

## Horn of Plenty: a new concerto for English hornist Robert Walters

by Daniel Hautzinger

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There was no Cleveland Orchestra when the Oberlin Conservatory of Music opened 150 years ago.

By the time the orchestra was founded in 1918 — with pivotal support from Oberlin’s John Long Severance ’85 — the conservatory was 53 years old and well into a phase of monumental growth. In 1919, the year-old orchestra performed for the first time in Oberlin’s Finney Chapel. It has returned to campus every year since — well over 200 performances and counting.

Ninety-six seasons later, as the conservatory celebrates its 150th anniversary, it honors these extensive ties to the Cleveland Orchestra with the commission of a work for English horn by composer Bernard Rands. Rands’ *English Horn Concerto* will receive its [world premiere](#) at Severance Hall at 8:00 pm Friday, November 27. It will be performed by Oberlin Professor of Oboe and English Horn [Robert Walters](#), who is also solo English horn and an oboist in the orchestra.

“It’s particularly meaningful to me to have one project combine both places that I live and love and work,” Walters says of the commission, which will receive repeat performances at 8:00 pm November 28 and 3:00 pm November 29. “I’m just beyond proud to be associated with Oberlin and to have something like this to commemorate the conservatory’s anniversary.”

The premiere is a key component of Oberlin’s sesquicentennial festivities throughout the 2015-16 academic year. In January, two student ensembles — the Oberlin Orchestra and Contemporary Music Ensemble — will make their debut performances at Symphony Center and Roosevelt University in Chicago.

The idea for an Oberlin commission that would bridge Walters' two professional lives originated with former Dean of the Conservatory David Stull. It was Stull's successor, Andrea Kalyn, who envisioned the work as a celebration of Oberlin's 150th anniversary. "She took that ball and ran even further with it," Walters says.

At the time, Walters had already been contacted by Rands, who wished to write a piece for him. A few years ago, Walters performed Rands' *Concertino for Oboe* with Oberlin's Contemporary Music Ensemble. "I knew that Robert's name is synonymous with excellence in the double reed world," Rands said. "I got a recording of his performance of my concertino, and sure enough, it was absolutely superb."

Rands' admiration only grew when Walters recorded a work for English horn and strings by Rands' wife, composer Augusta Read Thomas. "Hearing him play that, I said definitely, I'm going to write Robert and tell him I want to write for him," the composer recalls.

In crafting the concerto, Rands sought to highlight the idiosyncrasies and strengths of Walters' playing. "He really wrote something that feels like it was written for me," Walters says. "There's a lot of high register playing, because I'm pretty comfortable in that range. Friends jokingly call the English horn the *anguish* horn because it often depicts slow, sad music. But the opening movement of this piece is athletic and fleet, while the second movement is mournful."

The third movement is an homage to Debussy, whom Rands calls "the most important composer to me." It's fitting, therefore, that the program opens with Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. The evening is filled out by the *Symphonie fantastique* of Berlioz, another of Rands' key influences.

Both pieces also feature prominent English horn parts; indeed, Walters says that the *Symphonie fantastique* contains the first major English horn part in the symphonic repertoire. Asked if he would be playing the famous solo in the Berlioz in addition to his Rands concerto, Walters quickly exclaimed: "Are you kidding? I wouldn't pass that up!"

That unbridled enthusiasm is part of what attracted Rands to Walters' playing in the first place. "Robert is so intelligent and curious," he said. "He brings an understanding at a deep level of what's intended by the notes to music."

And Walters' enthusiasm extends to Oberlin too. "I feel like just the luckiest person ever to be teaching at this school."

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