

# LETTER V

## THE VIRGINIA CLASSICAL MUSIC BLOG

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Review: Trio la Milpa

**Aug. 22, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Richmond**

The oboists of the Baltimore Symphony, who perform in a chamber trio named after a Mexican restaurant on the South Side of Richmond, just returned from a tour of Greenland. For a full explanation, which I would want if I were you, follow this link:

<http://www.styleweekly.com/article.asp?idarticle=14971>

Katherine Needleman, Michael Lisicky and Sandra Gerster Lisicky made their debut as Trio la Milpa four years ago in the August Musicales series at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church; so this concert was a return to the ensemble's roots. Also a reunion, as many of their former colleagues in the Richmond Symphony were in the audience.

The oboe trio – usually, two oboes and an English horn – occupies a pretty obscure corner of chamber music. The nearest to "standard" repertory for this instrumentation is a pair of pieces written in 1795 by the 25-year-old Beethoven, the Trio in C major, Op. 87, and a set of variations on "La ci darem la mano," the aria from Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

In this program, the "La ci darem" variations followed two arrangements, Needleman's of the Concerto in G minor by Handel and David Bussick's of Bartók's piano suite "Nine Old Dance Tunes from 'Tizenot magyar parasztdal,'" and the Danish composer Jan Koetsier's Variations and Fugue on "Buss und Reu," the great alto aria from Bach's "St. Matthew Passion." An arrangement of "Song of the Greenland Whale Fisheries," prepared by Michael Lisicky for the tour, was played as an encore.

Those selections revealed both the attributes of and challenges to this instrumental configuration. These high winds – the vocal equivalent would be two sopranos and a tenor – sound with great clarity and a prismatic quality in combination. Expressively, they are at their best in a bittersweet melody, which Beethoven and Koetsier recognized in the tunes they selected for their variations. The Koetsier set is arguably the tougher of the two, because these bright instrumental voices essay a darkly brooding tune.

Michael Lisicky's richly soulful – and unusually bassy – English horn carried the expressive and coloristic weight of the "Buss und Reu" variations, and contributed robust bass lines to the Beethoven and Bartók. The crisp and complementary voices of Needleman and Sandra Lisicky were best displayed in the Bartók, with its extroverted dance rhythms and blizzards of short notes. Bussick's arrangement combines oboe tones into a remarkably true echo of the Magyar bagpipe often employed in Hungarian folk dances.

Needleman's Handel arrangement is about as close to orchestral as it could be, scored for oboe, oboe d'amore (played by Sandra Lisicky) and English horn – i.e., soprano, alto and tenor voices. Apparently, it's the first of a series: Needleman is now at work on a suite from Handel's "Water Music," and Michael Lisicky presumably is figuring out how to make an English horn impersonate a French horn. (He's more than halfway there, judging by his work in the Koetsier-Bach variations.)

The group's sparkling musicianship came with a side order of Greenland travelogue. The audience learned that the territory is three times the size of Texas but populated by only 56,000. Trio la Milpa knew beforehand that the native language, Inupik, doesn't have a word for oboe. (The term for "birdsong" suffices.) Once on the ground (or ice, which covers 80 percent of the territory), the oboists found they weren't the first visitors to have to make linguistic adjustments. A Danish missionary, translating the Lord's Prayer, found that Inupik has no word for "bread." So in Greenland, they pray, "Give us this day our daily seal."

ABOUT THE BLOGGER  
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A music critic and cultural writer based in Richmond, VA, Bustard wrote for the Richmond Times-Dispatch for 36 years. He now contributes to Style Weekly in Richmond. He also has written for Symphony and Chamber Music magazines, the webzine NewMusicBox and other periodicals. Bustard is a recipient of the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award for music writing, as well as awards from state and national press associations.