

Benjamin Britten's Temporal Variations

An Enigma Explored, Part III: Britten and the Oboe

In part three, *George Caird* considers Britten's relationship with the oboe and the four oboists for whom he wrote his renowned works for the instrument. (Parts 1 and 2 were published in DRN124 and 125.)

Britten wrote four works for the oboe during his lifetime, a number only exceeded by works for piano, voice, violin and cello. No other wind instrument received such attention from the composer and it is therefore worthwhile to reflect on why this might be. Having included the oboe, oboe d'amore and cor anglais in some of his earliest works, Britten records his fascination with the instrument on hearing Léon Goossens perform at a Queen's Hall Promenade Concert on 2nd October 1930: 'Goossen's [sic] Oboe Concerto ('beautiful, monotonous, impossibly gorgeously, immortally played by Léon').'¹



Composer Eugene Aynsley Goossens,
brother of Léon

There are subsequent diary entries which confirm Britten's admiration for Goossens' playing such as on 27th November 1930: 'Orchestra not too good, but L. Goossens adorable' and on 25th February 1932: 'Léon plays Eugene Goosen's [sic] attractive(ly) Oboe Conc. superbly as can only he'.



Léon Goossens

There is no hard evidence that Goossens directly commissioned the *Phantasy Quartet Op.2* on which Britten began work on the 9th September 1932, but on 17th October the composer records: 'Go to R.C.M. in morning to see Léon Goossens about my Oboe Quart.' The *Quartet* was entered for the Daily Telegraph chamber music competition on 29th October but the prize on this occasion went to Elizabeth Maconchy's *Oboe Quintet*. The work was to produce great outcomes for the composer: a broadcast performance by Goossens the following August and, in 1934, an invitation to the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Florence where Goossens played the work with the Griller Quartet.



Terence MacDonagh

Goossens had begun teaching at the Royal College of Music in 1924 and during the 1920s built up the premier oboe class in the country. His students included Terence MacDonagh, who later was to succeed him at the RCM, and Evelyn Rothwell (Barbirolli) who established a worldwide reputation as an oboist and teacher herself. Many of Goossens' students enjoyed successful careers and it is interesting that three of these were to give the premières of Britten's subsequent works for the oboe. Goossens played throughout his career on a Lorée oboe

which became a symbol of his magical playing and of his influence on the tonal possibilities of the instrument. This early, slender instrument, very different from its modern counterpart, was light in sound but had wonderful tonal possibilities. It was the model for the English Louis oboes made between the two World Wars that many of Goossens' students would have played on, if not a Lorée.

Britten's interest in the oboe in his early years is further borne out by his use of the instrument in his *Sinfonietta Op.1*, in many of his film scores including the Rossini-based *The Tocher*, *Coal Face*, *Ways of Communication* (for piano and wind quintet) and *God's Chillun*.² It is not surprising then that, on entering the RCM in 1930, he had quickly got to know and worked with some of its oboe students, notably Sylvia Spencer, Natalie Caine and Joy Boughton.



Sylvia Spencer

Born in 1909, Sylvia Spencer joined the RCM Junior Department in 1923 as a violin student, taking oboe lessons as a second study with Léon Goossens.³ She continued as a senior student from age 17 with Goossens as her teacher, progressing to professional work as his second oboe and eventually becoming 2nd oboe of the City of Birmingham Orchestra in 1928. Spencer only held this position for two years, returned to London in 1930 on full graduation from the RCM and thereafter freelanced.

Spencer's connection with Benjamin Britten probably came through the RCM as Britten began his studies there in September 1930, and Spencer would have remained in contact with the College in the years following her graduation. It is interesting to note that she had already asked him for a trio for flute, oboe and piano for the Sylvan Trio by the 3rd April 1933 when Britten recorded in his diary that he was to write, 'a Suite for Fl. Ob. Pft. commissioned by Sylvia Spencer'.⁴ On 25th July that year, she also deputised for Goossens in a rehearsal of the *Phantasy Quartet*. More than a year later, she performed this work with the renowned Griller Quartet at a Contemporary Music Society concert: 'Sylvia Spencer and the Grillers play my quartet very beautifully; not perfectly, but with imagination, and spirit. It goes down well, after that they play the Prokofiev *Quintet* brilliantly...'⁵

Despite in the end not being involved in the première of the *Temporal Variations*, Spencer remained friendly with the composer. She made contact with him in 1943 after his return from the USA, asking after a copy of his folk song arrangement of *I wonder as I wander* which she had obviously considered performing, playing the one-voice piano part on the oboe. A postcard from Britten to her, dated 8 June 1943, was interestingly inconclusive:

Sorry for long silence, but work and 'flu have completely occupied me these last months. Sorry, also, that I can't or couldn't let you have a copy of 'I wonder as I wander' – copyright

reasons outside my control! But I hope they'll get straightened someday, as I want to hear you blow it – Best wishes, Benjamin Britten⁶

Born in 1908, Natalie Caine went to school at Southwold in Suffolk, and was initially a pianist and composer, coming to the oboe late.⁷ On entering the RCM her life changed on hearing Sylvia Spencer play the oboe, and Caine immediately asked Goossens for lessons. Her progress was rapid and soon she was performing at a high level. In 1933 she deputised in rehearsals of Britten's *Phantasy Quartet* and thus got to know the composer. This connection may well have led to her involvement in the première of the *Temporal Variations* as, with both Sylvia Spencer and Joy Boughton discounted by November 1936, Britten may well have been instrumental in turning to another RCM connection.

In later life and after World War II, Caine played notably with the Philharmonia Orchestra, taught at the RCM and Junior RCM and is on record playing the cor anglais in trios with Sidney Sutcliffe and Roger Lord. Her students, Janice Knight and Carolyn King⁸ remember a modest, highly musical and supportive teacher who spoke little of past glories. But it is known that Caine, on hearing of the eventual publication of the *Temporal Variations* with the apparent 'altered' dedication from her to Montagu Slater, was deeply hurt by this. Caine played on an English Louis instrument, made in the style of the old Lorée instruments such as Goossens'.



Joy Boughton

The third student of Goossens who was associated with Britten is perhaps the most important in being the player for whom the composer wrote *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid Op.49*. Joy Boughton is less relevant to a study of the *Temporal Variations* save that she was approached to play the première. However, as the daughter of the composer Rutland Boughton, and a player who grew up in the artistic atmosphere of her father's Glastonbury Festival, it is not surprising that she became the player of choice for the English Opera Group when it was formed after the Second World War. She in many ways personified Britten's fascination with the oboe which combined the 'impossibly gorgeous immortal' playing of Goossens with an artistic freedom, a mixture that could cast light on the works that the composer wrote for the instrument.

So, in tracing Britten's connection with the oboe through these players of the instrument, another question emerges. Might the oboe itself have become significant to the composer? Britten's visit to Barcelona in April 1936, just as he was working on *Our Hunting Fathers*, was for the first performance of his *Suite for Violin and Piano Op.6* with the violinist Antonio Brosa. The performance took place on the hill, Montjuïc,



where previously it had been intended to hold an anti-fascist Olympics.⁹ Here, Britten heard a band accompanying some Sardana dancing outside the Town Hall, remarking on the Catalan shawms, the tible and the tenora, in an observation that may prove significant when we consider the composer's choice of instrument for the *Temporal Variations*:

In afternoon to various places with (Brosa) & Peggy & to the big reception in the Generalidad? (Generalitat) – with infinite speeches. But afterwards the Saltaders danced to the enchanting music (more powerful oboes (tiglis?) in the Square'.¹⁰

As a result of hearing this Catalan music, Britten collaborated with the composer Lennox Berkeley, who was on the visit to Barcelona, to write the suite *Mont Juïc* based on Catalan tunes. This four-movement suite was eventually completed in 1938 with two movements by each composer. The power of the tible and tenora seem to be captured in the third and fourth movements that Britten composed, though it should be said that the alto saxophone solo might well have been a choice by Britten as the best way to emulate these Catalan wind instruments. The published edition of *Mont Juïc* provides an ossia for clarinet in the absence of a saxophone in performance. This is in contrast to *Our Hunting Fathers*, where the saxophone solo in Messalina is offered an ossia on the cor anglais in the Fair Copy.¹¹



Sir Lennox Berkeley with Benjamin Britten

But, while the saxophone and clarinet may have fulfilled some of the qualities that Britten heard in this folk style, it is the double-reed oboe that Britten chose to write for it. It is interesting to note the use that Britten makes of the oboe in *Our Hunting Fathers* where in both his Composition Sketch and the Fair Copy he explicitly selects the oboe for certain passages. This will be discussed further when we look in detail at the *Temporal Variations*.

Thus Britten may well have wanted to put across the visceral tone of such folk music in parts of his *Temporal Variations* and, as in his later work, *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*, to ask the oboe to combine the sweetness of Goossens' playing with the Dionysian abandon of a folk oboe. The connection between the ancient double-reed aulos, argues Linda Ardito¹², represented the opposite of Apollo's lyre as a symbol of perfection and order and was associated with 'the Dionysian cult and accompanied dance, poetry, song and drama in rituals of praise for Dionysus (Bacchus), god of wine, fertility and mysticism'. In connection to this point, Natalie Caine reported that Britten had asked that the lower notes in the Oration movement of *Temporal Variations* should not hold back and be more raw sounding.¹³

This quality is important in seeking to answer the question as to why Britten chose the oboe for his *Temporal*

Variations. The idea that the composer may have held a special regard for the instrument as one that could play with exquisite refinement on the one hand whilst also fulfilling a kind of primaeval role as a folk instrument seems to give credence to the creation of the *Temporal Variations* and the later *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*.



Photo: Enid Slater (Slater Estate)

Montagu Slater by Enid Slater

Could this idea have been particular to Britten himself or a shared view with others? It is interesting to note that in an undated radio play, *Oboe at Esop*, by Montagu Slater,¹⁴ a scientist, Professor Thomas Oboe is visiting Esop City to advise its plastic factory on why its ground-breaking, clear plastic products were mysteriously disintegrating. He suggests that he has the answer: the plastics are suffering from a kind of virus that can only be treated by high frequency sound waves 'such as made by an alternating current between two quartz plates'. His machine to produce these waves appears to convince the local scientists that he is right and in conducting the necessary experiments Prof. Oboe first emulates an oboe, then drums, fiddles, bassoons and cor anglais. He admits at this stage that the power produced by these waves is probably what the Pied Piper of Hamelin used in leading the rats and the children away from town in that famous story.

This surreal script goes on to relate that Prof. Oboe then gets involved with the local scientists and with Esop's burghers and at the end of the play it appears that

Professor Oboe, the scientists and many burghers have disappeared. How might Slater have thought of the oboe as the basis for this parable on the power of music over people? In addition to his collaboration with the composer on *Peter Grimes*, Slater was later to be involved in the creation of the 1946 film *Instruments of the Orchestra* for which Britten wrote *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. And surely this stemmed from Slater's long-held interest in musical instruments, a subject he would have enjoyed sharing with Britten.

In Part 4, George Caird looks at the manuscript sources, the published edition and its orchestrated version by Colin Matthews.

- ¹ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 54.
- ² *Britten on Film* (NMC records) and MS in Britten-Pears Library.
- ³ Programme of Commemoration Concert 7-3-1979, Royal College of Music, Sylvia Spencer Collection, MS 14271.
- ⁴ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 137.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 237.
- ⁶ Benjamin Britten, postcard MS, Sylvia Spencer Collection 13193, Royal College of Music.
- ⁷ The Guardian, *Natalie Caine obituary*, 17 February 2009.
- ⁸ Conversations with George Caird, 2019.
- ⁹ John Fuller: 'Britten, Auden and the 1930s' in *Literary Britten*, ed. Kate Kennedy (The Boydell Press, 2018).
- ¹⁰ John Evans, *Journeying Boy*, p. 347.
- ¹¹ Benjamin Britten, *Our Hunting Fathers*, Fair Copy MS, Arch. BBM/our_hunting_fathers/1/5 Britten-Pears Library.
- ¹² Linda Ardito, *The Aulos: Symbol of Musico-Medicinal Magic* (The Double Reed, Vol. 22. No. 2, 2006).
- ¹³ Conversation between William Waterhouse and Natalie Caine reported verbally to George Caird, c. 1980.
- ¹⁴ Montagu Slater, *Oboe at Esop*, MST 1/4/19, Manuscripts and Special Collections, University of Nottingham.

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