

Premiere of Peter Schickele's Bassoon Concerto

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Before the recent spate of notable new bassoon concertos, including those by John Williams and Ellen Taaffe Zwillich, bassoonists worried that their instrument was being disregarded by contemporary American composers. They appear a lot less worried now that another new concerto, this one by **Peter Schickele**, has entered the repertoire. In a radio interview prior to the premiere, Mr. Schickele admitted to being a bassoonist in the past but he was "now in a twelve-step program"!

Schickele, whose waggish personification of the fictional P.D.Q. Bach has brought him world fame, is a skilled and thoughtful composer. He successfully utilizes the character of the bassoon. The work requires a performer with a proficient acrobatic technique, supple articulation and a lyrical, warm tone. **George Sakakeeny** fulfilled these requirements with ease and confidence.

The concerto was commissioned for the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra of Columbus and dedicated to National City as part of the celebration of the orchestra's twentieth anniversary season. The solo was elegantly performed by Sakakeeny, principal bassoonist of the orchestra. He performed the work again at the 1999 IDRS Meeting in Madison.

Schickele's Concerto is the third new work premiered by Sakakeeny in recent years. Alexander Blechinger's *Fagott Konzert* was written for him in 1997; he performed it at the IDRS meeting in Tempe in June, 1998. He premiered Michael Daugherty's *Dead Elvis* with Boston Musica Viva in 1993. IDRS members are familiar with Sakakeeny's excellent playing from the IDRS's 25th Anniversary compact disc on which he performs the Villa-Lobos *Duo for Oboe and Bassoon* with Chicago Symphony principal oboist, **Alex Klein**.

The Schickele premiere was conducted by the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra's founding conductor and music director Timothy Russell. Dr. Russell is professor of music and director of orchestras at Arizona State University. Three other works filled out the program, the *Symphony in B-flat Major, Op. 18/2* by Johann Christian Bach, another new concerto commissioned for the orchestra's twentieth



Conductor Russell, bassoonist Sakakeeny and composer Schickele fight over the bassoon prior to the premiere.

season, C. Curtis-Smith's *Concerto Pro Musica - Violin Concerto, 1998* performed with great conviction by violinist Sergiu Luca, and Franz Joseph Haydn's *Symphony No. 92 (the 'Oxford') in G Major*.

This concert took place in Columbus, Ohio at 7:30 pm on Sunday, March 7, 1999 in the newly restored Southern Theater. The auditorium dates from 1913. Fortunately, it was not torn down when it fell into disuse by the middle of this century. Those responsible for its restoration have retained magnificent acoustics. It was an ideal setting for a bassoon concerto.

The concerto lasts about twenty-three minutes and is in five movements: Blues; Intermezzo; Scherzo; Song and Romp. At the first rehearsal I dubbed the Intermezzo the "Weissenborn movement". It is based on a simple, etude-like pattern which becomes a canny canon between the soloist, the piano and the orchestral bassoonist. The Scherzo movement may be rhythmically difficult for some ensembles. The Song movement is almost anti-climactic after the Scherzo, but the Romp movement rounds out the concerto with a truly exciting finale. The solo bassoon's highest note is d" (a ninth above "middle c"); Schickele's use of the low and middle register is especially attractive.

The instrumentation is ideal for accompanying a bassoon: Strings with 2 Flutes (2d double piccolo), 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 1 Bassoon; 2 Horns, 2 Trumpets; Piano and Percussion: Timpani, Vibraphone, Bells, Claves, Small Suspended Cymbal, 4 Mounted Bongos,



Conductor Russell, bassoonist Sakakeeny and composer Schickele appear pleased after the performance.

Marimba, Piatti, Small Triangle, Small Wood Block. (While the score called for one percussionist, ProMusica used two, a timpanist and a percussionist.) The orchestral piano part, ably performed by Nelson Harper, is difficult and requires close ensemble cooperation with the soloist in more than one movement. **Janis McKay**, professor of bassoon at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas played the orchestral bassoon part with great distinction.

While the balances were very good in rehearsal, percussion dynamics may need to be carefully controlled in some halls. Schickele scored some key clicks for the woodwind section. The excellence of key maintenance in ProMusica's woodwind department produced

almost inaudible key noise. After the first rehearsal, composer and conductor were seen in an office supply store auditioning plastic ball-point pen clicks as a substitute.

Mr. Schickele attended the performance, the first and the dress rehearsals. Schickele had a successful previous commission for ProMusica entitled *Thurber's Dogs*. That work was premiered and recorded by the orchestra. Maestro Russell remembered Schickele's comment that he would like to write a concerto for his own instrument which resulted

in the orchestra's second commissioned work from Schickele.

A near-capacity audience heard the concerto and demanded many bows from the composer, soloist and conductor. In the audience were bassoon students from Ohio University and Ohio State University in addition to a large contingent from Oberlin who were there to hear their teacher play the premiere. ❖

(Editor's Note: George Sakekeeny also gave an excellent second performance of the work for the composer and the IDRS Conference audience in Madison on August 14, 1999, with the Madison Symphony Orchestra, John DeMain, conducting.)