

The Oboe Music of Gunnar Johansen: Two Compositions and One Mystery

By Gordon Rumson
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

The name of the pianist and composer Gunnar Johansen is not widely known to the general public. However, for those who had the opportunity to hear him perform or who happened upon his recordings, his status is almost legendary. In a life of 85 years (he was born in 1906) Johansen performed widely, recorded copiously and composed prodigiously.

The eminent critic, Harold C. Schonberg, wrote in the *New York Times*:

Gunnar Johansen is not one of the headliners, but he is a highly respected pianist whose lack of public appearance has been a matter of choice ... In his home he installed a battery of the most up-to-date recording equipment, ... [and] made a series of records that has put most of his contemporaries to shame.¹

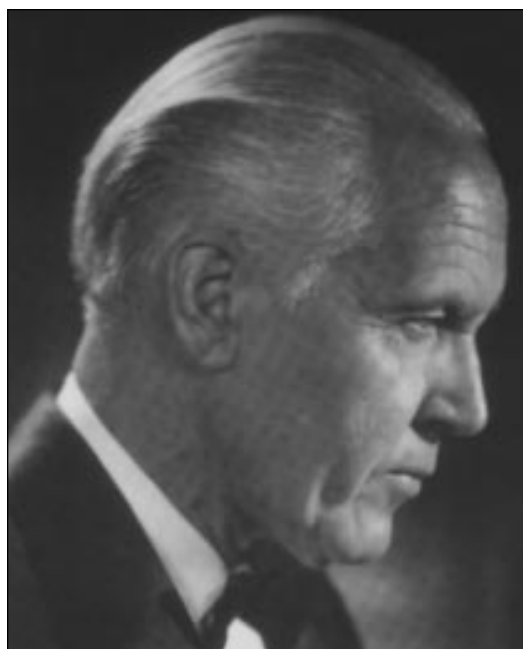
In the course of his musical life, Johansen, pupil of the pianist Egon Petri and Artist-in-Residence at the University of Wisconsin at Madison from 1939 to 1976, recorded the complete keyboard works of J.S. Bach, Ferruccio Busoni, Ignaz Friedman and virtually all of the original works and transcriptions of Franz Liszt. He himself referred to these vast cycles as “Monuments to Music.”

Quite apart from his recordings and in the best tradition of the pianist as composer, Johansen left an enormous catalogue of works, including a set of variations for orchestra, three violin sonatas, numerous songs, three piano concertos, a cantata for voices, piano and small ensemble, over 100 notated piano works and about 520 improvised Sonatas for piano committed directly to tape.

Among this bounty of creativity are two works for oboe: the *Vocalise* of 1975 and the *Sonata* of 1943.

The *Vocalise* has been performed several times by oboist **Marc Fink** of the University of Wisconsin. This very characteristic oboe piece has its genesis in a question, a practical joke and a concession.

Originally Johansen wished to compose a piece for the soprano Marylyn Mulvey, longtime associate of the Danish pianist and comedian Victor Borge. It was to be in a favorite form of Johansen’s—wordless singing.² Johansen asked his friend Victor Borge—they were childhood



acquaintances in Copenhagen—what the upper and lower limits of Mulvey’s voice were. Mr. Borge gave the notes of Example I as the range. Johansen should have doubted the answer. However, he duly complied, composed the piece and discovered that such was not the range of Mulvey’s voice. Thus, Johansen authorized a concession for the performance of the *Vocalise* upon any suitable instrument. His preference was for the oboe.³

The first of this five sectioned work⁴ is marked “Semplice, ma espressivo” and begins with a piano introduction which sets a pastoral tone (Example II).

The entry of the oboe is with new material, marked “berceuse-like”, which after decoration and sixteenth notes gradually transforms itself into the theme of the piano introduction. The two instruments interlace in free imitation until the close.

The second section is unmarked, though the tempo should be taken from the first movement. The oboe is in free recitative which circles widely before settling in at a cadence leading to the second part—an extended solo for piano marked “poco meno fluente”. After a brief outburst from

the oboe, the piano establishes an accompaniment pattern over which soars the theme from the first movement (Example III).

The third section is marked “Temp di valse elegante”. Johansen was a great lover of the Viennese waltzes and often performed the concert paraphrases of Strauss by the pianist Godowsky. This waltz is filled with peculiar chromatics and bitonal twists that give it an air of unrestrained abandon. As one listens one almost feels whirled around by a carousel.

In complete contrast, section four, marked half-note = 66 in 3/2 time, is a long slow arioso for the oboe above the piano’s dark cycling of chords (Example IV).

The fifth and final section is a decorated reprise of the first section. It is structurally identical save that it is now concentrated and more intense. The berceuse is now heavily ornamented and should provide the oboist quite a work out (Example V).

In complete contrast to the score of the *Vocalise* which was edited by the present author from Johansen’s score and reviewed by the composer before his passing, the score to the *Sonata* of 1943 presents a mystery.

There are two manuscripts of the *Sonata*. The first is Johansen’s composing score and the second, which includes a part for the oboe, is in a clear copy in the composer’s hand. At the head of the copy of the part is the following inscription:

Third movement of the Installment sonata for our rare friend and master Alfred C. Barthel, on the occasion of 29th April 1943.⁵

Could it be that this work has more movements?

The composing score is even more informative. Its title page inscription is as follows:

Oboe Sonata for A.C. Barthel on his birthday March 29, 1943. Barthel, oboist Theodore Thomas brought from France(?) to join the new Chicago Symphony Orchestra 1904. I was present at the 25th anniversary of the Orchestra and met Stock, fall of 1929.

Unfortunately, the rest of the movements have not been located. This in spite of extensive inventory work done by the present author at Johansen’s studio in Blue Mounds, Wisconsin. Nor has the author located significant information concerning this A.C. Barthel—“friend and master”—who Johansen obviously regarded with such respect. It would be of great value to discover if the library of some university, the family or a student of the master, possess the papers and perhaps scores of this musician. It might be that Johansen sent copies of the work

movement by movement, hence the reference to the work as an “installment sonata.”

The surviving movement is marked “Vivace facile” and is introduced by an unusual pentatonic theme. The mood is one of pastoral yearning and it is interesting that this corresponds with the *Vocalise* and the English horn theme of Johansen’s *Pastorale* for piano, three recorders and orchestra which was composed in 1949. Obviously the oboe evoked very specific ideas in Johansen’s imagination.

The chief characteristic that can be discerned from the score of this work—for neither mention of its performance nor a recording has as yet been discovered—as its continuous forward movement and intuitive, yet precise, design. The piano, as can be expected from such an eminent pianist, plays an extensive role in the musical process. It is a major work, even if it must remain for the time being in one movement. The author hopes that this mystery of the missing movements might be solved by the acumen and memory of members of the *International Double Reed Society* and welcomes information or suggestions.⁶ ❖

End Notes:

¹ Harold C. Schonberg, “A Completist Turns His Piano Talent to a Piano Legend,” *New York Times*, 8 October 1989, sec. H, p. 27.

² Among other works making use of this device, there is a “*Song Without Words without Meaning*” dating from the 1930’s, the “*East-West Cantata*” for wordless choir, piano and instrumental ensemble from the mid-1940’s and the *Sonata 160* of the early 1960’s.

³ The present author, as pianist, has also performed this piece with flute. Johansen, on hearing a recording of the performance said that he “almost preferred it to the oboe.” Nevertheless, the oboe remained his instrument of choice.

⁴ The edition of this work, available through Sikesdi Press (1102 Bellevue Ave. S.E. Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 4L1) divides the sections into five movements. This was approved by the composer who completely reviewed the edition. The single movement of the *Sonata* is scheduled for publication in the near future.

⁵ The quotations have been edited for punctuation.

⁶ Please contact the author c/o the address listed in end note⁴.

The Oboe Music of Gunnar Johansen – Examples:

Example I

Example II Vocalise Movement I

Semplice, ma espressivo

Voice

Piano

mp

5

10

(poco ritard)

Example III

58 *with a lift*
mf

63 *8va.....*

Example IV

ca. 66 = o
dolce
p
pp

Example V

17 *leggero*
p
22 *p*
27 *poco rit.....*