

Preview

Oboe d'amore concerto debuts at Severance Hall: a conversation with Robert Walters (and a poem)

by Mike Telin



It's always a big event when an orchestra performs Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. The opening *O Fortuna* (O Fortune) is one of the most recognizable pieces of music thanks to its use in hundreds of commercials and films. The massive forces gathered on stage and the volume that is produced make it a thrill to hear live. Beginning on Thursday, April 11 at Severance Hall, Conductor James Feddeck and The Cleveland Orchestra will be joined by Rebecca Nelsen, soprano, Nicholas Phan, tenor, Stephen Powell, baritone, and the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and Children's Chorus for four performances of Orff's masterpiece.

The concert also includes two Cleveland Orchestra firsts, a performance of J.S. Bach's *Concerto in A major, BWV 1055* for oboe d'amore and orchestra featuring Cleveland

Orchestra English horn player Robert Walters. The concerts also mark the first time that any oboe d'amore concerto has been performed by the orchestra.

Prior to joining the Cleveland Orchestra at the beginning of the 2004-05 season, Robert Walters served as solo English horn and oboe player with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. He made his debut as a soloist with The Cleveland Orchestra in Ned Rorem's *English Horn Concerto* in 2006 and in 2011 he performed the *English Horn Concerto* of Latvian composer Peteris Vasks with the ensemble. In addition to his musical talents, Walters is a prolific poet and writer who earned his master of fine arts degree at Columbia University.

We reached Robert Walters by telephone at his studio in Oberlin where he has served as professor of oboe and English horn. We began by asking him when it was determined that *BWV 1055* was indeed a d'amore concerto?

Robert Walters: It was 1936. It was previously known as a harpsichord concerto but then a manuscript was discovered of the melody for a single line instrument. It was in the key of A, and in the same range as the d'amore. Bach was using the instrument a lot in his cantatas and the *B-minor Mass*, so musicologists surmised that the original intent of this concerto was also for the d'amore.

What's incredible — and I'm not certain this is true — is that it may be the most recorded oboe concerto. I was doing a lot of research on Spotify, Amazon and YouTube, trying to find different people's approaches to the piece and there are dozens of recordings of it. Performances on original instruments and modern instruments by American and European players. I was shocked.

Mike Telin: I didn't do the Spotify thing but I did the YouTube and it was amazing. Equally amazing were the differences in approaches to the piece.

RW: Wildly diverse tempos.

MT: How do you approach the tempos?

RW: Not wickedly fast. I think that makes sense when it's performed as a harpsichord concerto but I don't think it makes sense to play it too fast on a single-line instrument. Although the piece is very lyrical and technically it lies well on the instrument

There is a recording of Murray Perahia playing it on piano and the last movement is much faster than any other recording. It is thrilling and it works for him. That's probably why they are such convincing performances.

Some musicologists claim that when Bach would turn a [single line] concerto into a keyboard concerto he would add flourishes and things that felt stylistically right for the instrument. So that is my approach, I try to play it in a way with regard to tempo and ornamentation that is something pleasurable to perform and to listen to.

MT: Also in the recording I listened to everyone used a different size of orchestra, but they all worked.

RW: Yes, from large to medium ensembles all the way to one player on a part and yes, they all work. I'm going to be recording it with one player on a part with people from the orchestra the following week. I'm also playing it in June at the International Double Reed Society convention in California and that section is between one on a part and what we are using at Severance, so I'll get to experience it in many versions over the next couple of months.

MT: I don't know but it seems that no matter what, Bach always works.

RW: I found a recording of the concerto by a teenage Chinese pianist who was a really great player, but the orchestra was made up of a combination of Western and Chinese instruments like pipas all playing the orchestra part and it sounded wonderful.

MT: What do you like about playing d'amore, as compared to oboe or English horn?

RW: The sonority is incredibly vocal and very human but at the same time it sounds otherworldly, a haunting sound. I've been trying to figure out whether it's a large oboe or a small English horn. I'm still not sure which.

MT: *On a completely different topic, do you still find time to keep up with your writing?*

RW: I do, and I write a sonnet for my wife and daughters every year. They are a snapshot of what is going on in our lives as a family. So I always keep up with that.

MT: *Do you have anything that can be included in this article?*

RW: [Thinking] I do, and can you send me an e-mail and just say “cello sonnet?”

MT: I will, and thanks so much for talking.

The following was written for Catharina Meints, Associate Professor of Viola da Gamba and Cello at the Oberlin Conservatory, who was formerly a long-time member of the Cleveland Orchestra.

Cello

for Cathy

Dark body of resonance and curve,
Chamber of shadows and possible music.
Mute figure carved in silhouette,
A solitude that will never be sung.
Unsounded—a swan alone on water
Without the moon, without an image to reflect—
Like the lyric that waits unwritten,
No voice without the mediant hand.
At night recurring dreams of unaccompanied
Bach—the saraband trapped in silence—like unspent love
The cello sits, locked in its case as four strings
Bridge the abyss, the wound asleep beneath the wood,
Unsoothed until expressed; each phrase must find
Its breath—the dark path drawn by a passing bow.

Robert Walters

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