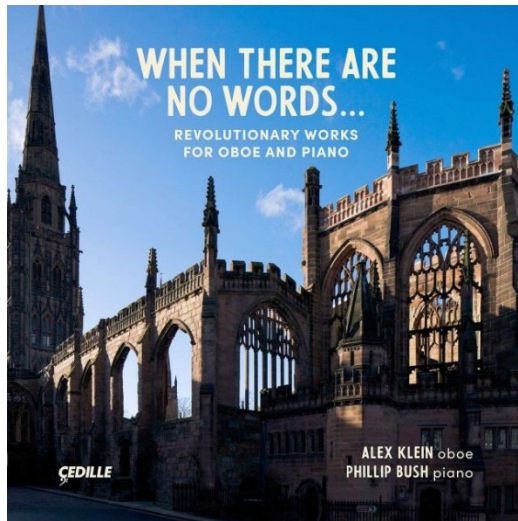


Fanfare Magazine: When There Are No Words

Peter Burwasser | May 2022



This compelling selection of 20th-century music for oboe and piano is connected by underlying political and social themes, often of a horrifying nature, as befits that tumultuous one hundred years, thus, *When There Are No Words*. In most cases, the political connection to the actual musical work is tangential, and the music is utterly able to impress apart from all extra-aesthetic considerations. A case in point is the charming, characteristically Neoclassical Hindemith Sonata. It was written after the composer left Germany for Switzerland in 1938, shortly after his opera *Mathis der Maler* was banned by the Nazi regime (the program notes incorrectly ascribe the banning to Hermann Goering, rather than Joseph Goebbels). That same year, Pavel Haas wrote his *Suite for Oboe and Piano*. Although

the flowing, expressive music is not specifically anti-fascist, the opening of the second movement, *con fuoco*, opens with a fanfare for solo piano that mimics a Nazi march, and the meek reply by the oboe may represent the hopeless situation for Haas and his fellow European Jews. Haas was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944.

American composer William Bolcom wrote his *Aubade* – for the Continuation of Life under the cloud of the terrifying threat of nuclear war between America and the Soviet Union. The construction of the music is, at first, lyrical and even conversational, leading to an agitated exchange between the instruments. Towards the coda, the oboe line eases into a gentle, sweet melody, suggesting optimism that mankind will back away from insanity, while the piano part continues along a quietly anguished, dissonant path, but then ultimately joins the oboe in a hopeful resolution. This is a beautifully crafted work from a true American master. Benjamin Britten is something of Bolcom's older, British counterpart, another superb craftsman with an interest in his native folk and popular musical forms. *Temporal Variations* is dedicated to the British writer Montagu Slater, who, like Britten, was a committed pacifist, a perilous, even brave position during the Second World War, when Britain's very existence hung in the balance. The origin of the piece, which is a splendidly lively collection of theme with eight variations, is murky. The music, now a staple of the oboe repertoire, was only rediscovered after Britten's death.

José Siqueira was a Brazilian composer who had the fortune of spending most of his career in the eye of the storm that is Brazilian politics. In the mid-century era he founded several orchestras as well as the first Brazilian musician's union, for which he served as president. In 1964, the mainly progressive government was overthrown in a military coup, and Siqueira quickly became a *persona non grata*. The *Three Études for Oboe with Piano* were written in 1969, by which time Siqueira had moved to the Soviet Union. It is a concise, folksy, easy to enjoy set of pieces, with no specific political overtone besides the composer's personal history.

The overt emotionalism of the music of Czech composer Klement Slavický may be tied to his political situation in a way similar to that of Shostakovich, baring his soul in his music rather than engaging in the very dangerous direct confrontation with the authorities. Slavický and his wife were fired from their jobs at the Czech national radio station in 1951, due to their refusal to join the Communist party. This suite, consisting of a Pastorale, Scherzo, "Triste," and concluding with "Bacchanale rustico," covers a broad range of dramatic expression, from the glowing soulfulness of the "Triste" to the rollicking Scherzo. The concluding "Bacchanale" exudes the kind of manic, faux joy that Shostakovich also employed, whether or not that was the Slavický's intention. Unlike his Russian colleague, Slavický was fortunate to have lived long enough to witness the liberation of his nation; he died in 1999.

Alex Klein's oboe playing is a marvel. He was the principal oboist at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for nearly a decade, so his virtuosity is a given. He rises to the level of artistic greatness in his ability to discover, with remarkable insight, the dramatic and emotional sense for the music here, varying his intonation and pacing accordingly. Veteran chamber musician Phillip Bush, who was a student of Leon Fleisher at Peabody, is a superb partner. I expect to return to this wonderful release often for sheer pleasure.