

Auerbach	"Prayer" for English Horn Solo, Op. 33a (1996)
Beethoven	Quintet in E-flat Major for Piano and Winds, Op. 16 *
Saint-Saëns	Caprices sur des airs danois et russes
Musgrave	Night Windows for Oboe and Piano (2007)
Harbison	Quintet for Winds *

Lera Auerbach's "Prayer" for English Horn Solo was commissioned by Candis Threlkeld who debuted the piece in 1997 in Aspen.

Beethoven was twenty-six years old when he composed the Quintet in E-flat major for piano, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon. In an anecdote about a performance of this piece Franz Anton Ries, a violist and friend of Beethoven, states that in the finale Beethoven, who was playing the piano part, took it upon himself to play an improvised solo without telling the rest of his ensemble. The rest of the players simply had to sit and wait for the young genius to stop showing off. The Quintet definitely has a Classical flavor to it because Beethoven had not yet fully developed his Romantic sensibilities in his music. The Quintet is charming and light, and uses the same movement structure as Mozart's Quintet for piano and winds, from the mid-1790s. Beethoven undoubtedly knew about the earlier Quintet, and it's interesting to think that he was secure enough to invite comparisons to Mozart when he wrote his own Quintet, only five years after Mozart's death.

Beethoven's most important change from the Mozartean model is in the role of the piano. While Mozart thought of the instruments as equal partners in the dialogue, Beethoven casts the piano as the solo instrument, with the other instruments acting as a small orchestra. The first movement begins with a slow introduction that leads into a waltz-like Allegro, with the pianist performing soloistic passages for much of the time, while the ensemble plays accompanimental figures. The second movement opens with a melody played on the piano. The ensemble as a whole echoes the theme, but the oboe and horn take solo turns with it as well. The movement acts a set of variations with the piano playing elaborate sections in between the variants. The final movement features two themes, one for the piano, one for the winds. The prominent horn figure here is reminiscent of a hunting horn. There is a central developmental section in the movement that provides a contrast with sudden darkness overtaking the sunny proceedings. The unrestrained enthusiasm returns, bringing the piece to a satisfying close.

In 1871, Camille Saint-Saëns founded, with poet Roman Bussine, the Société Nationale de Musique, an organization established to support the music of French composers, and to promote a French national style that did not draw upon the Germanic tradition. The Society presented concerts of new French music and received the support of members like Gabriel Fauré and Jules Massenet. In the mid-1880s, conflict arose over the issue of promoting the music of non-French composers. Saint-Saëns (and Bussine) ended up resigning from the Society when the more progressive Cesar Franck was elected president. Around the same time, Saint-Saëns composed two of his best-known pieces, *Carnival of the Animals* and his Third Symphony (both dedicated to Liszt who died in 1886), but his life was not settled. Saint-Saëns lost two children in the 1870s, left his wife in 1878, and resigned from the Society that he himself had founded in 1886. With the death of his mother two years later, nationalistic Saint-Saëns moved from France to the Canary Islands and traveled extensively.

Written against the backdrop of this tumultuous period, Saint-Saëns' *Caprices sur des airs danois et russes* (Caprices on Danish and Russian airs), op. 79, displays the focus on instrumental color that was a hallmark of the composer's music. The opening flourishes in the piano part reflect the composer's great skill with the instrument. The wind instruments provide a contrast with long lyrical melodies at times throughout the piece. The Danish music is fresh, with clean phrases, accented by birdlike passages in the flute. The counterpoint among the voices is

extremely skilled; Saint-Saëns excelled at counterpoint. A rumbling piano theme introduces the Russian theme, but a pastoral oboe solo provides a peaceful respite, almost like a shepherd piping alone in the field. The clarinet echoes the theme. Then a jaunty tune begins in the piano, and is matched by sprightly lines in the other instruments. The instruments show unrepressed excitement here, passing musical motifs from player to player in an imitative fashion. Each of the instruments gets a final chance to play a soloistic passage, but Saint-Saëns achieves great cooperation among the players. The resulting texture provides a highly coherent ensemble piece that still allows the players to shine as individuals, and has all the charm and color one expects from Saint-Saëns.

The American painter Edward Hopper often depicted lonely urban scenes. One such work is an oil painting from 1928 called *Night Windows*. The viewer of the painting looks into a set of three windows that form the corner of an apartment. The room inside is brightly lit and more colorful with its greens and reds than the brown façade of the building. The window on the left is open, and a white curtain is blowing out. The window on the far right has a shade which is down part of the way, but the viewer can see inside, although it's difficult to discern what is there. The view inside from the middle window is unobscured by shades or curtains. There is a woman inside, only seen from behind. She is wearing something—a red dress or a towel, perhaps—and is bent slightly forward, away from the viewer. She's clearly in the middle of something, but we don't know what. We can see neither her head nor her hands. With *Night Windows*, Hopper captured the experience of walking down a dark street and looking inside a lit window, seeing for a moment the life of a stranger. This is the painting that inspired Thea Musgrave's *Night Windows for Oboe and Piano* (2007). Commissioned by the International Double Reed Society and dedicated to Nicholas Daniel, Musgrave's *Night Windows* seeks to evoke—in the composer's words—loneliness and nostalgia. The piece received its premiere in July of 2009 at the national conference of the National Double Reed Society.

When John Harbison got a commission from the Naumburg Foundation for a wind quintet, he viewed the opportunity as advantageous for two reasons. First, he was enthusiastic to contribute to a traditionally sparse repertoire, and second, he was pleased to take on the challenge of writing for a wind ensemble. Working with the Aulos Quintet—the group that premiered the work—proved to be a pleasant experience as well. In the piece, Harbison strove to create interesting combinations among the instruments, but to always maintain a sense of clarity about the themes and mixtures. On the surface, this clarity might seem to suggest simplicity, but Harbison's Quintet for Winds is considered by many to be one of the most challenging works in the repertoire. One of the reasons for this is the tendency of the instruments to play in unexpected parts of their range. The horn and bassoon often play at the top of their range while the oboe and flute play below them, in their lower range.

There are five movements in the Quintet, each one unique in character. The opening movement, called "Intrada" features the bassoon and horn prominently, although all the instruments contribute to a tightly wound sound. The second section, "Intermezzo" has an interesting texture that seems at once meandering and purposeful. The middle section, "Romanza" lives up to its name with some passionate moments, but there is also a lightheartedness in moments of contrast. What follows is a dizzying Scherzo with perpetual motion. The finale is marked "alla Marcia," but there is nothing traditional about this march. The middle section features the oboe and horn holding the steady march while the clarinet's jagged line makes the music sound almost bewildered. The texture so present in the rest of the piece brings the work to a watertight close.