

Review of the 4th Isle of Wight International Oboe Competition

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If I was asked to describe my ideal Sunday morning, a seat in the sunshine with pleasant companions, plenty of good fresh coffee and Sunday newspapers would all feature. On Sunday, May 9th, not only was all this available, in the most beautiful setting of the Priory Bay Hotel on the clifftops on the Isle of Wight, but Mozart's *Oboe Quartet* too. I almost thought I was in heaven!

This was, in fact, the setting for Brian Kay's Sunday Morning Radio 3 Live which was part of the programme for the 4th Isle of Wight International Oboe Competition. I have been to the competition since it started in 1993 and I was most impressed to see that this year it had developed into a four day music festival with a Strauss theme, to include a Strauss Ball, a concert by the Bournemouth Sinfonietta and oboe masterclasses.

As to the competition itself, this too is developing, with competitors from a wider range of countries and a move this year from an all British preliminary panel of judges to one with a more international flavor. Chaired by the artistic director of the competition, the indomitable Lady Barbirolli, it comprised Christian Scheider, professor at the Hochschule Für Music in Cologne, Laila Storch, professor emeritus at the School of Music University of Washington and David Theodore, principal oboist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. The main panel of judges comprised Burghardt Glaetzner, professor at the Hochschule der Kunste Berlin, Alf Nilsson, professor of music at the Royal Musik Hogskolan, Stockholm, and former principal oboist of the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Daniel Stolper, professor of oboe at Michigan State University and principal of the Lansing Symphony Orchestra and from England, Richard Simpson, principal oboist with the BBC Symphony Orchestra with, of course, Lady Barbirolli.

Six players were selected by the preliminary jury as semi-finalists:

Jerome Broun age 23, a student at the Royal Northern College of Music;

Aisling Casey age 26, assistant principal oboe with the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra and studying with Professor Klaus Becker in Hannover;

Hélène Devilleneuve age 30, principal oboe in the Philharmonique of Radio France;

Jared Hauser age 28, a graduate student from Rice University in the USA;

Frédéric Tardy age 29, principal oboe at L'Orchestre National de L'Opera de Lyon, and

Jan Thuri age 23, a student at the Prague Academy of Music and Arts.

The works for the semi finals were the Saint-Saëns *Sonate*, Schumann's *Three Romances*, the C.P.E. Bach *Sonata in G minor* and Mozart's *Oboe Quartet* - a challenging combination. The Tagore String Trio (Frances Mason, James Halsey and Brian Schiele) joined the competitors to form the quartet. One of the competitors told me that he found it particularly interesting to hear such varied performances of the Mozart, reflecting the different national styles.

Three players were selected to go forward to the finals: Aisling Casey from Ireland, Hélène Devilleneuve from France and Jan Thuri from the Czech Republic. Consequently, after our enjoyable morning at the Priory Bay, we joined Brian Kay again, this time in his role as compere for the afternoon's concerto final at the Medina Theatre in Newport. Continuing the Strauss theme, to mark the 150th, 100th and 50th anniversaries of the passing of the Strausses - respectively Johann Snr, Johann Jnr, and Richard - the finalists had to play the Strauss *Oboe Concerto* accompanied by the Bournemouth Sinfonietta directed by Richard Studt.

The general view before the session started was that this was going to be a difficult decision for the jury. Speaking with members of the audience beforehand, although they each had their favorite, there did not appear to be any outright obvious choice. It was going to be close!

Aisling Casey was drawn to play first; she had been anxious when I spoke to her half-an-hour before - and who would not be - but this certainly did not show in her performance. Aisling is a very strong and confident performer and produced a beautiful dark sound, very much

in the Germanic style, possibly reflecting her recent studies in Hannover. Overall her performance was most impressive and set a very tough standard for the other two to follow.

Next was Jan Thuri from Prague. This was a very different style of oboe playing and unusual to Western European ears since we do not hear many Eastern European oboists as soloists. Jan's sound was lighter but possibly more lyrical than the previous player. Overall the performance was very elegant and stylistic.

Hélène Devilleneuve had to follow two very good performances which must have put some pressure on her. She started very well and after the first few phrases I thought that if she could keep this up we were listening to the winner. She had a beautiful sound, which reminded me in many ways of Maurice Bourgue, and I liked the interpretation. Unfortunately, she appeared to have a few problems with intonation which detracted from an otherwise excellent performance.

Each of the performances was very professional and each finalist coped well with the pressure which made the decision a difficult one for the jury. The audience thought it was going to be close but overall seemed to favor the Irish finalist. While the jury deliberated we were entertained first by the orchestra and then, as the decision-making stretched out, by Brian Kay who recalled amusing interludes from his Kings Singers days.

After long and difficult deliberations, not made easier by the three different styles of

performance, the jury returned! In time honored fashion they announced the results in reverse order; Hélène Devilleneuve third, Jan Thuri second, and, the winner of the 4th Isle of Wight International Oboe Competition, Aisling Casey. This was a popular decision and perhaps the power and maturity of her playing gave her the edge.

I now look forward to Aisling Casey's recital at the Purcell Room in London - part of her competition prize. I hope she includes some relatively modern oboe music in the programme because I am sure this will show her flexibility and broad range of performing skills.

I think congratulations are due to all of the competitors and also to those who arranged such an interesting four day festival. The Isle of Wight International Oboe Competition has definitely come of age!

I hope I will see many of our members at the Purcell Room for Aisling's concert on 23rd March, 2000. I cannot stress enough how important it is for all musicians to listen to other players (and not just oboists). Which reminds me that I did not mention one aspect of the competition - the accompanists: several of the judges commented to me that there were some fine accompanying. With so many beautiful works for oboe and piano, it is crucial for all young players, and particularly prospective competitors for the fifth competition in 2001, to work with a good accompanist as they can add immeasurably to the quality of performance. ❖