 17, 53, 81, and 127). Luckily, these runs occur after brief periods of rest, which give the player an opportunity to reset the embouchure for lower-range playing. These flourishes, as well as the many ornaments sprinkled throughout the movement represent the technical challenges of the Allegro.\footnote{11}  

The cheery ending of the first movement is followed by a dramatically different opening to the second movement, which is in d minor. The Adagio is much less challenging for the oboist’s fingers, but is deceivingly difficult. The oboe line is reminiscent of a soprano’s tragic aria, and must be played with a beautiful tone, vibrato, and pitch placement. This can be particularly difficult, considering the extremely high register and the large dramatic leaps, such as in measures 7 through 10 and the corresponding section, which occurs in measures 23 through 26. The soloist has a great deal of room for rubato throughout the movement and even has space for a cadenza in measure 31. The Adagio closes with a beautifully delicate arpeggiated ascent to a held high D.\footnote{12}
The third movement is the most challenging, technically. This movement was clearly written to give Ramm the opportunity to show off his prowess as a virtuosic player. Mozart’s writing sounds improvisatory at times and while the notes are very specifically notated in the score, the player must create the impression that he or she is embellishing the part on the spot. The challenges in this movement are plentiful; extended sixteenth-note runs and flourishes are scattered throughout the movement, as well as extremes in register and rapid articulation. One section that poses a particular threat to the ensemble is a thirteen-measure segment (measures 95 through 107) in which the oboe plays in cut time while the strings continue in 6/8. The cello gives the large beats (1 and 4), while the viola and violin play on the offbeats (2, 3, 5, and 6). The oboist must then fit a sixteenth note line over the top. The short figure from measures 152 through 155 is also rather daunting. The rapid movement between G, A, C, and Bb is extremely awkward and difficult to play cleanly on a modern oboe because the player must coordinate the movement of fingers from both hands at the same time; it would have been significantly easier on a Classical instrument because the fingerings for Bb and C only used fingers from the left hand, as opposed to both. It is followed by one of many articulated ascending runs, which returns the player to the upper register, where the piece concludes on a high F\textsuperscript{13}.

**Concertino for Oboe in B-Flat Major by Ignaz Lachner**

The discovery of a new work for oboe is always a cause for much celebration, as the instrument’s repertoire is so small. Works of the nineteenth century are particularly scarce because composers of the time did not seem fond of writing for the instrument.

\[^{13}\text{Mozart.}\]
The decline in the oboe’s popularity had much to do with the rise in that of the clarinet. Composers preferred the clarinet for its mellow tone, large dynamic range, and technical facility, all of which made the instrument better suited for the Romantic long-lined cantabile style than the oboe. While composers did not write nearly as extensively for the oboe as for the clarinet, they did write a number of virtuosic works for the instrument. Works from this period by composers such as Kalliwoda, Molique, and Pasculli have become part of the oboe canon, but many more likely remain undiscovered. When the Concertino for Oboe was discovered in the mid-1970s by descendents of Ignaz Lachner, those immediately affected were extremely excited. However, it would take another 30 years for the work to come to the attention of the oboe community.\textsuperscript{14,15}

Relatively little is known about the German composer Ignaz Lachner, who was born in 1807 in the town of Rain am Lech. Ignaz Lachner is often overshadowed by the reputations of his father, Anton, and his brother, Franz. Ignaz received a great deal of musical training from his father, and became talented player of the piano, organ, violin, and viola. At the age of 16, he moved to Munich and began to play for the Vorstadtischen Isartor Theater. Soon after, his brother Franz helped him to obtain the role of organist at a church in Vienna. While living in Vienna, Lachner became good friends with Franz Schubert and earned the position of second conductor of the Vienna Court Opera orchestra. In 1831, Lachner moved to Stuttgart to become a court music director. It was while he resided in Stuttgart that he composed some of his best-known works, including the opera “Die Regenbruder.” Lachner continued to travel, and held positions in Munich,

\textsuperscript{14} Bodo Lachner, “Die Entdeckungsgeschichte Von Ignaz Lachners Concertino Für Die Oboe,” in Concertino für Oboe und Orchester (Rödental: Befoco Verlag, n.d.).
\textsuperscript{15} Burgess and Haynes, 128-9.
Hamburg, Stockholm, and Frankfurt until his retirement in 1875. He continued to compose new works, primarily chamber music, until his death in 1895 and wrote more than 100 compositions in total\textsuperscript{16,17}.

A batch of notes of various composers, including Franz, Ignaz, and Vinzenz Lachner, was discovered in the corner of a deep, dark bookshelf in the middle of the 1970s. This collection had been left by Dr. Franz Lachner (1891-1964), who had owned the house containing the bookshelf. Within this collection was an album with the label: \textit{Concertino für die Oboe von Ignaz Lachner}. This handwritten score had remained untouched since the building of the house in 1928. Dr. Franz Lachner had inherited the notes from his father, Karl Lachner, Director of the College of Arts and Crafts in Hanover, and the youngest son of Ignaz Lachner\textsuperscript{18}.

Very little is known about the Concertino, but certain facts could be ascertained based on the details that were present in or absent from the score. It is unclear when or where Lachner composed the work, or for whom he wrote it. There was likely never a performance of the work, as the score exists only in the composer’s handwriting, and no orchestral parts accompanied it. The work is also missing from Lachner’s printed collected works and was just added as an appendix in 1974 by Harald Müller. Lachner researcher Harald Johannes was likely not aware of the existence of this work\textsuperscript{19}.

The premiere of Lachner’s Concertino for Oboe took place on July 12, 1992 in the Rudolf-Oetker Hall in Bielefeld, featuring soloist Takeshi Suzuki and the Bielefeld

\textsuperscript{16} Bodo Lachner.
\textsuperscript{18} Bodo Lachner.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Philharmonic, under the direction of Rainer Koch. Suzuki performed the work once again in Kyoto in 1993, but no other public performances took place until after the work was formally published\(^\text{20}\).

In 2000, Lachner’s great-grandson, Bodo Lachner began to search for a publisher for the Concertino. Along with the help of Bernhard Forster, a publisher and oboist who is concerned with the publication of hereto unpublished literature for his instrument, Bodo had the work published. It was given its first post-publication performance on January 18, 2002 by soloist Bernhard Forster with the Westsächsischen Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Ruben Gazarian in Borna, near Leipzig\(^\text{21}\).

Lachner’s Concertino for Oboe began to gain recognition in the summer of 2007, with the help of the International Double Reed Society’s annual conference. The conference is the home of the modern-day equivalent of the Paris Conservatory’s concours. The Fernand Gillet Oboe Competition is held biannually at the International Double Reed Society conference. The competition process begins more than a year prior to the conference, when a committee selects three to four works that competitors must prepare. These hopefuls are required to submit a recording of themselves playing the works, and the top five entrants are selected to compete live at the conference. The winner then has the opportunity to perform one of the works (pre-selected by the committee) on the closing concert of the conference. The Concertino was chosen to be performed by Jeffrey Stephenson, the winner of the 2007 Gillet competition, which was held in Ithaca, New York.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Bodo Lachner.
Lachner’s Concertino in B-Flat Major is a beautiful, lyrical piece first and foremost. Its challenge lies in conveying this, in spite of all of the technical intricacies. The opening of the first movement is relatively simple, except for a few isolated sixteenth-note runs. Many of these runs are slurred, which necessitates even greater clarity and fluidity of finger motions. Throughout the movement, the soloist must strive to create and maintain a long melodic line throughout all of the registers. The most difficult technical challenges of the movement are concentrated in the coda section, which begins in measure 178. These include slurred sextuplet runs, staccato arpeggiated patterns, large register leaps, extreme upper register, and few places to breathe. Luckily, this rather taxing portion of the piece is followed by an extended orchestral interlude, which transitions into the second movement.

The second movement is a beautifully melancholy Andantino in 6/8 meter. Its challenges are primarily expressive, as opposed to the finger and tongue calisthenics found in the other two movements. The Andantino contains a number of large leaps and arpeggiated figures that span between registers. These must be executed with precise pitch placement, and while maintaining a consistent, warm tone. This movement is rather taxing, due to the long lines and scarce opportunities for breaths. The cadenza in measure 68 is particularly challenging because the rest of the movement causes such fatigue.

The final movement of the Concertino is a sprightly Rondo. Creating an appropriate character for this movement is difficult, after having played the first two taxing movements. Specific challenges of the Rondo include variety of rapid articulation,

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22 Ignaz Lachner, *Concertino Für Oboe Und Orchester* (Rödental: Befoco Verlag, n.d.).
23 Ibid.
creating fluidity in slurred runs, cumbersome fingerings, extreme range, and endurance. The section starting at measure 116, and its parallel beginning in measure 284, require extremely careful practice. Both segments include tricky finger motions, and Lachner also changes notes in the passage, so that the pattern is nearly the same, but not exactly. A similar relationship occurs between the segments beginning in measures 326 and 354, which occur near the end of the work. By this point, the soloist is quite fatigued and the subtle differences are particularly difficult to navigate. However, when performed well, the effect can sound brilliantly virtuosic²⁴.

Lachner’s Concertino is a particularly special piece, as it is the result of a series of happy coincidences. After spending nearly a century in a long-forgotten cabinet, the piece was discovered, thankfully. The discovery of this manuscript brought a gem of a piece to a very limited repertoire. The Gillet competition regularly brings a great deal of attention to lesser-known works, and it is extremely fortunate that the Concertino was selected as a Gillet competition piece. The selection of the Concertino as one of the competition pieces, and its performance at the IDRS conference, helped the work to be rediscovered, yet again, and to bring it to the attention of countless oboe enthusiasts.

Conclusion: The Cross Section of a Canonization

The creation of a literary canon is neither arbitrary nor conclusive. Even in the case of canonizing a repertoire that has slim choices to pick from, the process is not a light or liberal one. There is good reason the pieces I chose for my recital are an important part of the oboe repertoire.

²⁴ Ignaz Lachner.
In the case of the oboe, where instrument-specific pieces are considerably less in quantity than more recognized instruments like the violin, how does one determine which of the few will become the tried and true? Just as the top oboists have traditionally been designated as such via feats of virtuosity, so have the pieces in the oboe canon, albeit from drastically different situations.

Mozart was a virtuosic composer writing for a virtuosic player; the end result was a highly challenging piece meant to designate a worthy player. Dutilleux composed his piece to test the player’s worthiness to receive his diploma from the Paris Conservatory. And even Lachner’s Concertino, while sadly hidden away in a dark corner of a bookshelf for nearly a century, came to be known through virtuosic means, the piece selected to determine the most talented virtuoso at a conference not five years ago. It was these pieces that I selected to attempt to prove my own worthiness, and it was these pieces that each provided a diverse test to my abilities. My recital, in short, was a cross section of a canonization.
Figure 1. Dutilleux: I: Aria. The section approaching rehearsal number 2 demonstrates extreme range and dynamics, as well as technical fluidity.\textsuperscript{25}

Figure 2. Dutilleux: II: Scherzo. The complex opening motive is repeated in successively higher keys in the oboe line.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} Dutilleux.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
Figure 3. Dutilleux: II: Scherzo. The mixed meters and relationship between the oboe and piano parts make the Scherzo challenging for the ensemble.\textsuperscript{27}

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Figure 4. Dutilleux: III: Final. The end of the Sonata is complicated by rapid legato articulation and extremes in range.\textsuperscript{28}

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{final.png}
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\textsuperscript{27} Dutilleux.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
Figure 5. Mozart: I: Allegro. The few uses of the lower range of the instrument in the Allegro occur in rapid ascending flourishes, such as in measure 9\textsuperscript{29}.

Figure 6. Mozart: II: Adagio. Measures 7 through 10 require continuity through large leaps between registers\textsuperscript{30}.

\textsuperscript{29} Mozart.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
Figure 7. Mozart: III: Rondeau. Within the bracketed measures, the oboist plays in cut time while the strings continue in 6/8 meter\textsuperscript{31}.
Figure 8. Mozart: III: Rondeau. The bracketed measures are particularly difficult on a Conservatory system instrument, but would have been much easier on a Classical instrument\textsuperscript{32}.

Figure 9. Lachner: I: Allegro Moderato. The coda section requires great technical fluidity and rapid articulation\textsuperscript{33}.

\textsuperscript{32}Mozart.
\textsuperscript{33}Ignaz Lachner.
Figure 10. Lachner: II: Andantino. The cadenza demands precise pitch placement and legato line, which is particularly difficult after the taxing movement\textsuperscript{34}.

\textit{Next page:} Figure 11. Lachner: III: Rondo: Allegretto quasi Andantino. The final page of the Concertino demands careful navigation, as the two statements of the theme differ slightly\textsuperscript{35}.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ignaz Lachner.
Bibliography


