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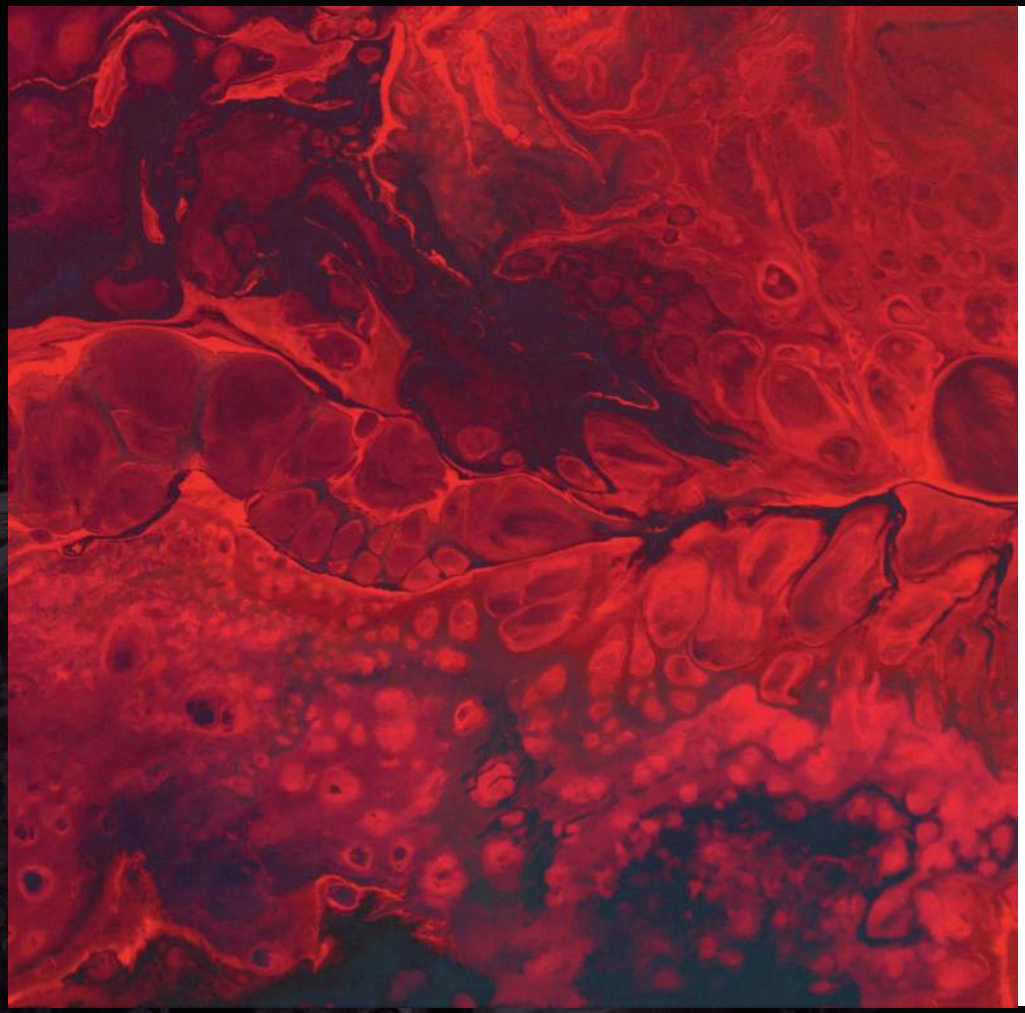

ACROBATICS AND PHONETICS

Sergei Prokofiev (1891—1953):
***Quintet*, Op. 39**

Prokofiev's chamber music output is relatively modest—a handful of sonatas, two string quartets, an overture of Hebrew themes for clarinet, string quartet and piano, as well as this quintet for oboe, clarinet, violin, viola and bass. It is perhaps not surprising that he had limited time to spare for chamber music when you see his list of other works—a dazzling parade of symphonies, instrumental concertos, piano sonatas, film music, ballets, and no less than twelve operas—a grand total of 131 opuses. He was clearly a busy man.

Nevertheless, it begs the question why this composer, so articulate and elegant in tone and style, didn't delve deeper into the more intimate genre of chamber music. For instance, the genesis of the quintet is more likely characterised by *ad hoc* thinking than an expressed desire by the composer of writing for a more unconventional ensemble. To put it briefly, this work is the result of a commission from a ballet troupe led by Boris Romanov, one of the central figures in Russian ballet in the first half of the 20th century. Prokofiev and Romanov were introduced to each other in Paris in 1924 at the home of the ubiquitous Serge Dhiagilev, the director of the *Ballet Russe*. Prokofiev had settled in the French capital after a few nomadic years since leaving the Soviet Union in 1918 (he would later move back in 1935). He was in the middle of working on his 2nd symphony, commissioned by the Russian bass virtuoso and conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitsky. Prokofiev provides us with the insight of how an artist then as now must earn a living: *In order to earn some extra money while writing the symphony, I*

accepted a commission to compose a ballet for a roving dance troupe which wished to present a program of several short pieces accompanied by five instruments. I proposed a quintet consisting of oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, and double bass. The simple plot based on circus life, was titled 'Trapeze'.

Romanov and Prokofiev entered into a contract whereby the former had exclusive performance rights for two years, though the work was also intended to be performed in the concert hall from the start. Even though the lifespan of Trapeze performances was limited, the quintet was given its first concert performance in Moscow in 1927, and has since become a staple of the oboe repertoire. Romanov had wanted music with sharp, contrasting rhythms, and the work clearly does possess a dansant feel. You'd be forgiven for comparing the piece with the contemporary French music scene, with its echoes of *Les Six* composers such as Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger and Francis Poulenc. Nor is it a far stretch of the imagination to draw parallels with Stravinsky's *Tale of the Soldier* (1918), with its alternating rhythms (especially in the 3rd movement), its daring violin part, and a compositional approach which both caricatures and characterises. Also comparable is Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), with its distinctively small ensemble (the eponymous "Pierrot ensemble": flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano), which was an early example of what has since somewhat humorously been referred to as "the poor man's combo".

The six movements constitute a charming divertimento form. The first movement, *Moderato*, is a variation movement where the opening oboe theme is characterised by "wrong" notes and sharp dissonances. The thematic exposition is followed by two variations, l'istesso tempo and vivace, before the theme returns. The second movement, *Andante energico*, opens with a punchy bass theme which is then further developed both motivically and in its entirety in the various parts. After a progression characterised by a moderately complex counterpoint, the movement concludes with a more persistent rhythmic unison. The third movement, *Allegro sostenuto ma con brio*, alternates between 3+4+3/8 and 5/4. This rather audacious rhythmic structure certainly didn't do any favours for Romanov's dancers at the time, although the listener can appreciate the acrobatic qualities of the music. The ensuing *Adagio pesante* is a processional, slowly mutating exploration of consonances and dissonances, tied together by the oboe's continuous legato and the viola's semiquaver accompaniment. In the fifth movement, *Allegro precipitato, ma non troppo presto*, the music takes us back into the circus arena. It takes off with a bravura-like feel, until the brief respite in the form of the *meno mosso* is interrupted by a final clarinet run followed by two powerful chords to conclude the movement. In the finale, *Andantino*, the pulse initially subsides with a dissonant minuet, before eventually turning into a cheerful trio part in 6/8. The minuet theme returns in a more fiery version, before the movement ends with an exuberant coda marked *tumultuoso e precipitato*.

The quintet, with its peculiar instrumentation and its tonal and rhythmic playfulness—described by some as "successfully circusy"—is a prime example of Prokofiev as an ironist and humorist, a superb craftsman who elegantly juggles his material and produces surprisingly sonorous, tonal and rhythmic kaleidoscopes. The work is one of his most radical, but the crassness of the elements are placated by the lightness of the form—like a kind of polite insolence. As a repatriated Soviet citizen, entrenched in the paranoia of Stalinist cultural life, Prokofiev washed his hands of *the Parisian atmosphere, where complex patterns and dissonances were the accepted thing, and which fostered my predilection for complex thinking*. The subsequent Soviet phase of his production is characterised substantially by the more sincere style favoured by the regime, yet without the elegance and certainty of style being compromised. Expat works such as the oboe quintet lead one to ponder the tantalising, yet ultimately futile question, what if later Soviet composers had also been allowed to spend some of their formative years in Paris?

Jon Øivind Ness (*1968):
***Bælþræk*, Quartet for Oboe, Violin, Viola and Cello (2016) / *Bælsiþ*, Concerto for Oboe and Sinfonietta (2018)**

Humour has long been a central ingredient in Jon Øivind Ness's music, ever since he put his perilous life as a cat owner to music in the trombone concerto *Dangerous Kitten* (1997). In recent years, his music has transformed significantly, from the complex irony of the 90s, via the almost—to quote the composer himself—romantic fervour of the mid-00s, to a microtonally oriented musical language and occasionally ascetic expression in the last 10 years or so. Broadly speaking, there has been a development from the anarchistic

maximal to the punctuated minimal (albeit occasionally massive), but as is so often the case, a leopard doesn't always completely change his spots. In the final movement of the oboe concerto *Bælsiþ*, the orchestration might remind the listener of a rather troubled ragtime-piano or a rusty old pianola. It might even bring to mind Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer".

The words *Bælsiþ* and *Bælþræk* mean something akin to "Journey of the Flame" and "Power of the Flame" respectively. Both are old Anglo-Saxon words based on the root word "bæl", meaning flame. The mixed vowel 'æ' and the fricative consonant 'þ' appear in both, and are symptomatic of Ness's attraction to musical and linguistic tipping points, thriving particularly in spaces 'in between' and in what is undefined, be it between the 'a' and 'e', or 'E' and 'F'. The music that emanates from this penchant for tonal and phonetic ambiguity nevertheless appears as genuinely heartfelt and straightforward.

In the composer's own words: *'Bælsiþ' opens up with a chord that is directly inspired by Burt Bacharach's tune 'My Little Red Book', for no specific reason. This chord is the impulse of a drone chord, which I see as an interpretation of a hurdy-gurdy, the ancient folk instrument that often accompanies various forms of folk music. The solo oboe appears from 'within' a mixed timbre a concoction of sound, but gradually emerges alone. At that time I was quite interested in certain forms of Eastern European folk music which behave like a form of 'chanting' over a drone. The mixed timbre idea re-emerges from 7'55", only this time in a deep register. The instruments are 'fixed', as it were, in roles where they play rhythmically in unison and are treated as one large, microtonal instrument. The subsequent tranquil accompaniment of almost-tonal chords is in turn followed by a new, delicate mixed timbre sound consisting of solo oboe, piccolo and a bright piano. The solo oboe plays two melodies which are answered by most of the ensemble, in what seems reminiscent of Chinese or Japanese folk music. A kind of 'foghorn' of bassoon and trombone then appears to communicate out in the distance, leading into a new dissonant mixed timbre, this time with oboe, clarinet and flute, eventually spreading down the octaves to include the bassoon and horn. There is a consistent melancholic tone throughout the piece, at times heartfelt and bordering on romantic, though in the end it reveals a composer who still can't let go of the silly or humorous.*

Bælsiþ has a certain rhapsodic character and exemplifies Ness's eclectic taste and reference universe. The oboe part is lyrical and declamatory, and ties the form together into a condensed whole. The same lyrical-romantic basic tone permeates the oboe quintet *Bælþræk*, where this listener sometimes gets a sense of natural idylls—perhaps because it is well documented that Ness himself spends a great deal of his time in various uncharted places under an open sky. What the recipient brings to the encounter when listening to a work naturally shapes the reception it will receive. However, one can also say that life shapes humans, and humans shape art—the creator and the recipient of the work stand on opposite sides, and the experiences and perspectives on both sides are equally justifiable.

The instrumentation and somewhat more spacious form of *Bælþræk* gives the impression of a brighter and more naive piece, whereas *Bælsiþ* has a greater element of darkness and resistance. *Bælþræk* is also an experiment in limitation, because at the time of composition Ness was preoccupied with a quote from Milos Forman's 1984 film Amadeus, namely Emperor Josef II's line "there are simply too many notes". A bevy of notes can hide a lack of content, and *Bælþræk* therefore develops slowly and minimally, with a cautious use of microtonal harmonics. As with the oboe concerto, the oboe plays a leading and connective role, supplemented by, for example, the violin, which opens with a searching theme in the higher register. After a progression that at times seems meditative, with floating, altering timbres, the music is taken further into a rhythmic part where Ness has allowed himself to be influenced by German kraut rock bands such as Neu! and Tangerine Dream. The fact that this transition is perceived as natural and organic can be attributed to the preceding "flowing" parts being tightly and precisely arranged.

It is not for me to say whether the two titles hint at the oboe as some kind of flamethrower. However, these archaic English words flirt with the mystical-mythical—with the migration period, the mystery of a distant past and fire-breathing dragons. The oboe, which so often in the history of music has played a pastoral role (such as the shepherd's flute in Rossini's *Wilhelm Tell* Overture, or Berlioz's rural tableaux in *Symphonie Fantastique*), gives the largely microtonal, often abstract musical landscape a hint of Arcadia. There's always the danger of the listening process becoming overstated, but this is precisely our privilege as listeners.

—Bendik Bjørnstad Foss
(translated by Paul Holden)

MARION WALKER
OBOE

Marion Walker is co-principal oboist of the Kristiansand Symphony Orchestra and a member of the contemporary music group Ensemble Ernst. Previously she has been employed as Principal Cor Anglais of the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, and has worked with all the professional orchestras in Norway as well as orchestras in Australia, Sweden and Switzerland. From 1997 to 2004 she was a member of the contemporary group Oslo Sinfonietta.

As an influential pioneer in the oboe community, Walker ventured the first "Oboes and bassoons for Children" project in Northern Europe, using special child friendly instruments with tiger stripes to accentuate that oboists, bassoonists and tigers are in danger of going extinct. The qualities and physical properties of the tiger motivate young pupils.

Recruiting and teaching a large group of 7–8 year olds, developing methods for teaching younger pupils, and cooperating with the national Norwegian Youth Orchestra organisation in connecting and supporting fellow oboists and bassoonists are important parts of this recruitment work.

Walker currently teaches oboe at the Culture School in Kristiansand, and is regularly hired as an instructor for various teacher training programs, orchestral and wind band seminars and Young Talents Masterclasses.

Walker has received many scholarships and grants, has had contemporary works written for and dedicated to her and has partaken in many recordings with different ensembles. Walker studied at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, The Conservatory in Geneva and the University of Western Australia. She plays on an oboe made by Howarth of London, model LXV.

ENSEMBLE ERNST
(BÆLSIÞ)

Ensemble Ernst was founded in 1996 and quickly established itself as one of Norway's pre-eminent and most entertaining contemporary music ensembles, touring at home and abroad, performing at festivals and releasing albums.

The ensemble has won a Spellemann prize (Norwegian Grammy), as well as the Norwegian Composers' Association's "Performer of the Year". Ensemble Ernst actively commissions works every year by Norwegian composers such as Jan Erik Mikalsen, Kristine Tjøgersen, Ragnhild Berstad, Jon Øivind Ness and Anna Linh Berg.

Ernst has always endeavoured to commission and perform quality acoustic music that communicates with the audience and performers alike. We intrinsically trust that people need first-rate performances of outstanding music.

Thomas Rimul has been the ensemble's conductor since the very start.

Musicians
Maiken Mathisen Schau—flute
Ingvill Hafskjold—clarinet
Embrik Snerte—bassoon
Joar Jensen—horn
Odd Nilsen—trumpet
Sverre Riise—trombone
André Fjørtoft—percussion
Sanae Yoshida—piano
Elisabeth Sigrid Lie—violin
Sigyn Fossnes—violin
Bendik Foss—viola
Inga Grytås Byrkjeland—cello
Marius Flatby—double bass
Thomas Rimul—conductor

MUSICIANS
(QUINTET, OP. 39 AND BÆLÞRÆK)

SARA ÖVINGE—violin (Quintet, Op. 39 / *Bælþræk*)
ANDERS RENSVIK—viola (Quintet, Op. 39 / *Bælþræk*)
INGVILL HAFSKJOLD—clarinet (Quintet, Op. 39)
GUNNAR HAUGE—cello (*Bælþræk*)
MARIUS FLATBY—double bass (Quintet, Op. 39)

CREDITS

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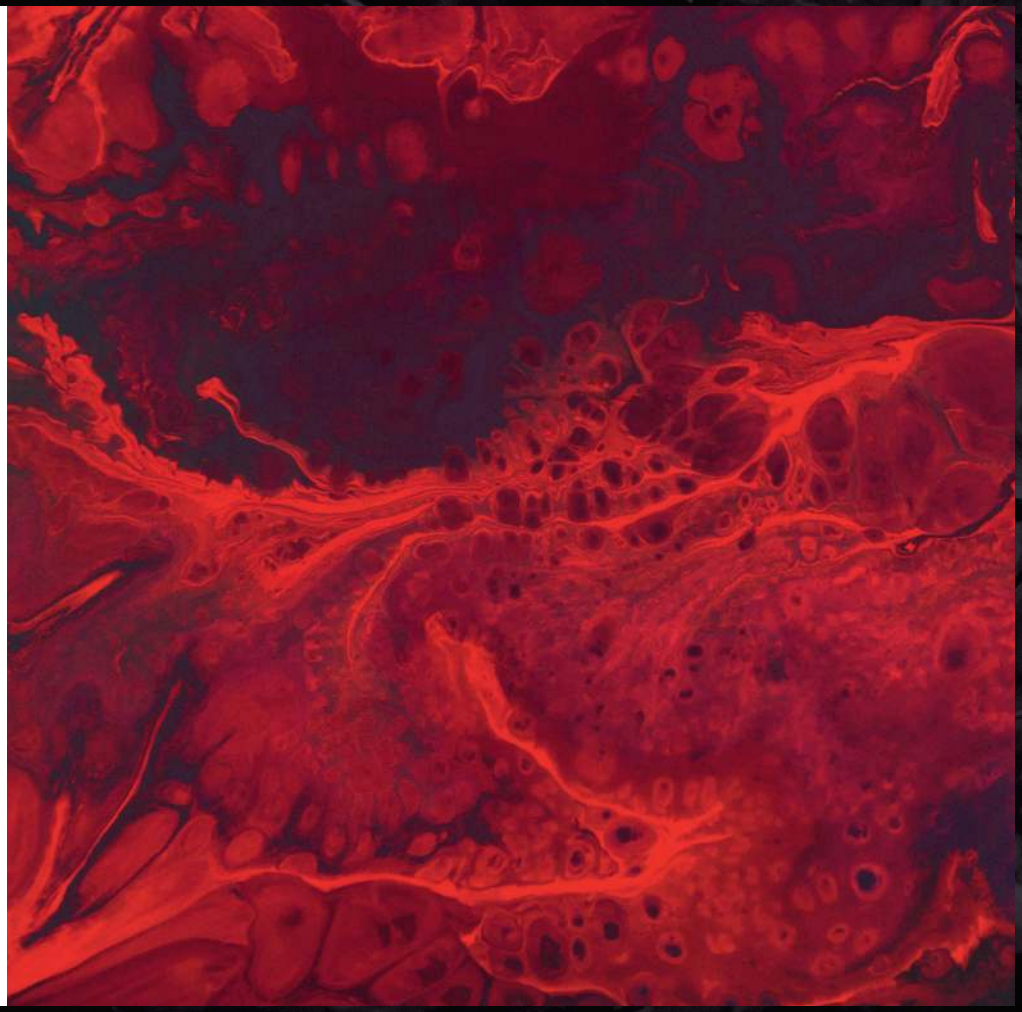

MARION WALKER—Oboe

SARA ÖVINGE—violin (Quintet, Op. 39 / *Bælþræk*)
ANDERS RENSVIK—viola (Quintet, Op. 39 / *Bælþræk*)
INGVILL HAFSKJOLD—clarinet (Quintet, Op. 39)
GUNNAR HAUGE—cello (*Bælþræk*)
MARIUS FLATBY—double bass (Quintet, Op. 39)
ENSEMBLE ERNST (*Bælsiþ*)

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)

Quintet, Op. 39

1. I. Tema con variazioni—05:00
2. II. Andante energico—02:59
3. III. Allegro sostenuto, ma con brio—02:14
4. IV. Adagio pesante—02:51
5. V. Allegro precipitato, ma non troppo presto—02:46
6. VI. Andantino—04:21

JON ØIVIND NESS (*1968)

7. ***Bælþræk,*** Quartet for Oboe, Violin, Viola and Cello (2016)—26:30
8. ***Bælsiþ,*** Concerto for Oboe and Sinfonietta (2018)—18:54