

Program Notes by Chris Darwin. Please use freely for non-commercial purposes.

Oliver Knussen (b. 1952) Cantata for oboe and string trio (1977)

Oliver Knussen sprang to prominence aged 15, when he stepped in to replace István Kertész conducting the premier of his own first symphony. Since then he has both composed and conducted a wide variety of music with distinction. He writes: 'Cantata was begun at Tanglewood, Massachusetts, in July 1975 and completed in London in October 1977. During this long period I was trying to as it were define my musical space – a time of considerable frustration and little completed work – exploring the harmonic areas I had stumbled upon when composing the first part of my Third Symphony (1973-79). [Of] the three pieces which eventually emerged... Cantata is consciously more relaxed and lyrical, but also quite compact – a single movement playing for about ten minutes.

'The title was arrived at after noticing that the relationships between the various episodes reminded me of the interdependence of recitatives and more-or-less self-contained numbers in some 18th-century solo cantatas, an impression reinforced by the predominance of the oboe. A slow introductory section proceeds, via a sequence of quasi-developmental episodes, towards a wild climactic passage featuring an elaborately ornamented (almost oriental) oboe line over manic violin and cello pizzicati. There follows an extended coda, in which the opening oboe melody reappears in altered form over a gently rocking repeated figure in the strings. Although essentially abstract, the work is certainly subjective, which fact may encourage the listener to let the music evoke whatever personal imagery it may contain.'