

SUNDAYS WITH THE ST. LAWRENCE
JANUARY 22 / 2:30 PM
BING CONCERT HALL



 STANFORDLIVE

PROGRAM NOTES

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791) OBOE QUARTET IN F MAJOR, K. 370 (1781)

Mozart first met the German oboist Friedrich Ramm in 1777, singling out his “delightfully pure tone” in a letter to his father, Leopold Mozart. Four years later, Mozart met Ramm again while rehearsing his opera *Idomeneo* for its premiere at the Bavarian court in Munich in late January 1781. The Oboe Quartet that he then wrote for Ramm, once *Idomeneo* was in production, is now recognized as one of the gems of the chamber music repertoire. Scored for oboe with violin, viola, and cello, this sparkling, extroverted piece judiciously balances the needs of chamber music with those of a miniature concerto. In other words, the musical material is shared between all four instruments, without the oboe soloist hogging quite everything. The singular bright texture of the piece results from the unusually high range that Mozart demands from the oboe. Previously he had made a high D the highest oboe note—in the 1779 operatic scene *Popoli di Tessaglia* that Mozart wrote for soprano and Ramm’s oboe, for example. Now, he exploits two even higher notes. Few, if any, other players of the day could play up to a high F and Mozart never again made these demands in his music, so it’s a safe bet that Ramm would have had exclusive use of the Oboe Quartet for a number of years. The slow movement is a particularly expressive aria of heavenly length, written in D minor, a key that Mozart tended to set aside for solemn music. The high-spirited rondo finale includes some startling rhythmic interplay near the middle and calls for virtuoso playing throughout.

ARTHUR BLISS (1891–1975) QUINTET FOR OBOE AND STRINGS, OP. 44, F. 21 (1927)

Knighted in 1951 and appointed Master of the Queen’s Music two years later, Sir Arthur Bliss may, at first glance, appear to be the very model of an early 20th-century English composer—the more so, perhaps, once Bliss developed an Elgar-like sweep to the broad melodies of his ceremonial music. But there was another side to this relatively little-known composer. His father was a Massachusetts businessman living in London who threw himself wholeheartedly into bringing up his three sons when his wife died, when Arthur Bliss was just four. Twenty years later, Bliss Junior followed Bliss Senior to the United States upon the latter’s retirement. He met the woman he would remain married to for the rest of his life while acting opposite her in Santa Barbara and, at the outbreak of World War II, found himself teaching at Berkeley. But England remained home and most of Bliss’ career was spent there. With the huge gap of the two world wars punctuating a long career, during the last two decades of his creative life, the once avant-garde composer found himself out of step with a new generation of English composers. The craft

behind his music, however, remained consistent. “If I were to define my musical goal,” Bliss said towards the end of his life, “it would be to try for an emotion truly and clearly felt and caught forever in formal perfection.”

The Quintet for Oboe and Strings dates from 1927, after Bliss, now in his mid-30s, had experienced the horrors of the First World War on the front and returned to London determined to make a career as a composer. It was written for the great English oboist Léon Goossens, an almost exact contemporary, then avidly encouraging composers around him to add to the instrument’s repertoire. The commission came from the devoted American patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and the Oboe Quintet was premiered in Venice later that year. The first of its three movements is carefully structured, framed by a wistful opening and closing. Soaring thirds on the violins introduce the main musical material, fundamentally pastoral and lyrical in mood but attenuated throughout by an atonal edge to the harmonic writing. After a sequence of variations on the main theme, an agitated secondary theme builds to a climax before unwinding. The central movement follows a similar three-part structure, beginning and ending with a rhapsodic, gently falling theme designed to showcase the sustained melodic virtuosity and depth of tone color of the pioneering English oboist for whom the work was written. The finale develops two ideas: a vigorous four-note cell played in unison by the strings and a lyrical melody from the oboe. Bliss then weaves them in and out of the melody of an Irish jig (*Connelly’s Jig*), building a technically demanding scherzo-like movement which culminates in a flight of virtuosity from the oboe.

—© 2017 Keith Horner

JOHN ADAMS (B. 1947) FIRST QUARTET (2009)

The First Quartet is John Adams’ second full-sized work for the medium and his first without electronics. His first work for string quartet, *John’s Book of Alleged Dances* (1994), was composed for the Kronos Quartet and is accompanied by prerecorded CD, and his second string quartet, *Fellow Traveler* (2007), is a five-minute piece written for Peter Sellars’ birthday. It was a stunning St. Lawrence String Quartet performance of *Alleged Dances* at Stanford in 2007 that inspired Adams to compose a piece for them, leading to the world premiere of the First Quartet at the Juilliard School and a subsequent tour. The First Quartet was originally commissioned by the Juilliard School with the generous support of the Trust of Francis Goelet, Stanford University, and the Banff Centre.

—Note courtesy of Boosey & Hawkes