

An Interview with Eric Ewazen

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This interview was conducted at the Masterworks Festival in Winona Lake, Indiana. The premiere of the new orchestral arrangement of Eric Ewazen's *Second Oboe Concerto* was given by **Linda Strommen**, oboe, Miriam Burns, conductor, and the Masterworks Festival Orchestra on June 27th, 2015.

Linda Strommen not only performed at the Festival but she also gave a masterclass to the oboists. **Reid Messich** organized the masterclass.

Terry Ewell (TE): *Well, welcome. I'm here with Eric Ewazen and talking about, well I guess it's not the premiere, but it's the revisiting of the Oboe Concerto. This is your second one.*

Eric Ewazen (EE): Yes, I had written my first *Oboe Concerto* for Linda Strommen and this was with string orchestra accompaniments. And that was about, I want to say, over ten years now, maybe over 15 years now. And then the second *Oboe Concerto*, also written for Linda, which was with a wind ensemble accompaniment originally. I had written that for Indiana University which premiered it there.

TE: *And that was five years ago was that?*

EE: Yes, that sounds right. Concerning the idea of doing an orchestra version: I talked about it with Linda and then again with Masterworks. It became possible for them to do a concerto featuring Linda. She suggested this so I was delighted! So, tonight's the night! And it's being premiered in this version.

For a first performance there's always sort of an excitement and also, well, you kind of figure out if there are some changes that need to be made at this point. Usually they're not substantial changes, rather, certain colors or doublings or whatever I have in the orchestra. It has just been a delight to be here at rehearsals to make those changes.



Photo by Katie Lautenschlager

Eric Ewazen, Linda Strommen, and Terry Ewell (L to R) on stage at Rodeheaver Auditorium.

TE: So please give us some background on your ongoing work with Linda. Did she commission the first concerto and then the second one?

EE: Yes. We had met at Juilliard. This was a time when we were both teaching in the pre-college division and we had just become friends. Linda had heard my music. It is really exciting for composers when they are friends with performers; then you collaborate together. So as I was writing the piece, section by section, it was the same process for both the first and the second one. We went through the work and I received Linda's feedback and suggestions. This is helpful because I am not a wind and brass player, piano is my instrument.

TE: But you write so much for brass and winds! I'm really startled at that.

EE: But I write as much for strings and the others too. Now proportionally it is true that I have a lot for the wind and brass world. And that's been fun for me because I'm adding to the repertoire. I have a certain musical language and it has been fun to add that. But being a composer it's always good to work with the players and get their feedback. And that's what I did.

When I was hearing her playing lyrically or passages that are flowing or playfully virtuosic, it inspired me to write the piece. That's how this came about. We did the premiere of the *First Concerto* at another festival, in Bellingham, Washington. Then once the first one was premiered, we had additional performances. She recorded it with St. John's soloists, which has a conductor with string orchestra in Manhattan. Then we said this turned out so well, let's do something else. So then the second concerto came about.

TE: Wonderful! Now Linda did share at the orchestra rehearsal that there were some personal aspects about this work. Her mother was in attendance at the rehearsal. Maybe you could talk a little about that?

EE: Of course. The idea when we got together was to write a work (the *First Concerto*). Linda's father had died in a bicycle accident. He was young and she was only in college. Those were rough times and sometimes music is there to comfort. I had also lost my father, but he was elderly at that point. Still when there's loss there's that feeling of sadness. It's so nice how sometimes artistic expression and music can provide comfort. Sometimes music is there to provide upbeat kinds of feeling or whatever. Also sometimes it's there to tell a story. So that became the first concerto.

Then in tribute to her mother, who is a remarkable, wonderful lady, Linda had the idea about a piece that would be dedicated to her mom. That's how the second composition came around. By this time I had known her mom: she's delightful, wonderful, and with a sparkling sense of humor. She's had many travels and adventures. The *Second Oboe Concerto* reflects her kind of spirit. I thought, OK, let me work on this and see what I come up with. I always find that all the parts are related. There was this poem by Louise Driscoll that was called "Hold Fast Your Dreams." It's just a very lovely poem, uplifting, and speaks to the feeling of holding onto beautiful memories. I thought that this reflects that side of Mrs. Strommen, who is a grand lady.

So there are three movements. The first oboe concerto was in three movements; the second is also in three movements. The first movement is a little bit of a life journey: ideas of the hills and valleys of life. This is a kind of a rollercoaster trip; many moments are peaceful with some moments of drama. The second movement is the one with a little bit more agitation. There are times in life that are sometimes hard to deal with. It's in a minor key, but I tend to be an upbeat person, so I end it on a *Picardy third*. That's for my theory students! So it is a little bit minor but it's maybe not as dramatic as the first movement. Then there is the third movement, in which I use this poem. I had also set it for chorus. It's all about beauty and there are memories of hard times. But also it contains a peaceful conclusion and this is a little bit unusual for my portfolio of works, because many times when I have a multi-movement work I do it the traditional way.

TE: *Yes, movements that are fast, slow, fast. But in this composition it is the opposite.*

EE: This is the opposite, exactly; slow, fast, slow. With each piece I write I like to give it an individual sound and I try to contrast previous works. To organize a slow, fast, slow composition requires a different type of approach. The fast part has to be energetic enough to justify the ending, for instance, as in Tchaikovsky's *Sixth Symphony* and Brahms' *Third Symphony*. Those pieces end very peacefully or sadly or in Brahms' case the music just seems to gloriously fade away. So I studied those scores and I came up with this composition.

TE: *Interesting, I was just wondering: you are a composer and teach music theory. I'm a theorist myself. I'm always very interested in the compositional process. So you mentioned that the poetry was part of the genesis of this work. Do your melodies sometimes precede the composition. Is that your process?*

EE: Well, for me it goes hand in hand. What I usually do is I use the piano when I compose. I have OK relative pitch. Good relative pitch but not perfect pitch. As soon as there are harmonies that are switching keys or tonal centers, I really need the piano. So I improvise a lot to come up with ideas. Now it can go either way: Sometimes I come up with a melodic line. However, a lot of times I come up with a certain chordal progression. Then, oh, I like this; and then I'll be humming along something to it and a melody suddenly or not suddenly comes. "You try this you try that," but a lot of times it's pretty much in tandem.

In my particular approach to composing, gestures are important. If I'm writing a piece that is motivic as, for instance, in the second movement of the *Second Oboe Concerto*, the one thing that is important for me is the rhythmic gesture. That little staccato motive gave it not only a feeling of urgency but also playfulness. And I thought "oh this will be good to have this." In the movement it jumps like a game playfully among the instruments. The oboe is of course the focus and she will generate a lot of the melody and gestures. But once in a while it will be tossed back and forth between her and the orchestra. And so that's one way of doing it. Or, sometimes where I want the music to have a little bit more of a lyrical nature, or maybe more in terms of structure in a through-composed style where one melody leads to another, I will reference what was heard before. So melodies reappear.

TE: *Now I notice you don't use key signatures in the Second Oboe Concerto. Yet the music is quite tonally centered and often the form of movements will be ABA. You return to the key center you started with. Is there a reason why you don't use key signatures at all?*

EE: Sure. And this is something I talked about with students at the Masterworks Festival. I met a couple of composers and I was looking at their music, which was wonderful. This was one of things I suggested to them even if they are writing in the tonal style. If you are writing in atonal style or twelve-tone music you will not be using a key signature. With tonal music I find that I like to switch tonal centers frequently and also I use a lot of modes. So for example, it is D-minor in the second movement (of *Second Oboe Concerto*); that is a focal point. Many times I use a Dorian mode where I raise the sixth scale degree. I can freely switch, but if I use a key signature initially I tend to gravitate towards that. Furthermore when I do modulate, I tend to modulate to the close related keys. Consider the Wagner scores where



Photo by Katie Lautenschlager

Reid Messich and Linda Strommen (L to R) following the oboe masterclass



Photo by Katie Lautenschlager

Linda Strommen, Miriam Burns, and the Masterworks Festival Orchestra performing the *Second Oboe Concerto*.

he moves “like crazy” from key to key, of course using key signatures. This is why we speak about Wagner being one of the fathers of 20th century music. Well that goes without saying, but part of it is the chromaticism that ultimately leads to Schoenberg and free tonal and twelve tone music. Wagner might have a piece with all sharps and then he cancels out the sharps and puts in three flats and still he has five flats in the piano part and four measures later it’s all sharps again and yet you have to look back and see what flats are carrying over and not carrying over. Anyway, here I am over a hundred years after he was composing, well over a hundred, and my music sometimes tends to be even more traditional than his music in terms of the sheer chromaticism.

TE: *I’m reminded of Richard Strauss in your music. His music modulates as frequently as yours.*

EE: Yes, Strauss. I find that sometimes for the performers it’s a bit of an adjustment at first but then they seem to go with the flow. So it always seems to work out.

TE: *Right. So is there is a tonal structure throughout the whole piece? I know that F is pretty much the tonal center of the first movement and then you progress to D-minor. Is that planned? Is that typical of your works?*

EE: No, it is not typical. However, sometimes since music theory is a big part of what I do, the very idea of a major key and its relative minor does make sense to me. So sometimes, yes,

I will do that. Now, I do have to say this, originally this piece was written for band. When I consider bands and wind ensembles, brass instruments, etc. I ask them if they would prefer to see flat keys or sharp key signatures? They want to work with flat key signatures. Hence the F major and D minor. But there's only one flat involved which lets me think of it more as no key signature at all. Now having said that there are still parts where people have said "Ah, wow..." and they scratch their heads cause here's all these sharps and flats occurring. But it does revolve around different things. In that case it was very calculated to the ensemble I was originally writing for. But of course I mentioned Brahms *3rd Symphony* and the key of F major. And there's no problem with an orchestra playing that. That was the genesis of the *Second Oboe Concerto*.

TE: Did you find it difficult to go from the brass arrangement to strings when you arranged this concerto for orchestra?

EE: No. I love the idea of the different kinds of colors. I've done this before with several pieces. In some pieces people have arranged my music for orchestra. Virginia Allen was in the Army Band as a conductor or assistant conductor. She was at West Point and taught at Juilliard. She is a wonderful conductor and she knows the music so well she's made arrangements of some of my pieces: my tuba, bass trombone, and my tenor trombone concertos. She's about to do an arrangement for band of my saxophone concerto, which I originally wrote for orchestra.

The *Bassoon Concerto* I also composed for band. If I'm not mistaken there are a lot of F-major sounds in there and the low B-flat. But of course bassoonists love that! The lowest note on the bassoon; you can't go wrong with that note! Someday I would love to make an orchestral version of the *Bassoon Concerto* too. That's one of my things I definitely want to be able to do.

I had a teacher, Warren Benson, who wrote a lot of wind ensemble music, orchestral, and, vocal music. This was at Eastman. I studied with him, Sam Ambler, Joe Schwantner, and Gunther Schuller. I also studied with Milton Babbitt for four years at Juilliard. So these were all my teachers. With all of them, the one thing that links these composers together no matter what their style is, it is colorful writing. It was Mr. Benson who said "It's good to flatter the sounds of the instrument." So I use that quote when I work with my students and see what they can do. With the wind ensemble, for example, you get a certain kind of wonderful resonance, a crystalline quality. There is brightness to the sound when you have a nice brass section with the high winds. The one thing that they have that the orchestra doesn't have is saxophones. So then when you combine saxophones with the woodwind section—which is already a complex sound mill to begin with—it is just full of different colors there.

TE: That "reedy" sound comes through.

EE: Exactly. Then you have a lot of different brass sounds with the euphoniums. So that was a consideration. In an orchestra, with the strings, you don't have the saxophones and you get a different kind of sound. You have the pizzicato of the strings, which I used a lot in this orchestral version of the piece. So you just use the colors that the instruments have. So the piece should be able to stand either way.

TE: Well, I'll tell you that we are very excited that you have written pieces for us. The double reeds are often neglected. We very much appreciate your time and I want to thank you for this interview.

EE: I appreciate this so much. Thank you. It's really been a pleasure and there's always more music to come.

TE: That would be great!