

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SELECTED BASSOON CONCERTOS
WRITTEN BY AMERICAN COMPOSERS
SINCE 1965

Vanessa Irene Kulisek Ferrari,
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Dissertation Directed By: Professor L. Richmond Sparks, School of Music

The goal of this dissertation project is to explore recent contributions by American composers to a body of repertoire that is often neglected: the bassoon concerto. The bassoon as a solo instrument is not a recent development, yet there remain relatively few concertos in the repertoire, compared to the number of those written for certain other instruments. The most well-known and most frequently performed bassoon concertos are those written by European composers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, there are several concertos for bassoon and orchestra that have been written in the last half-century by American composers – that is, composers from the United States – and it is worthwhile to bring more exposure to these works.

This performance project consists of two recitals focusing on five American bassoon concertos, each with varying degrees of familiarity among audiences. The first recital, performed on February 28, 2007, includes Raymond E. Luke's Concerto

for Bassoon and Orchestra (1965), Dan Welcher's *Concerto da Camera* (1975), and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1992). The second recital, performed on March 28, 2007, consists of John Williams' *The Five Sacred Trees* (1995), and John Steinmetz's Concerto (2003). Extensive program notes for each of these pieces include a biography of the composer and an overview and analysis of each work.

The pieces included in this project are performed with piano accompaniment; its respective composer did each of the five piano reductions. In the Zwilich and Steinmetz concertos, however, percussion is added to the piano accompaniment to better portray the essence of these composers' compositions.

Although there have been more than these five concertos for bassoon and orchestra written since 1965 by American composers, this project is intended to be a representative survey of available repertoire in this genre during this period. With that in mind, this performer has chosen a cross-section of works and composers with varying backgrounds, degrees of familiarity among the public, circumstances surrounding the compositions written, and stylistic traits – all in an effort to create a balanced program and an overview of the works currently available in the bassoon repertoire.

SELECTED BASSOON CONCERTOS WRITTEN BY AMERICAN COMPOSERS
SINCE 1965

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The goal of this dissertation project is to explore recent contributions by American composers to a body of repertoire that is often neglected: the bassoon concerto. The bassoon as a solo instrument is not a recent development, yet there remain relatively few concertos in the repertoire, compared to the number of those written for certain other instruments. The most well-known and most frequently performed bassoon concertos are those written by European composers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: over forty concertos of Antonio Vivaldi; W. A. Mozart's *Concerto in Bb Major, K. 191*; Carl Maria von Weber's concerto; and J. N. Hummel's concerto. However, there are several concertos for bassoon and orchestra that have been written in the last half-century by American composers – that is, composers from the United States – and it is worthwhile to bring more exposure to these works.

It seems that performers and listeners alike tend to shy away from modern music. Many are not accustomed to the tonal language employed, or perhaps they fear the complexity and difficulty of the music at hand. In turn, many symphony orchestras are cautious in programming such works.¹ If orchestras program a bassoon concerto, it is usually one of the standards, such as the Mozart, Weber, or Hummel concertos, not a contemporary concerto.

Bassoon concertos simply do not receive the performance time that concertos for other instruments receive, such as those written for piano, violin, cello, or even flute. The bassoon is still something of a novelty to many audiences, and even professionals do not

¹ Burns, "Bassoon Concertos Written by Contemporary Principal Bassoonists," 57.

often see the bassoon as a solo instrument, nor are they aware of its wide range and expressive qualities. Believed by many to be the "clown of the orchestra," the bassoon has remained primarily in the shadows of the solo world until relatively recently. Even so, performance opportunities are limited. A concerto may appear on a recital program – more likely on a wind instrument recital than a piano or violin recital – but logistical concerns may prevent many performers from programming concertos on recital programs. Assembling an orchestral accompaniment is impractical for many players, not to mention prohibitively expensive. In most cases, the soloist must play with a piano reduction, which is not always available. If there is a reduction available, it is not always an adequate arrangement to properly convey the music as the composer conceived it, although some orchestral scores translate into a piano reduction better than others. In short, limited performance opportunities might explain why more composers have not written bassoon concertos.

On the other hand, competitions such as the International Double Reed Society's annual Fox-Gillet Competition (established in 1980) and the "Morceaux des Concours" du Conservatoire National de Musique have proved instrumental in stimulating a substantial body of repertoire for bassoonists. In creating the George Eastman Prize Competition in 1982 – with the purpose of encouraging composers to write for instruments with limited repertoires – Robert Freeman, then the Director of Eastman, notes:

If one thinks that the violin repertory before 1690 did not amount to much, that there was little for string quartet before 1760, that the evolution of the piano and orchestral repertoires began late in the 18th century, and that the idea of a symphonic wind ensemble originated as recently as the early 1950's, it is

heartening to think that the best days of evolving repertoires for bassoon . . . for example, may lie largely in the future.²

In terms of form, modern composers take more liberty within the concerto form than their predecessors, such as varying the number of movements, applying programmatic elements, and individualizing the development of thematic material. Yet essentially, "as a format, the concerto has remained rather stable from Vivaldi and Bach onward: the solo instrument is profiled through a series of fast and slow movements against an instrumental group, a chamber ensemble or a full orchestra."³ The contemporary bassoon concerto is no exception.

In his New Grove article, Paul Griffiths writes of the twentieth-century concerto:

The essence of the concerto – that of a soloist playing with an ensemble – was one of the 20th century's most inexpugnable inheritances, and the term is even a title in the catalogues of many of the century's most radical composers, including Cage. There must be many reasons for this longevity of the genre, and they would have to include the wish of virtuosos to play new works, the enthusiasm of audiences, the relative looseness of 'concerto' as a formal definition, and the continuing challenge of a musical type which models what happens in music generally: the one communicates with the many.⁴

David Amram, composer of another late twentieth-century bassoon concerto, writes:

I find that writing a concerto is a special challenge and adventure – soaring through music as if one were leaping off the side of a mountain to go hang-gliding. Concertos are that exhilarating to compose! It's almost like being a novelist or a playwright as well as a musician. Knowing the skills and creativity that artistic musicians bring the work through their personalities, the concerto becomes a special combination of the composer's dream and the soloist's magic.⁵

In addition, "many twentieth-century concertos were written to the order of outstanding performers other than their composers, a circumstance that has often resulted

²Robert Freeman, quoted in "Competitions and awards."

³Klein, liner notes for *Benjamin Lees: Concerto for French Horn and Orchestra*; *Leonardo Balada: Music for Oboe and Orchestra*; *Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra*, 2.

⁴Griffiths, "Concerto, §5: The 20th century."

⁵Amram, liner notes to *Three Concertos*.

in works remarkable above all for difficulty and bravura.”⁶ This situation occurs in four out of the five works examined in this project, and all five of these pieces certainly demonstrate the virtuosic capabilities of the bassoon.

This performance project consists of two recitals focusing on five American bassoon concertos, each with varying degrees of familiarity among audiences. The first recital, performed on February 28, 2007, includes Raymond E. Luke's Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1965), Dan Welcher's *Concerto da Camera* (1975), and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1992). The second recital, performed on March 28, 2007, consists of John Williams' *The Five Sacred Trees* (1995), and John Steinmetz's Concerto (2003). Extensive program notes for each of these pieces include a biography of the composer and an overview and analysis of each work.

The pieces included in this project are performed with piano accompaniment; its respective composer did each of the five piano reductions. Although the colors and breadth of orchestral expression are limited in a piano reduction, this performer has found that the reductions are adequate in giving a fair representation of these works. In the Zwilich and Steinmetz concertos, however, percussion is added to the piano accompaniment to better portray the essence of these composers' compositions. In fact, Zwilich has made her percussion parts available outside of the orchestral parts for this very reason. According to Steinmetz, this performer is the first to play his concerto with piano accompaniment in a recital, and he has also made his percussion parts available for this project.

Although there have been more than these five concertos for bassoon and orchestra written since 1965 by American composers – such as concertos by Gunther

⁶ Griffiths, "Concerto, §5: The 20th century."

Schuller, William Winstead, Stephen Paulson, Willard Elliot, David Amram, and Johnterryl Plumeri – this project is intended to be a representative survey of available repertoire in this genre during this period. With that in mind, this performer has chosen a cross-section of works and composers with varying backgrounds, degrees of familiarity among the public, circumstances surrounding the compositions written, and stylistic traits – all in an effort to create a balanced program and an overview of the works currently available in the bassoon repertoire.

Chapter 2: Recital Program I

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra by Ray Luke

Ray Luke was born in Ft. Worth, TX, in 1928. He began composing at the age of 30 and earned his Ph.D. in composition from Eastman School of Music under Bernard Rogers, having previously earned his B.M. and M.M. degrees from Texas Christian University. He has had a long association with the musical circles in and around Oklahoma City, OK, holding various conducting positions with the Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra and various teaching and conducting positions around the country. He retired from his position of Theory and Composition and Composer in Residence at Oklahoma City University in 1997.

Luke is a prolific composer and has written over eighty works, at least twenty of which have been published. In 1969, his Concerto for Piano won the Première Prix and gold medal of the Queen Elizabeth of Belgium International Competition, making him the first American composer to receive this award. However, in spite of this prestigious honor, his works are not often performed.

Luke's Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra is the earliest work in this project. Burrill Phillips wrote his *Concert Piece* for bassoon and strings earlier in the twentieth century, but Luke's concerto seems to mark a renewed interest in writing bassoon concertos in the United States. It was commissioned by conductor Guy Fraser Harrison of the Oklahoma City Symphony and written in honor of Elizabeth Johnson, the orchestra's principal bassoonist and Luke's fellow faculty member at Oklahoma City University. It was first performed in Oklahoma City in March 1965.

In a telephone conversation with this author on March 21, 2007, Luke revealed that he wrote this piece, as well as his *Symphonic Dialogues* for violin, oboe, and chamber orchestra over a two-week period at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire in January of 1965. He received both commissions at roughly the same time and retreated to New Hampshire for two weeks to write them. He completed them with a day to spare and took the final day to copy the bassoon part so that "Betty" would have time to prepare it. He was and still is pleased with his concerto.

He also said that although his career was more focused on conducting and teaching composition, he felt he needed the creative outlet of composing. He has always composed rather quickly, but now that he has suffered damage to his right eye, he has trouble writing with a pencil and must compose on the computer, which takes him longer. He has recently finished a work for piano that has yet to be performed, and he is currently working on a soliloquy for his wife.

Luke has been admired for "his gift for rhythmic vitality while preserving the element of melodic line . . . and his mastery of tonal coloration in orchestration."⁷ His works are usually on the shorter side, are slightly discordant, but are still accessible to the typical listener. His bassoon concerto, possessing all of the stylistic traits mentioned above, is a typical example of Luke's writing.

The three movements are arranged in traditional concerto form: fast, slow, fast. The form of the first movement takes the shape of an arc. The Adagio introduction moves into the Allegro theme in which the melody is disjunct but contains long, slurred, yet rhythmic, phrases. Development of this thematic material eventually leads to a recapitulation of the Allegro theme, but then the Adagio theme returns, a whole-step

⁷ Paulu, Review of *Symphonic Dialogues*.

lower than its original statement. The movement ends with a quick, seven-measure return of the Allegro material.

The second movement consists of the bassoon playing a solo line based on a short, repeated dotted-rhythm motive over a quarter-note ostinato in the strings and harp accompaniment. A solo line accompanied by harp and strings is a feature often found in Luke's music. There is a short B section, a cadenza, and then the A material returns. This movement evokes a sense of melancholy, maybe even suspense; it comes as no surprise that Luke has several film-scores for television in his credit, for this movement sounds a bit like "movie music."

The second movement leads directly into a rhythmic, romping, jocular third movement in ABACA rondo form. The A theme is full of not only frequent meter changes, but also hemiolas within those meter changes. The B theme is reminiscent of the Allegro theme of the first movement in its long, fluid phrasing. The C theme is in the same tempo as the rest of the movement, but because of its augmented note values, the listener hears a contrasting slower theme. The A theme returns at the conclusion, and the piece ends with a dramatic *fortissimo*.

Luke handles the orchestration in the first movement by using a primarily homophonic texture when the bassoon is playing, and likewise in the second movement. As mentioned above, he also has only the harp and strings accompanying the bassoon line during most of the slow movement. The accompaniment in the third movement provides rhythmic accent under the solo line and imitation during sustained notes.

Concerto da Camera for Solo Bassoon and Small Orchestra
by Dan Welcher

Dan Welcher was born in Rochester, NY, in 1948. He was first trained as a pianist and bassoonist and earned degrees from both Eastman School of Music and Manhattan School of Music. He became principal bassoon of the Louisville Orchestra in 1972, and while there, he taught composition and theory at the University of Louisville. He accepted an Artist Faculty position at the Aspen Music Festival in 1976 and remained there for 14 years. In 1978, he moved to Texas to join the faculty at the University of Texas in Austin, and it was in Texas that his career as a conductor began to flourish. He was the Assistant Conductor of the Austin Symphony Orchestra from 1980 to 1990, making guest appearances with professional orchestras and ensembles around the country. He was the Composer in Residence with the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra from 1990 to 1993, but he returned to the University of Texas as Professor of Composition and Director of the New Music Ensemble.

He has written in practically every genre and medium, composing over one hundred works for orchestra, solo instruments, opera, wind ensemble, voice, and the like. He has received numerous awards from various organizations, such as the Guggenheim Foundation, ASCAP, Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and he continues to compose, conduct, and teach.

Welcher's *Concerto da Camera* was written in 1975 as a thank-you gift to the renowned bassoonist Leonard Sharrow, with whom he worked the summer before in Aspen. Sharrow premiered it on September 12, 1975, with members of the Louisville Symphony, conducted by Dan Welcher. Sharrow recorded the piece in 1976 and

included it on his LP *Leonard Sharrow Plays Works for Bassoon*, along with the Luke concerto. On the jacket notes for this recording, Welcher writes:

Concerto da Camera began its existence as "Sonata for Bassoon and Piano" while I was playing second bassoon in the Aspen Festival Orchestra during the summer of 1972. It was my intention to express in the piece my admiration and appreciation to Leonard Sharrow, with whom I had been privileged to work in the Orchestra for the entire season. The first and second movements were completed, in bassoon-and-piano form, during the fall of 1972.

Other projects intervened during the next two years, and the Sonata somehow metamorphosed during that time into a vague plan for a Concerto. The changes that two years can bring to one's compositional style, however, caused the *Concerto da Camera* to emerge as a kind of hybrid when I finally was able to finish and orchestrate the piece in the spring of 1975. Some of the atonal harmonic language I had come to employ had to be suppressed for the completion of the work, and the orchestration, so easily arranged for a pianist's hands when the piece was called "Sonata," proved quite hazardous when spread out in the denser sonorities afforded by an orchestral group. Indeed, the sonority of the piano, and the flexibility of execution that instrument possesses, proved indispensable for the Scherzo; and it was from this realization that the final orchestration sprang: quintets of winds and strings to sustain and highlight the essentially rhythmic writing; a "one-man-band" percussionist playing a score of instruments; and the aforementioned *sine qua non*, the piano.

The piece pays musical homage in a special way to a great composer, whose recent death makes these words necessary. Dmitri Shostakovich has always seemed to me curiously more contemporary than he is often given credit for being. Certain psychological traits illuminate even his lesser works, especially a juxtapositioning of the serious with the banal which (as musicologists are fond of pointing out) closely aligns him with Mahler. There is also a facility in handling long melodies within a very lean texture, and the use of recitatives as expositional devices rather than cadenzas that also aligns Shostakovich with the earlier composer and which may be seen to have been assimilated into my *Concerto*. In any event, the unifying motive of the *Concerto da Camera* is the ubiquitous four-note setting of Dmitri's musical initials (D, E-flat, C, and B in the German equivalent) which he used so often in his own "autobiographical" works, such as the tenth symphony and the eighth string quartet.

The *Concerto da Camera* is in three movements and an interlude. The first is a free sonata form with an introduction and coda, employing three unaccompanied passages for the bassoon. The second movement, Scherzo, is a fierce virtuosic display for this least fierce (shall I also say "and least virtuous"?) of instruments. It leads to a stretto of the D.S.C.H. motive which relaxes into the Interlude, a recitative for solo violin with comments by the bassoon over a pedal B-natural in the timpani. The interlude proceeds without pause into the last movement, in a slowly undulating 5/8 meter. There is considerable rhythmic development within the movement, culminating in an extensive double fugue for

the orchestra in which the bassoon does not participate. At the height of the fugue, the bassoon cries out alone the three-note figure of the opening, only to be shouted down by the onrushing orchestra. In the end, it is calm that prevails, with the bassoon's soothing melody accompanied by the pizzicato repetitions of the unifying motive, singing the piece to a gentle close.⁸

Because Welcher himself was a bassoonist, the piece is idiomatic for the bassoon, and although sections of it are technically difficult, he comments that it is not as difficult as the concerto of Jolivet, a twentieth-century French composer. *Concerto da Camera* is a lyrical piece, and it does not require any extended techniques. Welcher is also very careful in his orchestration: "Almost always, when the soloist is playing, only a few instruments accompany. And long passages are soliloquies: bassoon alone. This is a heritage from Shostakovich, who made excellent use of this technique in his seventh and ninth symphonies . . . the style is chromatic, but tonally based."⁹ The score calls for an orchestra consisting of strings and single players on flute (piccolo), oboe, clarinet, horn, trumpet, percussion, and piano.

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich was born in Miami, FL, in 1939. She studied piano, violin, and trumpet as a child and then went on to earn both her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees from Florida State University. She then moved to New York to study violin with Ivan Galamian. In 1970, Zwilich decided to pursue her true passion and began composition studies at The Juilliard School with Roger Sessions and Elliot Carter, becoming the first woman to receive a doctorate in composition from Juilliard in 1975. In that same year, her *Symposium* for orchestra was premiered by the Juilliard orchestra

⁸ Sharrow, jacket notes.

⁹ Burns, "Bassoon Concertos Written by Contemporary Principal Bassoonists," 44.

under Pierre Boulez, and she soon began receiving commissions. In 1983, after several successful chamber music works, her Symphony No. 1 earned her the Pulitzer Prize in music, making her the first woman to receive that coveted honor. Commissions soon began to arrive at her door in earnest, and she was eventually able to make her living as a composer exclusively.

Early in her composition career, Zwilich's style contained more "jagged melodies, atonal harmonies and structural complexities," but since then, she has leaned toward a more accessible style as she seemed to become "interested in communicating more directly with performer and listener."¹⁰ However, Zwilich counters this: "I've evolved, like we all do. It is the nature of someone in the arts to grow. I've never had an epiphany [regarding tonality], like some of my colleagues . . . I don't set out to please an audience, like a pop musician. I just write the best music I can."¹¹ Her music has been frequently compared to that of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and even Brahms, and she has been described as having "succeeded in combining technical expertise with a distinct power of communication. Her idiomatic writing is ably complemented by a poetic element found in her handling of melody, harmony, and counterpoint."¹²

Zwilich's *Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra* was commissioned by the Pittsburgh Symphony Society and dedicated to Nancy Goeres (their principal bassoon), Lorin Maazel, and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. The premiere performance was on May 13, 1993, and the work was recorded by the three dedicatees on the New World Records label and released in 1996. It is in the liner notes of this recording that Zwilich says:

¹⁰ Schwarz, "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich."

¹¹ Burwasser, "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich," 18.

¹² Slonimsky, "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich," 4046.

Particularly in the case of the bassoon (whose solo literature is limited, and whose orchestral use overemphasizes the "comical" or grotesque qualities that are possible on the bassoon), I felt a mission to portray the instrument as it possibly can be, not as it is usually characterized.

To my delight, I have found that the bassoon is a remarkable solo instrument with a wide range of expressive power. An artist-virtuoso can perform just about anything on the bassoon, from fluid, vocal, singing lines to wildly virtuosic fast passages. Perhaps more than any other instrument, the bassoon is able to suggest a single line breaking into multiple voices, even at breakneck speed. My concerto calls on all of these abilities, plus the ability to respond to the orchestra (the bassoon even has a significant relationship to the percussion). But, above all, I have tried to write more than an instrumental exercise, but through the bassoon to make a highly personal musical statement.

The first movement, mostly slow in tempo, grows out of the lyric, singing, and dramatic qualities of the bassoon, with a brisk allegro between the slow sections. The second movement is mostly very fast, interrupted by a virtuoso cadenza that begins by recalling the slow music of the first movement.¹³

Zwilich's concerto strays from tradition in that it is written in two movements, each in ABA form. The first movement begins with a slow, lyrical section that is comprised of several smaller motives, one being a two-thirty-second-note-dotted-eighth-note motive that occurs throughout both movements. She gives specific instructions for this motive: "the soloist should treat the figure as an ornament, always on the beat, with weight on the first note. The fast notes should be a little faster than notated, but don't always play the figure the same way. The same figure in the [orchestra] should be played strictly."¹⁴ As in spots in the Welcher concerto, the opening is reminiscent of Shostakovich's bassoon cadenza in his Symphony No. 9 – slow, anguished wails in the high register of the instrument. The middle section is marked "allegro" and begins with a loud sixteenth-note motive in the drums, followed by rapid arpeggios in the bassoon. The percussion drives this section as the bassoon plays continued arpeggiations through

¹³ Klein, liner notes for *Benjamin Lees: Concerto for French Horn and Orchestra*; *Leonardo Balada: Music for Oboe and Orchestra*; *Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Zwilich, *Concerto*, score, 4.

numerous meter changes. The movement ends with a return of the A section and a final *piano* statement of the thirty-second-note motive.

The second movement is also in ABA form, but begins “Allegro Molto” with a snare motive quite similar to the one in the fast section of the first movement. Zwilich takes the bassoon line at lightning speed through multiple ascending octatonic scales, many of which are the same as the one before it, but begin on a different note or on a different subdivision of the beat. At the end of the opening section, the bassoon holds an upper F-sharp (above middle C) for what appears to be sixteen measures. However, Zwilich has been kind to the soloist and has interspersed rests within the duration of the note. In the score she writes, “pretend to keep playing,” and she has written the orchestra part to come in at *fortissimo* during those rests, so it might appear the soloist has been holding the note throughout the duration. This leads into the B section of the movement, consisting of a cadenza in the bassoon that is made up of thematic material primarily from the first movement. The A section returns, again with percussion, and the piece ends on a *fortissimo* low B-flat.

The orchestra for Zwilich’s Concerto consists of flute, piccolo, oboe, English horn, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, 2 horns, trumpet, trombone, percussion (1 player) and strings. Percussion is added to the piano in the performance for this project, for it is vital in portraying the intensity and excitement in the work.

Chapter 3: Recital Program II

The Five Sacred Trees: Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra **by John Williams**

John Williams was born in Long Island, NY, in 1932 and attended UCLA after his family moved to Los Angeles in 1948. There he studied composition privately with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. After service in the United States Air Force, Williams returned to New York to attend the Juilliard School where he studied piano with Rosina Lhevinne. While there, he worked as a jazz pianist, both in clubs and in recording studios. He returned to Los Angeles and began his long association with Hollywood and composers such as Bernard Herrmann, Alfred Newman, and Franz Waxman. He wrote music for numerous television shows in the 1960s and won four Emmy Awards for his work.

Williams has composed over one hundred film scores to date, and he has received forty-five Academy Award nominations, the most nominations of any living person. He has won five Oscars, seven British Academy Awards, twenty Grammy Awards, four Golden Globes, four Emmy Awards, and numerous platinum and gold records.

In 1980, Williams was named the nineteenth conductor of the Boston Pops orchestra and retired in December 1993 after fourteen seasons. He currently holds the position of Laureate Conductor there and is Artist-in-Residence at Tanglewood. He has been awarded numerous honorary degrees and in June of 2000 became the first inductee into the Hollywood Bowl Hall of Fame. He was the recipient of a Kennedy Center Honor in December of 2004.

Known primarily for his brilliant, award-winning film scores, Williams has also written numerous works for the concert stage. In addition to his *The Five Sacred Trees*, some of these include his cello concerto, premiered by Yo-Yo Ma with the Boston Symphony Orchestra; two symphonies; concertos for flute, for violin, and for tuba; a trumpet concerto, premiered by the Cleveland Orchestra and their principal trumpet, Michael Sachs; various celebratory pieces, such as fanfares for several Olympic games; and most recently, a horn concerto for Dale Clevenger of the Chicago Symphony.

The Five Sacred Trees was commissioned by the Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York as part of its 150th anniversary celebration. The Society gave principal bassoonist of the New York Philharmonic, Judith LeClair, her choice of composers, and she approached John Williams in September of 1993 to write the commission. The two of them proceeded to work together on the piece, and he completed it in February 1995.¹⁵ In turn, he dedicated the concerto to her, “whose unparalleled artistry is a mystery and a wonder in itself.”¹⁶

The piece is a programmatic work based on the Celtic myth of the five sacred trees, and in the score, Williams writes:

As we become increasingly aware of the damage done by the destruction of our forests, it is illuminating to discover that our ancestors, many thousands of years ago, prayed to the spirits before felling a tree. One prayer was appropriate for a maple, another for the elm, the ash, and so on.

The English poet, Robert Graves, writes of these prayers . . . which have moved me to compose this music about trees featuring the bassoon, itself a tree.¹⁷

In an interview, Williams more thoroughly describes his thought process regarding the genesis of the work:

¹⁵ Chisholm, “Judith LeClair.”

¹⁶ Williams, *The Five Sacred Trees*, score.

¹⁷ Ibid.

I began to think of the uilleann pipes of Irish music, which might be thought of as the ancestor of the bassoon – a stick that you blow through and finger – and the roots of the great [Mugna] tree, the original source of music. In my imagination at least the bassoon has its deepest origins in the uilleann pipes: so the Celtic flavour of the concerto seemed very appropriate . . . thinking of the bassoon as a tree – something that might have been if not divine, at least sacred when it was alive – there must be a ghost inside the thing somewhere; the instrument is haunted by the spirit of the wood. A concerto based on the five sacred trees of Celtic mythology seemed to be a good way of combining my thoughts on both music and mythology.¹⁸

The work consists of five movements, each representing a different tree.

The first movement is entitled *Eó Mugna* and Williams writes the following:

Eó Mugna, the great oak, whose roots extend to Connla's Well in the "otherworld," stands guard over what is the source of the River Shannon and the font of all wisdom. The well is probably the source of all music, too. The inspiration for this movement is the Irish Uilleann pipe, a distant ancestor of the bassoon, whose music evokes the spirit of Mugna and the sacred well.¹⁹

The uilleann pipe is similar to a bagpipe in that it uses bellows filled with air; yet, its sound is softer and more melodic than a bagpipe. Williams imitates the sound of this instrument, and the Irish inflection in general, with written-out grace notes and an improvisatory solo line.

The movement can be divided into three sections with an introductory bassoon cadenza and a coda. This cadenza sets the mood for the entire piece, evoking images of solemnity and mythological landscapes as it moves into the A section – a singing melody in 6/8 meter with dotted rhythms, quintuplets, grace notes, and scalar runs, again with the purpose of sounding improvised. The B section begins with an orchestral interlude, including triumphant brass and ending with another quasi-cadenza into the return of the A section and a coda in the lowest register of the instrument.

¹⁸ Walker, "Songs from the Wood," 22-23.

¹⁹ Williams, *The Five Sacred Trees*, score.

Williams writes of *Tortan*, the second movement:

Tortan is a tree that has been associated with witches and as a result, the fiddle appears, sawing away, as it is conjoined with the music of the bassoon. The Irish Bodhrán drum assists.²⁰

This movement, in sharp contrast to the first, is a dance driven primarily by rhythm. Through most of the movement, the meter is 2/4, but each measure contains septuplets, triplets, and dotted rhythms. The form is again ABA, and the first section is essentially a duet between the solo bassoon and a solo violin. Marked *energico*, the movement evokes images of witches and sorcerers flying around on broomsticks. The B section consists of thematic material from the first movement (and third), but the solo bassoon plays this line over a driving, dotted-rhythm ostinato in the orchestra. The A material returns and leads into a coda containing fragments of the A material, concluding with scalar sweeps in the bassoon and an ending reminiscent of Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

The third movement, *Eó Rossa*, is about a yew, and Williams writes:

The *Tree of Ross* (or *Eó Rossa*) is a yew, and although the yew is often referred to as a symbol of death and destruction, the *Tree of Ross* is the subject of much rhapsodizing in the literature. It is referred to as "a mother's good," "Diadem of angels" and "faggot of the sages." Hence, the lyrical character of this movement, wherein the bassoon incants and is accompanied by the harp!²¹

This movement is a lyrical song in primarily A-minor with four stanzas, and with the exception of the third stanza, the bassoon is accompanied only by harp. The theme contains material quite similar to the opening movement, is relatively narrow in range, and is written in a quasi-cadenza style in the final stanza.

The fourth movement, *Craeb Uisnig*, is described as follows: "*Craeb Uisnig* is an ash and has been described by Robert Graves as a source of strife. Thus, a ghostly battle,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

where all that is heard as the phantoms struggle, is the snapping of twigs on the forest floor."²² In her article on *The Five Sacred Trees*, Lisa Chisholm states that this is likely a reference to *The Sons of Uisnig*, a legend that appears in Graves' *The White Goddess*. It is a story of a young mistress who was to marry the Irish King Uisnig, but married another man for love. The couple and the groom's three brothers escaped, only to be lured back to the kingdom with promises of peace. The four brothers were killed, and the young maiden was driven to suicide.²³

Williams has written what appears to be a battle scene: agitated themes, percussion, rhythmic pizzicatos in the strings, and quick dynamic changes. The fourth movement is the most expressionist movement in the concerto, and quite possibly Williams' most expressionist composition of all.²⁴ The movement is through-composed, but it can still be divided into sections. The first section is a gradual ascension through the registers of the bassoon, with rapid scalar passages and syncopated off-beats in sixteenth-note patterns, culminating in a sweep to a high D-sharp, one of the upper-most notes on the instrument. In the next section, the bassoon is in its lowest register again with a driving ostinato rhythm, leading to more sweeping scales and a series of very fast trills and shakes in hemiolas over 3/8 meter. The third and final section is almost lyrical, yet still very intense. Also in 3/8 meter, the bassoon leaps quickly back and forth between registers and ends at *fortissimo*, while the orchestra finishes the movement at *piano*, snapping the last few twigs.

²² Ibid.

²³ Chisholm, "Judith LeClair."

²⁴ Oliver Reichhardt, reviewer, qtd. in Lopinto, "The Five Sacred Trees: A Pedagogical Approach," 48.

Dathi is the fifth and final movement, and Williams writes: "*Dathi*, which purportedly exercised authority over the poets, and was the last tree to fall, is the subject for the close of the piece. The bassoon soliloquizes as it ponders the secrets of the Trees."²⁵

This movement weaves a tapestry of thematic material from all the previous movements and introduces some new material, as well. It begins with a lyrical section played by the winds and then played by the strings. The bassoon's opening theme is written over a shimmering accompaniment in the low strings, and then it moves into a beautiful melody in the highest register. The next section is marked "tenderly" and the bassoon plays a chant-like melody, accompanied in lush harmonies by flute, harp, and strings. A more agitated section follows, and the bassoon returns with a brief cadenza, a new lyrical melody with characteristics of material from earlier movements, and another cadenza similar to the first movement. The movement ends quietly with a return of its opening bassoon melody.

Although *The Five Sacred Trees* requires a surprisingly large orchestra – 3 flutes, 2 oboes and English horn, 2 clarinets and bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contra, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, harp, piano/celeste, strings, and percussion – Williams is very careful not to score them all at once when the solo bassoon is playing. Furthermore, when hearing this work, it is difficult to ignore Williams' talent for writing film-score. Because each movement depicts a descriptive scene, he is able to capitalize on his gift for evoking images with music.

²⁵ Williams, *The Five Sacred Trees*, score.

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra by John Steinmetz

John Steinmetz was born in Oakland, CA, in 1951 and grew up in Fresno. He eventually attended California Institute of the Arts in southern California, where he studied bassoon and West African music, performing in the African Music Ensemble. At CalArts, he worked closely with Bill Douglas, composer and bassoonist, and he eventually went on three tours of Spain with the Bill Douglas Trio, a “bassoon-oriented jazz-funk-Latin-Renaissance-Afro-Irish ensemble.” He is an active free-lance bassoonist in the Los Angeles area, playing principal bassoon in the Los Angeles Opera, as well as working as a Hollywood studio musician and being a member of the chamber groups XTET and Camerata Pacifica. He has been a regular participant in the Oregon Bach Festival and a frequent guest faculty member at the Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music. He has performed at the Skaneateles Festival, the Moab Festival, and the Chamber Music Conference and Composers Forum of the East, and he premiered Donald Crockett’s *Extant* for bassoon and chamber ensemble with the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble.

In addition to his work as a bassoonist and composer, he is an active educator, writer, and facilitator. He has written various articles and essays, such as “Resuscitating Art Music,” “How to enjoy a Live Concert,” and “Music for All,” and he has facilitated meetings, workshops, board retreats, and project teams for numerous organizations around the country. He has also worked with various groups – such as the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Oregon Bach Festival, Skaneateles Festival, Pacific Classical Winds, and XTET – to design new concert formats, including pre-concert lectures. His passion in education lies primarily in helping listeners to understand and enjoy music and

exploring ways to foster learning in any field – particularly learning that encourages both independent thinking and awareness of interdependence.

Steinmetz claims that he is a bassoonist first and foremost, and a composer second:

I decided early on that I wouldn't try to make a living as a composer – that just seemed too hard! And I haven't really tried to develop a composing career either. I have written pieces when opportunities came, and so I have developed rather slowly as a composer.²⁶

However, the music he has written has been well received. His Quintet has been released on compact disc by the Borealis Wind Quintet (Helicon HE 1030), and his Etude No. 5 can be heard on bassoonist Benjamin Coelho's recording *Bassoon Images* (Albany Records TROY 608). His Sonata for Bassoon and Piano (1981), in particular, has been gaining popularity and has appeared on numerous recital programs of college bassoonists around the country. He has also written several comic pieces, such as *Possessed*, in which a solo cellist speaks the thoughts that run through a performer's mind during a concert; *The Creation of the World* for solo bass, which includes the use of a beach ball, a headlamp, and individually-wrapped cheese slices; and *What's Your Musical I.Q.*, a parody of musical appreciation classes.

Steinmetz claims that he has had many influences in his composing: folk music, Indian music, African music, jazz, Celtic music, rock, and so on. He is particularly drawn to “groove” music – styles that are grounded in rhythm. The composers he admires most include Lou Harrison, Steve Reich, Peter Schickele (“I love hearing people laugh”), John Harbison, and Joni Mitchell, but he gives a large amount of credit to his time with Bill Douglas: “My years studying with Bill Douglas and later performing with

²⁶ Steinmetz, interview by McEdwards.

him left a big mark on me; his spontaneity, rhythmic vitality, and beautiful tunes set a great example.”²⁷

The concerto by John Steinmetz, written in 2003, is the most recent work of the five pieces included in this project, and it is the first large-scale symphonic work written by this composer. Like Welcher, Steinmetz is a bassoonist, and therefore he is able to bring first-hand knowledge of the instrument and its idiosyncrasies to this work. This is also the only piece in this project to include any extended technique in the solo bassoon part, such as pitch-bending.

The commission for Steinmetz's Concerto was a joint effort: the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and conductor Jeffrey Kahane, the Keene (NH) Chamber Orchestra and conductor Eric Stumacher, and the Santa Rosa Symphony (also conducted by Jeffrey Kahane), as well as gifts from donors within those organizations. In turn, there were three separate premieres: the first was by bassoonist Kenneth Munday and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra on May 3, 2003; the second was by bassoonist Joy Flemming and the Keene Chamber Orchestra on their Mother's Day concert that same year; and the third was by John Steinmetz himself with the Santa Rosa Symphony on January 17, 2004.

When asked if he wrote this piece with these three players in mind, Steinmetz replied:

I guess I wrote it with all those players in mind, and none of us in particular. More than writing for a particular player, I was interested in bringing out certain qualities of the instrument. I did test the music on myself, though, and if I found a passage too difficult for me to play, I changed it!²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Steinmetz, email correspondence with author, March 20, 2007.

Steinmetz has taken a different approach to writing a concerto, evidenced by his "Program Note" in the score:

It seems to me that most of the famous and popular concertos depict a heroic soloist in a heroic struggle that eventually leads to a heroic triumph. Although playing the bassoon certainly requires heroism, our quiet-voiced instrument seems ill-suited for conquest. I think a bassoon concerto needs a different kind of scenario.

Maybe it's time for a different approach anyway. Our culture is so hypnotized by heroic individualism that we are in danger of conquering ourselves right out of existence. I tried to imagine a concerto that depicts human beings as part of nature, connected to everything else . . .

In this piece the bassoon, with its flair for blending and its great variety of color and character, sings a declaration of *interdependence*.

Of course an instrument cannot sing alone of interdependence. The bassoon weaves its part among the sounds of the orchestra, interacting in different ways. At the beginning the bassoon plays a melody along with the strings, coloring their sound; only later does the bassoon emerge as a separate voice in the orchestra. It moves between different roles: conversing, leading, following, blending, now in the spotlight, now merged into the texture. In the second movement the bassoon mostly stays in the foreground, mulling things over. The playful last movement, "Celebration," adapts a melody from Central Africa for a joyous orchestral party. Throughout the piece are musical nature symbols like birdlike woodwind calls, rippling melodies, buzzes, chirps, and flutterings.²⁹

Steinmetz is careful to point out in an interview, however, that "for the most part the piece doesn't depict nature – that would be setting nature apart – but it tries to depict some ways of connecting."³⁰

A critic from *The Press Democrat* reviewed the work after Steinmetz's performance in January 2004:

Steinmetz's Concerto for bassoon and orchestra is the composer's personal homage to nature. The work seamlessly blends jazz, Asian and African musical styles into a cohesive whole that sounds fresh and new, yet remains accessible in the best sense of the word.³¹

²⁹ Steinmetz, *Concerto*, score, February 2004.

³⁰ Steinmetz, interview by McEdwards.

³¹ *The Press Democrat*, "Intimate Concertos Enchant."

The first movement of the concerto consists of two different textures. One texture involves the melody moving in and out of unison in contrapuntal lines, reminiscent of Renaissance counterpoint. The other texture consists of complex, busy bird calls, ostinatos and nature sounds: “. . . those two textures contrast unity and variety, separateness and togetherness.”³² In the opening theme, Steinmetz writes the bassoon in unison with the strings, but when this theme returns at other times in the movement, the bassoon line moves in counterpoint with the orchestra. These statements of the theme are interrupted with sections of the other texture mentioned above: bird calls, drones, ostinatos. The meter changes constantly throughout the movement – from 9/8 to 11/16 to 5/8 to 2/4, and so on:

I avoided regular rhythms because they evoke humanity more than nature. The main melody of the first movement flows along in sixteenth-notes, but the meter keeps changing. I know that I was seeking both a flowing smoothness and a certain kind of unpredictability or spontaneity.³³

At one point in the middle of the movement, Steinmetz writes “playful, dancing” in the solo line during a syncopated passage. The movement concludes with a section in which the soloist must apply pitch-bending in the upper-most register of the instrument; this section is marked as “mournful,” “misterioso,” and “grieving.”

The second movement begins with a percussion cadenza marked, “restless” and “whispered, scurrying.” Then the bassoon enters as a recitative over a quiet bass drum roll. Steinmetz writes in the orchestral score: “The bassoon should sound free, sort of like a jazz singer – not to manipulate or twist the music but to make it sound spontaneous – as though the player is working it out while playing.”³⁴ Bird calls and nature sounds in

³² Steinmetz, interview by McEdwards.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Steinmetz, *Concerto*, score, February 2004.

the upper woodwinds and pizzicato quintuplets in the basses occur in the middle of the movement, before the bassoon enters with the hymn over a marimba roll, again marked "freely" with *molto rubato* and moving without break into the third movement.

The third and final movement of the piece, entitled "Celebration," is a dance in 12/8 meter with an ostinato rhythm throughout the movement. This melody-rhythm sounds almost familiar, but it has a unique syncopation that is enhanced by shaker and hand drum: "It is groove music," writes Steinmetz.³⁵ Also in this movement, Steinmetz is adapting a Central African Pygmy song: "I am adapting a song from the forest of Central Africa . . . I did this because I love the song, because it conveys a wonderful celebratory quality, and also because I liked the way that the music fits into the other sounds of the forest."³⁶ The beginning of the movement builds on the ostinato in layers with the bassoon eventually blending into the ensemble. Suddenly, the ostinato stops and the piccolo and bassoon go back and forth in a written-out improvisation section marked "playful (conversation with piccolo)," and shortly after this section, he writes, "rock out!" in the bassoon part. Later in the movement, Steinmetz writes "exuberant, soaring" in the solo line, and then reintroduces the themes from both the second movement and then the first movement – altered to fit over the ostinato. The piece ends quietly after a gradual *diminuendo* and more nature sounds.

Steinmetz's concerto is scored for the following: 2 flutes (2nd doubles on piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubles on English horn), 2 clarinets (2nd doubles on bass clarinet), 2 percussion, harp and strings. It is also worth noting that Steinmetz includes an *ossia* solo part for the third movement to make the piece accessible for more players. In this

³⁵ Steinmetz, interview by McEdwards.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

project, the piece is performed with piano and percussion, specifically vibes, shaker, and congas. At Steinmetz's suggestion, one player combines the two original percussion parts in such a way as to enhance the performance.³⁷ This is especially important in the last movement, where percussion is crucial to the overall style of the piece.

³⁷ Steinmetz, email correspondence with author, March 4, 2007.

Chapter 4: Summary

In summary, each of these contemporary American composers has contributed a unique work of art to the bassoon concerto repertoire. Although they had varying reasons for writing their compositions – such as a gift or tribute to a colleague or a desire to demonstrate the soloistic and virtuosic qualities of the instrument – bassoonists from all over the world, and their listeners alike, are fortunate to have received them. It is this performer's hope that shedding further light on these engaging and intriguing compositions will garner broader appreciation for them and other works like them. Perhaps more composers will be inspired to write for the bassoon, and the beauty and potential of the instrument will not only endure, but flourish.

Appendix A: Program from Recital I

Dissertation: "Selected Bassoon Concertos Written by American Composers Since 1965"

February 28, 2007, 8:00 PM
Ulrich Recital Hall, Tawes Fine Arts Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

Vanessa Kulisek Ferrari, bassoon
Roy Hakes, piano
Christian Ferrari, percussion

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1965)	Ray Luke
Adagio – Allegro	(b. 1928)
Andante	
Allegro con brio	
<i>Concerto da Camera</i> (1975)	Dan Welcher
Moderato	(b. 1948)
Scherzo	
Calmo	
Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1992)	Ellen Taaffe Zwilich
I.	(b. 1939)
II.	

Christian Ferrari, percussion

Appendix B: Program from Recital II

Dissertation: "Selected Bassoon Concertos Written by American Composers Since 1965"

March 28, 2007, 8:00 PM
Ulrich Recital Hall, Tawes Fine Arts Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

Vanessa Kulisek Ferrari, bassoon
Roy Hakes, piano
Russell Wilson, piano
Christopher Rose, percussion

Concerto (2003)

- I. Opening
- II. Recitative and Hymn
- III. Celebration

John Steinmetz
(b. 1951)

Roy Hakes, piano
Christopher Rose, percussion

Intermission

The Five Sacred Trees, Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1995)

- I. *Eó Mugna*
- II. *Tortan*
- III. *Eó Rossa*
- IV. *Craeb Uisnig*
- V. *Dathi*

John Williams
(b. 1932)

Russell Wilson, piano

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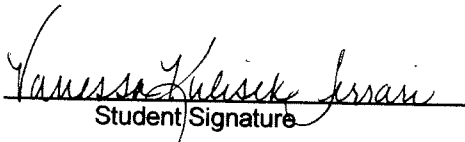
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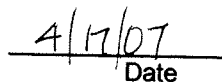
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