Duet For Oboe And Trumpet

Ervin Wolff*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1963 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Duet For Oboe And Trumpet

Ervin Wolff

Abstract

The oboe was sleeping. He knew he was sleeping because he was catching himself, in his mind, and saw himself sleeping and doing a good job of it...
THE OBOE was sleeping. He knew he was sleeping because he was catching himself, in his mind, and saw himself sleeping and doing a good job of it. The Oboe rather prided himself on that fact. Some people, he knew, only did a half-assed job of it with a lot of tossing and dreams that were few and unsatisfactory. His sleep was always deep and long and filled with superb dreams of libidinous actions which he remembered the next day with a soft warm haze of delight. This time, though, he was not dreaming, but only watching himself sleep with the mature pride of a master craftsman admiring a good piece of work he has turned out.

The Oboe’s roommate came in and shook his bed, braying something about having to get up or some other damn stupid thing. The Oboe greeted him warmly and with feeling.

“Up your ass!” he said to Trumpet.

The Oboe called his roommate Trumpet in retaliation for Trumpet’s having bestowed upon The Oboe’s brow the derogation of “The Oboe” merely because he, when the Muse struck him, had the habit of pinching his nostrils shut and making a reedy, Middle East sound. The only tune he could play in this manner so far was the old dancing girl
music, "Da Da Dah Dah Dah, Da Da Da Dah Dah Dah, etc.", but he had plans for an eventual mastery of "The Stars and Stripes Forever," a melody which he felt would be a good change of pace as well as a defense against criticism from certain overly conservative political student groups on the campus. The Oboe called Trumpet Trumpet because he didn’t like trumpets, for one thing, and because Trumpet was a very extra-curricularly active, BMOC, hail-fellow-well-met, fraternity type of the worst kind who seemed to bray everything in a brassy tatatata, for another. Just then, Trumpet returned to the bedroom and tatatataed, "Get up, get up, getathtathe sack!"

"Up your nose," The Oboe murmured gently and tried to go back to his third or fourth favorite hobby, watching himself sleep.

Trumpet shook the bed and blew another chorus. Any BMOC has to be persistent, if nothing else.

"In your ear," stated The Oboe. All this talk of love and lust was sending him off on an erotic track, and he rolled over to settle himself into the gully of the old mattress and cuddled the pillow tenderly in preparation for beginning a rerun of one of his favorite dreams about the subject. He snuggled comfortably into the curve of the mattress and thought about it.

It took a lot of thought, because The Oboe worshipped and adored and loved women, practically with no reservations at all. He thought that they were the greatest things in the entire universe next to beer and food. He liked best their throats, shoulders, breasts, thighs, and behinds, though not in any special order. He was never so happy as when making love with one of their number and it was a source of daily torment to him that he would probably not be able to do this with all of them in the short three score and ten years he was allotted according to one ancient legend. He dreamt.

Then he was flung upright in bed, his hands out, ready to fight or flee, and every nerve shuddering, shaking, or collapsed. Trumpet had shot off the alarm clock right in his ear. When he collected what few of his senses remained, he realized that this sadist he was living with would keep after him till he stayed up. For a moment he thought longingly of his pistol, with which he oftentimes hunted bottles and tin
cans, having obtained in this manner one of the finest head collections in the Midwest, which included a beautiful pair of matched eighteen-ounce Budweiser half-quarts. But then he gave his bed a fond pat on its rump and, clad in shorts and rubber slippers, shuffled around to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

The trip was made from memory of long habit and without the necessity of becoming conscious. He swallowed half the cup of coffee right off and screamed aloud, since Trumpet had again neglected to heat up the pot. Putting it on the fire, he drew a glass of beer from the refrigerated keg he had installed one day after long thought on the unnecessary cost and clutter of bottles and cans. Sipping this, he shaved and cleaned up, again by memory, since his eyes were not open.

By the time this ritual was over, The Oboe could see fairly well and went out to pick up the school paper which was dropped four feet to the left of the door every morning by some half-witted delivery person. The landlady came around the hall corner carrying a pail and a mop, as SHE did almost every morning, and saw him standing there in his shorts reading the headlines and fondly stroking his belly, as HE did almost every morning. She screamed and he nodded, just as THEY both did almost every morning.

He thought generally that she ran in genuine modesty, but sometimes he felt that she used the entire scene in the hall as a sinful stimulant in her daily exertions of mopping up cockroach bodies and collecting rents, sometimes six months in advance. Collecting rents, that is; she was generally behind with the cockroaches.

The paper's bannerline story was another one which told nothing much except that the states of the deep South still were omitting the last half of the nineteenth century in all history courses taught in their public schools.

So he found the sports page of the paper, tore it out, and burned it in the ash tray. The Oboe always did this if he got the paper first, because he was a firm believer in a high positive correlation between what he read and the state of his mind, and he had absolutely no desire to inadvertently begin reading a sports page some morning while engrossed in buttering his toast and find his brain turning to jelly. Especially a jelly with a flavor of sweaty jock straps.
The Oboe finished dressing and then read the paper while he cooked and ate breakfast. After eating, he lit a cigar and had a cup of coffee, this time hot, while he thought of dirty verses for the university fight song. He had reached six verses, with choruses, when it was time for classes.

Since his first class was one from the Speech Department, concentrating on semantics, he pondered, as he walked, on why the worst speakers, even more terrible than the math people, were those from the Speech Department. Perhaps it was analogous to finding so many sick people in hospitals; people who couldn’t or didn’t speak took speech courses, and those who could and did didn’t take speech courses. As a result the people who began absolutely incoherent took that many more speech courses and had no time for any other training so they became speech teachers. But this process didn’t explain why people who could add and subtract turned into math majors and built adding machines, and people skilled in black magic and witchcraft took physics courses and built bombs. The strain of all this was telling on The Oboe; he staggered a little just as he passed the gym, whether from the fumes or the mental effort he didn’t know. So he stopped and thought about beer for a while. This revived him, wetted his reed, so to speak, and he made the rest of the trip to class without incident.

Since he didn’t believe a word of the lecture, he again thought about a variety of subjects: beer, the girl from last weekend, supper, sex, cigars, making love. He gave the last the consideration it deserved.

Then, the first thing he knew, he found himself watching The Oboe sleeping happily.