

Preview

CityMusic Cleveland: an interview with principal oboist Rebecca Schweigert Mayhew

by Mike Telin



If you're a lover of Mozart wind concertos it's difficult to imagine a time when the composer's *Oboe Concerto in C* was not part of the standard repertoire. However, for well over one hundred years Mozart's beloved concerto was assumed lost. Beginning on Wednesday, December 12th and running through Sunday, December 16, [CityMusic Cleveland](#) principal oboist Rebecca Schweigert Mayhew will perform Mozart's *Oboe Concerto* under the direction of guest conductor Stefan Willich. The concerto also includes Mozart's *Overture to the Marriage of Figaro* and Mendelssohn's *Symphony No. 4 "Italian"*. The Mt. Zion Choir will also join CityMusic Cleveland for selections of festive seasonal music.

Mozart composed his oboe concerto during the summer of 1777, and a short time later reworked the score, which became the composer's *Flute Concerto in D*, a work that was continuously performed during the period the oboe score was lost. It was not until 1920 that Mozart scholar Bernhard Paumgartner found a manuscript of an oboe concerto that was similar to Mozart's flute concerto, but still the oboe concerto remained unpublished until 1948.

We spoke to oboist Rebecca Schweigert Mayhew by telephone, and talked about many things including how drastic changes in weather can cause problems for the instrument. But we began by asking her what she likes about Mozart's concerto and why she looks forward to performing the piece?

Rebecca Schweigert Mayhew: It's a beautiful piece and it's dramatically operatic and conversational. Musically it's very intricate and because CityMusic is a small orchestra we can treat it as chamber music.

I also like the fact that I will be able to perform it five times — although that will be a little hard on the reeds. But performing a piece five times allows everyone to really get to know the piece unlike if you were only performing it once.

Mike Telin: Wind players don't often get the chance to play concertos. And this fall we will have had two oboe concertos performed in town.

RSM: You don't hear an oboe concerto performed every season, and yes, we just heard Frank Rosenwein do a phenomenal performance of the Strauss concerto with The Cleveland Orchestra, but it doesn't happen that often.

MT: The concerto has an interesting history in that it is the same music, more or less as his D major flute concerto. And while it is true that the oboe concerto came first, it took a while for musicologists to come to that conclusion.

RSM: That's right, and to this day nobody has actually found the original oboe score. There may still be some people who believe that the flute concerto came first, but there was evidence found in the twentieth century that contradicts that claim. And it is a lucky thing because for one hundred and some years the piece was really lost.

MT: At the risk of offending every flute player on earth, I will say that I prefer the concerto played on oboe. It just sounds like an oboe concerto to me. But on another topic, will you be performing your own cadenzas?

RSM: I'm actually using John Mack's cadenzas. First of all I think they are perfect; I love they way they sound. But we also just passed his birthday and he would have been eighty-five this year. He was such an influential oboist, and he is so closely associated with Cleveland that it seems like an appropriate thing to do.

MT: I would imagine that you first started learning the concerto back in high school?

RSM: That's right, the Mozart concerto is the most standard audition piece, so everyone begins to learn it very early. Also oboists don't have a lot of concertos.

MT: Yes, and why is that? It's a beautiful instrument.

RSM: During the baroque era many composers were writing concertos for the instrument, but during the classical era things changed. The clarinet came onto the scene and the horn developed valves, so those wind instruments became more interesting for composers. And there are the tantalizing rumors about the potential Beethoven oboe concerto out there somewhere, which nobody has ever discovered.

MT: You don't need me to tell you that the concerto is not easy, but do the things that were difficult ten years ago remain difficult?

RSM: Absolutely! No matter how much you polish the piece, there is always more that can be done. Mozart's music is so pure and transparent that you can never refine it enough.

MT: Exactly. Then there is the subject of reeds, which you mentioned earlier. We could talk forever about reed problems, but that would be very inside the double reed club. But could you talk about these problems for the people who don't know why the difference between forty degrees and humid and twenty degrees and dry does cause problems with the reeds?

RSM: I'll try. Oboe reeds are very temperamental; they are very tiny so small changes in the environment can make a big difference in how they react. For me, typically a reed will only last about eight to ten hours of playing time. So a warm humid day will give you a fairly fat reed. And a cold dry day will cause the same reed to become thinner. Ideally you are making reeds all the time so that you are ready to adjust quickly. When we have a really heavy performance schedule like we will next week, it makes it difficult to find the time to keep up with the reed making.

MT: How many reeds will you have at the ready during the performances?

RSM: [Laughing] I don't know but I'll probably narrow it down to three that I'll have with me on stage. But at this point I have cases full of reeds that I have been making.

MT: You also have a different space to perform in every night as well.

RSM: Yes, so acoustically things will change every night as well. And, the oboe is also an instrument that is sensitive to acoustics as well. So the chances of me using the same reed every night are practically zero. The other thing that might be interesting for people to know is the water issue because City Music always plays in churches and it may be a little cold.

MT: And what problems does that cause?

RSM: The oboe has very tiny holes close to the top of the instrument that are crucial to every note that you play. So the temperature difference between my body and the room is enough for condensation to happen, that's just the laws of physics. So in December that is also something you always have on your mind.

MT: And the concerto itself uses the entire range of the oboe with a lot of leaps from low to high.

RSM: Exactly, which is why you hope the octave vents remain free of water when you're trying to do that.

Published on clevelandclassical.com December 11, 2012