

CD Reviews

By Martin Schuring
Tempe, Arizona

Dvorak
Songs, Sonatas and Silhouettes
David Dutton, oboe; Glenn Jacobson, piano
Bravura Discs CD-105
available from: B & D Publications
4 West 18th Ave., Spokane, WA 99203
(509) 455-8394

Oboe players have long deplored the scarcity of solo literature from the Romantic period. We listen with envy to violinists and pianists and singers as they perform lush melodies and enormous virtuoso concertos. Since we can't go back in time, transcribing appropriate music from other instruments is the obvious solution, which oboist **David Dutton** (who has given us CDs of interesting programs before) and pianist Glenn Jacobson have undertaken in this recording of Dvorak songs and violin pieces arranged for oboe and piano. The generous program includes seven *Gypsy Songs*, Op. 55, the violin *Sonatina*, Op. 100, three of the eight *Love Songs*, Op. 83, two of the four songs collected as *In Folk Style*, Op. 73, and three of the four violin *Romantic Pieces*, Op. 75. Interspersed is a selection of short pieces for piano solo: *Capriccio*, Op. 85, two *Silhouettes*, Op. 8, nos. 2 and 11, *Erinnerungen*, Op. 85, *Waltz*, Op. 54, no. 1, and *Humoreske*, Op. 101, no. 3 – a nice programming idea that gives the CD a recital-like atmosphere.

The liner notes state that the oboe pieces were arranged “with very few modifications,” and this is indeed true. A few octave transpositions and the taming of the occasional double stop accomplish the task. But just because our instrument can play the notes written, should we? For a transcription to be fully successful, the listener must be fooled – in other words, the music should sound as though it could have been written for the chosen instrument. Dvorak, though he wrote difficult music for all instruments, mostly wrote idiomatically in a way that suited the color and capability of individual instruments (although second oboe players may have a different opinion). This recording includes both hits and misses on this score. Many of the vocal pieces work beautifully: listen to the *Gypsy Songs* (especially the third and fourth – the fourth is the familiar “Songs my Mother Taught Me”) and the *Love Songs*. Some of the violin transcriptions are successful also: the *Romantic Pieces* are beautiful and sound entirely natural on the oboe. Any of these

groups would work on a recital program; many of the individual pieces would make fine encores. The major piece on the disc, the *Sonatina*, is less apt. Even with his disregard for second oboe player comfort, Dvorak would not have written the low register accompanimental chattering featured in the “B” section of the slow movement, the development of the first movement, the second strain of the scherzo, and elsewhere. This is uncomfortable stuff. There are certainly pleasant moments in the piece, but as a *piece*, it might be better left to the violin.

David Dutton's tone is warm and vibrant throughout with thoughtful yet intuitive phrasing and very clear inflections, though in some of the more lyrical music I found myself wanting longer lines with perhaps less attention to detail. Pianist Glenn Jacobson is a fine partner, but the somewhat boomy acoustic and distant recording obscure some pianistic detail and clarity.

There are a few other minor problems. The track numbering does not agree between the notes and the disc itself (14-19 are actually 15-20; after that, it's right again). The recorded quality of the oboe is clear and accurate, but the piano sounds too distant and muddy. Octave key water is occasionally audible as are the poor tuning of the piano in the finale of the *Sonatina* and an occasional pitch lapse in the oboe during the *Romantic Pieces*. None of these is a reason to avoid this disc, however, which is a useful addition to the library for oboists in search of new repertoire convincingly played.

Two Crows



Ludwig van Beethoven
Symphony No. 7, Op. 92 Septet, Op. 20
arranged for wind nonet Montreal Winds
ATMA Records ACD 2 2129
available from:
835A, rue Querbes, bureau 310B
Outremont (Québec) H2V 3X1
CANADA

The Montreal Winds (*Les Vents de Montréal*) is a group of leading professional players from that city, changing its numbers and personnel as demanded by the music. This recording includes **Theodore**

Baskin and **Diane Lacell**, oboe; Simon Aldrich and Sonia Morin, clarinet; **Michel Bettez** and **John Clouser**, bassoon; Guy Carmichael and Jean Gaudreault, horn; and **Bruce Bower**, contrabassoon. André Moisan serves as conductor for the Symphony and, together with Bruce Bower, is responsible for the artistic direction of the group.

Here we have an entirely different approach to the matter of transcription. Arrangements of masterworks for smaller ensembles were common in Mozart and Beethoven's time: many famous operas and other major pieces too unwieldy for home performance were reduced to more manageable proportions, sometimes with the composer's approval, sometimes not. Beethoven was certainly aware of the commercial opportunity represented by this practice: the Seventh Symphony was published in versions for string quartet, piano trio, piano four hands, piano solo, and the harmonie ensemble heard here. Although Beethoven presumably approved of this anonymous wind arrangement, it must have caused him some discomfort: to accommodate the range of the wind instruments, the entire piece is transposed down a step to G Major with the exception of the Scherzo which remains in F Major. Furthermore, the Scherzo is missing an entire section (making a three-part design instead of five), and the Finale has had the development section removed whole. From a performance standpoint, this surgery (mutilation?) is probably fortunate, since the remaining 35 minutes still represent a significant challenge for living, breathing wind players who want to remain alive and breathing.

Apart from the stamina issue, the arrangement is quite deftly done and exceedingly well played. Although passages in the outer movements demand a ferocity that perhaps exceeds the capacity of this sort of ensemble, they very nearly pull it off. The Scherzo sounds brilliant and lively, and possibly better in this arrangement than in the original. The slow movement flows beautifully, full of lyricism and drama. Listen to the wonderful blend the two bassoons and contra achieve at the beginning. The outer movements, particularly the Finale, are less satisfying: the music requires a relentless sort of energy that only larger forces can provide, but none of the dissatisfaction extends to the playing. The blend, sonority, and pitch of the Montreal Winds are all exceptional. Their dynamic range and clarity throughout are impressive, so that what could have been a novelty recording is instead a pleasure to hear. Should an intrepid group of readers want to conquer this exertion, score and parts are available from Edition Comusic in Amsterdam.

The *Septet*, Op. 20 is a slightly different situation.

The arrangement recorded here was made in 1812 by Jiri Druzecky; some additions and corrections were made by Antonin Myslik in the 1980s. Score and parts are published by Supraphon in their *Musica Viva Historica* series. Since the *Septet* is a chamber work of more occasional character than the symphony and already includes three wind parts, the odds would seem to favor a convincing adaptation. And, for the most part, that is what we get. The only real awkwardness is the difficulty of the violin part which, of course, is too high for either the oboe or the clarinet to manage comfortably. But, with some octave transpositions, and some virtuoso playing (listen to the oboe solo near the end of the Adagio), a good time is had by all. The more occasional movements – the Minuet and the Scherzo – are so effective that they could have been written for this combination. The entire piece sounds more user-friendly than the symphony (with the exception of the first clarinet part, which is a virtuoso marathon); the fast music, in particular, just sparkles and dances.

All of the ensemble work is impeccable, but some individual praise is appropriate, too. I especially enjoyed Theodore Baskin's delicate and finely nuanced oboe playing; Michel Bettez and John Clouser, who share the principal bassoon duties, both sound beautiful; and contrabassoonist Bruce Bower drives the whole group from underneath with both power and finesse, particularly in the Symphony. The recorded sound is excellent; only that last sheen of spaciousness is missing. A recommended disc.

Two 1/2 Crows



The Montreal Winds (Les Vents de Montréal) *Chanson et Danses* Jacques Lacombe, conductor CBC Records MVCD1105

On this CD, The Montreal Winds perform a completely different program, one that every octet should listen to – a sort of salon music for the present. With the exception of the title work, Vincent d'Indy's *Chanson et Danses*, all of the music on the disc was written in the 1970s and 80s and, according to the program notes, was selected for its accessibility and attractiveness to performers and audiences alike. Many of the same players are heard as on the Beethoven disc: Timothy Hutchins, flute; **Theodore Baskin** and **Diane Lacelle**, oboe; André

Moisan and Simon Aldrich, clarinet; **Michel Bettez** and **Stéphane Lévesque**, bassoon; James Somerville and Jean Gaudreault, horn; and Robert Slapcoff, percussion. André Moisan and Bruce Bower provide the artistic direction, while Jacques Lacombe is engaged to conduct the three more complex pieces.

The title work, d'Indy's *Chanson et Danses*, dates from 1898 and contains the lush harmonies characteristic of the period. Scored for flute, oboe, two clarinets, horn, and two bassoons, its remarkable feature (a feature that unifies much of the disc) is its unusual rhythmic flexibility and drive. Even in the *Chanson*, a predominantly lyrical piece, there are difficult off-beat accompaniments to enliven the melody. In the *Danses*, these break forth in abundance with an elaborate tracery of accompaniment beneath exotic melodies that only occasionally take note of the barline. The Montreal Winds embrace this material wholeheartedly, reveling in the complexity of the *Danses* (just as they reveled in the episodic nature of the *Chanson*, letting the pauses resonate), so that the piece sounds as though the time signature changes frequently when in fact it never does. I wished for a little more wildness in the exotic melody from time to time, but this is a convincing performance and excellent playing, considerably enlivened by flutist Timothy Hutchins, who appears in only this piece. The music is published by Durand.

The second work, *Contrafacta Hungarica* (1974) by Ferenc Farkas for wind octet, comprises six arrangements of renaissance dances from Hungary. Lasting just a minute or two each, these nonetheless sound heavy, square and severe with lots of doublings and not enough color variety or embellishment. That judgment should not suggest a completely gray uniformity: there are moments of spirit such as the oboe obbligato in the *Passamezzo*, and the entire *Heiduckentanz* (whatever that might be) which would make a delightful encore piece played by itself. Ultimately, though, while the pieces are well made and the sonority rich and symphonic, too little variety makes this better background music than foreground. Editio Musica Budapest is the publisher.

The next piece is probably the most difficult (we have a conductor now) and certainly the most effective and entertaining. *Danzas* (1982) by Alfred Prinz, the former principal clarinet of the Vienna Philharmonic, is a tone painting of exotic moods and locations rendered with tremendous color and activity. The ethnic origin of the material is hard to pinpoint – some of it sounds Arab, some Latin – but it really doesn't matter. Besides the exotic melodies and rhythms, there is much more to enjoy: tone colors range from shrill to luxurious; activity is constant

but the texture is never heavy or thick; the sonorities are symphonic, but not in the sense of massiveness, rather in the sense of variety. Scored for wind octet, the work has a spirit all its own – a parade of colorful experiences filtered through a European sensibility and education. Anyone with a good wind octet (and perhaps a good conductor) should listen to this CD and then call Schirmer and get a copy.

In Hermann Regner's *Sechs Ländler* (1986), we cross the line from accessibility to simplicity. None of them is longer than two minutes, but even this is too long. The Ländler has its origin in the country; this music originates in the city, sounding altogether too civilized and dull. This criticism does not extend to the players, who attempt a loving presentation of the music, but they are ultimately overwhelmed by the weakness of the material. Only in the sixth dance do we see a possibility of the sort of energy all of these pieces might have had. The music is available from Mösel.

Alfred Uhl's *Drei Tanzstücke* (1985) is conceived in the same vein, but provides more life and juiciness. The first and third are a little too densely harmonized for my taste: while nominally tonal, the harmonies never progress to anywhere much. But the second piece is a delightful little waltz musette – certainly light music, but not banal, with lovely merry-go-round tone colors alternating with warmer moments in a clarinet/oboe duo. Doblinger publishes the music.

The finale of the program is definitely the liveliest piece on the disc. *Danzas macédoniennes* (1975) by Alojz Srebotnjak is scored for pairs of oboes, clarinets and bassoons plus one percussionist. A suite of five movements, the most striking aspect is the relentless rhythmic drive and variety in the faster movements. In these, the wind writing is brilliant, almost shrill, with the percussion providing support. Very exciting. Of the two slow movements, the first has a characteristically exotic oboe melody to provide interest, while the second abandons rhythm and melody in favor of tone color and harmony. Since rhythm and melody have provided much of the interest so far, this is the weakest movement in the group, but it's followed immediately by the irresistible finale which brings the piece and our program to a rousing close. The CD notes state that the music is published by Doblinger, but I found a copy from Schirmer in the ASU library (with the English title, "Macedonian Dances").

The Montreal Winds are to be congratulated for putting together a brilliant CD of interesting music, all of it new to me (except for the d'Indy) and all of it worth playing. The best of it deserves a standard place in the repertoire, and all of it will fulfill one

function or another admirably. So far, I haven't said much about the playing which is every bit as blended and virtuosic as on the Beethoven disc. Each individual player deserves praise, but the most impressive thing is the beauty of the ensemble playing with its complete commitment and unanimity. Bravo!

Two 1/2 Crows



Pipers 3

Oboe Trio *Intercession* Pipers 3 PICD1

contact: **Mark Baigent**

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Pipers 3 is a trio of three young English oboists: **Mark Baigent**, **Jessica Mogridge**, and **Julian West**. Each of them also plays English horn, and Jessica Mogridge performs on the kantele (a Finnish five stringed instrument) in one selection.

I'll get to the point immediately: this is terrific playing of fascinating music. The opening selection, Gilbert Amy's *Jeux*, tells us right away that this enterprise is at once serious business and great fun. The piece, scored for 1-4 oboes (and played here on three) is written in an improvisatory, almost aleatoric way – full of extended techniques, but yet with all the caprice and joy that the title implies. Unpredictable and brilliant, it jumps from one activity to another never stopping for very long except to change direction once again like a puppy in search of nothing in particular.

One of Boismortier's flute trios played on three oboes follows. The programming contrast is apt, cleansing the aural palate and demonstrating the stylistic versatility of the players. It's only six minutes long and no big deal, but serves its purpose of preparing the listener for the more emotional material to follow.

Richard Leigh's *Kantelaridé* was commissioned for Pipers 3. Opening and closing with the meditative plucking of the kantele, the piece is essentially a set of variations on two French folk dances scored for two oboes and English horn. The range of colors drawn from the small scoring is almost unbelievable: the variations range from wild and raucous to almost still. Dense harmonies are avoided throughout, so the whole piece has an aspect of remote antiquity to it that is entirely absorbing and sets the stage for the following work, the emotional high point of the disc for me. James MacMillan's *Intercession* is the title work and

entirely worthy of that designation. Scored for three oboes and recorded in an especially reverberant acoustic, its flurries of arpeggios and long keening unisons evoke an ancient almost primitive scene that is at once serene and lonely. The notes make reference to the spirituality of the work, and that's probably as good a description as any. With really rather simple means, it makes an overpowering impression and will reward many repeated listenings.

The one familiar work in the program follows: the Beethoven variations on "Là ci darem la mano." Following the immensely powerful MacMillan, this sounds a little pale in comparison. On the other hand, who wouldn't like to have an oboe trio CD on which the Beethoven sounds almost like the weakest work?

The finale of the program is John Lunn's *Trio* for two oboes and English horn. Written in a jazz idiom and inspired by Thai and Laotian folk music, this piece is a frenzy of activity from beginning to end. Wild bursts of virtuoso filigree, squawking multiphonics, really high notes, really low notes – pretty much everything characteristic and interesting you can do on the oboe is put to use. But far from being a novelty show, everything is employed so idiomatically that the special techniques are barely noticed except as adding to the fascinating effect.

The notes do not specify who plays which part on which piece, and it really doesn't matter. These three players are all so good and so well matched that it sounds at times like the same player on all three parts. Everyone has a virtuoso technique with intelligent musicianship and a sound production appropriate to any mood. The ensemble playing is impressive throughout and almost incredibly precise at times. Listen to the Lunn *Trio* and imagine how much skill and rehearsal that must have taken. The recorded sound quality is outstanding, and the entire production (from the cover photograph on down) is a completely professional effort that has labor of love written all over it. I've listened to this recording probably twenty times now, and it continues to give immense pleasure. Here's hoping for the continued success of this brilliant ensemble and many more recordings in the future.

Three Crows



CD Review

By Dean Frick
San Francisco, California

Charles Koechlin *Works for Bassoon*

Eckart Hubner, Bassoon

Inge-Susann Romhild, Piano

SWF-Sinfonieorchester, Roland Bader, conductor
CPO 999 434-2 Made in Germany

Charles Koechlin and the bassoon have a lot in common. Both have been misunderstood and neglected throughout their histories. In fact, many of Koechlin's works including those represented here remained unpublished for many years.

The major work on this disc is Koechlin's *Silhouettes de Comedie*, op. 193, twelve pieces for bassoon and orchestra reflect Koechlin's inspiration in the theatre and literature. Characters from a number of different works by Moliere (Geronte, Clitandre, Arnolphe Agnes), from the *Commedia dell' Arte* (Colombine Arlequin), and from popular dramas (Monsieur Prud'home after Henri Montier's famous *Bourgeois Gentlemen* and *Les deux Orphelins* by Adolphe d'Ennery and Eugene Cormon) appear in twelve short movements of one to five minutes each. The most important literary reference here is to Theophile Gautier's *Le Capitaine Fracasse*.

It is not known whether Koechlin intended the pieces forming *Silhouettes* to be performed together since he did not leave behind any written notes to his work. Koechlin demonstrates a remarkable knowledge of the bassoon. *Silhouettes* exploits the tonal character of every register of the instrument and places the highest demands on the soloist. Some of what he composed even borders on the limits of playability. The unusually high tessitura is a challenge in its own right.

Bassoonist **Eckart Hubner** whizzes his way through this endurance test of a score lasting slightly over 36 minutes and makes it sound like the magic it is intended to represent. Hubner makes what seems nearly impossible sound effortless.

Silhouettes demonstrates Koechlin's amazing skills as an orchestrator. He wrote his comprehensive *Traite de l'Orchestration* (1935/43). Famous composers of his time such as Faure (*Pelleas et Melisande Suite*), Debussy (*Khamma Ballet*), and Cole Porter (*Within the Quota Ballet*) had him orchestrate their works.

His treatment of the gigantic orchestra using instruments such as contrabass clarinet, oboe d'amore, saxophones and a full battery of percussion is worthy of admiration and wonder. Every movement has a different instrumentation.

One might think that placing a solo bassoonist before such large orchestrations would create major balance problems, but the instrumentation is generally of such transparency that the soloist is given free rein for the demonstration of his talent.

The SWF-Sinfonieorchester under the direction of Roland Bader provide backup to Hubner. In spite of its complexities, *Silhouettes* is a joy to hear. Few works in the bassoon and orchestra literature showcase the bassoon in so many different settings.

A lot of what he wrote is lyric poetry, offset by whimsical boisterousness. *Silhouettes* deserves an honorable place in the bassoon and orchestra literature, but I fear the obstacles of its technical demands and large orchestrations will prevent it from often being performed in its entirety as twelve pieces.

The premiere of *Silhouettes de Comedie* took place on February 18, 1998 in a concert by the Bern Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Peter Gulke and with the soloist **Klaus Thunemann**.

Hubner is joined by pianist Inge-Susann Romhild in the sombre *Trois Pieces* Op. 34, composed between 1898 and 1907 and thus stands at the beginning of Koechlin's contributions to chamber music. Another early piece, and probably the most well known on the disc is the 1919 *Sonata*, op. 71 in three movements. Its early composition date reflects its diatonic lyricism.

These two pieces receive solid performances by both artists, although I would have preferred that Hubner take a little more time with the opening cantabile theme in the first movement of the sonata.

It is refreshing to hear these under exploited bassoon works by a true master so well performed. The engineering and sound quality are also first rate. I highly recommend this disc.

Rating: 3 crows



About the Author ...

Dean Frick earned BA, BME, and MA degrees from Michigan State University where he studied bassoon with **Dr. Edgar L. Kirk** and clarinet with Frank Ell. He currently free lances in the San Francisco Bay area.