

Intriguing New Work for the Oboe

Eric Ewazen and Linda Strommen discuss “Down a River of Time”

by **Julia Gulasy**
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In 1997, **Linda Strommen**, Professor of Oboe at Louisiana State University and Assisting Oboe Faculty at The Juilliard School, commissioned composer **Eric Ewazen**, also of The Juilliard School, to write an oboe concerto in memory of her father. “**Down a River of Time**” had its premiere performance at the Bellingham Music Festival in the summer of 1999. The audience was captivated by Linda’s performance under the baton of Michael Palmer with the American Sinfonietta. Additionally, the work was met with overwhelming response at its European premiere in the spring of 2000. The piano reduction of this composition will be performed at the IDRS convention in West Virginia this August. Those who have previewed “Down a River of Time” are tremendously excited about its publication which is slated for release in the late summer through Southern Music. It will be available in both the chamber orchestra and piano reduction versions.

In a conversation with Mr. Ewazen and Ms. Strommen, the inner workings of “Down a River of Time” are explored, and the motivations behind the composition are revealed. The following are excerpts from the conversation:

Q: Ms. Strommen, what prompted you to commission the writing of an oboe concerto, and how was the composer chosen?

A (Strommen): *It had been a dream of mine for years to have the opportunity to commission an oboe work in honor of my late father, Dean Strommen, who was an avid supporter of the arts. I knew he would have been delighted by a composition which would widen the repertoire and a work that would be a contribution to the artistic world long after his or my passing. I put much thought into who might write such a work. In the early 1990s, upon hearing Eric Ewazen’s compositions in a faculty recital at The Juilliard School, it became quite clear. I was immediately captivated by his style and envisioned the endless possibilities of an oboe concerto. Since he had written for all other wind instruments except the oboe, Eric embraced the idea enthusiastically.*

Q: How did you arrive at the title, “Down a River of Time?”

A (Ewazen): *My father passed away on Christmas Day in 1997. On this day, the Cleveland Plain Dealer printed an article by Dick Fealger. It was a memory piece -- looking back to youth, talking about loved ones and reminding the reader that time goes so quickly. In this article, Mr. Fealger described life as moving “down a river of time.” These words captured my attention.*

Q: How long after you first envisioned the concerto was the work begun?

A (Strommen): *It was not until early 1997, a number of years after the initial conception of the concerto, that funding and a prime venue for the premiere were securely in place. Eric was excited about the opportunity before him. However, shortly after this point, Eric received unexpected news of great sadness -- that of his father’s passing. His loss seemed especially close to me, bringing back the depth of emotions I had experienced with the loss of my own father, in whose honor the concerto was to be written. A recurring question pressed upon my heart: How could I assist Eric through the grief process as others had so graciously done for me so many years ago? It was out of this question that an idea was born: Maybe the oboe concerto itself could serve as a vehicle for healing - especially in light of the soulful poignancy of the oboe with its idiomatic possibilities for expressing the heart’s deepest emotions. After all, doesn’t music, and art in general, speak in such profound and healing ways to our hearts and very lives, addressing our experiences in a very real way to the point of transformation? Furthermore, as musicians and artists, do we not hope to have the opportunity to touch a human heart through performance and reach deep within a soul to offer compassion, hope and understanding? It was this, I believe, that caused me to desire to play the oboe and also to feel innately my father’s own experience and value of art and its expression. Upon presenting my thoughts to Eric, he gracefully accepted my contemplation and, shortly thereafter, shared an article with me. This was the article entitled*

“Down a River of Time.” Once again I could envision a very moving and timeless concerto for oboe -- one that might bring Eric and listeners, through the process of wrestling with grief, to a place of hope and expectancy of life before them.

Q: Could you briefly describe Eric’s compositional style which encouraged your vision of the concerto, and in what ways would you say *“Down a River of Time”* is indicative of this?

A (Strommen): When hearing Eric’s music, I think of sweeping or soaring lines in the faster movements, often with swirling rhythmic agitation. The slow movements of his compositions seem to have a Samuel Barber-like depth and beauty with their poignancy and intensity of emotion. His final movements often speak with a sense of expectancy and uplifted spirit, leaving the listener with renewed feelings of joy. Eric’s compositions captivate the audience with their artful crafting and cohesiveness of melodic and harmonic language. Furthermore, his talents as an orchestrator and pianist are clearly evident in his colorful orchestrations and well-written piano reductions. *“Down a River of Time”* embodies these observations, and yet it is set apart in its uniqueness of rewardingly idiomatic writing for the oboe.

A (Ewazen): This piece, which is a contemplative journey through life, was composed as an aria with string orchestra. The oboe emulates the voice as it expresses intense emotional and personal feelings, orchestrating the importance of life’s dreams. Since the oboe is the ultimate expressive instrument -- like the human voice -- it speaks passionately. Furthermore, the great range of tonal colors and articulation available to the oboist have the ability to dramatically transform the feelings explored. The work captures the cycle of life in a very virtuosic manner. Each of the movement titles, with their progression: *“Past Hopes and Dreams ... and Sorrows ... and Memories of Tomorrow”* present imagery of traveling down the river of life with its ebb and flow.

The first movement, *“... Past Hopes and Dreams,”* is energetic, like the rushing tide of time. It is a young person’s journey - representing activity, relaxation, peace, hard work and excitement. Flourishes of energetic ostinato patterns create a feeling of water imagery in the solo part as well as the accompaniment allowing hints of impressionism to permeate the movement.

Undulation between major and minor tonalities give the sense of a full range of emotional experience from a point of retrospect.

In the second movement, *“...and Sorrows,”* there is profound sadness represented - a valley of tears. The oboe is singing a soliloquy as the string orchestra comments with ribbons of melody. There are hints of jazz-like elements with a type of minor/modal folk music intertwined. The accompaniment is rather subdued in this movement, with the lower strings prominent. Although this movement is written primarily in a minor key, major tonalities interrupt sporadically, offering glimmers of hope and comfort. Near the end of the movement lies an expressive cadenza bringing resolve to the pathos of emotions one can encounter with the impact of loss.

A (Ewazen): The third movement, *“... and Memories of Tomorrow,”* evokes a variety of emotions although, by and large, it is celebratory or joyful. This movement describes how one looks back at life and relishes the joyful memories, sometimes even forgetting the pain. The presence of gospel-type sonorities project the image of a revival meeting. While there are some brief moments of doubt and painful times represented through the use of dissonance and rhythmic agitation, the music exudes hopeful anticipation for embracing life anew. The movement leaves the audience on the edge of their seats as it valiantly soars to a victorious and uplifting conclusion in C Major. The third movement is quite virtuosic and has been described as athletic, displaying rapid scalar runs that require the full range of the instrument from low B Natural to high F Sharp. One critic described these ascending runs as so exhilarating that they nearly propelled her to her feet.

Q: Were you able to work closely on this project?

A (Ewazen): Our collaboration was invaluable. Linda read through each section of the music with me as I wrote it. I would hear her play, get her feedback (always enthusiastic!) and proceed. Later she helped me a great deal with dynamics and articulation, offering suggestions and trying out different possibilities, etc. It was a joy working with her.

A (Strommen): It has been a tremendously rewarding experience to work so closely with a composer through each aspect of the commission: composition, performance, publication and recording. Eric’s positive and delightfully enthusiastic spirit, coupled with his artistry as a

musician/composer/pianist has made the project a memorable experience for all. It is with great anticipation that we look forward to sharing the concerto with the oboe world and with listeners' ears and hearts for years to come.

Q: Are recordings available for the oboe concerto?

A (Ewazen): *We are in the process of recording the oboe concerto which will be available in spring 2002 on a CD along with my concerto for violin and strings and a symphonic work for string orchestra. Linda Strommen and the International Sejong Soloists - a brilliant and internationally recognized chamber orchestra founded by Hyo Kang and Dorothy DeLay - are featured, and I will be conducting.*

Eric Ewazen's "Down a River of Time" holds thought-provoking motifs that appeal to the heart of the performer and which are then effortlessly imparted to the listener. The work is sure to have a significant impact, not only on the present day oboist, but for future generations as well. The contribution that Eric Ewazen and Linda Strommen have made to the oboe repertoire truly represents a marriage between emotion and artistry. It is a piece that warrants serious consideration by the oboe community at large. Don't miss the performance at the IDRS convention this August by the artists who created this work.

Linda Strommen

Linda Strommen joined the Louisiana State University faculty in 1997 where she is currently serving as professor of oboe, oboist of the Timm Wind Quintet and co-director of the Chamber Winds Program. In addition to her commitments at LSU, she presently teaches on the oboe faculty of the Juilliard School, is principal oboe of the American Sinfonietta and is a member of the Brandenburg Ensemble. Prior to her LSU appointment, Ms. Strommen was a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. She has held previous principal positions in the Milwaukee, Honolulu, New Haven, Wichita and Akron Symphonies, and has served as interim principal oboe with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Rochester Philharmonic and Utah Symphonies. Ms. Strommen has also performed with the Boston Symphony and the Cleveland Orchestra.

Alongside her active performing career, teaching has been a priority in her professional

life. She received her formal training at the Cleveland Institute of Music and Northwestern University. Her principal teachers include John Mack, Ray Still, Richard Woodhams and Stephen Colburn. In her own teaching career, Ms. Strommen has served on the faculties of the Mannes College of Music, The Juilliard School Pre-College, Yale University and Wichita State University. Her former students represent themselves in orchestras across the country. Linda Strommen has held positions with many of the country's leading summer music festivals, including the Sante Fe Opera, the Marlboro Festival, Bard and Bellingham Festivals. Currently, she holds summer residencies at Le Domaine Forget Music Academy, the American Sinfonietta Performance Academy, the John Mack Oboe Camp and the Elaine Douvas Oboe MasterConference. Ms. Strommen has recorded with Telarc, Deutsche Gramophone and Summit. She currently serves on the advisory committee of the New York String Orchestra/New School Concert series.

Eric Ewazen

Eric Ewazen was born in 1954 in Cleveland, Ohio. Receiving a B.M. at the Eastman School of Music, and M.M. and D.M.A. degrees from The Juilliard School, he is a recipient of numerous composition awards and prizes. His works have been commissioned and performed by many soloists, chamber ensembles and orchestras in the U.S. and overseas. His works are recorded on Summit Records, d'Note Records, CRS Records, New World, Clique Track, Helicon, Hyperion, Cala, Albany and EMI Classics. Two of his solo CDs featuring his music for brass instruments are available on Well-Tempered Productions. A third solo CD featuring three of his percussion works will be released on Resonator Records during the summer of 2001. In the fall, Albany Records will be releasing a CD of his orchestral music featuring the Czech Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra of Prague, and a CD, entitled "Bass Hits", devoted to concerti he has written for bass trombone.

Recent premieres of his orchestral and chamber music have taken place in Mexico City, Mexico, Taipei, Taiwan, Paris, France, the Canary Islands and Chicago. Ensembles premiering his works during the past season include the Charleston Symphony and the West Virginia Symphony, the University of Arizona Symphony Orchestra, the West Point Band. He is the Composer-in-Residence with the International Horn Society Convention, held at Western

Michigan University in June, 2001. In April of 2002, his *Concerto for Bassoon and Wind Ensemble* will be premiered at Florida State University with bassoonist **Jeffrey Keesecker**, conducted by James Croft. Eric Ewazen has been vice-president of the League-ISCM,

Composer-in Residence with the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, lecturer for the New York Philharmonic's Musical Encounters Series, and is currently a faculty member of The Juilliard School.

A LIST OF MR. EWAZEN'S WORKS FOR DOUBLE REED INSTRUMENTS:

CHAMBER ENSEMBLE

Roaring Fork Quintet for Wind Instruments
(woodwind quintet) 20'
Trio for Bassoon, Horn and Piano 19'
Quintet for English Horn and String Quartet 20'
Quintet for Heckelphone and String Quartet
Mosaics for flute, bassoon and marimba 20'

VOCAL

SeaSkye Songs (soprano or tenor, piano trio,
oboe, percussion) 23'

ORCHESTRA/CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Down a River of Time (oboe and string orchestra)
20'
Chamber Symphony 22'

WIND ENSEMBLE:

Celtic Hymns and Dances 9'
Legacy 23'
Shadowcatcher (for brass quintet and
wind ensemble) 25'

Julia Gulasy is a professional oboist in the Atlanta area and a former student of Linda Strommen. She regularly organizes master classes around the country and most recently coordinated the Elaine Douvas Oboe MasterConference. Julia performs with a number of orchestras throughout the Southeast and is currently principal oboist of the DeKalb Symphony Orchestra.