

# Oboe Classics Plus

Jeremy Polmear

Oboe  
classics

Jeremy muses on where founding the Oboe Classics label has taken him.



Jeremy celebrating his 80th birthday above Dolgellau, North Wales

I used to get irritated when, in the middle of a normal conversation, an older person would interrupt with: 'I'm 83, you know.' Except that I find myself doing something similar now that I'm 80. I think it's going from being slightly embarrassed about the grey hair to being rather proud of making it thus far. So I am going to write about my nearly 25 years running Oboe Classics, and be discursive on the way.

Here's another irritant: 'It wasn't like this in the old days.' And it wasn't. At the turn of the century the CD reigned supreme, but now who buys them? Well, a few people, and I keep a supply of physical product for them; but it's now downloads and (especially) streaming. This really is a revolution. If I sell a CD I receive £11.99 even if it is only played once, whereas if someone streams, say, ten Oboe Classics tracks I get about 0.02p, or twice that if I am also the performer.

Not that I am complaining. It's wonderful that people can access almost anything that has been recorded, and it keeps alive performances that in the old days would have been deleted. And just occasionally I hit the jackpot: in 2006 I put up old tracks from Catherine Smith's 'Sheba Sound', and

one of them was streamed about half a million times. It was an arrangement of *Here Comes the Sun* when there was no actual Beatles version because it didn't pay them enough. So people searching on Beatles got, among other things, two oboes, bassoon and harpsichord. It's a lovely arrangement and a fine performance, but goodness knows what the average fan made of it. Then the Beatles relented and the income dried up.

It often seems a bit random which tracks are popular and which are not. I'm surprised and entertained. As John Lennon said: 'Life is what happens while you're making other plans.' I get pleasure promoting Oboe Classics tracks, jackpot or no.

And what a wealth of oboe music there is! One of the plus points of running the label is the discoveries I have made. For example, when Borislav Čičovački came with a proposal for a CD of his Serbian wife Isidora Žebeljan's music, I was dubious. But we went ahead and 'Balkan Bolero' is full of heightened Slavic emotions – aggression, love and dancing – emotions that I relate to particularly now as we currently have two Ukrainians living with us.

**Digression 1:** Since I have basically stopped playing, the Ukrainians were puzzled as to what I did. So I got out my oboe and played the *Swan Lake* solo. They marvelled: and so did I as I can still play it with just the one breath in the middle. Later, Lana (short for Svitlana) was given tickets to a young wind quintet concert and we went together. She asked me: 'Are you famous?' I said: 'Fair-to-middling; maybe you can tell when I introduce myself to the oboist: see how she reacts.' At the end we went back and I said: 'I'm Jeremy Polmear and...' No reaction at all!

The most extreme CD I have put out is Chris Redgate's 'oboe +: Berio and Beyond'. Some of the sheet music is in the booklet,

which you can see on the Oboe Classics website. Wow! The harder the music is the more Chris likes it, and his composers know this. So when you get to the final track – the Berio *Sequenza VII* – it sounds almost classical.

The least extreme album (I don't say CD because in this case there is no physical product) is 'Musical Meze' with me and Diana Ambache. Over the years we have toured in Africa and South East Asia for the British Council, and we needed programmes that would appeal to a wide range of people. We've also done recitals of words and music, where again we needed pieces of immediate appeal. When we stopped touring there was a danger that these performances would be lost, so we set up a couple of days and recorded 18 tracks including *The Watermill* on oboe and *Dido's Lament* on cor. I turned these into simple videos and I've just checked: *Dido* has been watched 18K times, *Watermill* 48K.

I have put out a lot of English music from between the two world wars. I had previously categorised this with the 'cowpat' stereotype until Emily Pailthorpe opened my eyes with a CD that included Britten's *Temporal Variations* of 1936, and her opinion that it was really his first *War Requiem*. I was, and am, moved by her committed performance, even more since she has turned it into a YouTube video with an inspiring collection of illustrations. From other English albums I'd like to mention three pieces: the Bliss *Oboe Quintet* played by George Caird, with its fantastically exciting last movement; Rutland Boughton's *Oboe Quartet No.2* with gorgeous sounds from Mark Baigent; and Arnold Cooke's first *Sonata* of 1957, movingly played by Léon Goossens and Clifton Helliwell. If you check this last one out (and I hope you will, I get .06p for the three movements), you will understand why I credit the pianist also.



Leading from the front in *Les petits nerveux*. L to R: Tony Robb, Jeremy Polmear, Diana Ambache, Phil Gibbon, Sue Dent, Neyire Ashworth

I had always wanted to explore the repertoire that comes from the addition of one other instrument to the oboe/piano duo, and I have done three albums: with bassoon (Phil Gibbon), horn (Steve Stirling) and flute (Tony Robb). In the horn one we included a trio version of Mozart's *Horn Quintet*, with Steve playing the horn part, me playing the violin part (very few changes were needed) and the piano filling in the rest. Horn and oboe toss melodies between them; so there's some lovely new Mozart music to play! Two other composers stand out for me here: first, Madeleine Dring, with her trios with both flute and bassoon. I love her music, it's so playful; always a winner in recitals. And Jean-Michel Damase, who I first came across with his horn trio. We picked him initially because he reminded us of Poulenc, but were rather surprised when, during some concerts prior to the recording, he got longer applause than the other pieces. But it was only when we were listening to the playbacks during the actual recording sessions – normally to check ensemble, intonation etc – that we found ourselves really enjoying his music. So in the flute album we included another trio of his which is, if anything, even better. I love French music, I love its shrug of the shoulders, its refusal to get bogged down in seriousness. This particular trio plays with these concepts, moving effortlessly from one to the other, and ending on an unresolved, beautiful fade-out.

I had long wanted to record the cor anglais *Quatuor* of another French composer, Jean Françaix so I explored his wind music and put together an album. The standout piece, for me, is his *Sixtuor* for wind quintet and bass clarinet. The fast movements are

fun, with wonderful use of the instruments, but I was a bit concerned about the two slow movements: both very quiet, not much seeming to be happening. But when I heard them, oh, they are gorgeous. So next time you are programming *Mladi*, please put this sextet in!

**Digression 2:** That Françaix album included *L'Heure du berger*, another concert winner that he wrote for a fashion show held in a restaurant. The last movement is called *Les petits nerveux*; it starts fast and gets faster. I had listened to some versions by other people that started OK but then settled down, which I knew French musicians never do. There's a famous early recording of the Poulenc *Trio* where the composer/pianist shoots off, not waiting for his wind players. So, taking a leaf out of Poulenc's book, I decided not to wait either, especially on the faster bit. Being good chamber musicians they came along, but if you listen carefully to the recording you can hear the oboe on the front of the beat. I think it works very well, and now that I'm 80 I can say that.

**Digression 2a:** There is a 1949 recording of the last movement of Mozart's *Quintet K.452* where the pianist sets off at what feels like twice the proper speed, with (once again) the wind players struggling to keep up. The final coda is even faster. The pianist's name: Jean Françaix.

It was always an aim of Oboe Classics to give opportunities to many different players, and looking through the catalogue I see that I have put out albums featuring some sixteen individuals and six groups. The individuals are from both the present and the past, and I'd like to mention Janet

Craxton here. She recorded very little, but over the years we've managed to find tapes of some of her many radio broadcasts (and there are more to come). I had lessons with Janet, but I don't think I learned anything directly, I was too nervous; it was from listening to her play that I benefitted. I am going to pick out one piece here: *Driving out the Death* by Elisabeth Lutyens, which Janet broadcast in 1974. Normally I find Lutyens' music too stark; but it's just right for this piece about the coming of Spring, and shares some of the gritty emotions of Stravinsky's version. I once went past my train stop on the tube, so engrossed was I in the story that Janet and her London Oboe Quartet were weaving in my headphones.

**Digression 3:** A forthcoming album has Sarah Roper and her Cuarteto Emispherico playing five newly commissioned pieces. It's lovely that Janet's work in enhancing the repertoire for this lineup is being continued, and these young composers have found a wonderful new range of music and sounds.

And that's been my experience on Oboe Classics; I am always surprised at the things people come up with, things I could never have predicted. Luckily I never had a Master Plan, just followed my nose. A good example of this happened during the 2020 lockdown. George Caird had written an extended dissertation on the Telemann *Fantasias*, and we wanted to turn that into a booklet-plus-CD along the lines of his previous one on the Britten *Metamorphoses*. But how could we illustrate the enormous expressive range of Telemann's music? Someone suggested a competition, and that's what we did; we had absolutely no idea what would turn up from people's bedrooms and kitchens. What we received was a wonderful collection which, thanks also to a brilliant sound engineer and modern technology, we turned it into a lovely album.

And now that I'm 80 and looking for a successor, I'm going to end with a little homily. When I was at Cambridge I met many people who were actively striving towards their goals: David Munrow, Christopher Hogwood, Antony Pay, John Eliot Gardiner, Andrew Davis, David Atherton. And I was all too aware that I didn't have anything that was driving me, apart from a love of music; I was just trying to keep my head above water, going somewhere, I didn't know where. But it turned out all right.