

Variations for oboe quartet (1968) 11 minutes Novello
Oboe, violin viola, cello.

The oboe quartet was written just after I finished my degree at Oxford. Victor Swillens, who had played my Soliloquy for solo oboe, commissioned the Variations for his Hilversum oboe quartet. It became a lucky work for me, winning the Cobbett prize at the RCM and then the 1971 BBC Composers' competition; it was subsequently taken up and recorded by Janet Craxton.

The piece is a double variation set, with nine variations in all, but they play without a break. Continuous variation is the idea at the heart of the work. Although the opening oboe theme is a twelve note row, this is not a strictly serial work; rather, exploring aspects of serial technique informed the harmony and the melodic development. The four players have independent characters; the oboe is pre-eminent, but the viola also emerges as an important voice. There is a good deal of rhythmic independence, and using independent tempi allowed the variations to elide.

After the first three variations, string glissandi create a transition to an oboe solo – the fourth variation, but also a second theme. In the *senza misura* variation that follows, all the instruments comment on this new theme in their own time. In the subsequent variations, both themes are varied: the opening is reprised while the oboe has a cadenza. The climax that is reached dissolves into the final variation, *Lento e tranquillo*. Its valedictory quality leads naturally to a coda that echoes the cadence of the original theme.

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