

Bringing Cornfields to Greenland

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Ice, whale fisheries and too much caribou: Trio La Milpa adds "oboe" to Greenland's vocabulary.

by Clarke Bustard

In late August, Richmond becomes the galactic epicenter of summer funk, and its sweaty inhabitants crave physical and psychic relief from heat and humidity. Some dive into pools and vow to stay submerged until October. Others crank up the AC and Italian ice and watch penguin documentaries.

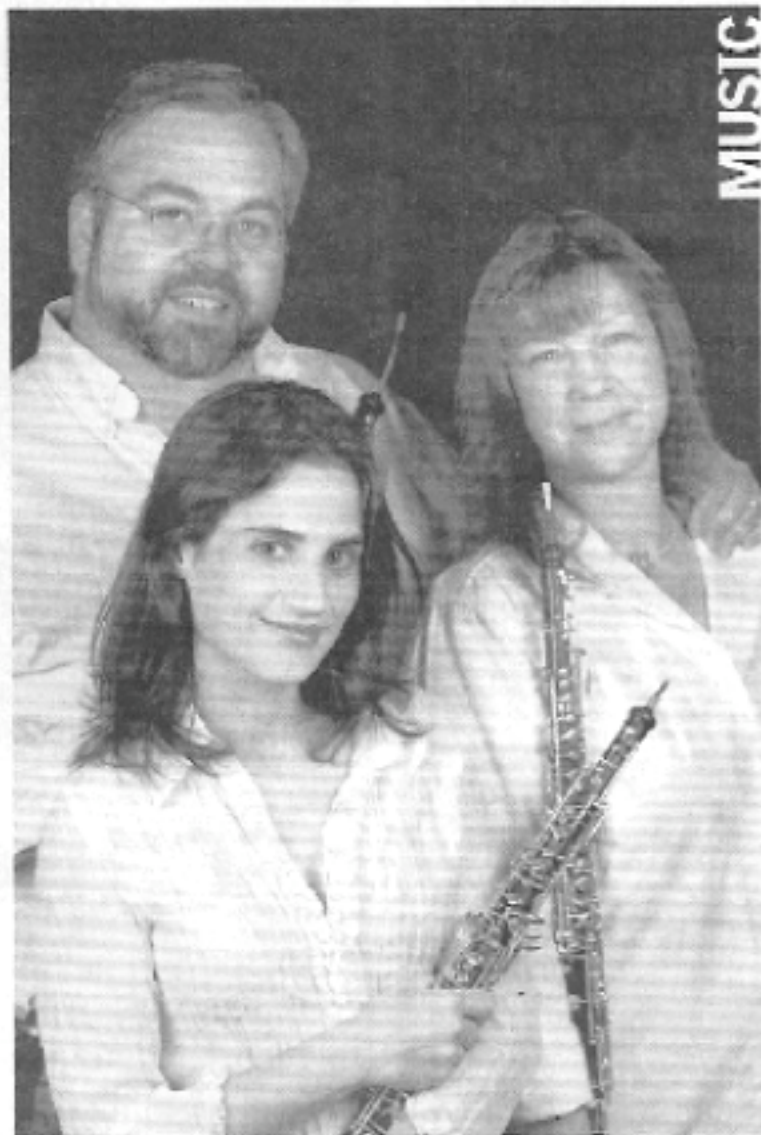
The more musically inclined might look forward to next week's concert by Trio La Milpa part of the August Musicales series at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. The trio — Katherine Needleman, Sandra Gerster and Michael Lisicky — plays oboes, whose high-pitched penetrating, slightly tart tones are about as cool and unclannish as musical sound gets.

The threesome formed their ensemble four years ago when they were performing at the Richmond Symphony. They named their group after a Mexican restaurant on Hull Street Road. "La Milpa is where we hang out after work," Lisicky recalls, "and since that's where our trio was born, that's the name we decided on." Never mind that it translates to "Trio of the Cornfield."

Trio La Milpa is now based in Baltimore, where Needleman is principal oboist of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Lisicky is the orchestra's second oboist and also plays English horn, the tenor of the oboe family, and the affaningly named oboe d'amore, the family's alto voice. Gerster, Lisicky's wife, is a teacher and freelance musician.

The trio is on tour in Greenland, where you don't find cornfields — 80 percent of the land lies under ice — and where the local language, Inupik, doesn't have a word for oboe. (The Inupik word for "bird song," used to describe the flute, will have to suffice.) Booked for the tour by the Danish

With their oboes, they leave the music of Greenland: Trio La Milpa is, clockwise from top, Michael Lisicky, Sandra Gerster and Katherine Needleman.



Embassy in Washington — Greenland is a self-governing dependency of Denmark — the group is playing eight concerts in five days.

Finding appropriate music for the gig has been a challenge. "We've done an arrangement of Song of the Greenland Whale Fisheries, the only place-specific piece we've got so far," Lisicky says. But we're used to having to develop new repertoire. Not many pieces have been composed for oboe trio.

The bigger challenge, he says, "could be finding food for Katherine, who's a veg-

etarian. The local veggies are potatoes and turnips. The normal Greenlandic diet is heavy on caribou, musk ox and fish. There's only one Chinese restaurant in the country. She's packing plenty of ramen noodles just in case." ■

Trio La Milpa performs Aug. 22 at 7:30 p.m. at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. Donation requested, 359-2463.

Style Weekly music critic Clarke Bustard produces Letter K for Virginia Classical Music. Ask at www.letterkblogspot.com.