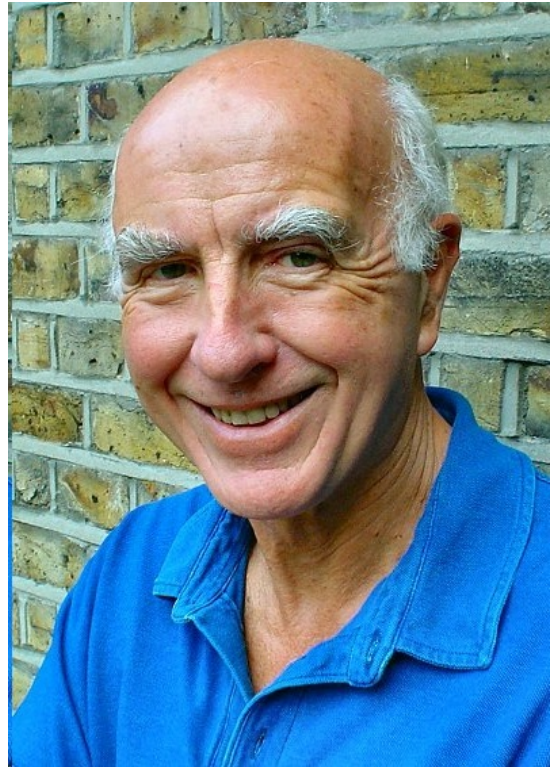


# REMEMBERING THE LOQ

*Brian Hawkins writes about his years performing with Janet Craxton in the London Oboe Quartet, with reference to their CD of music by Lennox Berkeley, Nicola LeFanu, Elisabeth Lutyens, Elizabeth Maconchy, Francis Routh and Richard Stoker (Oboe Classics CC2011).*

In January 1967 I was asked by Perry Hart if I would be willing to step in at short notice to deputise in the Oromonte Trio for their indisposed viola player at a BBC Invitation Concert. The programme of works by Priaux Rainier was to include the first performance of the String Trio of 1965, dedicated to the Oromonte, and Janet Craxton would join us for a performance of 'Quanta' for Oboe and String Trio, a work they had already played together, and the Mozart K370 Oboe Quartet. Janet and I had not met or worked together before, and I was immediately captivated by her charm and sense of humour. I remember those rehearsals well. The Rainier Trio was quite a complicated score and our work was made more difficult by the spidery manuscript. 'Quanta' on the other hand, was already well-known by the others and much more approachable. Janet's playing in this and the Mozart inspired us all. Our live transmission from the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House was fuelled with adrenaline, but the tension was eased by the familiar and comforting voice of Alvar Liddel who introduced the programme. Priaux' insistence on rewriting the closing bars of the String Trio during the final balance test did not deflect us, and the broadcast went very well.



About this time, Janet had received the score of an Oboe Quartet from Lennox Berkeley, and was keen to perform it. As the Oromonte Trio was about to dissolve, Perry and Janet decided to ask Kenneth Heath, then principal cello of the Academy of St-Martin-in-the Fields, if he would like to join the three of us. He agreed, and the London Oboe Quartet was born. Later, as the LOQ, we recorded the Rainier Trio and 'Quanta' on the Argo label for the British Council.

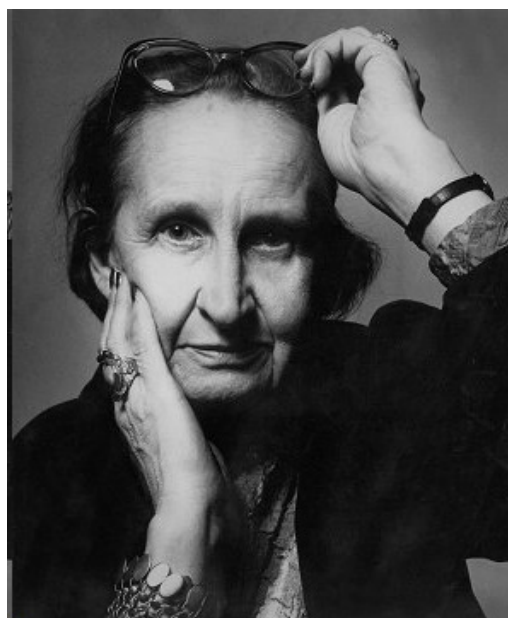
Beginning work on Lennox Berkeley's new piece, we now looked forward to our first public performance. Janet booked the Wigmore Hall and, with an oboe quartet by J.C. Bach and naturally the Mozart included in the programme, we performed the Berkeley for the first time on 22nd May 1968. The BBC came along and the concert was recorded before a

full house for Radio 3. (Tracks 10-12 of the CD.)

Lennox Berkeley took a close interest in his new composition from the beginning and attended some of our rehearsals. An oboe quartet frequently aired then, as now, was the popular Phantasy Quartet by Benjamin Britten, his close friend. This appears on Oboe

Classics CC2009 played by Janet's former pupil George Caird. The Oromonte had played it frequently with Janet, and the parts we subsequently worked from in the LOQ contained markings and suggestions directly from Britten's earlier supervision. To discover an equally attractive work would be a welcome addition to the relatively slim repertoire for this ensemble and we approached our score with eager anticipation. We were pleased at once with what we heard, and felt that we had another potentially popular piece to add to our repertoire. Berkeley, unlike some composers in my experience, was happy to correct things that did not lie well or did not seem comfortable. For example, he re-grouped a semiquaver passage in the cello part of the second movement, to make the passage lie more comfortably in the bow. Later, we played the quartet in Aldeburgh at the Jubilee Hall in a recital attended by Britten. At a reception afterwards in the Red House, he welcomed the work warmly.

Janet now applied herself to encouraging other composers to write for her and the quartet. High on the list was Elisabeth Lutyens who in 1971 gave us 'Driving out the Death', her Op.81. This ephemeral, highly effective piece was a wonderful vehicle for Janet's playing. Her command of wide range and of sustained line can be admired in this recording (Track 13). Lutyens was most insistent on detail and nuance and she was an inspiring and spirited presence at many of our rehearsals. She once grabbed my viola and demonstrate noisily on it saying, 'I was a once viola player, you know!' This recording, made in the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House, was produced by Eleanor Warren with Elisabeth Lutyens in attendance. Both women puffed away non-stop, and cigarette smoke filled the control room. I remember the play-backs being intense. Deriving great satisfaction from this work, we included it in many of our programmes, playing from her immaculately written score. A further work by Lutyens, 'O Absalom', was commissioned by Perry Hart with funds from the Arts Council, and entered our repertoire in 1977. The composer wrote: 'Its real origin lies in my enormous admiration of the violinist Perry Hart. The work is meant as a homage to her.' In this work, the oboe doubles with cor anglais. 'Madrigal' for oboe and violin, a six-minute piece written for Janet and Perry later, was composed by Lutyens in memory of Kenneth Heath after his sudden death.



Elisabeth Lutyens; photographer unknown

'The Bee Oracles' for tenor, flute, oboe, strings and harpsichord was another commission from Priaux Rainier, premiered in a Wigmore Hall concert on 21st March 1971 with Peter Pears as a guest performer. The programme also contained another first performance, the Quartet for Cor Anglais and String Trio by Jean Françaix. There had been a wonderful and very French correspondence between Janet and Françaix as movement followed movement through the postal systems, accompanied by wry letters apologising that the speed of delivery was at the tempo of 'the building of the Autoroutes in France'. We all agreed that the French were actually rather good at laying motorways across their rolling countryside, but this did not stop Janet from quoting the Françaix letters to delighted audiences whenever we played the piece. This was recorded by the BBC but subsequently lost. Unfortunately Janet was reluctant to commit her playing to commercial recordings: the cor anglais quartet would have been an excellent basis for such a disc. *[A doubtless inferior version has been recorded by Jeremy Polmear on Oboe Classics CC2029, Ed.]* Janet's cor

anglais sound was incomparably rich and all too rarely heard. She loved playing the Mozart Adagio K580a to enhance our programmes. Janet's unmistakable voice was pitched quite deep, rather like the cor anglais, I suppose. The BBC once sent a cheque addressed to J. Craxton Esq, which was opened in surprise by her brother John, the artist. The secretary in the finance department had mistaken Janet over the telephone for a man.

We performed the Mozart Oboe Quartet many times. I had played this great work with several oboists, but typically, Janet shed fresh light on the score each time. Even when on tour performing it nightly, we would rehearse it afresh, and our enthusiasm never dimmed. The final bars, especially the final note on a diminuendo (many players produce an unintentional crescendo!) always brought a real sense of wonder. In Sunderland on one occasion, playing to the Music Club, the closing notes spun such a web that the audience did not seem able to applaud. We walked off to the sound of our own feet. Hadn't they realised we'd finished, or was it Janet's magic spell? We were relieved that the clapping burst out when we were out of sight.

Through Janet, other commissioned works began to flow in, from Elizabeth Maconchy, Richard Stoker, Frances Routh, Douglas Young (commissioned by Peter Pears) and others. It was always exciting to arrive at rehearsal to find Janet waving some new music at us with a triumphant smile. This CD contains some of those works, and there is still more to tell. When a distinguished composer agrees to write a work for one's group, there is a feeling of satisfaction and anticipation. Berkeley and Françaix, for example in the early days, caused us great excitement. Premières were obviously very much in our hands as performers, and the responsibility produced, I think, some very exciting, even dramatic performances. When Alan Rawsthorne was approached and his Oboe Quartet scheduled to receive its first performance at a City Music Society concert in Goldsmith's Hall in the City of London in May 1970, we were on the edge of our seats as usual, impatient to lay our hands on the music and get to work. A second performance had already been scheduled the following January also for the City Music Society, this time at a lunchtime concert in Bishopsgate Institute. The programme note for the second concert welcomed the opportunity for club members to hear a repeat of this 'important addition to the Oboe Quartet repertoire'. We started to work on the piece and invited Rawsthorne to attend an afternoon rehearsal at Perry's house in Barnes. We were quite pleased with the rather pastoral mein of the work which had revealed itself in earlier rehearsals, showing the composer's very distinctive harmonic slant, but felt a disappointment too, which we did not feel able to impart to Rawsthorne there and then. Janet, later, considered returning the final movement for a re-working, but we thought that this would be churlish under the circumstances: Alan Rawsthorne was very near the end of a most distinguished career as a cherished English composer, and this was almost his last composition. We were in the presence of a very distinguished man, and we just enjoyed his company. John McCabe's Oboe Quartet was dedicated to Alan Rawsthorne on the occasion of his 60th birthday.

When Ken Heath died suddenly in 1977, Janet asked Oliver Knussen to write a piece to commemorate the event. The Oboe Quartet (In Memoriam Kenneth Heath) was commissioned, and once again the Wigmore Hall was booked for a special concert to be held on 12th October 1977. The rest of the programme was to be the Mozart C major quartet K171 (285b), actually one of his three flute quartets which works very effectively with the oboe, the three Madrigals for violin and viola by Martinu, the Britten Phantasy Quartet and K370. One evening when we were at my house in Wimbledon rehearsing the few pages we had been given, Ollie appeared with more music. But the work was by no means complete and the concert was only a week away. There was an animated confrontation, and we heard Janet's voice raised - a very rare event. The programme had to

be changed. At the end of our morning rehearsal at the Wigmore, an apologetic Knussen appeared with more music: "please play at least some of it". But there was no possibility of playing unrehearsed, and the concert went ahead as amended. The cellist was Charles Tunnell, who subsequently joined us as a member of the LOQ. The first performance of the Knussen Quartet was ultimately given by Janet, Marcia Crayford, Christopher van Kampen and myself.

In 1978 we were ten years old. It was especially sad that Ken Heath was not with us to celebrate, but our Wigmore programme on 14th June that year looked well tried and tested. Ken would have recognised it as a nice distillation of all the music we had played together since that thrilling opening-night with the Berkeley. Charles Tunnell was part of the team now, and we played old favourites, the Mozart, the Berkeley, the Françaix, some Lutyens, and to allow hard-blowing Janet a chance to rest her lips, we strings played a Beethoven String Trio and a little Skalkottas. A nicely balanced evening for the audience we thought, just like a good meal.



Family photo of Janet with cat.

There were three more years to go before we lost Janet. Ollie Knussen, who had known Janet since childhood and worked with us regularly in the London Sinfonietta, observed in the programme for Janet's memorial concert on 24th April 1982, that 'the most beautifully sung Mozart one could ever wish to hear were her solos in the London Sinfonietta's performances of the Serenade for 13 Wind Instruments'. His tribute is telling. He goes on to say: 'Janet's quiet support and understanding, despite more than ample cause for annoyance, is something I shall never forget'. Other written tributes paid in the beautifully presented programme for this most moving Wigmore concert, were from Priaulx Rainier, Elisabeth Lutyens, Elizabeth Maconchy, Rudolf Schwartz, David Atherton, Denis Matthews, Lennox Berkeley, and by her old friend and fellow oboe player, Evelyn Barbiroli. The programme was given by four members of the London Sinfonietta, the Trio Canaletto, the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, and the remaining three

members of the LOQ. We played the Mozart E flat Piano Quartet with Nina Milkina. Sir Peter Pears spoke in tribute. Tess Miller played with us later, and Perry re-formed the Oromonte as an ensemble playing similar repertoire to the old LOQ. Perry eventually returned to her homeland in Australia, and died in Sydney.

Our repertoire had never been big: the scale of our concerts was intimate and our work together assumed the qualities of a family gathering. Janet's loyal husband Alan Richardson was never far away in the homely surroundings of the top flat at Kidderpore Avenue, offering his shrewd, invaluable advice. Working in an intense way with Janet over the years meant that we evolved a style of string playing that fitted with Janet's oboe sound, and we tried to reflect the innumerable nuances of tone of which she was capable.

My own family's enduring memories of the Craxton household are of Essie and Harold's copious Christmas-time parties at Kidderpore Avenue, with blazing fires in every hearth, mountains of glorious fare, and shadowy figures of guests, a wide and fascinating range of friends and colleagues, eating, drinking and happily chatting. It is hard to believe that Janet died in 1981. I still miss her.