

## Exploring Franz Reizenstein's Oboe Sonata, Op.11 (1937)

by John France

### Introduction

It is unfortunate that the on-line *Franz Reizenstein* archive has several important pages still 'under construction.' I welcomed this webpage in a [post](#) on *The Land of Lost Content* in 2011. The most potentially useful element missing is the 'Performance History', which would have been helpful in the study of the present Oboe Sonata. I understand that the work was written as far back as 1937 but was put aside until it was premiered and published in 1942. It is not possible to find any compositional history of this piece but, by luck, I uncovered a couple of references to the Sonata's premiere performance in contemporary newspapers.

Franz Reizenstein (1911-68) was 26 years old when he composed his Oboe Sonata. He had left Berlin in 1934 and arrived in London, where he studied composition at the Royal College of Music with Ralph Vaughan Williams and piano privately with the pianist Solomon. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Reizenstein was interred as an 'alien' but with the advocacy of Vaughan Williams he was released and subsequently spent the war years as a railway clerk with the opportunity of performing at many public concerts.

### Programme Notes

The Oboe Sonata has three short movements: 'Allegretto', 'Cantilène-andante' and 'Vivace' and lasts for about 12 minutes. It was dedicated to the music critic and editor of *Tempo* magazine, Ernest Chapman who was later honorary secretary and concerts manager of the Macnaghten Concerts.

Margaret Reizenstein (Liner Note, Continuum CCD 1024), gives a succinct overview of the work, noting 'the rich melodic invention and unflagging rhythmic movement...' and opining that 'the [Sonatina is] short, tuneful, and good humoured, with an immediate appeal.' The Sonata is neo-classical in its formal construction and I consider that the harmony is *piquant* rather than 'astringently twentieth-century' (op.cit.)

The opening 'allegretto' is written in modified sonata form. The first theme (oboe) is a cheerful little tune (Fig.1) with the contrasting second subject being more reflective and expressive. The development section is compressed, but full of interest. The movement ends thoughtfully.

The image shows the first page of the musical score for the first movement of Franz Reizenstein's Oboe Sonata, Op. 11. The score is for Oboe and Piano. The title is 'SONATINA For Oboe and Piano' by Franz Reizenstein, dedicated to Ernest Chapman. The tempo is 'Allegretto' and the duration is 1 1/2 minutes. The score shows the first few measures of the first theme, marked 'f' (forte). The oboe part starts with a cheerful melody, and the piano part provides a rhythmic accompaniment.

Figure 1

The slow lilting 'Cantilène', written in 3/8 time, is the heart of the work. After a long piano introduction, where the main theme is stated, the oboe joins in to explore this idea. The example (Fig.2) below shows the repeat of the theme before the movement comes to an end with a reflective coda. It is in

these pages that the listener may pick up on the fact that Reizenstein studied with Ralph Vaughan Williams:



Figure 2

Formally, the finale, 'Vivace' is a little rondo. The 'refrain' is presented as a wide-ranging melody played over a toccata-like semiquaver pattern given out by the right hand on the piano (Fig.3):

Figure 3

As the movement progresses, contrasting episodes are heard, including a 'tranquillo' section where the oboe is supported by tremolo chords on the piano. The main impact of this movement is that of a 'perpetuum mobile'.

Reizenstein has created a fine balance between soloists and displays a profound understanding of the oboe's characteristics. The entire Sonata calls for superb technical dexterity – and not only from the oboist.

### The Premiere and Reception

The Oboe Sonata, op.11 was premiered at the Wigmore Hall during an afternoon concert on Saturday 14 March 1942. The main events at this recital were Igor Stravinsky's neo-classical Concerto for two pianos (1935) and Ernest Bloch's String Quartet No.1 (1916). Other music heard included Poulenc's *Ronsard Songs* (1924/5) and Prialux Rainier's *Three Greek Epigrams* (1937), which are settings of Greek poems by the female Arcadian poet Anyte of Tegea, translated by Richard Aldington. The performers at the recital were Peter Graeme, oboe, Myra Verney (singer), Franz Reizenstein and Noel Mewton-Wood (pianos), Gerald Moore accompanist, and the Griller String Quartet.

The *Liverpool Daily Post* (16 March 1942) reported on the recital: 'There was another of those adventurous concerts at the Wigmore Hall yesterday (q.v.) afternoon. A chapter of accidents had transformed the programme, but although we would have wished to hear the new string quartets of [Benjamin] Britten [String Quartet No. 1 in D major, op.25 (1941)] and [Arthur] Bliss [String Quartet No.1 B flat major (1941)] the occasion is sure to present itself soon, and meanwhile the concert was

not lacking in novelty.' Turning to Reizenstein's Oboe Sonatina, the critic reminded readers that the composer was a pupil of Paul Hindemith. This present work 'relaxes a little from the austerity of his schooling [and] provided one was prepared to accept the modern idiom, it was distinctly light-hearted and pleasing.' I guess that even in 1942, the 'idiom' was hardly advanced for the audience at that event.

There is a similar assessment in *The Scotsman* (16 March 1942) which reports that the Sonatina '...[showed] unmistakable signs of his master Hindemith, in this work, there are stretches of less strenuous writing than one associated with some of his [Reizenstein's] other work, and there is much to be enjoyed on a first hearing.'

*The Times* (15 January 1943) carried a review of the score. The critic wrote that the Sonatina 'aims at...directness and simplicity' in form. It features 'astringent' harmony, but 'avoids the fault of pitting the tenuous cantilena of the oboe against an overloaded harmonic piano part.' Finally, he thinks that 'the themes are distinct and purposeful and the rhythmic movement unflagging.'

E.R. (Edmund Rubbra), evaluating the score for *Music and Letters* (July 1943), thinks that 'this is undoubtedly no more than a piece d'occasion, thrown off for a reason best known to the composer. It should not therefore be judged from higher standards. Yet need the composer have been so...[meagre]...of warmth, or have built up such a bakelinish texture? It is all dexterous and polished, but the final emotional effect is nil. One can admire the nicely oiled machinery, but not the article it produces.' (*Bakelite* was an early form of synthetic plastic introduced around 1909.)

Certainly, this was the direction of thought in E.H.H.'s belated assessment of the score in *Music and Letters* (January 1960). He states that 'Franz Reizenstein's Sonatina is a thoroughly professional composition, in which the oboe can be heard at its best'. I am not sure if this critique implies that the 'professional' aspect of 'the piece may have cast its shadow over inspiration. Finally, E.H.H. notes that the original copyright was 1942 (to Boosey and Hawkes) but was reassigned to Lengnick in 1958.

Franz Reizenstein wrote several other pieces for wind ensemble including the Wind Quintet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon and Horn op. 5 (1934), the Three Concert Pieces for oboe and piano, op.10 (1937), the Duo for Oboe and Clarinet, op. 38 (1963) and the Trio for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon, op. 39 (1963).

### **The Recording**

In 1975 L'Oiseau-Lyre Records (SOL 344) brought out a remarkable LP of Franz Reizenstein's chamber music. This album featured the Piano Quintet in D major, op.23 (1948), the Partita for treble recorder (or flute) and piano, op.13 (1938) and the present Oboe Sonatina. The Quintet was performed by the Melos Ensemble (Emanuel Hurwitz, Ivor McMahon (violins), Cecil Aronowitz (viola), Terence Weil (cello) and Lamar Crowson (piano). The soloists in the Partita were Carl Dolmetsch (recorder) and Joseph Saxby (piano). The legendary Janet Craxton played the oboe in the Oboe Sonatina accompanied by Lamar Crowson.

*The Gramophone* (July 1975) provided the formal review of this album. L.S. (Lionel Salter) began by lamenting the fact that little of Reizenstein's music had been recorded. The honourable exceptions were the 1960 Lyrita LP (RCA 19, REAM2105) of piano music played by the composer, a recording of the hilariously funny *Concerto Popolare* and *Let's Fake an Opera* for the Hoffnung Festivals and a 'cherished' 78rpm record of *The Lambeth Variations* written under the pseudonym of Frank Raystone. In 1975 none of Reizenstein's four concertos or other major works were available. This has been remedied to a certain extent by 2020. L.S. thinks that this is a situation 'unthinkable in most other countries, where a pianist/composer of his talents and standing would certainly not have lacked representation...'

Turning to the Oboe Sonatina, the critic explains that it is now a mainstay of the repertoire. I think this is over stating things a little bit, certainly 45 year on. The Sonatina, he feels, 'has melodic and rhythmic charm and, in the finale, brilliance with the piano asserting itself as at least an equal partner.' Craxton interpreted the Sonatina 'most sensitively, but her tone in real life has more colour than this...' Of concern was the fact that in 'the recapitulation of the first movement she is disadvantageously recorded in relation to the piano.' This was a technical issue, as Lamar Crowson has an 'instinct for chamber music that is well-nigh unerring.'



The editorial section of *The Gramophone* (September 1975) welcomed this 'valuable collection of Franz Reizenstein's chamber music' despite it being 'rather variably recorded'. It considered the 'impressive Piano Quintet fared best' but this was not ideal as there was 'some discrepancy between the string quarter in front and the piano behind.' I should point out that this problem has been resolved on the CD remastering. As to the Oboe Sonatina, the editor thought that Janet Craxton 'lacked the bloom one expected, a sound that almost crumbled, while in the Partita... the wind instrument was located 'too far behind the piano', and was 'piping forlornly in the background.'

A long evaluation of this LP was given in the *Musical Times* (December 1975). Paul Griffith considered that both the Partita and the Oboe Sonatina were 'courteous pieces, engaging in their rhythmic wit, melodic charm and the skilfulness of their formal and contrapuntal control.' Like many reviewers, Griffith notes that they are the 'work of an expert craftsman [and] a smoothed and smiling [pupil of] Hindemith...' They received 'polished performances here.'

In 1991, the Oboe Sonatina was reissued on the Continuum label (CCD 1024). This CD included the Piano Quintet in D major, op.23 as well as the Sonata for violin and piano, op.20 (1945). In this last work the soloists were Eric Gruenberg and David Wilde. The Partita for treble recorder and piano was omitted. Michael Jameson (*The Gramophone*, November 1991) felt that the 'recordings sound a little dated and rather brittle.' On the other hand, all the performances 'are affectionate and authoritative.' As for the Oboe Sonatina, Jameson considered that the playing by Craxton and Crowson is 'by turns witty and plangent, admirably suited to this light-hearted diversion.'

In 2006, Simax Records (PSC1161) released a recording of Brynjar Hoff, oboe & Kaare Ordnung, piano playing the Oboe Sonatina. I have not heard this CD. I understand that this was originally released on Libra Classics (LCD 1004) in 1995. I was unable to find a review of this CD, which seems to have been deleted. Other works included Britten's Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, op.49 (1951), Mozart's Oboe Quartet in F major, K. 370/368b (1781) and Schumann's Drei Romanzen, op.94 (1849).

## Conclusion

Franz Reizenstein's Oboe Sonatina makes an ideal recital piece. It balances workmanship, continental neo-classicism and an English sensibility that commands our attention. It demands to be heard on a regular basis and deserves a new recording some 45 years after the premiere LP release.

Janet Craxton's and Lamar Crowson's recording of Reizenstein's Oboe Sonatina has been uploaded to *YouTube*: [Allegretto](#), [Andante](#) and [Vivace](#).

Acknowledgement: Sonatina For Oboe and Piano op.11: Composed by Franz Reizenstein  
© Copyright 1942 Complete Music Limited. Printed by Permission of Hal Leonard Europe Limited