

Berlioz's Lost Oboe: The Simple-System Oboe in France, 1815–50

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In his groundbreaking book *The End of Early Music* (2007), Bruce Haynes observed that “early music” has come full circle, from a movement devoted to finding an alternative to Romantic performing style to one that revives that very style.¹

As a historical oboist for the past twenty-five years, I’ve long observed a growing trend among period ensembles to explore nineteenth-century repertoire, with many of these orchestras now readily tackling large-scale Romantic works by composers such as Mendelssohn, Schumann and Berlioz.² However, because modern copies of nineteenth-century oboes are virtually non-existent (at the time of writing, less than half a dozen makers worldwide have produced a handful of non-marketed prototypes), period oboists are confronted with a unique challenge as the movement marches unrelentingly forward into the realms of Brahms, Offenbach, and Wagner. In addition to learning how to play these new instruments (and how to make reeds for them), oboists are faced with the obstacle of simply finding appropriate instruments on which they can perfect new-found techniques.

The task of purchasing original nineteenth-century models from antiquarians is a daunting one, since Romantic oboes are exceedingly rare compared to clarinets, flutes, and horns, and despite often exorbitant prices, originals come with no guarantee of professional viability. Furthermore, despite the rising demand, historical woodwind makers remain reluctant to design new models they may not be able to market. Because of the scarcity of historically accurate nineteenth-century replicas, the Historical Performance movement’s encroachment into these later soundscapes is currently at somewhat of an impasse.

The historical oboist’s dilemma is further compounded by the fact that there is a dire shortage of practice-led research that investigates the specialised performance techniques required to make these models function in high-level professional settings. Because current studies have not addressed precisely how a twenty-first-century period oboist can use Romantic instruments to achieve their artistic goals, I decided to undertake doctoral research at London’s Royal Academy of Music in 2016 to formally interrogate this conundrum.³

The timeliness for such an investigation was alluded to by Haynes, who noted that...

during the 19th century the oboe changed more than in any other period. Most accounts have dwelt on the mechanism, with little consideration of other less obvious alterations [reeds, bore and tone hole dimensions], and how they influenced the instrument’s playing characteristics.⁴

The instrument I chose to explore as a case study is an original boxwood ten-keyed oboe constructed by Guillaume Adler in Paris around 1840, which I acquired in 2013 from an

antiquarian in London, and have been using intermittently over the past ten years to fulfil various professional engagements.

Little is known of the life of Frédéric Guillaume Adler. Like the more famous French oboe builder Guillaume Triebert (1770–1848), Adler was born in Germany and emigrated to Paris, opening a workshop on Rue Mandar in the 2nd *arrondissement* in 1808. Known primarily as a bassoon maker, Adler was cited alongside Savary and Triebert in Jancourt's bassoon method of 1847 as one of "several skilful makers [who] have recently contributed to [the bassoon's] improvement."⁵ Fétis, in his *Revue Musicale* of 1828, also stated that Adler improved the bassoon by adding keys:

M. Adler, luthier très recommandable de Paris, a reconnu les avantages de celui-ci et en a fabriqué, d'après son modèle, qui ont été essayés par quelques-uns de nos artistes les plus habiles, et approuvés par eux. Les instrumens de M. Adler se distinguent ordinairement par un fini précieux dans toutes leurs parties. Le basson à quinze clefs, qu'il a mis à l'exposition des produits de l'industrie, peut être considéré comme un chef-d'oeuvre sous ce rapport.

Mr. Adler, a very commendable instrument builder in Paris, has recognised the advantages of [a new bassoon with "innovations" by Almenraeder] and built his own model, which has been tested and approved by some of our foremost artists. Mr. Adler's instruments are distinguished by a refined finish on all their parts. The fifteen-keyed bassoon he recently put on display at a trade fair may be considered a masterpiece.⁶

Adler died in Paris in 1854.

The particular Adler oboe I have been playing can be classified as a 'simple-system oboe' and was used in France from roughly 1815 to 1850, a period which corresponds to the fall of Napoléon's Premier Empire (1815) through the Bourbon Restoration (1815–30), and up until the end of Louis-Philippe's July Monarchy in 1848 and in musical terms coincides with the career of Berlioz. It was during this time, especially in the 1830s, that the composer, viewed by many as the only "great" French Romantic composer, produced his most celebrated works: *Symphonie fantastique* (1830); *Le roi Lear* (1831); *Rob Roy* (1833); *Harold en Italie* (1834); *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838); and *Roméo et Juliette* (1839). Although



Figure 1. An oboe by Guillaume Adler (Paris, c.1840). Boxwood with ivory tips and ten brass keys.

during this time France would also discover the symphonic works of Beethoven, be swept away by Rossinimania and Italian *opera seria* by Bellini and Donizetti, and be held in the thrall of Grand Opera as exemplified by the largely forgotten works of Meyerbeer, Auber, and Halévy, it is the enduring symphonic works of Berlioz, with their progressive harmonies and gargantuan proportions, that are now seen as France's crowning musical achievement of that age.

Despite the many rewarding solos that Berlioz left behind for the oboe, his era is a neglected chapter in the history of the instrument, and it is from that observation that the theme of my thesis emerged. In terms of instrument design, it was precisely during the 1840s that the oboe became mechanised in France—a revolutionary procedure that would see a complete overhaul of its key system, and to some extent tone-hole sizes and bore dimensions, that permanently changed its tone to the one we are more familiar with today. My Adler oboe was crafted right before this transition, and its acoustic properties are therefore more akin to late eighteenth-century Classical models familiar to Mozart, Gluck,



Figure 2. Christopher Palameta performing on the Adler oboe in 2016 (left) and 2021 (right).

and Grétry than to the modern instrument now seen and heard in symphony orchestras.

The process of reviving a 185-year-old instrument has been long, arduous, and fraught with booby traps, requiring relentless testing of many different parameters, including reeds and staples, performing techniques including fingerings, pitch levels, etc. Of course similar testing has already been applied to many eighteenth-century oboes, yet up until recently, the demand to resurrect nineteenth-century models in the hopes of achieving a professionally viable performing tool was insufficient to warrant a thorough investigation.

An additional paradox that I wanted to address is our current perception of the Romantic period as a time of crisis in the history of the oboe, transmitted across generations by the players themselves. Léon Goossens famously stated that the lack of nineteenth-century solo repertoire “is simply a badge of historical injustice that oboists must wear.”⁷ In light of this prejudice, I was curious to determine whether oboists have inherited this badge partly

because we are unaware of extant Romantic works for our instrument. Has this rather bleak view been exacerbated by the fact that much of our nineteenth-century repertoire has never been recorded? Again, I turned to Bruce Haynes for guidance, who stated that “one must ‘do it’ so that others can ‘hear it,’” and cautioned...

as long as musicology communicates by words and not by acts, it can only go so far in helping musicians. There are innumerable details of music too subtle to be described in words that are nevertheless of decisive importance for the character and style of a performance. These nuances can only be investigated and communicated in the context of musical performance; musicologists who are not musicians will never find them.⁸

With the underlying motivation to challenge the oboist's *idée reçue*, I concluded my research by recording a recital of solo repertoire for oboe and pianoforte closely mapped to the Adler oboe in order to aurally document how an original simple-system oboe could be used (to quote Clive Brown) to “make discoveries about effectively performing music by less familiar composers, [...] to rekindle the vitality it was once felt to possess.”⁹

The Simple-System Oboe

Early nineteenth-century French oboes with three to thirteen keys (such as the 10-keyed Adler) can be seen as the final phase of the 2-keyed *hautboy*. While we nowadays refer to this model as the simple-system oboe (as opposed to the more mechanised *systèmes* introduced by Triebert from the 1840s, or the Boehm oboe patented by Buffet in 1838), contemporary nomenclature for this prototype was varied, and included *hautbois ordinaire*, *hautbois ancien système*, and in Triebert's designation *systèmes* 1 and 2.

On the simple-system oboe, keywork did not replace pre-existing cross fingerings. Instead, the keys provided the player with options to alter a note's intonation, timbre, and/or projection, and could also facilitate technique by making certain slurs and intervals easier to execute. The *clef d'octavier* (as the octave key was originally called in France) allowed the player to slur upwards, a technique that was complicated, and in some cases impossible on earlier oboes. Because the instrument could still be played without using any of its keys, one of the defining features of simple-system oboes is their lack of interactive keywork. On the simple-system, each key had just one function: to cover or uncover a tone hole; on more mechanised oboes a key can have multiple functions. For instance, the *Brille* or rings that provide the means of closing one hole, and simultaneously closing or opening another. Patented in 1808 by Frederick Nolan, these rings, called “*lunettes*” in French, were first applied to the flute before being integrated to clarinet and oboe mechanisms. The first instance of their use on oboes is on the right-hand holes 5 and 6 to close an open-standing F $\sharp$ key.

Simple-system oboes are characterised not only by acoustic properties that differ substantially from mechanised models, but also by their exterior physical appearance. As the direct heir and successor of the 2-keyed eighteenth-century *hautboy*, the simple-system retained the latter's hallmark onion-bulb baluster at the top and turnings at the tenons; in addition, ornamental mounts in ivory or silver were also preserved.¹⁰ Though exotic

hardwoods began to gain popularity among makers, boxwood continued to be the primary material of construction.¹¹

The French simple-system oboe retained the acoustic profile of the 2-keyed eighteenth-century hautboy. Compared to mechanised models, the distinctive features of the *ancien* system include “small tone holes which lead to a radiation of the sound into the lower part of the instrument and the bell,”¹² thinner bore walls, a conical reed well drilled directly into the bore (as opposed to a cylindrical metal reed well with a narrow collar at its base found on later models created a point of resistance in the airstream), a non-linear bore profile with chambering and steps at strategic locations, and a distinctive lip on the inner rim of the bell which also contributed to its distinctive tone. One important difference between the eighteenth-century oboe and the simple-system oboe of the early nineteenth century is the *clef d’octavier*, which began to become standard on French oboes in the 1830s.¹³

Because the technique of the simple system still relied heavily on the use of cross fingerings (supplanted by keys on later models), oboists favoured reeds that were somewhat lighter and freer compared to those used on more mechanised models. Brod, for example, who recommended a relatively narrow shape (7 mm wide at the tip, quite similar to modern measurements), was praised for his light tone (alternatively qualified as “delicate” by sympathetic critics or “thin” and “small” by those less impressed by his timbre). By contrast, players in Germany, Italy, and England used wider reeds.¹⁴ Garnier, a generation earlier than Brod, played on a two-keyed Delusse model and recommended a reed that was around 8 mm wide at the tip.



Figure 3. Simple-system vs. mechanised oboe.

The two oboes shown in Figure 3 are both by Guillaume Triebert: on the left a simple-system oboe from c.1835, and on the right a *système 4* c.1845. Note that only ten years separate these two instruments so different in outward appearance and in acoustic properties. The later instrument features interactive keywork (*brille* with an open-standing F# vent, and a trill key for middle C#; a coupler to close the Eb hole with the low C-key), as well as lower placement for the G# and low C# tone holes. The earlier oboe is in boxwood; the later in a rosewood; the earlier retains ornamental turnings, and combines keys mounted in wooden rings, and metal saddles; the later has a more streamlined appearance, and all the keys are mounted on posts.

The leading French exponents of the simple-system model were the oboe virtuosi who flourished in Paris during the first half of the nineteenth century. These included Gustave Vogt, professor at the Conservatoire from 1816 to 1853, and his students, Henri Brod, Stanislas Verroust, Louis-Auguste Vény, among others. All of these men held influential positions in the city’s rich and eclectic musical landscape. As well as highly regarded performers and influential teachers,

they were accomplished composers, and if not themselves involved in instrument building, took a keen interest in it.

Guillaume Triebert's new models of the 1840s did not immediately eclipse the simple-system oboe: rather, simple and mechanized models coexisted for several decades. Evidence of this up until at least the mid-1860s can be gathered from various historical sources including manufacturer catalogues, advertisements (some with drawings and/or photographs), didactic treatises, oboists associated with particular instruments, the repertoire these musicians composed, and the instruments themselves. As such, we can conclude that the simple-system oboe is not anachronistic to French works from the 1850s and even 1860s, including the early works of Bizet, Gounod, Franck, and Massenet.

The coexistence of several different models and systems was not unique to oboes. Cylindrical Boehm flutes coexisted alongside simple-system models with conical traverso-like bores; valved horns stood alongside their natural horn counterparts (a common feature in the works of Wagner was to have two of each in a section of four horns, and it was in fact only in 1903 that the natural horn ceased being taught at the Paris Conservatoire); and Müller-system clarinets rubbed shoulders with models fitted with innovative Boehm mechanisms.

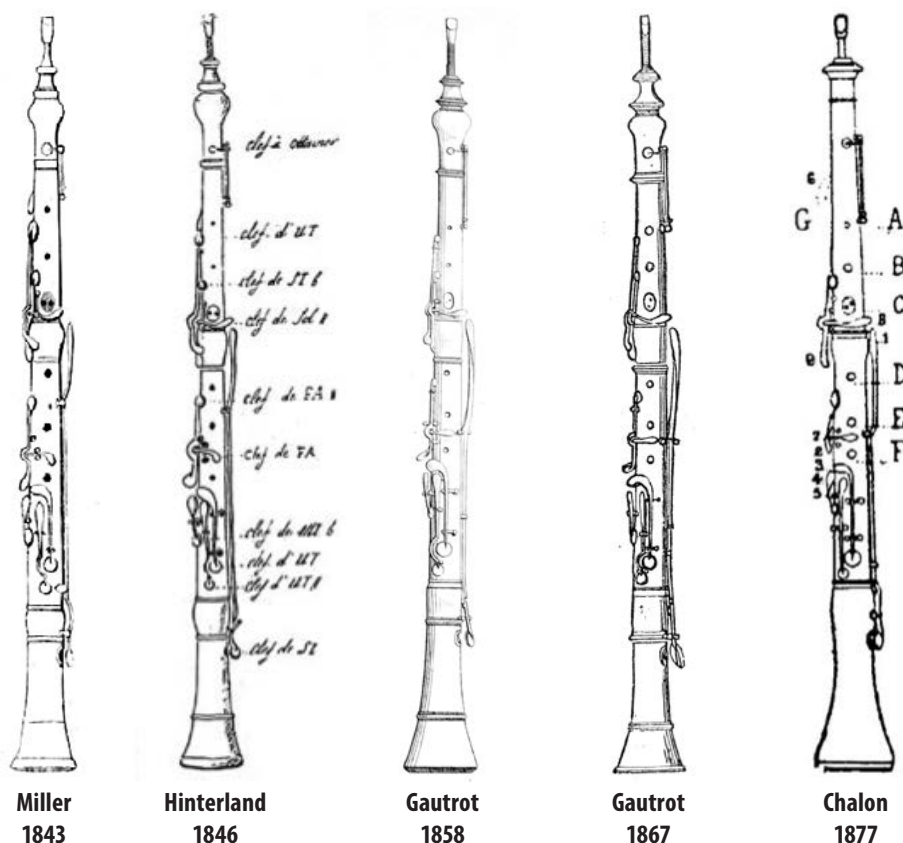


Figure 4. Comparison of five simple-system models with 9 or 10 keys as depicted in French oboe methods from 1843–77.

The fingering charts of many French oboe tutors from 1816 until 1877 provide clear depictions of simple-system instruments with between 4 and 13 keys. Figure 4 shows representative illustrations from five methods.¹⁵

While it is impossible to know precisely when my 10-keyed Adler oboe was constructed, it is safe to place the date of its manufacture between the late 1830s and early 1840s. An Italian tutor from 1846 by Vito Hinterland depicts the exact same model.¹⁶

Added Keywork

As mentioned above, one of the defining features of the simple-system oboe was its keywork, and most oboes produced in France between 1815 and 1850 are fitted with between 4 and 12 keys (brass, silver, and nickel silver were all widely used).

In practical terms, I have found that many early nineteenth-century orchestral scores are technically easier on the simple-system than on later mechanised instruments, and orchestration treatises repeatedly emphasised the importance of adhering to a conservative range and to unpretentious technical demands when writing for the oboe. Surprisingly, I have found that a good amount of solo repertoire is also more straightforward *without* the use of keys. For example, even though many of Brod's works for oboe and piano often feature entire sections in remote keys such as $G\flat$ major or $D\flat$ major (for example, his Valse in $D\flat$ major, op. 31), these passages are cleverly written so that they could potentially be navigated on a 2-keyed instrument.



Figure 5: Brod: Valse in $D\flat$ major, op. 31.

Nonetheless, because of the increasing omnitonicity of nineteenth-century repertoire, by the 1860s French oboe manufacture had come to the “end of a branch” so to speak, and it would appear that the technique of the simple-system oboe had been taken as far as it could go. As Holoman observes,

a sweeping change in the sound of [early nineteenth-century] orchestras resulted from improved mechanisms for the traditional instruments. These innovations had the effect of improving the abilities of the players, particularly with regard to the new spectrum of keys and the vivid melodic configurations that the progressive composers increasingly required.¹⁷

Presumably, these new “vivid configurations” were a motivating factor for Triebert and other progressive makers to rethink the oboe’s mechanism. For example, in 2018, when I participated in recordings of several Offenbach operettas from the 1860s on a Buffet *système* 3 oboe, I definitely felt that a later model equipped with more keys was advantageous to help navigate the composer’s writing, which often ventured into B major and other remote tonalities. Likewise, when I performed Massenet’s *Werther* (1887) in 2023 on a *système* 6, I found that added keys such as the *Brille* and left E $\flat$ were indispensable for smoothly executing highly exposed solos such as the following:



Figure 6. Massenet, *Werther* (1887), oboe solos from Act I.

Repertoire

Like a snowball effect, the *idée reçue* that the oboe fell into disuse because “it was considered unequal on its own to the aspirations of Romantic expression”¹⁸ has been handed down across generations by oboists themselves, with Holliger declaring in his typically bombastic fashion “that there was no tradition of oboe playing during the nineteenth century. There was very little solo playing and the instrument nearly disappeared.”¹⁹

To better understand this phenomenon, I approached a panel of fellow historical oboists who specialise in the nineteenth century,²⁰ and asked them the following questions:

- How do you view nineteenth-century solo repertoire for oboe?
- Do you feel that we, as oboists, have a good knowledge or awareness of Romantic repertoire for our instrument?
- If not, why do you think that is?

Almost all of the respondents felt that there was a growing awareness about the music itself, but that further excavation was required, and that our collective perception, which views the repertoire as meagre if not destitute, is the inculcated result of “being told for too long that there is none,” or “being fed that there is a dearth.”²¹

Likewise, all of the participants agreed that it was in the orchestral arena that the nineteenth-century oboe was given free rein to fully express, as Berlioz noted, its “tender and innocent” voice. Burgess and Haynes remarked that...

a special role was reserved for [the oboe] in orchestral music. [...] In Paris alone there were over fifty venues used regularly for concerts and theatrical performances, each with its own orchestral ensemble. The oboe’s place in art music has largely been guaranteed by the continuing status of the Romantic orchestral repertoire.²²

Therefore, before reexamining some of our neglected solo literature from early nineteenth-century France, let us take a moment to revisit some of this era’s more colourful orchestral solos.

The Oboe in the Orchestral Arena

The writings of Berlioz provide a useful point of departure for depicting the oboe’s orchestral role in nineteenth-century France. In his 1844 *Traité d’instrumentation*, he observes that:

Le hautbois est avant tout un instrument mélodique ; il a un caractère agreste, plein de tendresse, je dirai même de timidité. [...] La candeur, la grâce naïve, la douce joie, ou la douleur d’un être faible, conviennent aux accents du hautbois : il les exprime à merveille dans le cantabile. [...] Ces plaintes d’une voix innocente, ces supplications incessantes et toujours plus vives, pouvaient-elles convenir à aucun autre instrument autant qu’au hautbois ?

First and foremost, the oboe is a melodic instrument. It has a pastoral character, full of tenderness, even timidity I should say. [...] Candour, artless grace, pure innocence, mellow joy, the pain of a tender soul—all these the oboe can render admirably with its cantabile. [...] The complaints of an innocent voice, the incessant and ever-increasing supplications — what instrument could better express them than the oboe?²³

This description, with its emphasis on the oboe’s tender, pastoral voice, and its disinclination for rapid passagework, sets an overarching framework for how the instrument’s tonal identity was perceived at the time, and is reflected in the propensity of *romances*, *élégies*, *vocalises*, *nocturnes*, and other lyrical titles in the instrument’s nineteenth-century solo repertoire. Berlioz further adds that...

Un certain degré d’agitation lui est encore accessible, mais il faut le garder de le pousser jusqu’aux cris de la passion, jusqu’à l’élan rapide de la colère, de la menace ou de l’héroïsme, car sa petite voix aigre-douce devient alors impuissante et d’un grotesque parfait.

A certain degree of excitement is also within its power; but one must refrain from increasing it to cries of passion, the stormy outburst of fury, menace or heroism; since then its small voice, sweet and somewhat tart at the same time, becomes completely grotesque.²⁴

Orchestral solos are therefore primarily lyrical in character and exploit the oboe's poignant and expressive voice, with very few exposed passages calling on virtuosity and finger dexterity.

In this section, we will focus on six contexts in which the oboe would find itself participating in orchestral solos: 1. Italian *opera seria*; 2. French Grand Opera; 3. ballet; 4. the symphonies of Beethoven and Mendelssohn premièred by the Société des concerts du conservatoire; 5. the symphonic works of Berlioz; and finally, 6. instances where the oboe's perceived Middle Eastern roots were used to evoke Oriental exoticism.

1. In the 1820s, Parisian audiences were swept up in a torrent of Rossinimania. Italian *opera seria* enjoyed huge success both in their original versions at the Théâtre-Italien and in French adaptations at the Opéra (where Rossini began directing in 1824). And while it is true that the solo voice of the oboe in Italian opera was losing ground to the clarinet, Rossini nonetheless gave prominent solos to the oboe in his operas, including *L'Italienne à Alger* (1817), *Le Barbier de Séville* (1819), and *Guillaume Tell* (1829).



Figure 7. Rossini, *L'Italienne à Alger* (1817), oboe solo from the overture.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUtRnAHQpKo>

Rossini wrote the above solo for the oboist Baldassare Centroni (1784–1860), who performed at the opera's Venetian première in 1813, and is known to have played on a 2-keyed oboe by Heinrich Grenser.²⁵ This once again shows that, while the simple-system oboe possessed several keys, many orchestral solos were played without them.

This period also saw the Parisian premières of Bellini's *Norma* (1830) and *La Pirata* (1832); and Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1831), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1839) and *Lucrezia Borgia* (1840). As was fashionable at the time, all of these works became the basis of *airs variés* composed by oboists themselves. *Le siège de Corinthe* contains a particularly luxuriant solo for the oboe. For the 1826 Parisien première of this opera (in fact a revised version of *Maometto II* that Rossini had composed for Naples in 1820), Rossini rescored a solo originally for clarinet, giving the bulk of it to the oboe, but retaining one phrase for clarinet (see fig. 8) The following year Brod reprised the solo in a nocturne (fig. 9). Not only did he reinstate the phrase that Rossini had given to the clarinet, but he introduced a virtuosic high-reaching variation before the final trill.



Figure 8. Rossini, *Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826), oboe solo from Act III: Prière, "Avançons ; Ô toi que je révère."



Figure 9. Brod, *Nocturne sur Le Siège de Corinthe*, op.16 (c.1827).

2. Another platform from which the French simple-system oboe could display its lyrical capacities was in the pit of Grand Opera, which between 1830 and 1850 enjoyed a heyday in Paris. In the hands of virtuosos such as Brod, Vény, Verroust or Vogt, the simple-system oboe would have been heard in the premières of operas by Berlioz (*Benvenuto Cellini*, 1838; *La Damnation de Faust*, 1846); Meyerbeer (*Robert le diable*, 1831; *Les Huguenots*, 1836); Halévy (*La Juive*, 1835); and Auber (*La muette de Portici*, 1828; *L'Enfant prodigue*, 1850).

These thickly orchestrated works contain substantial solos for the oboe, where composers often used the instrument's pungent, overtone-rich timbre to cut through dense orchestral textures. For example, in Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, which recounts the 1572 St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Parisian Protestants, the following lilting oboe melody emerges unexpectedly like a ray of hope for the fleeing Huguenots, amidst a flurry of stringendo scales in the strings.

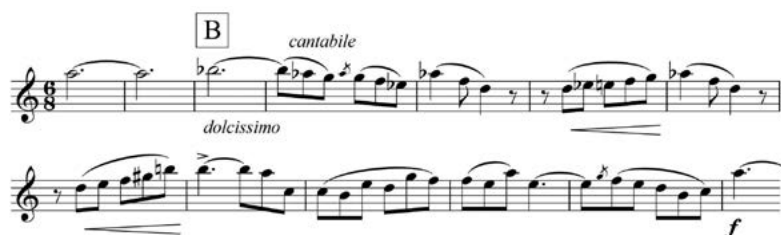


Figure 10. Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots* (1836), Act V, Scene 3, oboe solo.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79q_1Q_L5Qw

In the same vein, *L'Enfant prodigue* (1850) by Daniel Auber (1782–1871) features an extensive solo for oboe in the ballet of Act II. Berlioz reviewed the première, praising Verroust's “accomplished virtuosity.”²⁶

13 HAUTOIS

10. Solo.

1. Solo.

All. moderato. 5

Figure 11. Auber, *L'Enfant prodigue* (1850), Act II oboe solo from ballet scene.

3. Stand-alone ballets first appeared in Paris during this period, with enduring works such as *Giselle* (1841) by Adolphe Adam; *La Sylphide* (1832) by Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffter; *La somnambule* (1827) and *La Fille mal gardée* (1828), both by Ferdinand Hérold; and the ballet-pantomime version of Nicolas Dalayrac's *Nina* (1813). *La Sylphide* contains several exposed passages for both oboe and cor anglais, as does Adam's *Giselle*. In the latter, a haunting four-minute oboe solo underpins the scene where the guilt-racked Prince Albrecht, kneeling in front of Giselle's tomb, places flowers on her grave and begins to weep.

Andante Solo
f

5
p

Allegro
ff

Andante

rall.

animato 2

Andante 1o Tempo
pp

rall.
ff

Figure 12. Adam, *Giselle* (1841); oboe solo from Act II, "Entrée d'Albrecht."

4. Another platform was the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, which gave the Parisian premières of symphonic works by Beethoven and Mendelssohn. Subsidised by the state and directed from the violin by Habeneck, the Société presented its inaugural concert with resounding success in 1828, with a program that opened with the Parisian première of Beethoven's Third Symphony ("Eroica"). In his history of the Société, Elwart listed the first-rate oboe section, which at that time included Brod, Vény, and Vogt.²⁷ Between 1828 and 1832, all nine of Beethoven's symphonies were premièred by the Société, often with two or occasionally three heard on the same program. In the first ten years of the Société's existence, a remarkable 68 separate performances of Beethoven's symphonies were given, dwarfing those by Mozart (5 performances) and Haydn (7).²⁸

In the 1840s, Mendelssohn's orchestral works were also premièred by the Société and were equally well received, with Berlioz enthusiastically reviewing the 1844 première of the "Scottish" Symphony.²⁹ Because Verroust replaced Brod as *hautbois solo* after the latter's death, this means that all of Mendelssohn's symphonic works (premièred between 1842 and 1852) would have first been performed by Verroust on his ten-keyed simple-system oboe by Tulou (much like the Adler).



Figure 13. The 10-keyed oboe Tulou offered to Verroust in 1849, with gold keys Paris, Musée de la Musique E.992.7.1.

5. The simple-system oboe also asserted its distinctive voice was the symphonic works of Berlioz, all premièred by the Société during the 1830s. Of course, no overview of his output would be complete without the iconic "Scène aux champs" from the *Symphonie fantastique* (1830). As Burgess notes, in this celebrated duo, "the artist-narrator finds himself in the fields, the witness of a dialogue between two shepherds, one playing English horn, the other oboe. The English horn positioned in the orchestra represents the artist, and the off-stage oboe, his beloved."³⁰



Figure 14. Mendelssohn, Third Symphony (1842);
oboe solo from the first movement.



Figure 15. Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) oboe solo from 3rd
movement, "Scène aux champs."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njRFkGtemu8>

The following excerpt from the overture *Le Roi Lear* exemplifies Berlioz's perception of the oboe, of its innate "pure innocence" and its capacity to depict the "pain of a tender soul." The oboe's cantilena, underpinned by a throbbing *pizzicato* triplet figure in the strings, is a lucid portrayal of Cordelia, the tragic figure in Shakespeare's play on which this symphonic poem is based, who is banished after refusing to return the incestuous advances of her father, King Lear.³¹ In his *Mémoires* (1870), Berlioz recalled the praise he received from the King of Hanover who, upon hearing the symphonic poem in 1854, cried: "*les plaintes de Cordelia! Oh! cette Cordelia! Comme vous l'avez peinte! comme elle est timide et tendre! C'est déchirant, et si beau!*" [The lament of Cordelia! Oh this Cordelia! How you have portrayed her—her humility and tenderness! It is heart rending, and so beautiful!]"³²



Figure 16. Berlioz, *Le Roi Lear* (1831), oboe solo.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqrHHaa7SA>

Berlioz's perception of the oboe's expressive capabilities is further demonstrated in a particularly luxuriant solo from the second movement of *Roméo et Juliette*, op. 17 (1839). This passage manifestly held special significance for the composer, since he dedicated an arrangement of it for oboe and cello to Gustave Vogt:³³

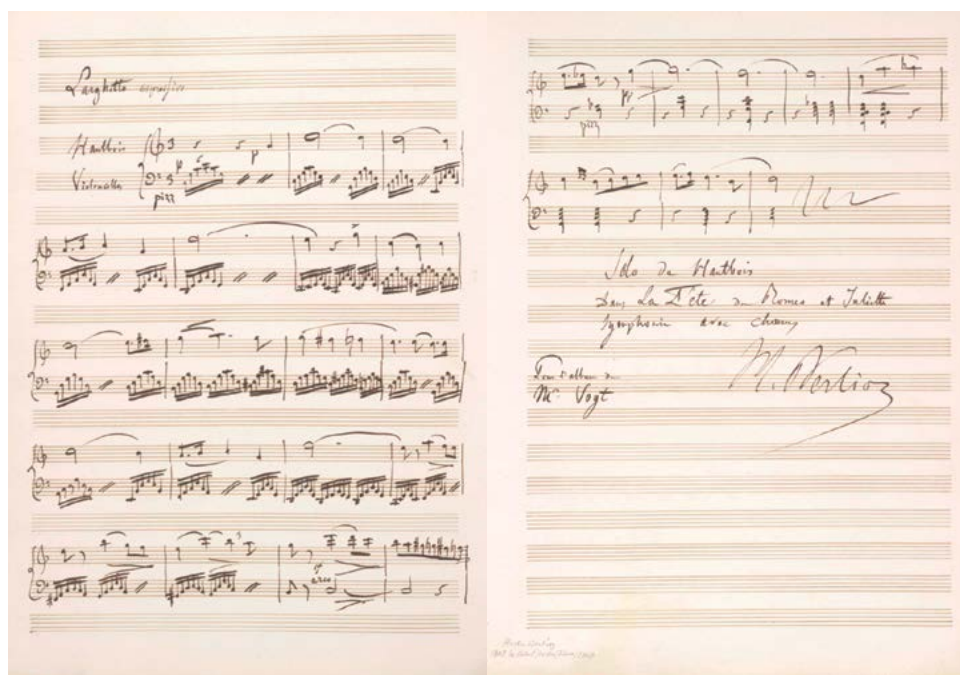


Figure 17. Berlioz, *Solo de hautbois dans la fête de Romeo et Juliette*, Larghetto espressivo from Gustave Vogt's Musical Album of Autographs (c.1843).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkll5O_cmXU

6. Finally, the oboe was occasionally used to represent the exotic, as an imitation of Middle-Eastern double-reed instruments. A prime example is *Le Désert*, an *ode-symphonie* composed by Félicien David and premièred at the Paris Conservatoire in December 1844.



Figure 18. David, *Le Désert* (1844), "Marche de la caravane."

In summary, while in France at the dawn of the nineteenth century the oboe had already begun to forge its own solo repertory, it was in the orchestral arena that the instrument could reveal the full extent of its expressive powers. During the period under study (1815–50), France would discover the symphonic works of Beethoven, Italian *opera seria*, and came under the spell of Grand Opera. But it was the enduring works of Berlioz that gave the simple-system oboe the opportunity to fully express its “candid, innocent and somewhat timid” voice in a myriad of memorable solos.³⁴

Solo Works

The task of cataloguing the oboe’s nineteenth-century repertoire has recently been carried out meticulously by Sandro Caldini, whose *Oboe Bibliography 1800–1950* offers a comprehensive inventory of Romantic solo and chamber repertoire for oboe.³⁵

James Brown noted that more than 60% of the oboe’s nineteenth-century solo repertoire was written by oboists themselves, but because only a fraction of this literature has been made available through modern editions (and most of it has never been recorded), many oboists are unaware of its breadth and richness.³⁶ The oboe is not alone in this predicament, however, and as Holoman observes, much of “the [nineteenth] century’s enormous repertory [is] still to be rediscovered. Who has [...] heard but a fraction of the corpus of chamber music and song that has been left to us?”³⁷

The cult of the virtuoso, which resulted from the sudden arrival of visiting talent from abroad, captivated Paris audiences during the first half of the nineteenth century. The remarkable performances of Chopin, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Kalkbrenner, Thalberg, Ernst, and Paganini catapulted the piano and violin as the uncontested rulers of the concert stage, and this was reflected in domestic music-making. The burgeoning middle class had a voracious appetite for new repertoire, and it has been estimated that by 1829, Paris could count over 80,000 amateur musicians (compared to less than 3,500 at the time of the French Revolution), with a piano gracing the parlour of no less than one in ten middle-class

households.³⁸ Hundreds of private *soirées musicales* suddenly cropped up, and in the 1830s, “there were nearly as many salons as there were wives of men in high posts who possessed the skill to form and keep a stable of individualists looking to be entertained. Everybody who was anybody was a regular visitor at eight or ten or a dozen salons.”³⁹

During these intimate gatherings, wind instruments were relegated to a lower plane, far below the voice, piano, violin, and cello. Yet even among the underprivileged woodwinds there was a pecking order, with the oboe bringing up the rear behind the more facile and accessible flute, clarinet, and horn. In the nineteenth century, the oboe continued to be viewed as a specialist’s instrument and “because of the difficulties associated with reeds and the patience required to produce an acceptable tone quality, the oboe never became popular as an amateur instrument, and was little used in domestic music-making.”⁴⁰ Despite this, the sizeable corpus of early nineteenth-century French chamber works for oboe that has recently come to light bears witness to a lively, dynamic tradition of oboe playing in France.

Much as the modern canonic tradition has contributed to the eclipse of the vocal French *romance* by the German *Lied*, so too has it established a hierarchy, albeit on a smaller scale, of nineteenth-century compositions for the oboe, favouring German works over French. Many are the oboists who have studied Schumann’s *Drei Romanzen*, op. 94 (1849), Hummel’s Introduction, Theme and Variations, op. 102 (1823), and Kalliwoda’s *Morceau de salon*, op. 228 (1859), yet how few of us are even aware of the over 100 compositions by Vogt, Brod’s 70 opus numbers, and Verroust’s forty *airs variés*?

The oboe quartet or quintet, which was a favourite genre for the instrument in the classical period, began to dwindle in popularity at the opening of the nineteenth-century. An early Romantic example for this configuration is Georg Druschetzky’s oboe quartet in G minor (c.1810). Here is a link to a video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0UiI2s1hDY>).

The oboe and pianoforte duo emerged in France around 1800 and continued to be fashionable well after 1850. Jacques Widerkehr’s three *Sonates en duo*, composed in 1798 but not published until 1817, were among the first of the genre. A short excerpt of the author playing one of these sonatas on the Adler oboe can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsI4jTBf6G8>.

Early nineteenth-century works for oboe and piano were primarily composed by virtuoso oboists themselves. The compositions of Barthélémy, Brod, Bruyant, Garnier, Lavigne, Sabon, Soler, Vény, Verroust, and Vogt explore a range of popular forms of the period, which include through-composed fantasy pieces and sonatas, along with nocturnes and *airs variés* based on favourite operatic themes.

In addition to the many virtuosic works written by French oboists, sonically rewarding duos also exist by the harp virtuoso Robert-Nicolas Charles Bochsá (1789–1856) and pianist Louis-Emmanuel Jadin (1768–1853). Their nocturnes, composed in collaboration with the oboist Charles Garnier around 1815, are a welcome addition to our Romantic repertoire. Documenting these works in performance allowed me to demonstrate many of my findings on performance style and technique, timbre, and reeds in a practical and tangible way. The repertoire, composed between 1815 and 1840, is closely mapped to the Adler oboe (c.1835). Since only three of these works are currently available in modern editions, for the recording I used original editions housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. A review

of my recording *Berlioz's Lost Oboe* (Ramée/Outthere, 2023), which presents a handful of these works, appeared in *The Double Reed* 46/2.



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Endnotes

- 1 Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A period performer's history of music for the twenty-first century*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 219.
- 2 Nineteenth-century composers whose works I've performed and recorded with European ensembles over the past five years include Beethoven, Berlioz, van Bree, Brahms, Bruckner, Elgar, Hiller, Liszt, Mahler, Massenet, Mendelssohn, Offenbach, Schubert, Verdi, Wagner, Weber, Wilms, and Witt.
- 3 "Berlioz's Lost Oboe: The simple-system oboe in France, 1815–50" PhD diss, Royal Academy of Music, London, 2022.
- 4 Page et al., "Oboe," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 8. ed. Stanley Sadie. (London: Macmillan, 2002), 851.
- 5 Eugène Jancourt, *Méthode théorique et pratique pour le basson*, op.15 (Paris: S. Richault, 1847), 1. "Plusieurs facteurs habiles ont contribué de nos jours à son perfectionnement."
- 6 François-Joseph Fétis, *Revue musicale. Première année, tome II* (Paris: Fétis, 1828). 221 (translation by the author).
- 7 Léon Goossens and Edwin Roxburgh, *Oboe* (London: MacDonald and Janes, 1977), 158.
- 8 Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, 129.
- 9 Clive Brown, *Classical & Romantic Performance Practice 1750-1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 632.
- 10 These protrusions are sometimes thought to be purely ornamental but are in fact functional as they reinforce the wood where cracks are most likely to occur, and influence the timbral makeup of the instrument. Note that the baluster has been retained on the top joint of the modern *Wiener-Oboe*.
- 11 Denser and heavier exotic hardwoods such as ebony, grenadilla, palisander or rosewood, cocuswood, and violetwood were required on later models to support the elaborate key system. These woods naturally produced a brighter tone.
- 12 Marc Ecochard, *L'accord du hautbois baroque et classique: Un aperçu sur l'accord original de l'instrument et ses adaptations modernes, à partir d'un texte du facteur Carl Theodor Golde*, trans. Jem Berry as *Tuning the hautboy: A perspective on original tuning and modern adaptations* (unpublished, 1996), 4.
- 13 Burgess suspects there was a shift towards larger holes at the same time as the increase in mechanism but that the two phenomena may not have been related in a causal way.
- 14 William Bainbridge, *Observations on the Cause of Imperfections in Woodwind Instruments, particularly in German Flutes; with remarks on the embouchure... also remarks on Oboe, Clarionet and Bassoon Reeds* (London: the author, 1823).
- 15 For full publication details, see Geoffrey Burgess, "Pedagogic Material for the Oboe from the Nineteenth Century: A Bibliography," in *Celebrating Double Reeds: A Festschrift for William Waterhouse and Philip Bate*, ed. T. B. Ewell (Baltimore, MD: IDRS, 2009).
- 16 Vito Hinterland, *Nuovo Trattato Generale Scientifico, artistico, teorico, pratico, musicale, corredato di tavole d'esempi e tavole, di figure di tutti gli strumenti attualmente in uso con dichiarazioni delle parti esposte* (Naples: MS, 15.ix.1846). See Burgess, "Pedagogic Material," 45.
- 17 D. Kern Holoman, *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 329.
- 18 Page et al. "Oboe," in Sadie, Stanley, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 2002).
- 19 Frederic Palmer, "A Conversation with Heinz Holliger," *The Double Reed* 6/1 (1983): 49.
- 20 The eight survey participants included Mark Baigent, Geoffrey Burgess, Leo Duarte, Paolo Grazzi, Taka Kitazato, Hélène Mourrot, Masamitsu San'nomiya, and Stefaan Verdegem.
- 21 Geoffrey Burgess and Mark Baigent, personal commentaries.
- 22 Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes, *The Oboe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 130.
- 23 Hector Berlioz, *Grande traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (Paris: Schonenberger, 1844), 104. Translation from Burgess and Haynes, *The Oboe*, 144.
- 24 Ibid.

- 25 Alfredo Bernardini, "Due chiavi per Rossini? Storia e sviluppo dell'oboe a Bologna prima del 1800," *Il Flauto Dolce* 17/18: 18-32; trans. as "Zwei Klappen für Rossini? Zur Geschichte der Oboe in Bologna vor 1850," *Tibia* 2/92 (1992): 95-107.
- 26 Hector Berlioz, *Feuilleton du journal des débats* (9 décembre 1850), 1-2. "Le premier air de danse commence par un délicieux solo de hautbois que M. Verroust a joué en virtuose accompli."
- 27 Antoine Elwart, *Histoire de la Société des concerts du Conservatoire impérial de musique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Castel, 1864), 61.
- 28 Adam Carse, *The Orchestra from Beethoven to Berlioz: A history of the orchestra in the first half of the nineteenth century* (New York: Broude, 1949), 92.
- 29 Nicole Grimes & Angela R. Mace, *Mendelssohn Perspectives* (Routledge, Abingdon & New York, 2016), 321. Premières of Mendelssohn's works in Paris include: *The Hebrides*, 1842; *Paulus*, 1842; Symphony no. 1 in C major, 1843; Symphony no. 3 "Scottish," 1844; Symphony no. 4 "Italian," 1852.
- 30 Geoffrey Burgess, "The Evolving Persona of the French Oboe in the Nineteenth Century, As Seen Through Literature," *A Time of Questioning: Proceedings of the International Double-Reed Symposium*. Utrecht 1994, ed. David Lasocki. (Utrecht: STIMU, Foundation for Historical Performance Practice, 1994), 105.
- 31 Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1870), re-edition by Garnier-Flammarion (Paris, 1969), chapter 59.
- 32 The manuscript survives in the Vogt's Musical Album of Autographs preserved at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City. Discussed in Geoffrey Burgess, "The Premier Oboist of Europe": A Portrait of Gustave Vogt (Lanham, MD, and Oxford, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 181; and Bea Friedland, "Gustave Vogt's Souvenir Album of Musical Autographs: A beguiling glimpse of musical Paris in the 1840s," *Notes* 31 (1974-5): 262-77.
- 33 Berlioz, *Grande traité*, 104.
- 34 The author, 2018.
- 35 James Brown, *Our Oboist Ancestors: A guide to who was who in the nineteenth-century oboe world* (Malmesbury: Abbey Printing, 2006), Introduction.
- 36 Holoman, *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, 339.
- 37 Robert Wangermée, *Conscience et inconscience du virtuose romantique : à propos des années parisiennes de Franz Liszt in Music in Paris in the Eighteen Thirties*, Bloom, Peter (ed). (New York: Pendragon Press, 1987), 555, 572; Page et al. "Oboe," in Sadie, Stanley, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 2002).
- 38 Peter Bloom, ed. *Music in Paris in the Eighteen Thirties* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1987), 11-12.
- 39 Page et al. "Oboe."