

# **The Pastoral Oboe in Twentieth- Century Britain: Evolution, Influence and Relevance**

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Hello and welcome to my Master's lecture recital. Today I will be looking at the topic of the Pastoral Oboe in twentieth-century British music. First, I will be exploring what pastoralism within music is and what I mean by the term 'pastoral oboe'. Then I will look at how composers including Edward Elgar and Benjamin Britten were influenced by this style, while simultaneously focussing on twentieth-century oboist Léon Goossens. Goossens was born in 1897 and died in 1988 and can be considered as the pioneer of the sound of the pastoral oboe. Finally, I will be exploring how the pastoral oboe is still relevant today.

There are many interpretations of what the pastorelle is. Musicologist Geoffrey Chew explains pastoralism as "a literary, dramatic or musical genre that depicts the characters and scenes of rural life or is expressive of its atmosphere."<sup>1</sup> Chew's definition seems to me oversimplified and does not detail what characteristics and sound are expected with the term pastorelle. I suggest that this vagueness originates from critics' use of the term when reviewing music. The first archival example where this obscure description is used dates from May 1903 in the journal *The Musical Times*, when a critic reviewing the song "The Good Shepherd" used the description "a pastoral intermezzo".<sup>2</sup> Contemporary readers were supposed to know what was meant by the description, with the association of rural imagery already in people's thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chew and Owen Jander, "Pastoral," *Grove Music Online* (January 2001): <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40091> (accessed 18/08/2024).

<sup>2</sup> "Music in Staffordshire," *Musical Times* 44, no. 723 (1903): 335.

The definition of pastoralism has many interpretations. Musicologist Arnold Whittall suggests that pastoralism is the imagery that is created through the music rather than how the music creates the imagery.<sup>3</sup> This helps with understanding how much of a link there is between the music and the imagery it is supposed to create for the listeners. By contrast, music critic Frank Howes tried to group pastoral composers together, including Peter Warlock and George Butterworth; for Howes, a central feature was composers' departure from German compositional traditions and use of English folk-song and madrigals in their music.<sup>4</sup> Howes gives us a better idea of the characteristics of pastoralism like the use of traditional English folk music.

Musicologist Eric Saylor delves deep into pastoralism. He first looks at how it was derived from poetry and prose that featured countryside, shepherds and nature themes. As previously mentioned, it was then used as an adjective to describe British music from the start of the twentieth century by critics. Saylor develops ideas from Robert Hatten and Ted Perkins to define characteristics of musical pastoralism.<sup>5</sup> The features that Saylor mentions are: English folk song inspirations including the use of modal scales and pentatonicism, long passages of static harmony, triadic harmonies, motivic and thematic repetition, recombination and fragmentation, free phrase structures, rhapsodic melodies creating the imagery of a shepherd improvising on his

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold Whittall, "The Signs of Genre: Britten's Version of Pastoral," in *Sundry Sorts of Music Books: Essays on the British Library Collections*, ed. Chris Banks, Arthur Searle, and Malcolm Turner (London: The British Library, 1993), 363.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 262.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Saylor in *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017) refers to Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 97-99 and Tedrow Perkins, "British Pastoral Style and the Oboe," *Double Reed* 11, no. 2 (1988): 25-27.

pipes, plus flowing rhythms and cadenza-like flourishes, quiet dynamics and thin textures, and texts and titles that evoke the imagery of natural landscapes.<sup>6</sup>

The writings of Saylor, Chew, Whittall and Howes have helped me to reach my own understandings of the term and the style and sound of pastoralism. I see it as a style prominent in early twentieth-century British music. This is due to the ability of pastoralism to create the imagery of rural life, which through both World Wars many people wanted to picture as they associated it with tranquillity and peacefulness instead of wartime turmoil.<sup>7</sup> Listening to a broad range of twentieth-century British works and reading authors such as Saylor has allowed me to reach my own working definition of pastoral music. It is a style that has lyrical, peaceful melodies and luscious harmonies with heavy influences and characteristics of English folk music. Understanding the term pastoral with respect to music leads us to understand what is meant by the pastoral oboe.

The pastoral oboe is a perceived style of playing and sound of the oboe. The idea of the oboe sound being pastoral originated before the twentieth century, it was only from the 1900s that it became embedded in the sound of British oboists. The pastoral oboe sound originated in orchestral playing and works. Scholar-performers Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes suggest that Beethoven's Sixth, or "Pastoral", Symphony that premiered in 1808 is one of the integral works that started this

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Saylor, *English Pastoral Music: From Arcadia to Utopia, 1900-1955* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Saylor, "It's Not Lambkins Frisking At All: English Pastoral Music and the Great War," *The Musical Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (2008): 40-41.

association between the oboe and the pastoral.<sup>8</sup> In the second movement the oboe imitates birds with the flute and clarinet while in the third movement, although in a fast tempo, the oboe plays an energetic, light and spritely solo melody. I would argue that even today's listener perceives this symphony as a bridge between the pastoral concept and the oboe. The orchestral work that cemented this perception that the oboe, as well as the cor anglais, were associated with the pastoral is Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. In the third movement titled "Scène aux champs" which translates to 'Scene of the country', the oboe and cor anglais have a dialogue which is supposed to depict a conversation between two shepherds.<sup>9</sup> Within these orchestral examples, the main style of playing and sound is a sweet tone, and long and lyrical phrases which accompany the peaceful and tranquil imagery of the countryside and nature that is being depicted in the works.

You may be asking yourself "how did this perception of the pastoral oboe reach Britain in the first place?" Well, it comes down to the make of the oboes, the schools of playing, and what I argue to be the main reason for this style and sound of playing: British oboist Léon Goossens. The British School of playing that Goossens led was heavily influenced by the French school of playing. In the French School, with French oboist Georges Gillet at its helm, the oboe had a light, sweet and vibrant tone with clean articulation.<sup>10</sup> French oboe makers were creating their oboes to aid such playing. Recently I had the opportunity to try out historical oboes from the 1800s all the way to early 1900s and I found that playing some of the French oboes had this

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes, *The Oboe* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 217.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 221.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 202.

natural light and sweet quality to them. This style of oboe making was brought over to Britain from the French school of playing, influencing British oboists, including Léon Goossens.

Goossens was a pioneer for British oboe playing in the twentieth century. He modified and evolved oboe techniques, inspired the younger generation of oboists and influenced many composers to write solo works for him and for the oboe in general. Goossens' first teacher was Charles Reynolds who was taught by French oboist Antoine Joseph Lavigne; thus the baton of the French school of playing was being passed down to Goossens, which he adapted into his own style.<sup>11</sup> This is reinforced by the fact that before the First World War most orchestral oboists in British orchestras were employed from France, bringing with them their vibrant tone and clear articulation which audiences of the early 1900s and the rest of the orchestra expected from the oboe.<sup>12</sup>

Various writers claimed that Goossens transformed and revolutionised the oboe from this perceived unpleasant piercing sound into a refined and beautiful tone.<sup>13</sup> One of Goossens' students, Evelyn Rothwell, summed up in an obituary for her teacher that he created a vibrant, warm and singing tone, contrasting from the dead and ugly sound that was accepted by everyone before Goossens; this style that Rothwell describes became standard for British oboe playing in the twentieth

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 196.

<sup>12</sup> John Warrack and Janet K. Page, "Goossens, Leon," *Grove Music Online* (2001): <https://doi.org/10.1093/omo/9781561592630.013.90000380893> (accessed 20/12/2023).

<sup>13</sup> Carole Rosen, *The Goossens: A Musical Century* (London: Deutsch, 1993), 125.

century.<sup>14</sup> Goossens inspired many composers to write music for the oboe including concertos and sonatas; Goossens had 49 different works either dedicated with intention of him to play or commissioned by Goossens himself. In today's lecture recital I will explore two of those works.

Goossens' sound is preserved on record. Listening to Goossens' performances, for example his performance of the Vaughan Williams Oboe Concerto, which was composed for him, enabled me to grasp what his playing style was and in turn the expected sound and style of the pastoral oboe.<sup>15</sup> He focused on expression, with the extensive use of rubato, vibrato and dynamics. He would shape long phrases with rubato to draw attention to certain harmonies and melodies, for example, holding a note slightly longer to emphasise dissonance. He used the rise and fall of dynamics to follow the shape of the melody, and he pioneered the use of frequent diaphragm vibrato with different speeds of vibrato to help shape the melody and dynamics.<sup>16</sup> Goossens was also known for his amazing breath control, while also including the use of circular breathing to keep a phrase flowing, which perfectly matches the long flowing phrases of pastoral music. In my view, Goossens truly forged the pastoral oboe playing style.

I will now present an example of the archetypal writing, style and sound of the pastoral oboe, using a work composed for Goossens, Elgar's *Soliloquy* for oboe and

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Burgess and Haynes, *The Oboe*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Shellackophile, "Vaughan Williams Oboe Concerto (Goossens, 1952)," YouTube, 13 July 2015, video, 18:21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTR1aZdx0rs>

<sup>16</sup> Léon Goossens and Edwin Roxburgh, *Oboe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Macdonald Futura Publishers, 1980), 87.

orchestra, by way of example. In 1930, Edward Elgar set out to write a three-movement suite for oboe and orchestra with the intention for Goossens to perform the suite.<sup>17</sup> However, only the middle, slow movement was completed before Elgar's death.<sup>18</sup> The sketch was bequeathed to Goossens and was left unfinished until 1967, when Goossens commissioned Gordon Jacob to finish the orchestration. The features that are typical of the pastoral oboe are the use of the directions *ad libitum* and *rubato*; this contributes to the imagery of a shepherd improvising on his pipes. Characteristic long melodic phrases that support his technique of breath control are also present. In Goossens' recording from 1967, during the *Tempo Moderato* sections there are melodies that last for 7 bars with no rests, yet you cannot tell whether Goossens breathes or not within these long phrases.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, he used diaphragm vibrato on notes from a dotted crotchet and longer to help shape the melody and the use of different speeds on certain notes to create more intensity. I will demonstrate these techniques and style in this performance to present to you the style and sound that is expected of the pastoral oboe.

I invite my collaborative pianist Rob Challinor to accompany me.

## Play Elgar

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<sup>17</sup> Goossens and Roxburgh, *Oboe*, 160-161. (Letter addressed to Goossens from Elgar about the suite showing this intention).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 161. (In the letter, Elgar writes that he has to stop writing the suite as he has sciatica.)

<sup>19</sup> Edward Elgar, Leon Goossens Oboe and conducted by Norman Del Mar, recorded in 1967, *Elgar: Soliloquy*, RCA Red Seal, LRL1 5133, released in 1976, vinyl.



Hopefully you heard the features of the pastoral oboe that I described. I would now like to move on to explore how composers were influenced by Goossens, alongside this new English school of playing. I will show how composers have tailored their own compositional style for the pastoral oboe by focusing on the first movement of Malcolm Arnold's *Sonatina for Oboe and Piano*, which was composed for Goossens in 1951. This first movement is very quirky and lively, with similarities to his other first movements for other sonatinas like the one he composed for clarinet in the same year. There is high contrast of dynamics and articulation and when comparing this movement to other Arnold works for solo woodwind instruments there is that similarity of energetic themes and interplay between the solo instrument and the piano. Arnold showcases most of the range of the oboe from the lowest note of B flat three to over two octaves above at a D five. Goossens' recording with pianist Frank Stone in 1957 goes slightly slower than the given tempo; this gives him more space to express himself and offers him a chance to emphasise the lyrical sections to really create a contrast between the lyrical and staccato sections.<sup>20</sup> He once again used slight rubato and vibrato on the top notes at the start of each bar of the lyrical section, lingering on them with a faster vibrato again creating that contrast. When comparing the lyrical sections within the first movement of Arnold's *Clarinet Sonatina*, there is less chance for the clarinetist to pull around the tempo due to a very syncopated and busy piano part. This suggests that Arnold tailored this movement of the *Oboe Sonatina* for Goossens' style of playing as well as quick flourishes in these lyrical sections to contribute to his virtuosity. I am now going to

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<sup>20</sup> Malcom Arnold, *Sonatina for Oboe and Pianoforte*, broadcast performance (1957) heard in "Léon Goossens," *Mining the Archive* BBC radio programme. Available in the British Library National Sound Archive.

perform this first movement for you; I encourage you to keep in mind how much the pastoral oboe style has influenced composers and oboists alike.

### **Play Arnold**

Once again, I hope you heard the contrasts both melodically and harmonically, which help define the pastoral oboe and its playing.

Moving now to the final section of my lecture recital, I want to look at how Goossens' style and sound has impacted and inspired oboists after him, including contemporary oboists like myself. Benjamin Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* is a great work to show this point. Like the Arnold, this was written in 1951, composed for Joy Boughton, a student of Goossens. I will be playing the first three movements, but I have made the programming decision not to perform them in chronological order but instead to play them in order from most lyrical in style to least. In contrast to the previous two pieces, these works are narrative-driven and the music, through development of a theme, portrays the actual metamorphosis of each character in the title.<sup>21</sup> The first of the three I will be playing is number three *Niobe*.

Niobe was the prototype of a grieving mother; at the top of each work Britten gives a two-line summary of the narrative and imagery he wants to create. He says that

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Kennedy, *The Master Musicians Series: Britten* (London: Dent, 1981), 195.

Niobe “who (is) lamenting the death of her fourteen children, was turned into a mountain” which is quite a tragic narrative to convey.<sup>22</sup> The expression given at the start of the piece is *piangendo* which translates to crying, the start of each two-bar phrase begins *mezzo forte* and has an accent on the first note to create this feeling of Niobe wailing. In a recording of this piece from 1952 Boughton really takes her time and takes advantage of being unaccompanied to play rubato and lean into the interesting harmonies.<sup>23</sup> I will be employing a similar interpretive decision in my own playing. Britten gives a direction in the middle climax section to be *espressivo et rubato*; this gives space to emphasise the imagery of the full extent of this woman’s grief. The piece ends with the woman slowly turning into a mountain heard from the return of the main melodic idea which gets quieter and quieter. Britten in the last four bars gives a performance direction of no expression to represent the lifeless state she is taking on. To emphasise that she is turning into a mountain Britten ends the piece on a high D flat which fades away, representing the high peak of the mountain she has metamorphosized into.

### Play Niobe

The first piece of the six is *Pan* who is the Greek God of shepherds. The wild and rustic music in this piece is depicting Pan playing upon the reed pipe which was his beloved Syrinx, bringing back the pastoral idea of someone improvising on his pipes

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Britten, *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid for Oboe Solo, Op.49* (London: Hawkes & Son, 1952).

<sup>23</sup> Joy Boughton, oboe, “Niobe,” by Benjamin Britten, recorded 1952, on *Anatomy of a Masterpiece: Britten Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op.49*, BBC, 2007, CD.

in a field with the tempo marking of *senza misura*, meaning without measure.<sup>24</sup> In the middle section there are repeated A sharps at the start of each bar: Joy Boughton and many other oboists including Nicholas Daniel play these very dry and start off slow and get faster through them. I have also employed this interpretation in my own playing as it creates the idea of testing out a reed or an instrument and getting more confident with the sound.<sup>25</sup> An interesting fact is that years before I started this Master's degree I had played this middle section like I am today which is similar to Boughton and Daniel; this demonstrates the lineage of this playing style being passed down and taught to oboists including myself.

### **Play Pan**

The last of the three I will be playing is number two, *Phaeton*. This is the least pastoral in style and sound, through the detached style and *staccatissimo* notes in the last section, which are in stark contrast to the lyrical movements one and three. Phaeton is the son of Helios, Greek God of the sun. The narrative of this movement is about Phaeton riding upon his chariot and being buried into the river by a thunderbolt.<sup>26</sup> The thrill and excitement of riding this chariot is shown by the loud and fast quavers. I feel that the two quaver fragments that occur throughout this piece represent the

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<sup>24</sup> Britten, *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*.

<sup>25</sup> Joy Boughton, oboe, "Pan," by Benjamin Britten, recorded 1952 and Nicholas Daniel, oboe, "Pan," by Benjamin Britten, recorded 2007, on *Anatomy of a Masterpiece: Britten Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op.49*, BBC, 2007, CD.

<sup>26</sup> Britten, *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*.

horse galloping. The climax occurs near the end of the piece where it feels as if the chariot is struck by lightning and is out of control as the descending chromatic passage occurs. The piece ends with the chariot sinking through the water with the lyrical cadenza. Most recordings I have listened to including Boughton's and Daniel's take it under Britten's given tempo marking in order to give more shape; this I argue is reinforcing the influence of Goossens and the pastoral oboe style.<sup>27</sup> Although different to the pastoral style and sound we normally hear, there is once again a link to nature with the imitation of a horse galloping and the lyrical quieter section in the middle.

### **Play Phaeton**

Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* have become part of an oboist's core repertoire and are often played in contemporary times because they showcase many different aspects of the oboe, from pitch range to dynamic range, lyricism and fast passages.<sup>28</sup> More pertinently in the present context, they show how the pastoral oboe is relevant today. When preparing, researching and listening to past recordings of British oboists playing this work, I found that the interpretations that I demonstrated to you today have been present in my findings. At the same time, a lot of the techniques that Goossens and many after him used, techniques which I have shown as manifestations of a pastoral oboe sound, have been part of my playing from before

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<sup>27</sup> Joy Boughton, oboe, "Phaeton" by Benjamin Britten, recorded 1952 and Nicholas Daniel, oboe, "Phaeton," by Benjamin Britten, recorded 2007, on *Anatomy of a Masterpiece: Britten Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op.49*, BBC, 2007, CD.

<sup>28</sup> Burgess and Haynes, *The Oboe*, 213.

this year of research even started. For example, I was being taught diaphragm vibrato before I came to university, thus suggesting how embedded Goossens' influence on the British School of playing is. For a majority of British oboists, myself included, the pastoral oboe has become an inherent style of playing that has shaped twentieth-century oboe performance and pedagogy throughout the century, with continued relevance today.

To conclude and summarise my findings, in this lecture recital I have presented my own interpretation of what the pastoral oboe is, by exploring pastoralism within music and showing you the characteristics of the pastoral oboe. I have highlighted Léon Goossens' position as pioneer of this style, and my performances of the Elgar and Arnold have demonstrated works tailored for Goossens and his style of playing. My performance of parts of Britten's *Metamorphoses* have shown the strength of Goossens' pedagogical lineage, demonstrating the evolution of the pastoral oboe in twentieth century Britain and highlighting its continued relevance today. I have shown through my playing the influence that Goossens and his pastoral style has on oboists, and I will continue to show the inherent style and inspiration that Goossens has on my playing in my recital on Friday.

I would like to thank Rob for accompanying me today and thank you all for coming.

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