JANET CRAXTON

music for oboe and strings

Lennox Berkeley, Nicola LeFanu, Elisabeth Lutyens, Elizabeth Maconchy, Francis Routh, Richard Stoker

The London Oboe Quartet

L to R: Kenneth Heath, Janet Craxton, Brian Hawkins, Perry Hart.
Inset: Charles Tunnell with Janet Craxton.
Photos: Richard Adeney
Francis Routh (b 1927):
Oboe Quartet Op 34 (1977)
1 Introduction –
12 variations –
Coda 9:51

Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-94):
Oboe Quartet (1972)
Poco lento, tempo libero 5:07
Scherzo 2:45
Poco lento, dolento 4:21
Allegro molto 3:44

Richard Stoker (b 1938):
‘Polemics’ for Oboe and String Trio,
Op 40 (1970)
6 Sonata 2:28
7 Scherzando –
Sostenuto –
Scherzando 5:41
8 Finale 3:18

Nicola LeFanu (b 1947):
Variations for Oboe Quartet (1968)
9 Moderato serioso 10:51

Lennox Berkeley (1903-89):
Quartet for Oboe and String trio (1967)
10 Moderato 6:53
11 Presto –
Meno vivo –
Presto 3:02
12 Andante 4:25

Elisabeth Lutyens (1906-83):
‘Driving out the Death’ for Oboe and
String Trio, Op 81 (1971)
13 Carrying out of Winter –
Pantomimos –
Carrying out of Summer –
Euché –
Driving out the Death –
Dithyrambos 14:23

Total Time 77:35
Francis Routh (b 1927), Oboe Quartet Op 34 (1977)

Francis Routh knew Janet Craxton from student days at the Royal Academy of Music in London. In 1958 Janet played in a concert of British contemporary music in a forerunner of what became the Redcliffe Concerts – a series with Francis as Artistic Director. “I wanted to write Janet a virtuoso piece, something that showed off her artistry” he said. “I once told her that she was wasted in orchestras and ensembles, which she didn’t agree with.” Certainly this piece begins with some extravagant flourishes from the oboe, and its twelve short variations take us on a journey of different moods and styles. How much input did Janet have into the music?

“[I]n form, the piece is something of a three-movement concerto, but written as a theme and variations and played without a break. The initial motif is heard at the very start on the strings. Then the first five variations (at 0:48, 1:24, 2:06, 3:04 and 3:35) constitute the first movement, which speaks openly, the strings vivace and the oboe espressivo. The second movement (variations 6 to 8 at 3:58, 5:26 and 6:08) is inward, contemplative, somewhat impressionistic in colouring, with harmony in tones rather than semitones, and a slower rate of harmonic change. The third movement (variations 9 to 12 at 7:03, 8:01, 8:20 and 8:36) resumes the vivace of the first, and the coda (9:21) balances the Introduction with a restatement of the theme and two final oboe flourishes.

Janet Craxton and the London Oboe Quartet

Notes by Jeremy Polmear

Janet Craxton (1929-81) founded the London Oboe Quartet with Perry Hart (violin), Brian Hawkins (viola) and Kenneth Heath (cello) in 1968, and later with Charles Tunnell (cello) after Kenneth Heath’s death in 1977. During the twelve years of its existence the Quartet played at most of the major UK music festivals and made frequent BBC broadcasts, from which these recordings are taken. Janet Craxton was always a champion of new music, and the Quartet commissioned five of the six works on this CD, as well as music by Neil Saunders, Alan Rawsthorne, Oliver Knussen, John Exton and John McCabe.

A previous Oboe Classics CD, An English Renaissance, celebrated Léon Goossens with a number of works inspired by his oboe playing. In the notes for that CD George Caird commented that in the generation following Goossens “the oboe playing of Janet Craxton should be singled out as the torch-bearer for music for oboe and strings. But that, and the composers who wrote for her, is another story.”

The music on this CD tells part of that story. To gain a deeper understanding of its context I talked to Brian Hawkins, viola player of the Quartet and, where possible, the composers. More information about Janet and the London Oboe Quartet can be found in Brian Hawkins’ memoir on www.oboe.classics.com (follow the ‘more details’ link for this CD).

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“I remember we had to learn this piece pretty fast” said viola player Brian Hawkins, “but it was no problem. The parts are well written for the instruments, and fall nicely under the fingers, for example in the lovely string effect in variation 11. When composers want the string trio to sound like a quartet, as in variation 6, I have to do double stopping on the viola, but again it is well written for the instrument. And we players had all worked with each other a lot - in the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, in the London Sinfonietta - we knew each others’ style. And Janet did have an extrovert side, which comes out well here. We played this piece a lot around the country. It always went down well, maybe because although it was ‘modern’ people found they could easily enjoy it. It has an approachable, but gritty, spicy style.”

I asked Francis Routh where the spiciness came from. “Possibly the scale I was using. I was experimenting with an extended tonality at the time, and used a whole tone scale plus a perfect fourth. This was a scale I found very fertile - I used it in many later compositions too. Looking back, I am very happy with the piece, I like the way the constituent bits fit together. But it’s the performers who can make or break a piece. Janet had lots of special qualities; she built bridges with composers, with promoters, and with audiences. I think she was the foremost British oboist of her generation.”

Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-94), Oboe Quartet (1972)

For insight into this powerful piece I turned to Nicola LeFanu, daughter of Elizabeth Maconchy and herself the composer of a work on this CD. She told me of Maconchy’s other compositions of the same period. “This Quartet comes at the same time as her very powerful tenth String Quartet, and particularly as the monodrama Ariadne, with which it shares the same emotional world; there are even some echoes between the material of the two pieces.” So Janet is a kind of Ariadne, then, abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos, experiencing the loss and anger of a deserted woman? “It is an uncharacteristically poignant piece of my mother’s. Maconchy would have known Janet’s playing well; both were major presences on the contemporary London musical scene of the 1960s; Janet’s sound and phrasing would have been in her head.”
I commented that the oboe solo at the very start is immediately recognisable to anyone who knows Maconchy’s work as being by her. “It’s partly the intervals she uses – perfect fourths and tritones, and especially major and minor sevenths; the A and the low B used three times at the end of that solo act as tonal reference points. They help to give stability in a freely atonal piece. The cello has to tune his bottom C string down to a B in this first movement so he can reinforce this.” I comment that Maconchy’s music is often noted for its intellectual rigour. “Yes, and this opening solo confirms that. It turns out that almost all the harmonies and melodies in the piece are there, or are implied, in this first solo. But putting it like that ignores the emotion that is so evident in this opening lament. It’s a real demonstration of Maconchy’s stated intention to express a ‘passionately intellectual and intellectually passionate musical discourse’.”

Brian Hawkins remembered that, at rehearsals, Elizabeth Maconchy was very clear as to what she wanted. “For example, she knew that the very first, high string entry (at 0:34) was hard, but she wanted it to sound like two violins; also the element of strain, of sounding ‘on the edge’, suited her purpose. And of course the strain was helped by the presence of both a BBC microphone and a live audience!”

Nicola picked out some other moments: “notice, at 1:31, the first loud section, the use of patterns of five notes, both by Janet and in the strings. This comes a lot in this movement. Then at 2:20, there is a section of ‘linear counterpoint’, with four individual melodic lines. This is typical of my mother’s music. When the cello enters at 2:38, he is playing Janet’s original theme, complete with low B.”

The second movement is a scherzo, sometimes associated with playfulness. It’s hard to find this within such a serious context, but perhaps the way the movement quickly fragments into little explosions from the oboe, the continual stopping and starting, is playful. “Also”, commented Nicola, “notice the group of five notes at the beginning - a reference to the first movement, but used with a quite different characterisation, and which soon gets varied into fours, and threes. And there is a kind of codetta at 0:45 where the oboe takes over the single cello pedal C from the beginning of the movement, but uses it melodically to bring the music to rest.”

This leads to some more high double-stopping from the upper strings. “Again, it’s hard to play” said Brian, “but it’s an effective moment, with tension even though it’s soft music.” The scherzo soon resumes. “This took a lot of rehearsal, and I had to write in a lot of cues in the viola part. But Janet always came to the first rehearsal fully prepared - I don’t know when she found the time to practise - so we had something to hold on to.” A final codetta, with beautiful alternate fingerings for the oboe top C, brings the movement to a close.

“The third movement is the most obviously Ariadne-like” said Nicola. “The players are marked dolente in those sets of three chords, which recur in various guises throughout the movement. This is the most integrated movement, with the music being expressed either through harmony, or through melody. It’s also the nearest to her string quartets, with all four players exploring the music on equal terms. There’s a lot of impassioned anger here, especially at 1:23, with those low string chords.” And is the anger resolved? “I guess not. That final chord of the movement would be straight open fifths, but there’s no root in the bass and the oboe moves down a semitone to clash with the strings, so we are left hanging.”

The last movement starts confidently, but as soon as the oboe enters it seems to collapse in on itself, with closely repeated rhythmic patterns. I commented that these remind me of Janáček. Nicola agreed. “In a mature work like this, you can’t really speak of influences any more, but it is significant that, after studying with Vaughan Williams, Maconchy took herself off to Prague. It’s as if she realised that there was a sensibility in Eastern European music that appealed to her. Incidentally, Vaughan Williams said that my mother was his favourite pupil, perhaps because of her musical independence; she was determined not to become another member of the English pastoral school. (She was brought up in Ireland.) Also, the claustrophobic feeling in that first oboe solo comes not only from the repeated rhythms; the very intervals that were wide in the first movement, are now compressed into tones and semitones.”

Soon the fast, forthright music reasserts itself, and seems to encompass a revisiting of earlier material of the piece - for example, the opening A’s and B’s (0:38), and the Scherzo (2:39). As Nicola LeFanu put it, “there is tension between slow introspective sections, and fast energised movement. In the final climax (3:01), even the introspective music becomes loud and impassioned, until at the end the fast music sweeps all aside. No indulgences!”
Richard Stoker (b1938), Polemics for Oboe and String Trio, Op 40 (1970)

"I had known Janet since we were both on the staff at the Royal Academy," said Richard Stoker. "She came to hear my third String Quartet, and asked me to write something for her. I like writing for an oboe and one violin instead of two violins, because then you can have an argument! I didn’t tell Janet about this plan until later, but she was OK about it. I talked to her a lot about music and life in general, she had such experience - she was nine years older than me. I think of this piece as a philosophical discussion, a Platonic dialogue."

The argument starts right from the beginning of the first movement. "I thought of the oboe as Janet, and the strings as me," said Richard. Brian Hawkins mentioned how sympathetic the string parts were written technically. "Also, Perry Hart’s extrovert delivery and sound are very suitable for this piece. Her attack was almost savage at times, and she encouraged us to do the same. This made a good foil for Janet’s sound."

With regard to the second movement, Richard said "I like scherzos. In this one I tried to put in the sort of music Janet liked; I had in the back of my mind the third movement of the Mozart Oboe Quartet, which Janet had made very much her own. But I did put in some portamenti, upward slides. There were some in the first movement too, but mainly for the strings. Janet practised them long into the night, she wasn’t used to them. ‘I’m not Holliger’, she told me. Then the central section (starting at 0:59) is the heart of the work, with a lot of fresh material. The arguments are put aside and we listen to the oboe. Incidentally, the strings bowing over the fingerboard at 4:01 is an effect I got from Elgar. I wanted a beautiful ending before we launched back into the scherzo."

In the last movement, all four voices participate in the argument with a fugue, which continues while the opening phrase of the piece reappears in the oboe at 1:33. "After the fugue finishes at 1:49, the material is similar to the first movement," said Richard. "But sometimes the oboe has taken the violin part and vice versa. Maybe they’ve changed sides!"

"We performed this piece a lot", said Brian, "it’s an energetic experience for both performers and listeners, with good endings to the movements." Looking back on it, Richard Stoker said he was pleased with the piece. "It’s a magnificent performance, and I think it is one of my best works - well it had to be, writing for Janet."

Nicola LeFanu (b 1947), Variations for Oboe Quartet (1968)

Listening to Janet Craxton’s elegant delivery of the opening bars of this piece, it is surprising to realise that this is the only music on the CD not to have been written for her. Nicola LeFanu explained that “the Dutch oboist Victor Swillens broadcast an earlier piece of mine, the Soliloquy for solo oboe. He asked for a Quartet for his Netherlands Oboe Quartet, which I was happy to write - I was a postgraduate at the Royal College of Music at the time - and not only did he play it, but it worked hard for me, and had many other performances. But I already knew Janet’s playing well; I went to nearly every London Sinfonietta concert. The instrumental virtuosity of those players in the sixties, and the continental avant-garde music they played, was very ear-opening."

The Quartet won the Cobbett Prize and the BBC Composer’s Prize. Incidentally, the Cobbett Prize final performance links three of the CD’s composers; Nicola and her mother were both present, and the adjudicator was Elisabeth Lutyens. I asked Nicola about the compositional techniques she used. “That first oboe solo is a 12-tone melody, but this is not
strictly a serial work. There is no tonal centre, but the chords in the opening section (up to 1:10) give rise to the flavour of later chords. And the idea of variation is at the heart of the work; not only the choice of variation form, but in that I followed the ideas of the second Viennese school of continuous variation as the piece proceeds.” This sounds tough going, but I commented to Nicola on the underlying warmth of the piece right from the start, and not just from the sympathetic acoustic of the BBC Maida Vale studio 2 where it was recorded. “I had just returned from studying with Godfredo Petrassi in Italy, and he was always concerned with the exact sound of things; for example, the first violin entry - which

string it should be played on, and how that would affect the sound.” Brian Hawkins agreed: “the string sonorities are very well-voiced, and the writing is within the ‘normal’ range, giving us the freedom to be expressive.”

But what about these variations? The piece sounds very homogenous. “Having picked on the variation form, I wanted to make it my own,” said Nicola. “Each new variation is characterised, but I didn’t want that compartmentalised effect that variations can produce. Sometimes I elided the variations. For example, at 2:36, the oboe and viola continue the current variation while the violin and cello enter with a new one, at a faster tempo. Incidentally, I gave the viola an important part in this work; I felt it was a natural partner for the oboe.” Whether or not this is the reason, Brian was enthusiastic about the piece. “It doesn’t feel over-composed, it’s got just the right number of notes, remarkable in a composer who was 21 at the time. In fact it sounds and feels like a mature piece, by someone who knows what they want. It’s very cohesive, with a wide range of expression. We didn’t pay much attention to the detailed structure in rehearsals”, he added, “but it’s like driving a car with a chassis - you aren’t aware of it, but it’s nice to know the thing isn’t going to fall to bits!”

Looking at some other specific moments in the piece, I commented on the beautiful string glissandi at and around 3:58. Nicola smiled. “Yes, but they are not just there for beauty; sounds can have a structural purpose too. This is a transitional section, to wipe the slate clean for the oboe’s entry at 4:31 with a second theme - this is actually a set of double variations. At 5:08 all the instruments comment on this new theme independently, in their own time, with the viola to the fore. Then there is a long build-up to an oboe cadenza at 6:45, after which the cello enters, playing the original oboe theme.” After another build-up, there is a beautiful dissolve into a slow section at 8:40. “This is actually the final variation, and I am setting us up for the end of the work. I wanted a valedictory quality, and I used simpler, more consonant harmonies. Then in the section after 9:44 I tried to summarize and integrate all the material, including both themes. Finally the last three bars, with the strings playing ‘sur la touche’ - above the fingerboard - echo the last three bars of the first theme to make the cadential gesture.”

Nicola LeFanu and Elizabeth Maconchy, late 1970s

photo © Lionel Cherruault
Sir Lennox Berkeley often wrote for individual performers, such as Kathleen Ferrier, Dennis Brain - and Janet Craxton. The Oboe Sonatina of 1962 was commissioned by Janet, and paid for with a painting by her brother John. “Janet liked the barter system”, John told me. “Once, a pupil arrived with a rich chocolate cake cooked by his mother. Janet tried it, and said it was so good that she would waive her fee for any future lessons as long as there was chocolate cake!” The payment for this Quartet was also connected to John Craxton; Lady Norton, wife of the British Ambassador to Athens, invited John to Greece in 1946 and enabled him to work there. She also raised the money for the Quartet under the auspices of the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

It was actually written for Janet to play with the Oromonte String Trio, of which Perry Hart was the violinist. However, by the time it was completed the trio had disbanded, and Janet and Perry formed the London Oboe Quartet, and invited Kenneth Heath and Brian Hawkins (who had already played with the Oromonte) to join them. Brian remembered rehearsing the Quartet: “Lennox Berkeley came to quite a few rehearsals; he seemed quite a shy man, keen to please, and was happy to adapt the parts if we made comments about their performability. It’s a real quartet, and treats all the instruments equally. I had known Lennox Berkeley’s work from his String Trio, and initially I wasn’t very impressed with the start of this Quartet, I thought it was a bit wishy-washy. But I now see the interweaving of the three strings, and the quiet oboe entry, as sublime. The last movement, too, is really rather courageous; it eschews a crowd-pleasing finale, reaches a stern climax at 2:45, and then dissolves.”

Between these movements is a kind of scherzo, growing out of a rhythmical figure for the strings and a rapid arpeggio involving major and minor thirds for the oboe. Indeed, major and minor thirds permeate the entire work from the opening of the first movement, with the strings rocking gently in 5/8 time. This gives the music an enigmatic quality, until we are reassured at 2:16 with a fast section in 4/4 time.

The scherzo itself, after an aggressive start, proves the most playful of the movements, continuously inventive in texture and rhythm, for example at 0.15 onwards. After a relaxed middle section the scherzo returns, with a delightful, Brittenesque ending.

Brian also vividly remembered the recording; “it was at the first LOQ London concert, at the Wigmore Hall, Wednesday May 22nd 1968. The Hall was full, and I hope some of the excitement comes over in the CD. Actually if you listen carefully you can hear that one of us did some over-excited foot-tapping, which reached the on-stage microphone. All I’m saying is that it wasn’t Janet, and it wasn’t me! Anyway, the concert was a great success, and we felt well and truly launched.”
We know a great deal about the origin of this work from Elisabeth Lutyens herself, who introduced this performance in the Concert Hall of BBC Broadcasting House in May 1974. Like the Maconchy work, it is the opening oboe solo that is the germ of the whole piece. This idea appeared in Lutyens’ head one day while she was pondering the commission. She said that she became aware of “a donné – a short musical phrase that persisted in presenting itself to me. Now one does not have to accept these intrusive strangers, but they always deserve examination. I decided to accept it as it was, even though I felt it to be as unmouldable as a physical sculptural object. If, therefore, this was its character, it should be retained as such. To my mind, this involved treating the three strings almost as one instrument; their reaction to the donné colouring, and thereby changing its significance.”

Brian Hawkins agreed: “it’s technically easy for us, but we wanted to sound like a kind of string harmonium, and balancing and blending our chords was a challenge.”

Lutyens then turned her attention to the theme of the piece. Knowing that the main phrase was going to be unchanging, she decided on a number of strongly contrasted sections. She had recently read a book on Ancient Art and Ritual, which commented on the periodicity of the seasons, with winter the season of death and spring the season of life. She had also recently written the opera Isis and Osiris on the same subject, and took the title and subtitles of this Quartet from the Greek interpretation of ritual and drama of the seasons; the spring, the dance and mime of summer and winter, life and death.

The first section is subtitled Carrying out of Winter. Lutyens described a spring ritual in Bohemia where “children carry out a straw puppet and burn it. While they burn it they sing ‘we have carried away death and brought back life’ – the puppet representing death, or winter. It is interesting to note that although Death is dramatically carried out, the coming back of life is only announced, not enacted.”Perhaps this explains the stark, vulnerable quality of the music.

By contrast, the second section, Pantomimos (2:40) is lighter in character, with first the oboe, then the strings, each performing a little dance of two notes a tone apart (an interval in the donné). But Lutyens pointed out that, to the Greeks, a Pantomime did not mean what it does to us today. In pre-scientific societies people “did what they wanted done. The Greek word nemesis means the action, or doing, of a person called a mime. The mime was not mimicking thunder, say, out of curiosity, he was making it, and enacting it and uttering it for magical purposes. But as the belief in magic declines the mimic, the maker, sinks to be in our modern sense the mimic, in a sort of child’s play.”

Lutyens continued: “The third section, Carrying out of Summer (4:22), was another seasonal drama, with the fight all now gone between Spring and Winter.” Certainly this section has more repose; but even here, rough winds seem to be shaking the darling buds of May. Of the fourth section, Euché (6:28), Lutyens commented: “The Greek, when he wanted help in trouble from the Saviours or Diascouri, carved a picture of them. Underneath he inscribed the word Euché; it was a presentation of his strong inner desire, it was a sculptured prayer.

The miraculously slow music of the fourth section glides into the fifth section, Driving out the Death at 9:23. The donné reappears unchanged, and the music rises to a heartrending climax. Lutyens commented that the name of the final section, Dithyrambos (10:47), “is open to many interpretations. One is that the Dithyramb is the song of birth. Birth is the time of Spring, the time of the Maypole. These may be arcane expressions, but we still celebrate the existence of periodic events by public high days and holidays.”Brian Hawkins commented on the string writing here: “these are lovely string solos at the start of this section, one for each instrument; cunningly constructed, with great apparent simplicity. To
be honest, we didn’t understand the significance of the titles, we just ‘played the dots’, and allowed the music to emerge. And as we grew into the piece, it achieved an almost monumental status with us. We performed it a lot; along with the Mozart Quartet, it became a cornerstone of the group. It epitomised the sound of the London Oboe Quartet; Janet’s beautiful playing, and the integrated strings underneath.

Listening to this final Dithyramb, it’s not hard to feel that this powerful music is still about death rather than life. While Janet Craxton was still at the height of her powers, death took her, unexpectedly, from no obvious cause.

Janet Craxton the musician

On Janet’s death, the pianist Denis Matthews related an anecdote about her. “In 1957 I was on a tour of Canada with Léon Goossens and we chanced to overhear a broadcast recording of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, not knowing what orchestra was playing. Suddenly Léon said: ‘It must be the BBC from home - only Janet can play like that’ - and so it turned out to be.”

For insight into what made Janet’s playing so immediately recognisable I turned to international oboe soloist Nicholas Daniel, who from an early age was a visitor to her house in Kidderpore Avenue for oboe lessons, and studied with her at the Royal Academy of Music. “As a player, she didn’t immediately strike one close to as having the biggest sound,” he said, “but there was a luminous, projecting quality that could come through an orchestra without any harshness; and always the musical honesty and integrity shone through.” Janet’s honesty and integrity as a player, and as a person, was to be a recurring theme in our conversation. “She was always faithful to the composer’s intention, sometimes to an obsessional degree. As a teacher, she demanded loyalty to the composer first, to the creator. I imagine she thought of herself as a re-creator.”

And this put her close to composers. “I remember hearing her and Alan Richardson her husband perform the Poulenc Sonata when I was fifteen, and being struck by the intensity of it, by the lack of unnecessary rubato. The same went for her recording of Benjamin Britten’s Metamorphoses, which she made in his presence.”

Naturally, this makes her a great advocate of the pieces she plays. “Right from the first track on this CD”, said Nicholas, “the Francis Routh Quartet, I thought ‘I’ve got to play this!’ And I felt that about each of the works.”

Composers were inspired by her and wanted to write for her, as the CD demonstrates. “For example, Lennox Berkeley,” Nicholas remembered. “I was working with him in the 1980s. He was heartbroken by her death. And I think his Quartet was written with great insight into the nature of Janet’s playing. There is a terrible wistfulness about it that I used to find just depressing, but now, with the benefit of a few years of distance, I find an appropriate and valuable expression of a response to the mechanised world we find ourselves living in. This piece, and this performance, deserves repeated listenings.”

“What comes through again and again on the CD is the sheer emotional power of Janet’s playing. And to help her is an incredibly strong technique and a distinctive, warm yet flexible sound. Ten years ago that sound might have seemed dated, perhaps being thought of as being too light in quality. But more people nowadays are beginning to see that the thick sound favoured in many European orchestras - including Britain - with its stodgy, single-colour timbre is ultimately inexpressive - and really rather boring. Janet’s sound developed from her English background, her studies in France, and her use of the soft, long-scraped reeds that are favoured in America.”
She never shows off her technique for simply virtuoso purposes, though. “I suspect that at heart she was not a natural soloist,” said Nicholas “she was more comfortable in chamber music. She didn’t want the spotlight, or at least was more than happy to share it with the composer. To take one specific example, in the last movement of the Maconchy Quartet (at 1:00), she comes in on an incredibly quiet top E. Not just because she can, but because it creates an incredible musical moment that gives me goosebumps.”

“And this musical integrity is another reason to celebrate this CD. It’s an important disc in terms of style, because she understood the language of these composers so well. I would like to think that she would have been happy for Oboe Classics to release this disc of pieces she had a hand in creating and inspiring.”

A Note on the Recordings

These performances were brought back into the light by Brian Hawkins, who found them in the Sound Archives of the British Library. They were all originally BBC broadcasts, and for more information about the circumstances of their production I turned to Anthony Burton, who was on the production staff at the BBC from 1974-89, was an adviser on BBC Enterprises’ 1987 issue ‘The Art of Janet Craxton’ (now deleted), and presented Nicholas Daniel’s Memorial Concert to her in 1991. “There are three types of recordings here”, Anthony said. ‘Firstly, the Berkeley Quartet, which is a live concert before a paying audience, where the microphone is allowed to eavesdrop and there are no retakes. Then there are the Maconchy and Lutyens Quartets, which were performed at concerts set up in the Concert Hall in Broadcasting House ‘before an invited audience’ - which means they didn’t pay. These were almost always a single take, and we would only try again or only edit if something went obviously wrong, like a false start. They were recorded really only so that they could be transmitted at a time convenient to the schedules, not in order to preserve or edit the performances. Incidentally, these concerts of contemporary chamber music were part of a tradition going back to the beginnings of the BBC, certainly as far back as the 1930s.”

“Things began to change during the period of these recordings - the 1970s - when the original instrument revolution was under way, and young players were coming into the BBC studios who had worked with commercial record companies and got used to their methods, with lots of time, short takes, and extreme accuracy. This in turn influenced the way younger producers worked in the BBC. In any case, because of wholesale changes in the economy of Radio 3, there are now very few studio chamber music recordings, they are normally recorded at live concerts.”

Given the tight deadlines, then, the accuracy of the London Oboe Quartet is remarkable. “In my experience of working with them”, said Anthony, “they were always perfectly prepared; not only were the notes under their fingers, but they knew what they wanted to do with the music. They were good to work with, the sessions were always good humoured. Janet’s strong personality was always in evidence.”

Remarkably accurate though this music-making is, the wonders of the computer can be used to enhance any performance; razor
blades are no longer required. I spent a day in an editing suite with Morgan Roberts of The Classical Recording Company. The changes we made were very minor, but they included, for example, improving the ensemble in the crucial three chords that recur in the slow movement of the Maconchy. Anyone who came in slightly early was removed! Janet’s own playing was stunningly accurate, but even she made a few false starts, some of which we were able to fix by substituting identical notes from nearby. This may sound like cheating, but we only did it where we thought it improved the musical effect; and after all a CD is intended for repeated listening rather than the one or two transmissions of a radio broadcast.

Then there was the recording quality to improve, good though it is. This was particularly true for the Maconchy Quartet, which was recorded from the original radio broadcast, and suffered some interference in the signal. In this case, a special program called Cedar ReTouch was used, which creates a visual image of the sound. Clicks and pops show up in the image, and can be deleted without affecting the music. We also used this program to get rid of the sound of music pages being turned, and to remove or reduce audience noise in the public recordings. And the rumble of the underground trains on the Bakerloo tube line beneath the BBC Concert Hall is less in evidence, too.

Janet Craxton was born in 1929 and studied the oboe at the Royal Academy of Music with Helen Gaskell (1945-8), and at the Paris Conservatoire with Pierre Bajeux (1948-9). She was principal oboe at the Hallé orchestra (1949-52), the London Mozart Players (1952-4), the BBC Symphony Orchestra (1954-63), the London Sinfonietta (1969-81) and the Royal Opera House (1979-81). In 1958 she was appointed Oboe Professor at the Royal Academy and tutor to the National Youth Orchestra. In addition to founding the London Oboe Quartet in 1968, she was a member of the Leonardo Ensemble and the London Concertante. She died in 1981. More information about Janet Craxton can be found at www.craxtonmemorialtrust.org.uk (follow the links to the Craxton Family).

Perry Hart was born in Australia and received her early musical training at the Sydney Conservatorium. She later studied with Szymon Goldberg in Europe and the US. She came to the UK in 1960, and was a member of the London Bach Orchestra and Professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama as well as playing solo recitals and chamber music. She was a founder member of the Oromonte String Trio and Piano Trios. In the 1990s she returned to Australia where she died in 2002.

Brian Hawkins studied at the Royal College of Music with Cecil Aronowitz. He has played in the Edinburgh and Martin String Quartets. He joined the English Chamber Orchestra and the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields, and was principal viola of the London Sinfonietta in the late 1960s and ‘70s. He also became a member of the Vesuvius Ensemble and the Nash Ensemble. He has been Professor of Viola and Chamber Music at the RCM from 1967 and was appointed Head of Strings in 1992; he is now an FRCM.

Kenneth Heath studied the cello at the Royal Manchester College of Music and subsequently with Pierre Fournier in France. He was then appointed solo cellist at the Royal Opera House, and in the London Symphony Orchestra. In 1963 he became principal cellist of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, leaving in 1965 to perform more solo and chamber music, as well as being principal cellist with the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields. He died in 1977.

Charles Tunnell studied at the Royal College of Music with Harvey Phillips, and in Paris with André Navarra. In 1960, while still a student, he played in the English Chamber Orchestra’s inaugural concert at the Royal Festival Hall. This was the beginning of a connection that was to last over forty years, the last twenty five of which he was principal cellist. He also played for many years in the Tunnell Piano Trio, the Vesuvius Ensemble and the English Baroque Ensemble. He now spends much of his time teaching in Spain.