

*Character Studies*, for oboe and piano, by Richard Wilson

Growing up with an oboist as older sister taught me much about the mysteries of the reed. This seemingly innocent appendage to the instrument turns out to possess, for oboists, a numinous quality. It is supplicated to but rarely appeased. In my memory, odd corners of our house--cupboard handles, window sills, door knobs--were decorated with remnants of red silk string, a constituent of reed making. On tables here and there were shot glasses of water in which strips of cane soaked. (Knock one of these over and you were dead.) Peculiar croaking sounds ("crowing") signalled that reeds in more advanced stages of gestation were being tested. The futility of this was already evident to me as a child. For I knew that, on the day of a performance, no reed would be found anywhere that was satisfactory. High anxiety seemed to attend every aspect of reed making and oboe playing in general.

My *Character Studies*, written for my sister on her 50th birthday, communicates this anxiety only in portions of the second of the three pieces. The outer movements take their inspiration, I suppose, from Robert Schumann, whose Second Symphony features, in its slow movement, the oboe in a solo that was played so beautifully (and without audible anxiety) by Marc Lifschey in my youth in Cleveland. Thus I have taken a lyrical approach to the instrument rather than stress the less characteristic acrobatics perfected by Holliger and one or two others.

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