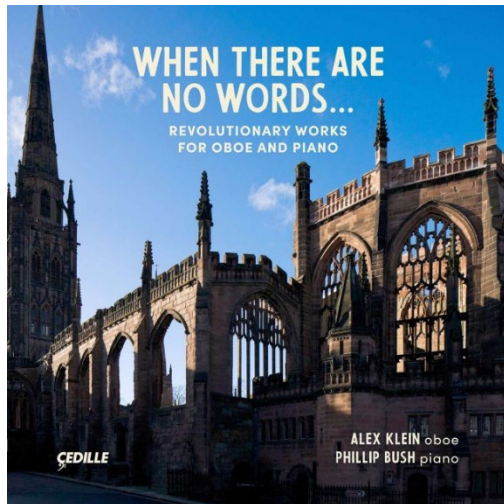


# Fanfare: When There Are No Words

Colin Clarke | May 2022



When the oboe soloist is the Chicago Symphony's principal oboe emeritus, you know you're in good hands. Together with pianist Phillip Bush, Klein presents a program that is at once delightful and instructive, and which is subtitled "Revolutionary World for Oboe and Piano." There are three aspects of this "revolutionary" dimension contained here: Hindemith and Haas coming head-to-head with war and hate; Bolcom and Britten using music as anti-war statements, and Siqueira and Slavický as unwilling exiles. These comprise three "chapters" of response to aggression and war. All five works were composed at times of great stress for the respective composers.

Hindemith is always a good place to start a recital. His reputation for dourness is ill-earned, and his Oboe Sonata is a breath of fresh air. Written in 1938 while in exile in Switzerland, it possibly reflects happier days in his homeland of Germany. Bush plays with a light touch to match Klein's effortless delivered. The variety of expression they find in the second movement (*Sehr langsam*) is remarkable, as is the meta-expression of contrasts between the two movements of the sonata. This is a carefully, finely constructed piece, and both Klein and Bush (with his exquisite fingerwork) deliver a performance that has the intricacy of clockwork (think of a Swiss Ravel, perhaps!).

The arrival of Pavel Haas's suite for a split second seems like a continuation before Haas reminds us of the labyrinthine ways of his harmony. A pupil of Janáček, Haas became one of the composers to find recorded fame in Decca's excellent Entartete Musik series, along with composers such as Gideon Klein and Viktor Ullmann. The suite was originally written as a set of songs for voice and piano, but that was destroyed and the suite emerged instead. While the term "Suite" might imply happier music, the markings of *Furioso* and *Con fuoco* for the first two movements belie that; and we certainly here the fire in the performance of the second movement here. A true meeting of equals, Klein's expressive lines are matched by Bush's nimble chords here. The quotations from the Hymn of Saint Wenceslas in this second movement will be familiar to many and offer a nice "anchor," while the concluding *Moderato* is more expansive and offers at least some repose.

Fueled by fears of nuclear war in the early 1980s, William Bolcom's *Aubade*—for the Continuation of Life finally finds a sense of hope via a chorale that leads to a D-Major chord. But the chorale it is hard-won, tinged harmonically and skewed. *Aubade* is another testament to the greatness of Bolcom's music (everything I have heard has been of the highest possible standard): the musical vocabulary is cohesive, vibrantly expressive, and hugely powerful. The advent of low, solid piano chords against shrieking oboe is clear enough in its intent.

It's good to see the Britten Temporal Variations here. The composer was, as is well known, a great pacifist, and the War Requiem is one of his greatest works. The Temporal Variations contains ciphers but speaks with a fierce openness, projected perfectly in the performance: the close recording helps with the intensity, while Klein's deep, rich tone adds extra layers of meaning. There is grotesque humor here, too, in the penultimate variation, "Polka." After the Britten, José de Lima Siqueira's Three Études for Oboe with Piano Accompaniment comes as light relief. The phrasing of the title strikes me as significant: It implies that the oboe is very much foregrounded. We hear music influenced by the folk music of Northeastern Brazil couched in the most affable terms. Yes, they are "études" in the sense they examine technical challenges, but frankly few would guess the title from the musical result Sequeira obtains. This is outdoorsy music, and the performance is beautifully unbuttoned and free: there is no missing the spirit of the dance, the central Allegro scherzando. While the finale is marked Allegro, it breathes a similar air to the first (which was marked simply Calma).

Finally, there comes music by Klement Slavický (1910–1999). Expelled from the then-Czechoslovakian Union of Composers because he would not join the Communist party, he moved to Kaden, 70 miles from Prague to work as a "church helper," a job he kept for over a decade. The "Pastorale" starts with an arresting, high oboe soliloquy; only when the piano enters does the consonance of the harmonies offer balm. Klein is remarkable, offering a sort of Czech piper hijacked from the third act of Tristan. A scurrying, angular Scherzo offers major challenges to ensemble (all effortlessly surmounted here). The third movement, Triste, is indeed laden, its initial emphasis on low pitches seeming to carry a weight. Little prepares the listener for the furious "Bacchanale rustica" that concludes the disc: hard-edged, full of the excesses its title promises. The perfect close to the disc, one might argue (and it would be a most convincing argument).

This is a most illuminating disc, with sterling performances caught in a present, full recording.