Janet Craxton English Oboe Concertos

Jeremy Polmear looks at the Art of Janet Craxton in the context of each of these four concertos.

To use the QR code on your mobile (Android) for free mp3s, set up a Music folder 'Janet Craxton Concertos' (Files, Internal Storage, Music, New folder). Log in to Dropbox (free). Click the QR link, tick all the items, click the downward arrow, select the new folder and go. Or contact mail@oboeclassics.com for a direct email link.

MALCOLM ARNOLD

By 1952, Malcolm Arnold was enjoying success. His two sets of English Dances had made him well-known and he had written many film scores. For the oboe he had already composed the Sonatina Op. 28. This concerto (Op. 39) was completed in August, and Léon Goossens, to whom the work is dedicated, gave a successful première the same year.

But by 1952 Malcolm Arnold, the *bon viveur* and Master of the Revels - had also had a psychotic episode in which he assaulted his wife and spent three months in an asylum. He had written the first of his nine symphonies, in which the contradictions in his personality are explored - for example, his rage, and its effect on him and those he loved.

In this concerto the first and last movements are slow and enigmatic; only the central Vivace is 'standard' Arnold. Janet Craxton establishes an overall mood of quiet regret. She takes the first movement slower than Arnold's marking. Janet honours the *mp* dynamic marking, just following Arnold's wayward melodic line, not trying to impose on it. At 1:21 she brightens up for a second theme, giving it a jaunty French feel, reminding us that she studied in Paris as well as in London.

At 2:07 there is an uncertain middle section (this is true also of the first movements of the Oboe Sonatina and the later Oboe Quartet), where possibilities are aired but never followed up, until the return of the first (4:11) and second (4:54) themes. Soon, the movement doesn't so much end as give up.

The second movement is exciting, even though Janet plays it slightly under speed. As before, dynamic markings are low - the oboe entry is again marked *mp*. Arnold puts in an opportunity for virtuosic display at 1:03; typically, Janet doesn't make a thing of it. The writing for the strings is consistently inventive, and at 1:46 Arnold inserts, for no apparent reason, the swirl of the pipes.

Janet's tempo is similar to Arnold's marking in the third movement, and this is where her interpretation really scores, in its simple, sad, introverted melody. At 1:30 there is a second melody, the first returning at 2:14. There are moments of change, but on the whole the movement is a sad meditation. Like the first movement, it gradually unwinds to nothing, in spite of the composer tacking on two bars of coda at the end, perhaps to tell the audience when to clap.

WILLIAM ALWYN

This concerto was composed in 1943 but had to wait for its première until 1949, when it was played at a Promenade Concert by Evelyn Barbirolli. It is considered to be Alwyn's most 'pastoral' work, but his wife Mary Alwyn has pointed out that he wrote it during World War II while serving as an Air Raid Warden in North London, composing the concerto during hazardous sleepless nights on patrol, and expressing his feelings of nostalgia for the peace and beauty of the English countryside. It is pastoral in the sense of looking back from wartime to a period of peacefulness.

It's always a temptation for an oboist, when playing with strings, to make smooth and expressive lines, but Janet does the exact opposite. Her sound is harder than usual (this may be a feature of the recording but we left it as it fitted her interpretation), her first entry is muscular and uncompromising, her second entry more so. As the piece progresses, there is no looking for beauty, and certainly no sentimentality. Even after 3:24 where the music could soften, Janet maintains the steeliness. She slightly lessens it at 4:14, but she passes on the lush writing at 5:14. At 6:10 she does relax, but never indulges. This beautiful section, enhanced with harp chords, is played with nothing added,

and is all the more effective for that: an arrival at a moment of peace. At 8:39 the yearning returns, and the movement ends ambiguously.

B The second movement follows without a break, and is a country dance, but always with an underlying tension. If you find yourself wishing the strings had had an extra rehearsal, the BBC Orchestras at this time were having to fill the radio schedules with several concerts a week; 'needle time' for LP records was severely restricted. Given the speed at which they had to work, it is surely impressive how well these conductors and orchestras co-ordinated with Janet and her interpretations.

At 4:00 the music begins to change back to the mood of the first movement; but Janet gives us, over the next few minutes, a sense of arrival, if not resolution. At 6:27 we are back at the opening music, and an ending that should be listened to rather than described.

RUTLAND BOUGHTON

Boughton's concerto No. 1 was written in 1936 and dedicated to his daughter Joy (a pupil of Goossens) who gave the first performance the following year. It starts at full tilt, almost as if to say "we've been going for a while, where have you been?" Janet emerges from the melée, and dominates the strings.

At 1:00 a gentler theme emerges, played by Janet in the way that only she could. The first theme returns at 4:12, and this cogently written movement is one to relax and enjoy rather than read programme notes.

The second movement is marked *Adagio espressivo*, but there is a letter from Rutland Boughton to Léon Goossens thanking him for a performance, complimenting him on the outer movements but hinting, in as tactful a way as possible, that if he was a bit more introverted in the middle movement he might find more in the music.

This is where Janet comes in. Her simple declaration of a new theme at 1:30 is exquisite. If there was ever a demonstration of 'less is more', this is surely it. And throughout the movement she draws us in with her simple story-telling of Boughton's melodic line. The final unwinding is magical.

The last movement is an imaginary English country dance, and Janet takes it fast and exciting. Boughton inserts the occasional interlude, but it's the dance that makes this a real crowd-pleaser of a movement.

MICHAEL BERKELEY

Rutland Boughton can write music of apparent simplicity that can touch us, and Michael Berkeley can write music of apparent complexity that can also touch us. It was composed in 1977 and the third movement is an Elegy to his godfather, Benjamin Britten.

The first movement begins with oboe and violins in a sombre duet of empty beauty. More strings join, and the movement evolves into a series of episodes, with abrupt changes of mood - it's a real roller-coaster. The strings are used to brilliant dramatic effect, sometimes reflecting, sometimes trying to swamp the oboe. Yet throughout, composer and performers convince us that this roller-coaster is firmly on the rails. There is a cadenza that is fully integrated into the music. At the end, we hear the ghost of Britten.

The Scherzo is lighter and more straightforward in tone, with a sense of an English country dance. It soon evolves into a waltz at 1:38, and another one at 2:27. There are more episodes, and at 3:53 there is a lovely moment of relaxed beauty before the return of the Scherzo, leading to an entertaining ending.

The third movement returns to the mood of the first, with two-part writing for the strings, and then Janet follows the apparently simple melodic line, with vulnerability added to the sombre beauty. At 2:36 the music collapses, then becomes an impassioned version of the melody on the strings. The oboe re-enters with the melody at 4:03, Janet's interpretation unadorned - letting the strings do the emotion. There is a striking example of this contrast at 6:13; and as this movement moves on to what I think is the best ending of an oboe concerto, ever, I will end on a personal note. When I listened to this piece for the very first time, in the British Library, checking out the practicalities of the recording - had the tape got mangled, had anyone knocked over a music stand during a quiet bit, were there any performance slips that couldn't be fixed - I began to get a strange feeling in my chest. I hope you do, too.