

MUSICAL EVENTS

SECRETS OF THE EAST GERMAN OBOE UNDERGROUND

*James Austin Smith proves that an oboist can have an adventurous solo
career.*

By Alex Ross

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At National Sawdust, a performance space in Brooklyn, Smith presented an unpredictably playful program of oboe music from the former East Germany. Illustration by Nora Krug

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o one has ever become world-famous by playing the oboe. Although the i

NThe forty-year-old American oboist James Austin Smith, who recently presented “Hearing Memory,” an adventurous program of East German music, at National Sawdust, in Brooklyn, has made his path all the more challenging by choosing to work outside the orchestral cocoon. Someone with his high level of training—he studied at Northwestern University, the Yale School of Music, and the Leipzig Hochschule für Musik und Theater—might have been expected to make the rounds of orchestra auditions, in the hope of winning a post in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, or the like. Smith has remained independent, although in 2017 he found a measure of stability by assuming a teaching post at Stony Brook University.

“I have many good friends in orchestras,” Smith told me. “But it’s not for me—the politics of it all, the way you’re locked into a certain repertory. When you’re outside the orchestra, you can end up feeling like marginalia, because there are so few really well-known pieces for oboe. For years, I did the freelance hustle. Then, during the pandemic lockdown, I had this realization: ‘You’re only doing what other people ask you to do. You’re always fulfilling other people’s visions.’ It made me think about what I care about, as an artist and as a thinker. And that’s how I ended up spending three years assembling this East German program.”

Oboists have a reputation for being odd. A durable myth holds that blowing air through a double reed into a narrow tube puts undue pressure on the brain. (I played oboe as a kid, and I may not have stopped in time.) Smith, who lives with his husband in West Chelsea, is a buoyant, gregarious guy with no obvious eccentricities. There’s a stubbornness to his makeup, though, that suggests oddity of a more fruitful kind. He wrote not long ago on his Instagram page, “I’ve often been described as having an ‘alternative career,’ which, frankly, is fine. But it’s hard not to hear the echoes of that far more insidious phrase ‘alternative lifestyle.’ Neither my career, nor my sexuality, are alternative. They are the sum of my passion, my curiosity, my hard work, my successes, and my failures. They are, simply, mine.”

Smith found his way to East German music while studying in Leipzig, in 2005 and 2006. His teacher there, Christian Wetzel, held a position that had once belonged to Burkhard Glaetzner, who, in 1970, had co-founded the avant-garde ensemble Gruppe Neue Musik Hanns Eisler. The circle of composers and performers to which Glaetzner belonged was in tension with official East German cultural discourse. Although Western-style avant-gardism was not exactly verboten in the seventies and eighties, it reaped no rewards for its practitioners. After German reunification, the Eisler group, which took its name from the firebrand of German leftist music, remained outsiders, their ideals now clashing with democratic capitalism...

In 2020, Smith returned to Germany to do more research and to interview surviving members of the scene. At National Sawdust, he played a video of a conversation that he had with Glaetzner—a bearded eminence in bluejeans, blunt and serious in manner. Glaetzner told Smith that the Gruppe Neue Musik lacked an explicit ideological agenda, although all art under a dictatorship carries political implications. The group’s goal, Glaetzner recalled, was simply to discover new works and to play them as perfectly as possible. Because the ensemble had no institutional ties and no budget, it couldn’t really be thwarted. He had often thought about immigrating to the West, because life in the G.D.R. was “in many ways absolutely unbearable.” But he would ask himself, “What would I do in the West? I have found a mission as a musician, and you don’t throw that away.”

Smith’s “Hearing Memory” concert, presented in collaboration with the pianist Cory Smythe and the violinist and violist Yura Lee, focussed on three leading composers of the later East German period: Friedrich Goldmann (1941-2009), who specialized in potent deconstructions of traditional forms; Georg Kutzer (1935-2019), an Eisler student who delved into electronic music; and Christfried Schmidt, who remains active past the age of ninety and has been able to see the belated premières of long-unperformed works, including a turbulent symphony in memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. Like

their counterparts in the Soviet Union—Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt—these composers tended toward a chaotic eclecticism, incorporating haunted echoes of a destroyed German past. All wrote prolifically for Glaetzner and other members of the Leipzig group.

Anyone who pictures East Germany as a uniformly gray, fearful world might have been surprised by the unpredictable playfulness of the music on Smith's program. Schmidt's "Aulodie No. 1," a solo piece from 1975, is a kinetic catalogue of extended techniques—multiphonics, flutter-tonguing, microtones—in the service of a narrative that flirts exuberantly with absurdity. At one point, the oboist is asked to put a second reed in his mouth and play a raucous self-duet. Katzer's "miteinander—gegeneinander," a 1982 duo for viola and English horn, verges on performance art, as the instrumentalists alternately play in violent unison or wander apart from each other, both spatially and musically. Goldmann's Oboe Sonata, from 1980, is outwardly the most conventional of the pieces, although its obsessive dance around the note B fosters a smoldering tension. One can go looking for subversive ideas—as, for example, when Schmidt has the players recite nonsense phrases alongside a passage of Hegel—but the composers seem concerned more with scrambling messages than with transmitting them.

The oboe proves an excellent conduit for such enigmatic games. The pungency of its timbre puts the ears on alert and on edge: no one can fall into a blissful trance at an oboe recital. Smith plays with the finely shaded elegance you'd expect of a largely American-trained musician, but he has also learned from Glaetzner's playing, which is a bit rougher in finish but supremely lithe and agile. Smith uses a maple oboe, which is lighter in weight than standard grenadilla-wood models; it allows him to expend less effort simply producing sound, freeing up energy for the lightning-quick transitions that this repertory demands. No less virtuosic was Smith's running commentary on the East German context. His deployment of videos, including some of musical discussions that he had found in television archives, gave the evening the feeling of a live documentary. For any young

performer seeking an alternative to the usual walk-out-and-play routines, this impeccable event could serve as a model.

Smith made clear, above all, why the project mattered to him. At the concert, he said that amid the chaos of recent years he had been asking himself, “What is the point?” The Leipzig group, he went on, showed him an example of “musicians who created with a purpose beyond their own practice, who created music with meaning beyond sound.” Lest the exercise seem too remote from modern American experience, Smith and Smythe offered the première of Matana Roberts’s “Schema,” a quietly intense structured improvisation rooted in Black avant-garde traditions. In a video interview with Smith, Roberts described the art of music as “documented strife and joy”—as concise a definition as you will find. ♦

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