

# STEPHEN CAPLAN AND STRINGS

Stephen Caplan, oboe. Emilio Castro, violin.  
Cesia Corrales, viola. Paul Christopher, cello.

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Our final concert this evening features Stephen Caplan, principal oboe of the Las Vegas Philharmonic, paired with string players from nearby Natchitoches. Caplan, a member of Alexandria's own Caplan family, joins us this evening to honor Brent Caplan, his cousin, who passed away last year at the age of fifty-four. This evening's program features music for oboe and string trio, a genre that has its origins in the second half of the eighteenth century. Those who enjoy chamber music will, of course, be aware of the innovations which Joseph Haydn and other composers made to the string quartet at this same moment in history. Compositions which replace one of the violins of the string quartet with a wind instrument are less familiar to us today, even though their genre developed simultaneously with the string quartet. Whether they pair string trio with flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, or another instrument, these pieces were typically written in the manner of the *quatuor brillant* in that the added wind instrument functions as a soloist accompanied by the remaining strings. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed quartets with flute and oboe soloists, but so did his contemporaries Carl Stamitz, Johann Christian Bach, and Johann Baptist Vanhal; Stamitz and Johann Nepomuk Hummel also wrote for clarinet quartet. Benjamin Britten, the twentieth-century composer who was a devotee of Mozart's music, emulates this soloistic approach in his *Phantasy*, Op. 2, and we will encounter it again at tomorrow's program by the *Metamorphosis Quintet* when we hear Gabriel Velazquez's *Concerto for flutes and strings*, *Una historia de amor*.

## Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

*Phantasy*, Op. 2 for oboe quartet

It has often be said, rightly or wrongly, that, until the turn of the twentieth century, Great Britain had not produced a composer of international stature since the death of Henry Purcell in 1695. George Frideric Handel was, of course, German, even if his compositions had become a fixture of British musical life in his own era and have remained so ever since. After Handel, the island nation repeatedly

welcomed foreigners to shape their country's musical persona, including Johann Christian Bach, Joseph Haydn, and Felix Mendelssohn. What native British composer can we induct into these ranks? Perhaps certain late nineteenth-century composers like Arthur Sullivan or Charles Villiers Stanford make the cut. Perhaps we must wait until the twentieth century and the arrival of figures like Edward Elgar, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, and, eventually, Benjamin Britten. Whether or not we are correct in our initial assumption—that for two centuries, Great Britain had little to contribute to music beyond its own shores—there was, in the twentieth century, a conscious effort among British composers to redefine their musical culture, apart from continental dominance; this often meant that they were looking back to triumphs of the English Renaissance and Restoration periods.

In 1905, the British music patron and amateur violinist, Walter Wilson Cobbett, established a competition for musical works in an invented genre he called the "phantasy." These were to be one-movement, chamber compositions of moderate length in which there was a free reign of ideas as well as an inner unity. Cobbett's phantasy was meant as a modern analogue to the English Renaissance genre alternately referred to in publications of that era as "fancie," "fantasia," or something of similar derivation. Cobbett maintained that these fancies had been the beginning of chamber music, at least within a British context. John Dowland, active at the turn of the seventeenth century, had been the master of the lute fancie; his works were also appropriate for performance by a consort of viols. Music for viols really took-off in the next few decades, and British composers like Orlando Gibbons, John Jenkins, William Lawes, Matthew Locke, and Henry Purcell created fancies for three, four, five, and six viols. The earliest of these predate Haydn's string quartets, usually seen as a birthplace of chamber music, by more than a century. Cobbett's first competition called for phantasies for string quartet and saw William Hurlstone named winner. The second competition in 1907, this time requesting piano trios, was won by Frank Bridge who, two

decades later, would become Benjamin Britten's composition instructor.

Britten entered and won the Cobbett competition of 1932 with his *Phantasy* in F minor for string quintet; it was one of his first major accomplishments as a composer. That same year, he composed another *Phantasy* of his own volition, this time for oboe and string trio, an ensemble modeled after the Oboe Quartet of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Its premiere was on BBC radio in August 1933 by the oboist Léon Goossens and members of the International String Quartet. A live performance was given that November and, in March 1934, it was selected for performance in Florence at the Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music. When Britten published this *Phantasy* in 1935, he assigned it his Opus 2. Cobbett had imagined that the *phantasy* genre would treat all participating musicians as equals, rather than allowing one soloist to predominate. In a sense, that remains the case in Britten's *Phantasy*, Op. 2 even though the oboe is definitely the lead player. Goossens had stipulated that Britten include a lengthy break midway through the piece, so that he would have a chance to "rest his chops." This means that, while the oboe predominates the texture when it plays, there are entire sections where it does not play.

The cello opens the musical dialogue with a martial rhythm which ascends into the viola and violin before the oboe ever enters with its more lyrical theme. This music progresses into the second more playful section where the instruments alternate quick scalar runs, with the oboe reclaiming its leadership role when it re-enters. The third section is marked by *pizzicato* pulses, first in the cello, and a drone, which begins in the violin; both of these textures exchange between different instruments later. A slower fourth section begins with shimmering high notes in the strings and some uncertainty from the oboe. Afterwards, the oboe drops out and the viola momentarily takes over as leader, playing a melody which is soon echoed by the violin. As intensity builds among the strings and then falls again, the oboe makes its long-awaited return, soaring in from a high E before immediately descending on an ornamented, improvisatory run. As the strings remain motionless, the oboe swoops upward again; now the oboe becomes a true soloist over a frozen texture in the strings. At long last, the strings begin to interact once more, restoring the *pizzicato* pulses and extended drone of the third section. Then enter the quick runs of the second section and, finally, the martial rhythms of the first section which conclude, as they had begun, with the solo cello. In effect, we have come full

circle, demonstrating the free reign of ideas as well as the inner unity which Cobbett had desired of his phantasies.

## Works with Popular Inspirations

Frank Sinatra: *Medley*; Astor Piazzolla: *Oblivion*

Between the works by Benjamin Britten and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, two major figures in the history of art music, we hear music by two seminal figures associated with popular music. These are Frank Sinatra, the singer who extended the sensibilities of big band jazz well into the era of rock, and Astor Piazzolla, the genius of Argentine tango. Stephen Caplan, as a musician active in Las Vegas, is part of the same cultural community which nourished Sinatra in the early 1950s when his career was in decline and then which Sinatra, over the next four decades as his popularity took off once more, reinvigorated as one of this city's first resident entertainers. His Las Vegas debut was at the Desert Inn in September 1951; there, he would perform for half-filled houses of ranchers and wildcatters. After 1953, however, "Ol' Blue Eyes" would hit many of Vegas's major attractions, including the Sands Hotel, the Sahara, Caesars Palace, and the Golden Nugget. He was also invited to speak at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas where he was bestowed an honorary doctorate. This evening Caplan plays two of Sinatra's most famous songs in arrangements made by Lauren Cordell, a violinist of the Las Vegas Philharmonic. These are the familiar tunes "It Was a Very Good Year" written by Ervin Drake and first recorded by Sinatra in 1965; and "Fly Me to the Moon" by Bart Howard, released in Sinatra's version a year earlier.

The name of Astor Piazzolla might be lesser-known to audiences in the United States, but, in Argentina, his own country, he is at least as well-known as Sinatra is here. That was not always the case, however, and when he first introduced his "nuevo tango," there was much resistance among his countrymen. These "new tangos" could include extreme chromaticism, fugal elements, and aspects of jazz; they also often exceeded the typical instrumentation for tangos. Piazzolla, unlike Sinatra, was a highly-trained composer, having studied classical composition first with Alberto Ginastera—at the time, Argentina's leading exponent of art music—and then Nadia Boulanger—the French pedagogue who had already taught Aaron Copland, Darius Milhaud, and Elliott Carter, and, later, would teach Philip Glass. Piazzolla would, instead, first receive acclaim in France and the United States, places where he was appreciated foremost as a composer who, like Johann Strauss II and the waltz, transformed a popular dance genre into a vibrant art form. Since the 1980s, his music has been

accepted in Argentina, actually hailed as saving the tango which had stagnated during the 1950s and 1960s. This evening we hear *Oblivion*, one of Piazzolla's most famous tangos. This short piece with its longing nostalgia and passion was composed for the 1982 film, *Enrico IV*, directed by Marco Bellocchio.

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Oboe Quartet in F major, K. 370

When Mozart returned home to Salzburg on March 13, 1773, both he and his father Leopold knew that his years of travel as a child prodigy were over. Mozart, now aged seventeen, had in his tours seen all the great cities of Europe, including Munich, Vienna, Brussels, Paris, London, Antwerp, Zürich, Milan, Rome, and many others. After visiting these cities and receiving the praise of Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, King Louis XV of France, and King George III of Great Britain, Salzburg and its self-important archbishop seemed rather provincial. Exhausting his limited opportunities locally, Mozart travelled in autumn 1777 to Mannheim, accompanied by his mother. This city was renowned for its orchestra, an establishment which the English music critic, Charles Burney, famously called "an army of generals." Mozart, while in Paris in 1766, had met the orchestra's director, Christian Cannabich. Now in Mannheim in 1777, he would meet and befriend many of the orchestra's outstanding players, including its principal oboist Friedrich Ramm. Mozart and Ramm became quick friends, and, in his letters home, Mozart praised Ramm's expressivity of tone. That summer, while still in Salzburg, Mozart had written his Oboe Concerto in C major; he soon shared a copy of its score with Ramm who, by February 1778, had already performed it five times. Though Mozart would make many connections while in Mannheim, he had no success finding a new post. He proceeded next to Paris, where that summer his mother fell ill and died. Finally, in January 1779, at the insistence of his father, Mozart begrudgingly returned home to Salzburg where the post of court organist had been secured for him.

In the meantime, the Mannheim court and its orchestra had relocated to Munich. The friends and connections Mozart had made in Mannheim were now in this city, and he received in summer 1780 a commission for a new opera to be performed in Munich: this would become *Idomeneo*. That November, Mozart travelled to Munich to oversee the production of *Idomeneo*, and there he was reunited with Ramm. Though we do not know the exact occasion for which the Oboe Quartet in F major was composed, we can be sure that, when it appeared in the early months of 1781,

it was intended that Ramm would be its soloist. Mozart knew well Ramm's playing style from his work on the Oboe Concerto, and he could write directly for his strengths. Indeed, one commentator has called the Oboe Quartet a celebration of Ramm's virtuosity. Oboes of that era had only two or three keys, making certain pitches much more difficult to play than others. Mozart's Quartet demands a clarity of tone throughout the range of the oboe and, without the many keys of the modern oboe to ease tone production, eighteenth-century oboists had to possess incredible dexterity in order to achieve the necessary fingerings. Mozart also demanded that the oboist play several notes at the extreme highpoint of their instrument's register—a challenge in itself. It is not only virtuosity, however, which still endears us to this work: Mozart's melodic writing as well as his counterpoint and exchange of textures foreshadow the compositional mastery he would display repeatedly in his forthcoming Viennese works. If he was a child prodigy no longer, then certainly Mozart was finding himself as one of the major composers of his own era and, moreover, any era.

The Oboe Quartet is in three movements, according to the traditional fast-slow-fast pattern. Its sonata-principle first movement is marked *Allegro* and is in F major. The oboe introduces the movement's delightful first theme. In this section at least, the oboe clearly predominates over the strings, though their interactions will soon become more balanced. The transition to the second theme, now in the dominant of C major, is incredibly subtle, occurring through the repetition of brief motives in both the oboe and strings. Now the oboe takes on an extensive solo, soaring over the strings; the strings also gain more independence, however, adding important punctuation after the oboe's solo. We even find them reiterating the first theme in the new key in the exposition's closing section before the oboe re-enters. The development begins as a contrapuntal dialogue, initiated by the strings. The oboe joins this dialogue before it launches a darker solo section with some tonal ambiguity. Soon enough, the first theme reappears, back in F major, initiating the recapitulation. The bleak second movement, marked *Adagio* and set in D minor, is only thirty-seven bars in length. The strings open this movement, though they promptly recede into an accompaniment role when the oboe enters with its painfully expressive line. This movement, in ternary form and with the oboe predominant over the strings, has the reflective character of an opera aria, suggesting that *Idomeneo* was still fresh in the composer's mind. The third movement, marked *Rondeau. Allegro* and once more in F major, possesses a joyful hunting atmosphere with playful alternations between the

oboe and the strings, especially the violin. The oboe line, however, is far more extravagant than anything attempted by its partners. After this pleasant game of chase, the Quartet ends unassumingly and without fanfare.

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**About Jackson.** Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 upon the completion of his thesis, “Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho.” He has shared this pioneering research through presentations given at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter’s annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. During his studies in Louisville, he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight D. Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world’s leading contemporary composers. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars’ College in Natchitoches, LA. Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. He has remained a concert annotator and organizer, co-directing the annual Sugarmill Music Festival. The scholarly writings he has produced for this festival have even attracted the attention of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, and award-winning nature photographer.

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