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News

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FOR ITS VALEDICTORY RECORDING, VERMEER QUARTET VENTURES INTO BRITISH MUSIC FOR OBOE AND STRINGS

Veteran Ensemble Fulfills Wish To Record with Oboist Alex Klein

Works by Britten and Bliss

On what is likely the final recording in its long and distinguished career, the Vermeer Quartet, with oboist extraordinaire Alex Klein, performs a program of 20th-century works by British composers Benjamin Britten and Arthur Bliss.

Their new CD, *Britten & Bliss*, offers Britten's *Phantasy Quartet*, Op. 2; Bliss's *Oboe Quintet for Oboe and String Quartet*; and, as a fitting finale, Britten's last major composition in any genre, the *String Quartet No. 3*, Op. 94 (Cedille Records CDR 90000 093).

This is the Vermeer's first recording of British music in a career spanning nearly four decades and its first recording with an oboist.

"The British repertoire is not something most people associate with the Vermeer Quartet," said ensemble violist Richard Young in an interview for Cedille Records. However, the Vermeer has been playing Britten's Second and Third quartets for many years. And the quartet members are Fellows of the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, England, where they've held annual master classes since 1978.

The CD's cover photo depicts a Venetian canal. That may seem odd for a British music CD, but there is a logic at work, explained Cedille Records producer James Ginsburg. The two large works on the disc have connections to Venice. The Bliss *Oboe Quintet* received its world premiere

there in 1927. Britten completed his *Third Quartet* there, and its final movement includes thematic material from his last opera, *Death in Venice*.

The project sprang from the Chicago-based Vermeer's desire to record with Klein, principal oboist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1995 to 2004 and an artist with whom they'd performed in the U.S. and in Klein's native Brazil, Young said.

"We love playing with Alex," Young affirmed. "He's just the best."

Young and his Vermeer colleagues credit Klein with a special talent "that means so much to serious string players: the rare ability to play very soft and very slow, in virtually any register, without any sacrifice of tone or intonation.

"Most important of all, there is always urgency in his playing, in the sound, even in the silences. It always feels like he's one of us. It's very rare for us to feel this with wind players," Young said.

Britten (1913-1976) was in his late teens when he wrote his *Phantasy Quartet* (1932) for oboe, violin, viola, and cello for a chamber music competition. Britten combined three modern string instruments with the distinctive timbre of the oboe. "The work is laid out in seven linked sections of contrasting tempos that reproduce the feeling of a Baroque fantasia," writes Andrea Lamoreaux in the CD booklet.

Famed British oboist Leon Goossens gave the premiere performance over the BBC in 1933 with members of the International String Quartet. The following year, it was presented at the prestigious International Society for Contemporary Music festival.

A British composer of American descent, Bliss (1891-1975) wrote many works for virtuoso ensembles and soloists. The three-movement *Oboe Quintet* was written for Goossens. Lively and tuneful, it "exploits the various tone-colors of the oboe to the fullest: lyrical singing to staccato jumping," Lamoreaux writes.

The beautiful middle movement, marked *Andante con moto*, “is everything we could possibly imagine English music to be,” writes John France for the UK’s MusicWeb International Web site. “Perfect equilibrium between the soloist and strings, long-breathed tunes and delicious harmonies.”

The propulsive last movement builds to what Lamoreaux calls “a fun-filled climax” with a fast-moving Irish dance called “Connelly’s Jig.” But this is no simple Celtic hoe-down. Bliss uses the jig as source material for complex interplay between oboe and strings.

The *New Grove Dictionary* calls Britten’s *String Quartet No. 3* (1975) “as profound a work as anything Britten wrote.” A present-day critic for *The New York Times* notes that in writing this seldom-heard masterpiece, Britten characteristically eschewed the rigorous atonality then in vogue. “Yet few pieces from that era sound as bracingly modern today as this quartet, with its ingenious yet essentially tonal language. Every episode of the five-movement work seems to emanate from some mystical realm.”

Richard Young, the Vermeer violist, has written about how his perusal of Britten’s manuscript for the Third Quartet at England’s Benjamin Britten Library years ago led to a revelation. The pained quality of Britten’s handwriting was evidence to Young that the mortally ill composer struggled to get the notes down. Young theorizes that it was Britten’s physical condition, as much as any end-of-life philosophizing, that explains the quartet’s amazingly economical writing. “He had no choice but to make every gesture count,” Young wrote. “Yet this is one of Britten’s most profoundly moving works.”¹

Founded in 1969 at the Marlboro Festival, the Vermeer Quartet has appeared at virtually all the most prestigious chamber music venues and music festivals. Its discography includes the complete quartets of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky (on Cedille Records), and Bartok, plus additional works by Schubert, Mendelssohn, Dvorak, Verdi, Shostakovich, Haydn, Schnittke, and Brahms. It’s renowned for its performances of Haydn’s *The Seven Last Words of Christ*. Its recording of that work

received a Grammy Award nomination, as did its recordings of the complete Bartok quartets and the Shostakovich and Schnittke piano quintets.

In addition to having served as principal oboist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Klein has performed as oboe soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, and the Chicago Sinfonietta. He has recorded for Teldec, Boston Records, Newport Classics, Musical Heritage Society, and Cedille. He won the 2002 Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Soloist with Orchestra for his recording of the Richard Strauss Oboe Concerto with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony. Klein left the Chicago Symphony in July 2004 due to a chronic hand ailment that made the constant demands of orchestral playing too difficult. He is currently active as a soloist, conductor, and teacher.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE') is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation. For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 5255 N. Lakewood Ave., Chicago, IL 60640-2220, call (773) 989-2515; E-mail: info@cedillerecords.org. On the Net: www.cedillerecords.org.

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¹Richard Young, editor. *Echoes from Calvary: Meditations on Franz Joseph Haydn's The Seven Last Words of Christ*. (Rowman & Littlefield, ISBN: 0742543846)

Britten & Bliss
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 093)

Britten: Phantasy Quartet, Op. 2 (1932) (13:16)
Bliss: Quintet for Oboe and String Quartet (1927) (22:35)
Britten: String Quartet No. 3, Op. 94 (1975) (25:58)

Vermeer Quartet
Alex Klein, oboe