

Oboe's range showcased

Trio closes August Musicales

By Martha Erwin

Special Correspondent

Most concertgoers recognize the oboe as the instrument that brings to an end those restless pre-concert moments by sounding the tuning note.

They also frequently hear the principal oboist playing lyrical solo passages within a symphony performance, sometimes sharing this limelight with the neighboring English horn player. But oboes are less frequently seen on the chamber music stage, and oboe trios are even more unusual.

Happily, Trio La Milpa, consisting of Katherine Needleman, Sandra Gerster and Michael J. Lisicky on English horn, proved that unusual can be delightful. Their performance last night brought to a close this summer's August Musicales series. It also was a close, of sorts, for Needleman, formerly the Richmond Symphony's principal oboist,

Katherine Needleman

With: Sandra Gerster and Michael J. Lisicky

At: Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church last night

who is leaving to fill that post with the Baltimore Symphony.

"Variations on a Theme of Haydn," by Haydn's almost-contemporary Joseph Triebensee, himself an oboist, showed off some surprising characteristics of these instruments — they can be nimble and delicate. They don't have to have a penetrating sound — they also can be played very softly. This is no small feat for a double-reed instrument.

Another surprise may have been the intricate, but listener-friendly, piece by the 20th-century Dutch composer Henk Badings. His three-movement "Trio IV," written in 1946, highlights the oboe's sportive,

lighthearted character in the outer movements, and gives long, melodic phrases to each member of the trio in the middle movement "Canto Amoroso" ("Love Song").

If Needleman, Gerster and Lisicky were taxed by those long phrases, they didn't show it. Instead, they played with gratifying soulfulness, and their intonation never suffered. A very Haydnesque composition by the youthful Beethoven (Trio in C major, Op. 87, probably written around 1795) proved the most challenging for La Milpa. Greater dynamic contrast would have sparked the first movement, and some passages sounded thin. But these challenges were noticeable only because everything else was almost flawless. Needleman's virtuosity was particularly displayed in the presto movement.

Lisicky hinted in his remarks to the audience that La Milpa will continue to perform in Richmond. Let's hope so.