

## A New Oboe Concerto is Born in Colorado

By Dan Stolper  
Lansing, Michigan

**P**ETER COOPER, principal oboist of the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, was soloist in the world premiere performances of the Oboe Concerto by William Mullikin, with the orchestra conducted by Roberto Minczuk. The performances took place on November 17, 18, and 19, 2000 in the Boettcher Concert Hall in Denver. Program notes for this new work, as well as biographical sketches of the composer and of Mr. Cooper, appeared in the orchestra's program book. They are reprinted here with permission.

Mr. Cooper informs me that he will record this new work together with the Richard Strauss Oboe Concerto and the Sonata de Camera for Oboe and Strings by Jean Berger with the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields under Sir Neville Marriner this summer. The Berger work was written for Robert Bloom about fifty years ago. Mr. Bloom premiered it, but it has never been recorded. Not only has Mr. Cooper helped with the genesis of a new concerto, he and his wife also recently became parents of their first child, Peri Cooper. Peter is also happy about the release of a new CD, *Whispers of the Past*, an appealing collection of duets with harpist Marcia LaBella (on Summit Records).

The Oboe Concerto was commissioned by board member Erna Butler in memory of her husband Brad Butler, for principal oboist Peter Cooper and the Colorado Symphony Orchestra. Instrumentation: timpani, percussion, harp, strings and solo oboe. Approximate duration is 23 minutes.

The Oboe Concerto came about because of a confluence of people at the Colorado Symphony. According to **Peter Cooper**, Marin Alsop had asked him to let her know what oboe concerto he would like to play next with the CSO. Mr. Cooper had always loved David Mullikin's music. "His pieces have a magical and wonderful quality to them. I thought he could write a fabulous oboe concerto. When I approached David with the idea, he immediately loved it." Mr. Cooper had been a longtime friend of Erna Butler and had been an influence in her joining the CSO's board. Mr. Cooper thought that Mrs. Butler might like to be part of the project and that the oboe concerto could be written as a memorial to her husband Brad, who had recently passed away. He thought that maybe Mullikin could incorporate themes or songs that had special

meaning to the Butlers in their courting days. Executive Director Tom Bacchetti and Music Director Marin Alsop were both enthusiastic, so Cooper approached Mrs. Butler. "She was thrilled with the idea of commissioning the piece," Mr. Cooper recalls. "It nearly brought tears to her eyes." After all his works for children, Mr. Mullikin said, "It was exciting for me to write a purely abstract work, not based on a story and for an adult audience at a Masterworks concert." Most of the work was conducted during the fall of 1999, with frequent consultations with the soloist. "I would write some material and give it to Peter," Mullikin recalls, asking that he play it through and report any passages that were awkward or unplayable. There weren't many. "The piece was extremely idiomatic for the oboe," says Mr. Cooper, "As we say, it 'lies well under the fingers.' I think he captured the oboe's qualities, which are both singing and expressive as well as playful and virtuosic." Mr. Mullikin's intent was "to make the Concerto as interesting and engaging as possible for the audience," as well as to exploit Mr. Cooper's talent as soloist. "Peter is a fantastic instrumentalist, one of the finest oboists around," he says, "so I wanted to give him a chance to show what the instrument can do." The Concerto is cast in four short movements, with a cadenza connecting the last two. In the first and third movements there is a recurring "motto" consisting of the notes "E-B-B." This is meant as an acknowledgement of Erna and Brad Butler's role in the composition, as well as an expression of appreciation to the family. The work begins with what Mullikin calls "a sort of Ralph Vaughan Williams-flavored moment. For those who are interested in form, the movement is quite traditional. In fact, it's almost a textbook sonata-allegro form," Mr. Cooper calls the concerto "heartbreakingly beautiful. Even though it starts out very calmly, it has a section in the middle that's filled with angst, then the pastoral quality returns at the end." The second movement is a scherzo, in which, Mullikin says, "I intended the audience to listen to this and say, 'I can't believe he's playing all those notes,' It has a perpetual motion kind of flavor, a sort of spinning idea, a little Shostakovich folk idea too." In the trio, Mullikin borrows a theme from the Richard Strauss tone poem *Don Juan*. "It's quite a contrast to the rest of the

movement,” says Cooper. “The outer parts are really demonic and then you have this moment of calm, kind of a 19th century salon music calm. You can just see people sitting in a drawing room listening to this little concert, and then the demonic section comes back and the moment of calm is but a memory.” The third movement is Erna Butler’s memorial to her husband. Erna Butler had mentioned particular songs that were special to the Butlers. One was “I’ll See You Again,” a song originally from a 1929 Noel Coward show called *Bitter Sweet*, and then used in a 1940 Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald film of the same name. Mullikin treated the tune “in the style of the Erik Satie *Gymnopedies*.” Even for those who can’t exactly name that tune, the music has a nostalgic, sentimental quality. Connecting the last two movements is a cadenza for the solo oboe, in which Mullikin invites Cooper to “show what the instrument can do, exploring the parameters of articulation, dynamics, tempo and sound.” Though traditionally notated, the cadenza allows the soloist considerable freedom of execution. “I don’t actually change the notes themselves,” Cooper says, “but I use my own judgement in how to play them.” The cadenza leads without a break to the last movement, Mullikin says it has a strong cinematic flavor. “I’m a great admirer of film music,” he says, “and if listeners want to imagine E.T. flying through the air, that’s O.K. with me. I just hope that it really makes people feel good.” Cooper finds the main theme “catchy and kind of addicting.”

#### PETER COOPER: OBOE

Principal Oboist of the Colorado Symphony since 1993, Peter Cooper has taught and performed as soloist with orchestras in Asia, Europe and the United States. Before coming to Denver, Mr. Cooper held positions as associate principal oboist of the San Francisco Symphony and principal oboist of the Hong Kong Philharmonic.

Mr. Cooper has performed as guest principal oboist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood, and has also been guest principal oboist of the Houston, Milwaukee and San Diego Symphonies as well as with the Israel Chamber Orchestra.

The David Mullikin *Oboe Concerto* is the fourth oboe concerto Mr. Cooper has premiered. Plans are underway to record the Mullikin *Concerto* along with the Richard Strauss *Oboe Concerto* next summer in London with Sir Neville Marriner and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields. Mr. Cooper previously recorded Swiss

composer Heinrich Schweizer’s *Oboe Concerto* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and premiered this work with the Hong Kong Philharmonic.

His new CD, *Whispers of the Past*, with harpist Marcia LaBella, was released last summer on Summit Records.

A prizewinner in the Tokyo International Oboe Competition, Mr. Cooper has performed as soloist with orchestras in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and England, as well as with the San Francisco Symphony. He has performed the Mozart and Strauss *Oboe Concertos* with the Colorado Symphony.

In the summer of 2000, he toured in the UK with the Corinthian String Quartet and played recitals in Wales. He also gave a master class at the Welsh College of Music.

Mr. Cooper is currently on the faculty of the University of Northern Colorado. He has coached and toured with the Asian Youth Orchestra in the Far East, and the National Repertory Orchestra in Breckenridge, Colorado. He has also performed as principal oboist or soloist in the Oregon Bach Festival, St. Barth Music Festival, El Paso Chamber Music Festival, Strings in the Mountains, Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival and



Peter Cooper

Bravo, Colorado. He is a frequent recitalist at the International Double Reed Society conventions.

Mr. Cooper plays on Marigaux oboes. Strasser-Marigaux, Paris, has sponsored him in a series of master classes and recitals throughout the United States.

A 1981 graduate of Northwestern University. Mr. Cooper studied with **Ray Still** and **Gladys Elliot**.

#### **DAVID MULLIKIN: COMPOSER**

Born in Lexington, Kentucky in 1950, David Mullikin holds degrees in music performance from the University of Cincinnati and the University of Michigan. He has been a member of the cello section of the Colorado Symphony (formerly the Denver Symphony) since 1973. Mr. Mullikin is very active in the Colorado Symphony's Education Department, both as a performer and composer. He has produced many works for educational use, including *The Steadfast Tin*

*Soldier, The Boy Who Cried Wolf, The Emperor and The Nightingale, Peter Rabbit, The Tortoise and The Hare, and Tunji and The Giant.* Mr. Mullikin has also worked closely with the Up Close and Musical string ensemble, for whom he has written *Overture for Strings, Arabesque for Bassoon and Strings, Anasazi Twilight* and *The Brementown Musicians*. Mr. Mullikin is also a member of the Ariel Trio, ensemble-in-residence at Metropolitan State College of Denver. His compositions for this ensemble include *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* and *Fables for Piano Trio*. In a 1999 review of the children's CD *A Symphony of Story*, *Rocky Mountain News* critic Marc Shulgold described Mr. Mullikin's music as "charming" and "evocative." Mr. Mullikin is married to Tamara Fahlman Mullikin, violin professor at Metropolitan State College and violinist with the Colorado Chamber Players. They have four children.