

Music for Two Oboes  
Program Note

The beginning of the story of Music for Two Oboes is a work for solo oboe that was written during the time I was composing my first large-scale orchestral work, a concerto for violin, viola, cello and orchestra (1978). Since I was feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the concerto, I decided to write short study pieces for solo instruments which would serve as “continuity sketches” for the movements of the orchestra piece. Since I knew that the second movement would open with an extended solo for the principal oboe, it seemed natural to write an oboe piece as the study for that movement. The piece became a lyrical exposition of melodic material that was central to the concerto, in a language that could be called “12-tone tonality”. When I was done with it, I asked an excellent oboist and student colleague, James Ryon, to perform it on a student composition concert.

The composition of my oboe duo was the result of a criticism of the solo oboe piece that I received from my teacher at that time, Elliott Carter. After the first performance of the solo piece, Carter (with not a trace of malevolence in his voice) called the piece “unintelligible”. Such an epithet from someone who had walked into the Juilliard School for that concert from off the street might not have had much effect on me, but from Carter it had a significant impact! Pretty much right then and there, I decided that the first performance of the piece was also its last.

On the other hand, there were some things in the piece that I liked, so completely discarding it was not a good idea. A couple of days later, I realized that what the piece needed was another oboe to “explain” the piece. And so I set to work on a new version, concentrating intently on the task of making the piece “intelligible”. Whether I succeeded is not for me to judge, but I do know that I learned a great deal from the whole experience. Revising and rethinking one’s own creations offers priceless opportunities for discovery and insight. Thank you, Mr. Carter!

Last note: James Ryon was a student of the legendary oboist, Robert Bloom. One of the oboists who played the first performance of Music for Two Oboes was Sara Lambert Bloom, former oboe teacher at the University of Cincinnati’s College-Conservatory of Music and Bob’s wife. The piece is beautifully recorded by Sara and Richard Woodhams (principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra) on a Centaur CD. Small world!

Joel Hoffman