

## *With Apologies to Wine Connoisseurs,* “The Bassoon Spectator’s” Best Buys and Short Takes

By Jeffrey Lyman  
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### BEST BUY

**Mozart: *Serenades and Divertimenti*  
for Winds Ensemble Zefiro,**

**Auvidis Astrée E 8529, E 8573 and E 8605**

The brilliant period instrument group Ensemble Zefiro has completed its cycle of recordings of the many serenades and divertimenti for winds by Mozart. From well-known works like the serenades KV 375 and 388 to the rarely heard early divertimenti KV 213, 240, 252, 253 and 270, to the magnificent “Gran Partita” KV 361, they’re all here and they’re all played with the freshness and vitality we’ve come to expect from this ensemble. You also get the divertimenti KV 166 and 186, both of which include pairs of English horns, and which are probably the least known of all of Mozart’s wind works.

Ensemble Zefiro breathes new life into everything they record, and they’ve done it again here. You’ll find subtle surprises and new twists to the familiar war-horses, and you’ll wonder why you may have never heard the smaller works. Especially outstanding is the performance of the c minor serenade, KV 388. They bring a passion and power to the outer movements that will leave you breathless. Don’t sit there reading, go get these CDs!

### BEST BUY

**Musica Non Grata: *Russian Music from the*  
*1920’s and Sofia Gubaidulina***

**Valery Popov in Concertos by  
Gubaidulina and Knipper**

**Melodiya/BMG 74321 49957 2 (Gubaidulina) and  
74321 9955 2 (Knipper)**

With its series “Musica Non Grata,” BMG has raided the vaults at Melodiya and has resurrected two important recordings by the great Russian bassoonist **Valery Popov**. The now-famous *Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings* (1977) was recorded first in 1978 by the work’s dedicatee, Popov. The original LP barely made it across the border from the Soviet Union, and people new to this extraordinary work have had only one choice in recordings, the BIS CD recorded by Harri Ahmas. Heated discussion was engendered by the BIS release, especially in regards to the infamous scream in the fourth movement. Immediately after its release, several bassoonists, this writer

included, tried to make the case that the vocal scream in the BIS recording was incorrect, and should have been rendered as an instrumental scream. The composer soon joined the chorus of voices asking for the original recording to be re-released. At last, Popov’s definitive version is back to set the record straight: scream with the bassoon, not with the voice.

There is of course much, much more to this work than this single effect. It is a powerful struggle between musical elements that attempt to break free from an environment of banal and indifferent accompaniment. There is no work like it in our repertoire, and this performance, made at a time when this score imitated life more directly than the Soviet authorities thought appropriate, is a true historic document. Add to this the budget price (\$9.99) and you’ve got a must-have for anyone interested in 20th century bassoon music.

The other bassoon concerto in this series of music by banned or officially censored composers is by Lev Knipper (1894-1974). A bit more accessible than the Gubaidulina, the Knipper is hardly less dark and powerful. Scored for bassoon and string orchestra, it is eloquent and mournful, and a *very* welcome alternative to the typical slight, humorous music so often dumped in the bassoonist’s lap.

**WIZARDS!: *A Fantasy for WIZARDS!*  
Crystal Records CD872**

The ambitious double reed consort WIZARDS! has released a collection of original and transcribed works from across the ages. From Chopin waltzes to Klezmer dances, the collection is sure to please. Michael Curtis’ *A Klezmer Wedding* is an evocative recollection of traditional Jewish dances, perfectly suited to the sound of the group. Two original compositions by Michael Kibbe and John Corina explore the possibilities of writing for “full-range” double reeds, with varied success. Dinos Constantinides’ *Transformations for oboe alone* is an outstanding solo workout for Andrea Gullickson. It is both exotic and virtuosic, and deserves to be widely-known. Johann Nepomuk Wenth, usually thought of simply as the arranger of works by “great” composers, proves himself able enough as the composer of a charming *Quartetto Concertante*. Transcriptions of works by Chopin,

Gottschalk, and Bartok, as well as an effective opening *Fantasy for WIZARDS!* by the group's bassoonist **Greg Morton** round out the offering.

**Bassoon Quartets from Up North: *Bassoonatics!*  
featuring The Caliban Quartet, and  
*Something Borrowed* by the  
South Minneapolis Bassoon Quartet  
CBC Records MVCD 1116 (Caliban)  
and SMBQ96 (SMBQ)**

Time was when there was a single tape of bassoon quartet music, endlessly copied and re-copied, and loved by anyone who ever got together with friends to read the arrangements by that pioneering group, the Bubonic Bassoon Quartet. Those days are gone, however, and the market seems to be teeming with recordings by bassoon ensembles. Two of the latest feature groups who must surely get together to pass the time on cold winter nights by perfecting their ensemble skills, as their skills are considerable. The Caliban Quartet features the members of the Toronto Symphony bassoon section: **Fraser Jackson, Nadina Mackie Jackson, Kathleen McLean and Michael Sweeney.** *Bassoonatics!* is a potpourri of clever transcriptions of Gershwin, Piazzolla, Stravinsky, Brahms and much more. The playing is superb and light-hearted at the same time, with intelligent programming and well-crafted arrangements.

To paraphrase Jerry Seinfeld, "What is it with these all-girl bassoon quartets?" I know of at least five of them, and they seem to be multiplying. This incarnation, from that fertile heartland of great bassooning known as Minneapolis, have put together the worthy successor to the Bubonic tape. On *Something Borrowed* they play everything from Bach's *Air on a G String* to Pat Ballard's *Mr. Sandman*. My personal favorite is their steamy rendition of *Jalousie*. You can order this disc directly from SMBQ, 438 Otis Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota 55104.

**The Cumberland Quintet: *Shadows and Dreams*  
Wind Quintets by Alexander Tcherepnin,  
Theodore Dollarhide, Robert Jager, Katherine  
Hoover, Herbert Baumann and Keith Foley.  
Centaur CRC 2335**

The wind quintet has had a difficult struggle in its attempt to win respect from composers and audiences, not to mention from woodwind players. This disc is a fine testimony to the possibilities inherent in the combination, and achieves some valiant successes with only an occasional dud.

The conservative Tcherepnin *Quintet*, Op. 107 and Robert Jager's *Mumblety Peg* did little to attract this listener's attention. Much more interesting, to

me, were the works alluded to in the disc's title: Theodore Dollarhide's *Shadows* and Keith Foley's *Einstein's Dreams*. Both take advantage of the textural possibilities of the group, and color overflows from each composer's palette. There are moments worthy of cinematic accompaniment in both, especially the mournful oboe solo accompanied by a drone in Dollarhide's "Abramelin the Mage." Katherine Hoover's *Homage to Bartók* is the most successful and interesting work on the disc. It gets to the core of Bartók's musical language while remaining clearly the work of another composer. The solo writing for clarinet and piccolo in the final *Vivace* is especially notable.

The Cumberland Quintet plays these works with authority and ease. From their biographical notes it is clear that this is a group with a true dedication to keeping the wind quintet alive and relevant in the chamber music world. Composers could hardly hope for stronger allies in the fight.

**Fiati: *Masterworks for Reed Trio*  
Music by Jean Françaix, Bohuslav Martinu, Heitor  
Villa-Lobos and Florent Schmitt.  
Valarie Anderson, oboe; John Anderson, clarinet;  
Charles Ullery, bassoon.  
Jeanné Digital Recordings, JDR2249, PO 32758,  
Minneapolis, MN 55432**

Perched among three standards of the wind trio literature, *A tour d'anches* for oboe, clarinet, bassoon and piano by Florent Schmitt stands out on this release as an unfamiliar but welcome gem. The reed trio Fiati has unearthed a true original, both in its instrumentation and in its musical ideas. While at times every bit as light as what one expects from French wind music of the 20's and 30's, Schmitt's voice is clear and distinct throughout, and is a pleasure to hear. The ensemble takes to this work with affection.

Bohuslav Martinu's *Quatre Madrigaux* is a hard nut to crack. It seems overly concerned with living up to its own title, and despite clear and careful performances by Fiati, the work still comes off as just so many intertwining lines. The effervescent Françaix *Divertissement* and the primitive Villa-Lobos *Trio* fare much better, and along with the Schmitt make for an enjoyable disc for an evening's listening.

**Hexagon: *Les petits nerveux*  
Music for piano and winds by Jean Françaix,  
Francis Poulenc, Camille Saint-Saëns  
and Albert Roussel.**

**Bridge Compact Discs, Bridge 9079**

If it's enthusiasm you want, then that's what you'll get with the purchase of this CD. It's hard to imagine any performers taking more delight in the music recorded here by Hexagon. This New York-based ensemble has assembled some of the greatest hits of the wind repertoire and recorded them with the energy of Labrador puppies on full-caffeine highs.

The final movement from Françaix's *L'Heure du Berger* sets the disc off on its running start. Next comes a performance of the Poulenc *Sextuor* that seems to be led more by a ringmaster than by a pianist. This is not to suggest sloppy playing or inattention to detail: quite the contrary. Every member of the group (Susan Rotholz, flute; **Matt Dine**, oboe; Alan R. Kay, clarinet; **Michael Finn**, bassoon; Chris Kromer, horn; James Winn, piano) shows both talent and taste, but not one of them is afraid to add their own joke to their collective sense of humor. This is a perfect match of repertoire and ensemble. Let's hope for more releases from Hexagon soon.

**Robert Baksa: *For Winds*  
Chamber works for solo winds, performed by the  
Bronx Arts Ensemble.**

**Newport Classic NPD 85624**

Robert Baksa composes the kind of music people seem eager to embrace on first hearing. He has a fine melodic sense, writes in an accessible style and composes idiomatically for the instruments. What seems to be missing, however, at least with this program, is something deeper beneath the surface that would bring one back time and again to this profile CD.

Among the four works recorded here, two double reed solo pieces are featured, his *Oboe Sonata* (1988) performed by **Marsha Heller**, oboe

and Elizabeth Wright, piano, and his *Quintet for Bassoon and Strings* (1975-94), with **William Scribner**, bassoon, and strings from the Bronx Arts Ensemble. Both works are immediately attractive, and are well-played in every sense. What they seem to lack is a second side to the music's personality, one that might provide some ebb and flow or tension and release. This is wonderfully pleasant music, but not especially distinctive music. The disc leaves one wondering if Mr. Baksa has a dark side. If he does, an occasional glimpse of it might serve his music very well.

The other works on the disc, his *Alto Sax Sonata* (1991) and his *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings* (1973) suffer from the same bland but pleasant malady. If most of the music from the 20th century is not your cup of tea, then perhaps this is.

**Bronx Arts Ensemble Performs Chamber Music of  
Max Bruch: Septet (1849), Quintet (1919),  
Octet (1920)**

**Premier Recordings, Inc. PRCD 1048**

What were you doing at age eleven? According to the excellent notes to this Bronx Arts Ensemble recording, if you were Max Bruch you were already drawing the attention of the art and music worlds. It was at this young age that Bruch composed his *Septet* (1849) for clarinet, horn, bassoon, two violins, cello and bass. This tuneful and well-crafted work owes more than a little to both Beethoven and Schubert, as one would expect, but is also aware of musical trends more current to Bruch's day.

As the notes suggest and as the three works recorded here confirm, the majority of Bruch's output is unjustly neglected today. Each discovery leaves one wanting more, and that is exactly what this disc will do for you. You'll find yourself paying close attention to Bruch's every musical word, and you'll eagerly await the next hearing or the next discovery. Congratulations to the Bronx Arts Ensemble for giving these works a chance at greater circulation. ❖