



# Oliver Knussen

Symphony No. 2 & No. 3  
Ophelia Dances • Trumpets  
Coursing • Cantata

Elaine Barry, Linda Hirst *sopranos*  
The Nash Ensemble  
Philharmonia Orchestra  
Michael Tilson Thomas *conductor*  
London Sinfonietta  
Oliver Knussen *conductor*

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	<b>Symphony No. 3</b>	14'52
<b>1</b>	Andante misterioso – Fantastico –	2'12
<b>2</b>	Allegro con fuoco –	4'54
<b>3</b>	Molto tranquillo	7'46
	Philharmonia Orchestra · Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor	
<b>4</b>	<b>Trumpets for soprano and 3 clarinets</b>	4'02
	Linda Hirst, soprano · Michael Collins, Edward Pillinger, Ian Mitchell, clarinets · Oliver Knussen, conductor	
<b>5</b>	<b>Ophelia Dances, Book 1</b>	7'08
	London Sinfonietta · Oliver Knussen, conductor	
<b>6</b>	<b>Coursing for chamber orchestra</b>	4'56
	London Sinfonietta · Oliver Knussen, conductor	
<b>7</b>	<b>Cantata for oboe and string trio</b>	10'11
	The Nash Ensemble	
	<b>Symphony No. 2 for soprano and chamber orchestra</b>	16'09
<b>8</b>	I Allegro – Scuro – Spettrale	4'30
<b>9</b>	'Die Ratten': Adagio – Il Scorrevole	3'12
<b>10</b>	III 'Edge' Lentissimo	4'21
<b>11</b>	A tempo – IV 'An die Schwester' Andante	4'06
	Elaine Barry, soprano · London Sinfonietta · Oliver Knussen, conductor	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>58'21</b>

## Members of the Nash Ensemble

Gareth Hulse *oboe* · Marcia Crayford *violin* · Roger Chase *viola* · Christopher van Kampen *cello*

Photo: Cive Barda



# Oliver Knussen: A Definitive Decade

Bayan Northcott

The six first recordings reissued on this CD comprise a substantial sampler of Oliver Knussen's output in the 1970s. Only 18 at the start of the decade, he was in the process of living down the *furor* attending the precocious launch as a composer and conductor in 1968, and pursuing his musical studies in the US. By 1976, his centre of activities had swung back to Britain and he was on the brink of the hugely influential career as conductor, teacher, festival director and recording artist he has developed since. But the salient achievement of these years was the gradual, often painstaking, focusing of his natural exuberance and his ear for a vastly varied array of influences into an idiom at once iridescent in sound and rigorous in structure that is unmistakably his own.

Among his compositional preoccupations of the period, Knussen has identified: 'a concern for overall

(and audible) harmonic coherence and the further ideal of a homophony of layers – the precise superimposition and interpenetration of quite independent textural strands, each 'complete' but designed to fulfill a specific role in the overall sound-picture at any given moment.' Another obsession worked on over this period was the pre-compositional blocking out and balancing of proportional time lengths stemming from a long-standing interest in cinematic practice. Yet he always emphasized that such constructional methods were deployed towards stylistic and – most importantly – expressive ends that, he believed, should speak for themselves.

Not all these scores spoke to their initial hearers; the critical backlash against Knussen's early success took time to work itself out. Elsewhere, the completeness with which Knussen solved his compositional problems

was mistaken by more avant-garde hard-liners as the stylistic backsliding of a lightweight. Today, we hear more clearly not only how masterfully Knussen wrought – so that the Third Symphony, *Ophelia Dances*, *Cantata* and *Coursing*, have, by now, established themselves virtually as classics of their genres – but how completely a composer still in his twenties elaborated a métier that would enable him to realize the large-scale structures of the operas *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* in the 1980s, and the vivacious array of concertos, chamber works, vocal settings and instrumental pieces he has released since.

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## Notes

by Oliver Knussen

### Symphony No. 3 (1973-79)

#### Op.18

In the early part of 1973 I planned a big symphonic poem about Shakespeare's Ophelia. I sketched the outline of a set of dances (a sort of wordless setting of Ophelia's mad songs), and a slow cortège-finale. These were to be preceded by a turbulent preparatory movement suggesting the origins of Ophelia's madness.

After seeing some cortège sketches, Michael Tilson Thomas asked me to complete the work for performance the following winter in his remarkable 'Spectrum' series with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In the event the preparatory movement *Introduction and Masque* turned into something much more elaborate than originally planned, and in fact raised so many compositional issues that I spent the next four years sorting out their implications.

This movement was thus first

performed separately in Boston on 24 January 1974, and it was only in 1979 that the Third Symphony finally emerged as a single continuous span lasting about a quarter of an hour – an abstract work with the shade of Ophelia hovering in the background. The new section, which derives substantially from the cortège sketch, was begun in Tanglewood in June of that year and completed in London just before the first complete performance, at a Prom on 6th September (for which it was commissioned by the BBC) conducted again by Michael Tilson Thomas, to whom the symphony is dedicated: his enthusiasm both provoked the music and is, I think, reflected in it.

The symphony falls into complementary halves that treat the same musical ideas in quite opposite ways, preceded by an introduction. Broadly speaking, the first part proceeds by abruption and the second by the slow accumulation of layers, but the continuity and timing of the whole could better be characterised as cinematic: the music is 'pre-edited' in much the same way as a Hitchcock film. I was very taken with the potential relationship in film between a tough but fluid narrative form, and detail which can be frozen or 'blown up' at any point.

The introduction is three-fold, comprising an initial turbulence that contains the germ of most of the subsequent ideas; a wild clarinet fanfare with circus percussion; and finally a long processional against a sustained, slowly shifting backdrop, during which several of the germs sprout tendrils. One of these is a rhythmically pregnant Perotin-like jig for trombones, and at its climax the *Allegro con fuoco* proper begins.

There are four main thematic blocks, all but one growing in some way from the introduction: A) a volatile 'first subject' intertwining of violins, accompanied by two sets of timpani; C) a double quartet of clarinets and horns; D) an unexpected and seemingly unrelated carillon of celesta, guitar and harp; E) a flute trio shadowed by much-divided strings. These ideas are linked by: B) a close-harmony group of bassoons (later trombones), so that the order of appearances is ABCDBE, and the sequence is completed by the return of A. There follows a reversal of the order of appearances, each varied and with the differences in tempo and duration between each block more or less ironed out. A reference to the introductory turbulence sparks off a brief section in which the ideas are put into very swift

juxtaposition culminating in a raving return of the introductory fanfares. This heralds the turning point: the orchestra rears up to a massive sustained chord, gradually losing velocity and power until, at *Molto tranquillo*, the second half begins.

The chord is seen to be the first of a very slow chorale, which is used as a passacaglia-like ground. This sounds like a new idea, but is actually a vast blow-up of the initial carillon entry, overlapped and re-scored for double string orchestra. In the course of seven variations, most of the music from the *Allegro con fuoco* is seen through the light of this chorale-ground. Although the mood is utterly different, the material is, I think, mostly recognisable. The proportions gradually contract through the first four variations to the climactic fifth, a double climax with wailing, whale-like horns. The sixth variation is the chorale unadorned, and the seventh – a coda – effects a calm return to the beginning of the symphony.

A large orchestra is employed, comprising mainly-quadruple woodwinds; four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani and four percussion groups (six players) spaced evenly along the back of the orchestra; celesta, guitar (doubling mandolin), harp and a large body of

strings. Ideally the woodwinds and 'carillon' group should be placed in front, flanked by strings on either side. This is rarely possible given the limitations of space on most concert stages. In this recording, the balances that were in my mind's ear when composing were achieved for the first time.

## **Trumpets (1975)**

### **For soprano and three clarinets, Op.12**

This short, explosive piece was written at the request of Alan Hacker for his ensemble Matrix, who gave the first performance with Jane Manning soon after it was completed in February 1975. The first sketches were made in Boston in spring 1974, as a welcome distraction from intensive work on the Third Symphony, and it is a development outside that work of the clarinet fanfares which permeate it. The brutally juxtaposed images of Trakl's poem are mirrored in the form of the setting, which is designed as a highly compressed sonata movement.

## **Ophelia Dances (1975)**

### **Book 1, Op.13**

Commissioned by the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation, *Ophelia Dances*, Book 1 for nine instruments was a sort of 'cartoon' for the abandoned dance sequence in the Third Symphony, intended to have a life of its own. It was written in the spring of 1975 and first performed in New York on 9th May by the Chamber Society of Lincoln Center directed (from the celesta) by Michael Tilson Thomas. A slightly expanded version was first played in January 1980 by the London Sinfonietta at a BBC College Concert.

On another level, *Ophelia Dances* is an instrumental response to Shakespeare's description of her chanting 'snatches of old tunes/ As one incapable of her own distress': a miniature homage to the Schumann of *Carnaval* and the Debussy of *Gigues* and *La boîte à joujoux* – 'light' music which leaves one wondering whether to laugh or cry. The 'old tunes' in this piece are the 'Sphinx' mottos of *Carnaval* (the pitches A, E flat, C, B and A flat, C, B) which provide all the melodic and harmonic material. There is an introduction, four dances which become more and more compressed, and a long slow coda, all played continuously.

## **Coursing (1979)**

### **for chamber orchestra, Op.17**

*Coursing* was composed between July 1978 and April 1979 and revised early in 1981. It is dedicated to Elliott Carter, in admiration, for his 70th birthday. The title is intended to suggest at once energy, fluidity and speed. The initial impetus toward the character of the music was a view of the rapids at Niagara Falls – that is, the immense contained force of the water, despite its smoothness, just before it plunges downwards (a leaf dropped onto the rapids is swept away and over the edge almost before the eye can register the movement).

What courses through this piece are numerous versions of the long unison melody heard at the beginning. This jagged, ricocheting line, which requires a high degree of ensemble virtuosity, is present in one form or another through all the different tempi and harmonic types employed.

*Coursing* was commissioned by the London Sinfonietta with funds provided by the Arts Council of Great Britain and was first performed in April 1979 under Simon Rattle.

## **Cantata (1977)**

### **for oboe and string trio, Op.15**

*Cantata* was begun at Tanglewood in July 1975, and completed in London in October 1977. During this long period, I was trying to define my own musical space – a time of considerable frustration and little completed work – and attempting in particular to refine and explore the harmonic aspect of my music. The Triptych which eventually emerged – *Autumnal* for violin and piano, Op. 14, *Sonya's Lullaby* for piano, Op. 16, and *Cantata* for oboe and string trio, Op. 15 – represent quite different technical solutions, and all three are intimate, diary-like pieces.

Although the most 'informal' and relaxed of the three, *Cantata* is quite compact – a single movement playing for just over ten minutes. I chose the title after noticing that the relationship between the various episodes reminded me of the interdependence of recitatives and more-or-less self-contained numbers in some dramatic solo cantatas that I admire, like Berlioz's *Cléopâtre* or Britten's *Phaedra*.

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 gently rocking repeated figure in the strings.

*Cantata*, commissioned with Arts Council funds, was written for the late Janet Craxton, who gave the first performance with members of the Nash Ensemble at the 1979 ISCM Festival in Athens.

## **Symphony No. 2 (1970-71)**

### **for soprano and orchestra, Op.7**

In my mid-teens I became fascinated by the early lyrics of the Austrian poet Georg Trakl (1887-1914), with their evocative and strange imagery held firmly in check by tight verse forms and simple rhyming schemes. A chance hearing of the poem 'Edge' by Sylvia Plath (1932-63) modified my original plan for a Trakl song-cycle into the idea of a work which describes a night of sleep, beginning with a haze of ideas buzzing around the sleeper's mind,

gradually focussing onto specific dream images (with a change of language at the point of deepest sleep), and ending with an awakening at dawn. This programmatic shape is overlaid on the outline and proportions of a four-movement classical symphony (with scherzo placed second), played without a pause, and scored for a Mozart-sized orchestra – double woodwind, two horns, and 22 strings – with high soprano soloist.

The first movement is ternary, suggested by a form in Japanese music in which the same piece is played several times, with different layers omitted and others added each time. The three sections (*Allegro – Scuro – Spettrale*) are separated by refrain-like interludes – variations on a palindromic contour, which slows down with each reappearance – and by sporadic comments from the soprano, singing isolated lines from Trakl and Plath. These converge on the first Trakl setting proper, 'Die Ratten', which begins at the third interlude and continues through most of the scherzo (*Scorrevole*) – in itself a larger palindromic shape.

The slow movement, *Lentissimo*, sets Sylvia Plath's poem 'Edge' as a single long vocal line with a still, drone-like

orchestral accompaniment – a complete role-reversal from that found in the opening movement. The interlude that follows warms onto an A major triad to initiate the final (*Andante*) setting of Trakl's 'An die Schwester', in which voice and orchestra are on equal terms. As the song continues, pairs of bassoons, oboes and clarinets unobtrusively drop out of the texture with brief, free cadenzas. In a short coda, the soprano utters two lines from Trakl's 'Winternacht', in English, as the rest of the orchestra winds up the movement leaving the pair of flutes to finish their cadenza – and the symphony – alone.

The Second Symphony was commissioned for the second Windsor Festival and first performed in a preliminary version consisting of the first three movements at Windsor Castle in October 1970 under Yehudi Menuhin. The first complete performance, conducted by my teacher Gunther Schuller, took place at Tanglewood in August 1971.

© Oliver Knussen, 1981, 1984

#### 4 Trompeten

Unter verschnittenen Weiden,  
 wo braune Kinder spielen  
 Und Blätter treiben, tönen Trompeten.  
 Ein Kirchhofsschauer.  
 Fahnen von Scharlach stürzen durch  
 des Ahorns Trauer,  
 Reiter entlang an Roggenfeldern, leeren Mühlen.

Oder Hirten singen nachts und Hirsche treten  
 In den Kreis ihrer Feuer, des Hains uralte Trauer,  
 Tanzende heben sich von einer schwarzen Mauer;  
 Fahnen von Scharlach, Lachen, Wahnsinn,  
 Trompeten.

Georg Trakl

#### Trumpets

Under trimmed willows,  
 where tanned children are playing  
 And leaves are blowing, trumpets sound.  
 A churchyard shudder.  
 Scarlet banners crash through  
 the maple's sorrow,  
 Riders along fields of rye, empty mills.  
 Or shepherds sing by night and stags tread  
 In the circle of their fire, the grove's age-old sorrow,  
 Dancers spring up from a black wall;  
 Banners of scarlet, laughter, madness, trumpets.

#### 8 Symphony No. 2

Weisser schlaf!

Aufflattern weisse Vögel am Nachtsaum.  
 Ihr mondverschlungnen Schatten!

Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

Die Nacht tanzt  
 über knöchernen Steg.

White sleep!

White birds fly off on the hem of night  
 Their moon-wrapped shadows!

The night dances  
 Over the bone footbridge.

(lines from assorted poems of Trakl and Plath)

9

*Die Ratten*

In Hof scheint weiß der herbstliche Mond.  
 Vom Dachrand fallen phantastische Schatten.  
 Ein Schweigen in leeren Fenstern wohnt;  
 Da tauchen leise herauf die Ratten

Und huschen pfeifend hier und dort  
 Und ein gräulicher Dunsthauch wittert  
 Ihnen nach aus dem Abort,  
 Den geisterhaft der Mondschein durchzittert

Und sie keifen vor Gier wie toll  
 Und erfüllen Haus und Scheunen,  
 Die von Korn und Früchten voll.  
 Eisige Winde im Dunkel greinen.

**Georg Trakl***The Rats*

In the yard the autumnal moon shines white.  
 From the roof-edge fantastic shadows fall.  
 A silence dwells in empty windows;  
 Through which the rats dive softly upward.

And flit about squeaking here and there  
 And a grey dust-haze lingers  
 After them from the latrine,  
 Through which the moonlight shivers, spectral.

And they scramble in greed, as if mad  
 And overflow houses and sheds  
 Full of corn and fruit.  
 Icy winds groan in darkness.

10

*Edge*

The woman is perfected.  
 Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
 The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
 Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:  
 We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
 One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
 She has folded

Them back into her body as petals  
 Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed  
 From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
 Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.  
 Her blacks crackle and drag.

**Sylvia Plath**

11

*An die Schwester*

Wo du gehst wird Herbst und Abend,  
 Blaues Wild, das unter Bäumen tönt,  
 Einsamer Weiher am Abend.

Leise der Flug der Vögel tönt,  
 Die Schwermut über deinen Augenbogen.  
 Dein schmales Lächeln tönt.

Gott hat deine Lider verbogen.  
 Sterne suchen nachts, Karfreitagskind,  
 Deinen Stirnenbogen.

**Georg Trakl***To the Sister*

Where you go is Autumn and Evening  
 A blue deer, that sounds under trees,  
 A lonely pond at evening.

Softly sounds the flight of birds,  
 The anguish over your brow.  
 Your slight smiling sounds.

God has altered the curve of your eyelids.  
 Stars seek at night, Good Friday's child,  
 Your forehead's curve.

When you awoke, the bells in the village were ringing.  
 Through the eastern gate showed, silver, the rosy day.

(from *Winternacht* – **Georg Trakl**)

## Oliver Knussen

Born in Glasgow on June 12, 1952, Knussen grew up near London where his father was principal double bass of the London Symphony Orchestra for many years. It was with the LSO that he made his debut in April 1968, conducting his *First Symphony* in London and New York. He attended the Purcell School, and studied composition initially with John Lambert. In 1970 he was awarded the first of three fellowships to Tanglewood, where he studied with Gunther Schuller, and for the next few years divided his time between England and the USA. During this time he completed several works which were subsequently widely performed on both sides of the Atlantic and established his early reputation, notably *Hums and Songs of Winnie-the-Pooh* (1970) the *Second Symphony* (1970-1), *Océan de Terre* (1972-3), and *Ophelia Dances* (Koussevitzky centennial commission, 1975). In 1975 Knussen returned permanently to the UK and the appearance of subsequent works, notably *Coursing* (1979) and the *Third Symphony* (1973-9) placed him in the forefront of contemporary British music.

The 1980s were largely devoted to the operatic double-bill written in collaboration with Maurice Sendak and produced by Glyndebourne Festival Opera, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1979-83) and *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* (1984-5, revised 1999).

From 1983 till 1998, Knussen was an Artistic Director of the Aldeburgh Festival, and between 1986 and 1993 he headed contemporary music activities at the Tanglewood Music Center. In 1992, in collaboration with Colin Matthews, he established the Contemporary Composition and Performance courses at the Britten-Pears School in Snape.

During this period, Knussen also established an international reputation as a conductor, initially through many appearances with the London Sinfonietta of which he later became Music Director (1998-2002). He has guest-conducted widely in the UK, USA, Europe and Japan, and has amassed a discography of some fifty CDs, predominantly of contemporary music.

Several of Oliver Knussen's later works have quickly established themselves in the repertory: *Flourish with Fireworks* (1988), *The Way to Castle Yonder* (1988-90), *Songs without Voices* (1992), *Two Organa* (1994), the *Horn Concerto* (1994) and the

*Violin Concerto* (2002). Recent works include *Requiem-Songs for Sue* for soprano and chamber orchestra (2005-6) and the piano piece *Ophelia's Last Dance* (2009-10).

Among his many awards are Honorary Memberships of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of the Royal Philharmonic Society, and in 2006 he was named the second recipient of the Michael Ludwig Nemmers Prize from Northwestern University, USA. He became a CBE in the 1994 Birthday Honours. Currently (2011) Oliver Knussen is Artist-in-Association with both the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and lives in Suffolk, England.

For information about the artists on this recording please visit NMC's website at [www.nmcrec.co.uk](http://www.nmcrec.co.uk)

Symphony No.3 and *Ophelia Dances* were recorded at Watford Town Hall on 11-12 May 1981.

Recording Engineer **BOB AUGER**  
Producer **ANTONY HODGSON**  
Assistant Producer **OLIVER KNUSSEN**

Symphony No. 2, *Trumpets, Coursing* and Cantata were recorded at St John's Smith Square, London on 24 June and 11 August 1983.

Recording Engineers **JOHN WHITING, MIKE SKEET**  
Recording Producer **OLIVER KNUSSEN**  
Production Assistants **SIVA OKE, PETER PAUL NASH**  
Editing **BOB AUGER**

Mastering **RICK CAMPION**

Executive Producer **COLIN MATTHEWS**

Cover image **FRANZ MARC, Der Wasserfall** (1912)  
CD & booklet design by **FRANCOIS HALL**

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Oliver Knussen's music is published by Faber Music.

NMC Recordings is a charitable company (reg. no. 328052) established for the recording of contemporary music by the Holst Foundation; it is grateful for funding from Arts Council England.

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**FOR FURTHER DETAILS PLEASE CONTACT:**  
NMC Recordings Ltd,  
Somerset House, Third Floor, South Wing,  
Strand, London, WC2R 1LA

Tel. +44 (0)20 7759 1827/8  
Fax. +44 (0)20 7759 1829  
E-mail: [nmc@nmcrec.co.uk](mailto:nmc@nmcrec.co.uk)  
Website: [www.nmcrec.co.uk](http://www.nmcrec.co.uk)

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Catalogue number: NMC D175

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