

Christopher James

## CONCERTO FOR BASSOON AND ORCHESTRA

Carolyn Beck, Soloist

The North/South Consonance Chamber Orchestra, Max Lifchitz, Conductor

Revised Version, 2011

I Introduction and Allegro

II Romanza and Scherzino

III Cadenza and Finale

Duration: 24 minutes

### Introduction and Notes

Completed in 1991, the original version of the **Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra** employed a sizable symphonic ensemble. I revised and re-orchestrated the work in 2011 specifically with the North/South Consonance Chamber Orchestra in mind. This ensemble has performed and recorded several of my works, and I have long admired their commitment to new music and their first-rate musicianship.

In writing this work, my aim was above all to deal with the expressive capabilities of the bassoon – I dearly love the instrument, and I hope it shows. But in a concerto you want fireworks, so I threw in some fireworks. And not grudgingly!

Like most composers I am preoccupied with matters of form; in a piece of any length this is unavoidable. My typical response is to develop hybrid forms that are tailored to the peculiarities of the material. That is what you have here, with each movement being roughly speaking a “two-in-one” affair, as the movement titles indicate. The piece is also stylistically eclectic. Back in the old days (forty years ago, when I was starting out) this would have damned me to hell; it would have been regarded as tomfoolery. Fortunately, times have changed.

The salient leading motive announced at the outset by the bassoon is very simple, a returning lower neighbor note figure followed by the upward leap of a minor third, thus, E-D#-E-G; this motive is combined with itself by transposition and inversion, giving rise to the characteristic harmonic background of the movement, typically involving astringent major-minor harmonies. The motive, irrespective of transposition, is also present at the head of the principal themes of the second and third movements, and was thus consciously employed as a unifying device for the entire piece. The enigmatic introduction to the first movement presents the basic material in embryo; everything is explained later on. To speak of *themes* in the main body of the movement does not quite hit the mark; rather, there are three distinct *characters*: one is spiky, acerbic, and scrappy; another mixes solemn with sad and wistful; the last is sprightly and playful.

The second movement is my homage to Weber; the *Romanza* presents a sweet aria-like cantilena, while the *Scherzino* alternates a bit of arch Viennoiserie with wacky across-the-bar Schumann. I can not place the specific reference to Weber that I must have had in mind, but it is unmistakable, in the arioso passage that precedes the reprise of the *Romanza*: clarinet over tremolo strings.

The third movement abruptly plunges back into furrowed-brow territory, but it soon becomes evident that this is a ruse, providing a jumping-off place from which the bassoon embarks on a series of hair-raising adventures. In complete contrast is the lyrically effusive *Fortspinnung* of the main theme. The finale is monothematic, as often in Haydn, with interspersed episodes, giving the effect of a rondo, and rounded off by a high-spirited coda.

I cannot forbear mentioning a biographical detail that could hold a key to understanding this work for someone approaching it for the first time. The composition spanned the period when I was an expectant father, and my first year and a half of fatherhood. This definitely explains appearance of the baby rattle in the finale, and very likely the predominantly sunny character of the piece.