

Re-inventing the Oboe

Christopher Redgate

Christopher Redgate explores the developments that have taken place in oboe writing during the last twenty-five years, suggesting that the changes amount to a re-inventing of the sound world of the instrument. He offers some suggestions for further development, including the possibility of redesigning the keywork.

Keywords: Oboe; Extended Techniques; Multiphonics; Extended Range

Introduction

A brief comparison of the oboe's available repertoire from the mid-1950s with some of its more adventurous repertoire of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century demonstrates a remarkable difference in composers' expectations of the performers, what is deemed playable, and even the concept of the sound world.

Traditionally the oboe is considered to be a melodic and lyrical instrument with a particularly evocative sound. The performance culture that surrounds the oboe world is still focused upon these traditional values and remains, to a large extent, conservative in its ideals and aims. It should be no surprise to learn, then, that many of the developments in the oboe world have remained on the periphery of the culture and are embraced by only a small section of the community. At the same time, however, as these developments have taken place there has been a considerable growth in the technical standards of performers and in the number of oboists working as virtuoso soloists. Undoubtedly the two areas of development are connected.

The development of 'New Sounds'¹ and extended techniques has not only opened up a unique sound world for the instrument but has also led to some major changes in performance technique and in the perception of the instrument.² Developments that have taken place include: the use of multiphonics; the development of a range of harmonics and alternative fingerings; the extension of the range; the use of double, triple and flutter tonguing; and circular breathing. Alongside these are other sounds, formerly rejected by oboists, such as key clicks, playing the oboe without the reed, and so forth.

The potential of the instrument has also developed in other ways as composers have continued to push performers technically and physically. This re-invention of the instrument, while being quite radical, has the potential for further development.

The following extracts demonstrate the way different composers have contributed to this development, challenged further growth and embraced extended techniques within their own aesthetic language. In each case the extended techniques and/or 'New Sounds' have been beautifully integrated into the music.

Michael Finnissy—*Runnin' Wild*³

Michael Finnissy has contributed substantially to the oboe repertoire. Most of these works are very demanding for the performer, and include quarter tones, complex articulations and a very courageous exploration of the highest register. A number of the works also demand from the performer a great deal of stamina. Only *Pavasiya*, for oboe doubling oboe d'amore, has employed multiphonics.

Runnin' Wild uses a great number of quarter tones and some very extensive phrases. It alternates between beautiful melodic lines and extremely rapid sections. This work demonstrates the agility some composers are beginning to expect from performers. Figure 1 is the beginning of the final section. Throughout the whole of this section the composer asks for very fast articulations. These need to be a combination of double and triple tonguing. Figure 2 requires the performer to play two notes within one single attack in a double- or triple-tonguing set and uses some wide interval leaps. Figure 3 uses A#6 and B6 within the context of fast passagework. These require unusual fingerings, and of course there is no time to get the teeth on the reed! In addition, because the fast passage lasts the better part of two pages, breathing has to be carefully planned, and while one can split it up to take breaths, dramatically and musically it is better not to breathe! To achieve this I have developed a form of circular breathing with which it is possible to articulate. Here is an excellent example of a composer who knows what is possible but is writing on the



Figure 1 Michael Finnissy, *Runnin' Wild*, page 5 (end of line one and line two). Copyright 2006 by Tre Media Musikverlage, Karlsruhe. Reproduced by permission.



Figure 2 Michael Finnissy, *Runnin' Wild*, page 5 (last line). Copyright 2006 by Tre Media Musikverlage, Karlsruhe. Reproduced by permission.

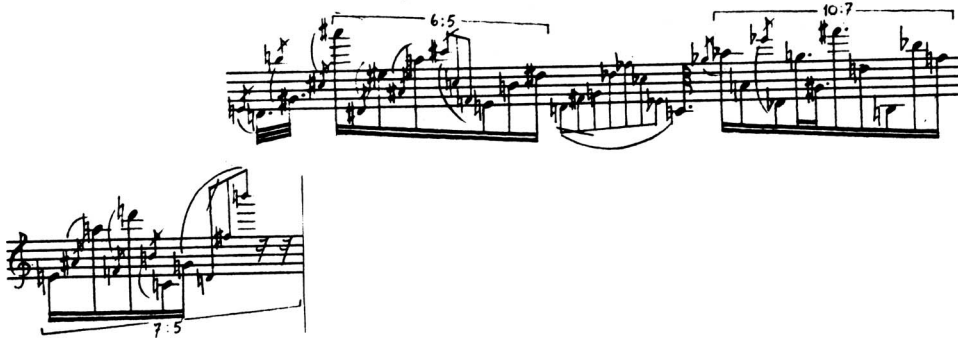


Figure 3 Michael Finnissy, *Runnin' Wild*, page 6 (part of line 2 and beginning of line 3). Copyright 2006 by Tre Media Musikverlage, Karlsruhe. Reproduced by permission.

edge, laying down new challenges within the context of an exciting musical framework.

Roger Redgate—*Ausgangspunkte* and *Oboe Quintet*

Though I have discussed *Ausgangspunkte* elsewhere in this journal, it is so radical in its oboe writing that some aspects are worth mentioning here. In Roger Redgate's oboe music there are often moments of lyrical beauty in the form of long lines of melodic writing. In both *Ausgangspunkte* and *Oboe Quintet* these lines are written in a very high register. There is a tension created between the inherent lyricism and the extraordinary sound created by the oboe playing so high in the range. The end of the *Oboe Quintet* is a fine example of this, where the melodic line rises slowly to some of the highest notes on the instrument (Figure 4). In such writing Roger Redgate is not only asking for the extreme range but is aware that the oboist will be struggling to create these pitches in legato and at these dynamics. This is an excellent example of a composer using extended techniques at an extreme level for his artistic aims.

On a number of occasions in the work, Roger Redgate develops different ways of creating several musical lines at the same time. In this context the use of multiphonics takes on a special role. The speed of some of the passagework is very fast and, because of this, begins almost to become polyphonic in nature. There are two occasions where

the text is written upon two staves so that the lines may be clearly understood, and on a number of occasions the beaming of short passages are inverted, giving the performer a clear understanding of the various lines. By the penultimate page the use of multiphonics continues the polyphonic texture, adding brief melodic fragments into the performance of the multiphonic (Figure 5). The climax of this work is a series of multiphonic trills one on top of the other (one of which becomes a double trill), once again giving the effect of a polyphonic texture (Figure 6). The multiphonics are extremely well integrated into the overall fabric of the work, not simply as interesting sounds but as an essential part of the development of the whole.

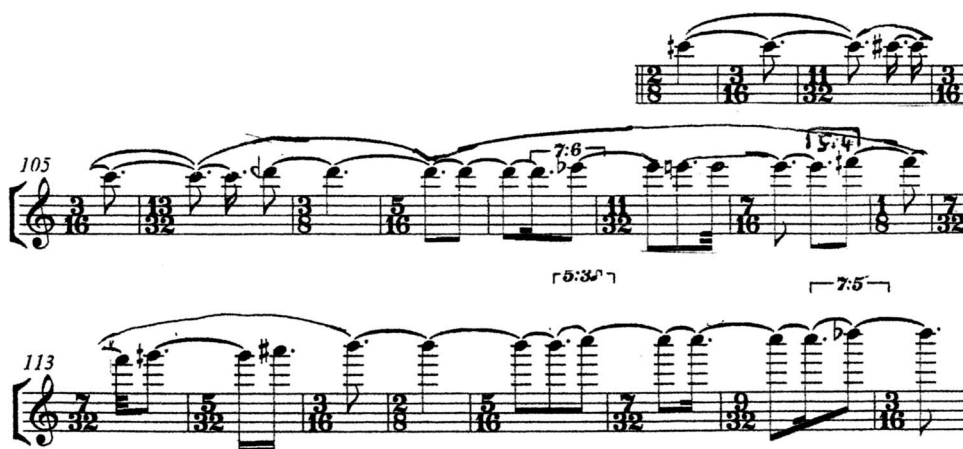


Figure 4 Roger Redgate, *Oboe Quintet* (solo oboe line only), bars 102–20. Reproduced by kind permission of United Music Publishers Ltd.



Figure 5 Roger Redgate, *Ausgangspunkte*, page 9, line 5. Reproduced by kind permission of Editions Henry Lemoine/United Music Publishers Ltd.

Aaron Cassidy—the green is or⁴

Works for oboe which are written on more than one staff are rare but not unknown and a number of works venture onto two lines for brief periods. In *the green is or*, Cassidy develops specific and unusual aspects of the contemporary techniques to

Figure 6 Roger Redgate, *Ausgangspunkte*, page 9, end of line 6 and part of line 7. Reproduced by kind permission of Editions Henry Lemoine/United Music Publishers Ltd.

create a form of rhythmic counterpoint, the result of which explores unusual philosophical and musical regions.

The upper line is concerned with the pressure of the embouchure on the reed, the dynamics and articulations, while the lower line is concerned with the fingering of the instrument but not articulation.⁵ The three lines that form the upper staff represent the highest pressure of the lips, the standard playing pressure and the lowest pressure, respectively. There is also the possibility of playing at pressures in between these levels and these are indicated visually in the score. See, for example, the first glissando in Figure 7, which only travels part way through the space available. The history of such embouchure indications goes back to the early days of contemporary technique experiments when it was realised that in order to make certain effects work specific embouchure instructions were necessary. The line also includes an enormous range of articulations and diaphragm activity from double tonguing to smorzato. The work demonstrates a remarkable exploration of the use of embouchure and articulation. Significantly the activity on the upper line should take place independently of the lower line. This has important implications for the actual pitches and rhythms that result. On the oboe, embouchure pressure does not remain constant but is altered by the performer according to what register and what dynamic is being used. In general the high register requires more pressure and the low register less, and while quieter dynamics require, generally, a tighter embouchure the loud dynamics require a looser⁶ one. There are therefore in the work many times where what is being done by the embouchure/air pressure works against what pitches are being fingered and so on many occasions pitches appear that are not what would be expected from the written score. The articulations, being independent of the written rhythms in the lower line, also have a filtering effect upon the rhythmic work on the lower line. The score of this work, as can be seen from the text in Figure 7, is very detailed and specific yet in performance there is an aleatoric side to the work caused by the careful planning of

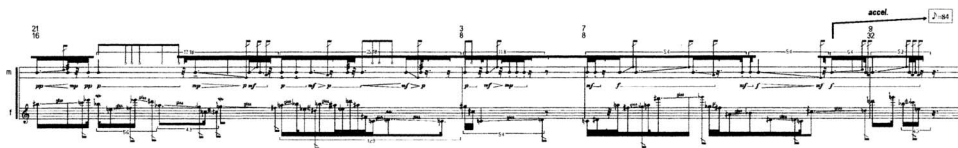


Figure 7 Aaron Cassidy, *the green is or from the green is either*, page 3, line 3. Copyright Aaron Cassidy/ASCAP Buffalo, New York. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission.

the different aspects of the performer's actions. The idea of fingerings not producing something predictable is an area worth further exploration. Bartolozzi suggests several 'aleatory fingerings' (see Bartolozzi, 1967, p. 49) but this is indeed only a beginning—in free improvisation I use a great number of fingerings which have unpredictable results.

David Gorton—*Erinnerungsspiel* for Oboe and Laptop⁷

In this work Gorton has explored a number of areas of extended techniques, including the use of the 6th harmonics, multiphonics and quarter tones. In Figure 8 he is creating a contrapuntal texture through the use of tremolo multiphonics which are interspersed with individual pitches. David worked extensively with me on the fingerings of these multiphonics and we had to be very creative indeed to find fingerings that would suddenly introduce the individual pitches.

I have become convinced that there is great potential for the future development of the oboe in music that gives the impression of polyphony/counterpoint either in the form of the use of multiphonics, perhaps interspersed with other material as in the Redgate and Gorton, or in a different way, as in the Cassidy.

Fingering the Oboe

I have mentioned briefly in the article 'A discussion of practices used in learning complex music' the use of unorthodox fingerings. There is one other area to be added to this, which is, in part, connected with the idea of fingerings that do not create predictable pitches. There are times when I consider the finger system of the oboe in an unusual way. I sometimes use the keywork as if it were more like a keyboard. The performance of some multiphonics can work better thinking in this way but it also opens up a whole range of other pitch and sound possibilities, some of which are very close to the concept of 'aleatory fingerings' mentioned above. In my recent work... *the sting of the bee*...⁸ I am thinking more in this way—though in this case not to generate unpredictable sounds but in the way I finger some of the passages.

Each of the above works demonstrates something of the new sound world of the re-invented oboe. They also offer an understanding of how composers and performers working together can further develop many aspects of the instrument.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for an oboe and laptop computer. Each system includes a staff of music with complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *fff*. Above the staves are performance instructions in a shorthand notation, including notes like 'F', 'C', 'Bb', and 'E', along with symbols like 'o', '+', and '-'. Bar numbers are indicated at the start of each system: (98-86), (37-45), (131-244), (71-59) for the first system; (317-180), (160-155), (178-228), (126-125), (71-59) for the second; and (131-244), (262-263), (126-125) for the third.

Figure 8 David Gorton, *Erinnerungsspiel* for oboe and laptop computer. Delta 2, page 4, bars 60–63. Copyright David Gorton 2006. Used by permission.

I am convinced that there are still a number of areas that can be developed further. This is not to say, of course, that a composer does not produce something of value if s/he is not developing in these ways!

Extending the Extended Techniques

I wish now to point to some areas of technical development that I am working on at the moment or that have the potential for further development.

Circular Breathing

I mentioned above in the discussion of Finnis's *Runnin' Wild* that I needed to develop tonguing while doing circular breathing. This is single tonguing at the moment. I am convinced, however, that there is also a possible way to double tongue at the same time as doing circular breathing.

Extended Range

Most of the ‘contemporary techniques’ literature suggests that any pitch above Bb6 will require a significant change in the technique of production—the teeth have to be added to the reed. This change, while not being popular with oboists (because of the potential threat to the reed and the substantial embouchure change), also adds a number of restrictions to the use of the pitches: a gap in the music is required in order to make the embouchure change. Consequently legato to and from pitches that require teeth is very difficult, if not impossible to achieve. The advanced literature suggests that with the use of the teeth, C7 can be considered the top of the range. I wish to suggest two possible areas for development. First, the range can be extended beyond C7—D7 is certainly within my grasp and I have on occasions been asked to go higher than that. Second, with careful work on breath support, embouchure technique and the aperture of the throat it is possible to go to C7 without the use of the teeth. In an ideal world I would like to see C7 becoming the recognised top note of the instrument in the next few years.

Harmonics

The use of harmonics and alternative fingerings for a wide variety of pitches has great expressive potential as well as opening up the possibility of making some areas of fingering easier—especially work from multiphonics and complex microtonal/high-note fingerings. For the better part of a century oboists have been using a few harmonics (from F5 to C6—third harmonics) to either colour pitches or to gain a still and quiet sound. In contemporary writing, a range of harmonics and alternative fingerings are being used but there is potential for much greater exploration of this part of the sound world. In particular their use in conjunction with quarter tones could be very interesting. Quarter tones can be markedly different in sound quality from the standard pitches on the instrument (rather in the way stopped notes are on a natural horn). A combination of quarter-tone fingerings with carefully chosen harmonics or alternative fingerings could possibly even out the discrepancies.

Many of the developments mentioned above have only marginally influenced some composers and quite a number of them are all but rejected by the oboe-playing community. Many of the techniques simply take the oboe a stage further in its evolution, without invading its traditional role as a lyrical instrument but increasing its potential and its possibilities for expressive performance.

These developments are often considered as something for an elitist community of oboists and composers and are often presented only in specialist formats for interested parties. And yet I am convinced that many of the techniques not only deserve wider acceptance but also, from the point of view of the evolution of the instrument, should be welcomed into the wider performing and composing community.

I suggest specifically that the following areas should be considered: the extension of the range of the instrument (at least up to Bb6); circular breathing; double/triple

tonguing; and a range of alternative fingerings and harmonics. Each of these areas has at some level existed in the traditions of the oboe albeit only at the periphery. Each of them should be taught at college level as they are either an enhancement of the existing technique of the instrument or they widen the range of the instrument's potential colours. In fact a number of the techniques can be very beneficial for students in that they highlight specific areas of the technique. College-level studies could also include a wide range of multiphonics; the study of a work such as Holliger's *Studie über Mehrklänge* would be ideal. A number of the multiphonics in this work require very precise use of the embouchure and so can help create in the student a greater understanding of embouchure technique.

Instrumental Development

The instrument itself has not changed substantially since the beginning of the twentieth century. There have been some minor changes that served to refine the instrument, but nothing major. Some of the recent developments in performance practice suggest that the time has come to once again revise the design of the keywork.⁹ Contemporary performance practices that particularly demand this are the need to use keywork in unorthodox ways, the use of micro-tones and the extension of the range. A small modification that would enable a wider range of multiphonics is also possible. There are of course a number of major implications that need to be explored if such modifications are to go ahead. Some of this technically difficult music would suddenly be a lot easier to play, thus altering the nature of its performance. On the other hand, such changes could open up new areas of performance and further opportunities for development.

There are several options available for any plans to redesign. These depend upon how wide-ranging the changes become. At the conservative end, a few key changes could be made, while at the radical end the instrument may not even look like a traditional oboe.

Notation Issues

There are some issues of notation that require specific attention—in particular the notation used for fingerings, especially for multiphonics, but possibly also for other situations where unusual fingering instructions are required. Most composers use a version of what is suggested in some of the literature. These give the necessary information for a performer but when there are large quantities of fingerings, and particularly when they have to be read at speed or learned quickly, they are often rather clumsy.

Conclusion

The oboe world has changed significantly during the last twenty-five years. A wide range of 'New Sounds' and techniques has been added, thus creating a concept of the

instrument that is radically different from the lyrical world of the early twentieth century. There are, however, many areas still to be explored, including a range of possible new versions of the keywork.

Notes

- [1] In 1967 Bruno Bartolozzi published a book called *New sounds for woodwind*.
- [2] Such advances have of course not taken place in a vacuum but have been part of the larger picture of extended technique development on a wide range of instruments.
- [3] Written in 1978, it was given its first performance by Christopher Redgate in 1980.
- [4] I am currently recording this work.
- [5] There are some exceptions to this scheme where the articulations, dynamics and so on coincide with the fingering exactly and therefore only one line is needed.
- [6] This is one of the reasons why it can be so difficult to play quietly in the lowest register of the oboe. A very fine balancing act is required of the embouchure.
- [7] I am currently recording this work.
- [8] ... *the sting of the bee*..., Christopher Redgate (2006).
- [9] The author is currently developing a project to explore this issue in depth and possibly to oversee the production of a revised form of keywork.

References

The following books include useful reference materials, offering a wide range of fingerings and some technical advice for oboists.

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