

Oboe CD Reviews

By Steven E. Ritter
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*(Editor's Note: We are happy to have received permission from the editor of the **American Record Guide** to reprint some of their reviews of oboe CDs on an occasional basis. Stephen Ritter, who reviews most of the oboe CDs for the magazine is a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church outside of Russia. He earned his music history and theory degrees from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1977 while playing woodwinds, and he studied conducting with Peter Paul Fuchs, author of The Psychology of Conducting. He has been an avid classical music lover since encountering the Tchaikovsky piano concerto in his middle teens, and he now calls himself "a hopeless, helplessly hooked fanatic who probably collects CDs at the expense of family welfare". He also attends as many concerts as time will permit and writes religious articles for various publications. His biggest frustration is the difficulty of finding others who love music as much as he does. He lives with his wife - a string teacher - and three boys in the Atlanta area, where he also works as a computer analyst.)*

Leon Goossens, oboe

Mozart, Cimarosa, Handel, Goossens, Bach,
Schumann, Frank, Kreisler, Elgar
various accompaniments
Pearl 9281 (Koch) 75 minutes

The true test of any "historical" recording is whether the emotions and fervor present in the original performance can transcend the distance of time and technological development and still manage to move us. Some great performances are so mired in sound-muck that their once formidable expressive power is all but gone. Listening becomes an intellectual exercise, trying to imagine what it must have *really* been like. Where that magic line between technical prowess and aesthetic movement lies is anyone's guess — different people react differently to the same old recordings.

There should be no problem with this superb new collection by Pearl containing some of the best recordings of the phenomenal Leon Goossens. His was certainly one of the sweetest tones ever produced, as aptly shown in the extraordinary — and legendary — recording of the Mozart quartet. I have simply not heard it better. The Cimarosa and Handel are both given

loving, caressing performances that we do not hear the likes of today. What was it about this older generation? Technically, our musicians today are the greatest the world has ever known, yet we have lost our musical souls. We play it, but we don't know what it means. Perhaps our sense of technological security has removed the layer of vulnerability that made our predecessors so able to absorb the messages of art in the midst of a troubled world. Goossens understands what he plays.

The now-forgotten concerto by brother Eugene is welcome; it was once often performed, and given the recent resurgence of the English pastoralists, I can't explain its universal demise. *Schwann* lists only one other recording.

Goossens left a legacy — his style and sound are what we most often hear today in America and Great Britain. In fact, for better or for worse, this type of playing could be said to form the bedrock of the current international school. But he surely would not approve of the blandness so common among today's performers. His style, while free from eccentricity, sports a siren-like allure that is impossible to resist. One only has to listen to the several shorter pieces here to understand the sensitivity and care that impregnate every note. Of special importance is the dark-hued Schumann *Three Romances*, a Goossens specialty. Elgar's *Soliloquy* is given in the completion by Gordon Jacob. It was written for Goossens at the end of Elgar's life and never finished. The 79-year old Goossens's powers were undiminished when he and Norman Del Mar set this down for posterity. Heavenly recordings heaven-sent. Roger Beardsley's transfers, like the notes, are beyond criticism.

Bach: Oboe Sonatas

Thomas Indermuhle; Ursula Dutschler,
harpsichord
Camerata 404 (Albany) 71 minutes
Baroque Oboe Sonatas
Bach, Handel, Telemann, Jan Adamus;
Kveta Novotna, harpsichord
Lotos 54 (Qualiton) 56 minutes

If anyone in the oboe world ever deserved the label "Mr. Consistency", it would surely be

Thomas Indermühle. His readings, while usually not the most memorable, are certifiably intelligent, musical, and well presented. He lacks only a certain sparkle that would set him among the most provocative elucidators of all things oboe. As it stands, we must be grateful for his presence, for almost no one else is rendering such stylish baroque fare in these days of post-modern-instrument consciousness. Indermühle dares to forge bravely onward when so many non-period practitioners have given up hope of every reclaiming the pre-Haydn musical corpus.

Not only does he play the stuff well, he spends a lot of time thinking and writing about it, as is evidenced in his fine liner notes and well-made arrangements. Some of these sonatas are new recordings based on the flute, harpsichord, and violin originals. Indermühle has re-examined the extant sources and Bach's own transcription process (he believes Bach always did it from memory) to present the most authentic, believable versions possible. His success is enhanced by a performing style that is not a slave to current baroque fastidiousness. I detect tempo fluctuations when appropriate, sensible dynamic contrasts, and a pace that allows the music to breathe — rushed Bach is simply an exercise in mechanics.

Camerata offers a generously wide aural environment that gives equal measure to the bounding, witty harpsichord of Ursula Dütschler. The English Reformed Church of Begijnhof, Amsterdam, offers just enough bloom to the sound to add depth and presence — no needless echo. If you are not familiar with this music in one of its various incarnations, or wish to hear it from an oboe viewpoint, this is a good place to start.

The slightly grating, compressed sound of the Lotos disc does little to sell the not inconsiderable talents of Jan Adamus and Kveta Novotna. In the rather humorous, badly-translated liner notes, I gather that Adamus prefers the Handel and Telemann for their more interpretively lenient structures that make for more improvisatory, ornamental gestures. Bach evidently is sacrosanct as far as the written note goes, despite the best-guess putting-together process that assembled most of the oboe sonata. Nonetheless, Adamus puts Handel and Telemann across fairly well, much better than the two Bach sonatas — especially when compared with Indermühle. If fault must be found, and in this case it must, it would be the technical inconsistencies. The trills are leaned into in a very severe manner. Vibrato is slow and sometimes wobbly, and there is no concerted effort to give us articulation that unifies

a piece instead of confusing us. More work and analysis of fundamentals, coupled with a more liberal sonic presentation (one that doesn't box in Ms. Novotna's fine playing) will greatly enhance any future productions.

Baroque Oboe

Bach, Telemann, Vivaldi, Couperin, CPE Bach
Douglas Boyd; Richard Lester, vc; Harold Lester,
Roderick Elms, harpsichord and organ
ASV 6189 (Koch) 73 min.

The Bach, for once, sounds as if a story is being extemporaneously crafted; we anticipate every phrase, then Boyd changes gear and surprises us. Telemann, according to the fine notes, never reached the profundity of Bach, but this *Trio Sonata in E-flat* gives the lie to that assertion. A portative organ is used to fill in an unnamed third part, and the resulting sounds are ambrosial. All the players contribute to a thoroughly delightful rendition.

After the stellar Telemann, Antonio Vivaldi's only oboe sonata is a slight letdown, perhaps the weakest work of the collection. Although François Couperin died before any composer on this disc, his suite sounds more classical than any other here. The suite, second of two from a collection titled *The Tastes Reconciled*, goes a long way in establishing the argument set forth in the notes that this music is far more suited to listening than to dancing. What Couperin would have thought about such a premise is debatable, but sitting or standing, the music remains strongly affective.

A good axiom is to save the best for last, and this piece by the ever-reliable CPE Bach offers the proof, competing for first place with the Telemann. It was transcribed from the violin (and just as idiomatic on oboe), and both oboe and harpsichord share an equal thematic load, unusual for this period, yet hardly novel for the always-original Bach.

This is very assured oboe playing, quite stylish, and fearless in many places. These days there is something I find exceptionally attractive about in-your-face baroque music with an attitude. A release that exhibits unmannered art that is still not afraid to make marked musical assertions is always welcome. Boyd demonstrates total mastery of his instrument, with flawlessly even technique. This is a terrific collection of baroque oboe by one of the UK's mainstay oboists (and at midprice).

Greatest Oboe Concertos 2

Bach, Marcello, Haydn, Wolf-Ferrari
 Simon Dent; Polish Chamber Philharmonic/
 Wojciech Rajski — Amati 9502 (Qualiton) 70
 min.

A lovely rendition of the slow movement from the familiar F-sharp minor Harpsichord Sonata, performed on oboe d'amore, opens this exceptional disc. The D minor Concerto is Bach with his blood circulating, complemented by a full-sounding body of strings. This version is a double concerto with violin, astutely performed with vivacity and esprit.

The Marcello easily surpasses (not an easy task) my previous benchmark, Jozsef Kiss on Naxos. These modern instruments pace themselves beautifully, bringing out all of the drama in this wonderful music. Dent squeezes out every drop of his pliant, dark-wooded tone to full effect. A marvelous effort.

Though we don't know for sure that Haydn actually wrote this C major Concerto, whoever did had the style down pat. Playfully romping timpani and broad, spacious aural effects spirit the first movement along while the oboe dances decoratively in and out of the main thematic material in a way not unlike his trumpet concerto. It is graced by long, lingering melodies that stretch endlessly. A teasing on-and-off rustic dance brings the whole work to a satisfying close. Dent and the orchestra grasp the full measure of the music.

The surprising Wolf-Ferrari is a stirring romp through the Italian countryside. It has a homespun, agrarian feel to it with just a touch of neo-modern spikiness, full of lively dance rhythms. The oboe is grand, producing a sound that could be enjoyed for hours without fatigue. If the quality of this band is an indication of Polish orchestral playing in general, it will be a wonder if our American orchestras *ever* get their record contracts back. A truly distinguished release.

Thomas Stacy, English horn

Fuchs, Berg, Ravel, Downey, Yvon, Read
 with Paul Schwartz, piano; Kent Tritle, organ;
 Elaine Stritch, narr; Gary Levinson, violin; Peter
 Kenote, viola; Qiang Tu, vc; Sarah Bullen, harp;
 William Moersch, Jonathan Haas,
 percussion/Glen Cortese
 Cala 511 (Allegro) 78 minutes

Of all of the members of the New York

Philharmonic invited to participate in Cala's admirable *New York Legends* series, Thomas Stacy is one of the few who can truly be called a "legend". This man has almost defined the English horn for the music world over the last 25 years. He has been a member of the Philharmonic since 1972, a fervent commissioner of new works, teacher, lecturer, and the most recorded English hornist in the world. This recital demonstrates his consummate mastery of the instrument — a burnished, juicy sound, flawless technique, and musicianship second to none. These are all works that have personal meaning for Stacy, though the pieces themselves are quite uneven in quality.

The blockbuster on this disc is also the first presented, Kenneth Fuchs's *Face of the Night*. Nicely expressionistic, lyrical, modal, with hints of minimalism that don't outstay their welcome, this piece deserves many recordings — but none will be able to compete with Stacy's evocative, darkly woven tapestry. The chamber group is very supportive, though perhaps a little ragged in a few spots. This is a terrific work.

Christopher Berg's *Why Else Do You Have an English Horn?* juxtaposes spoken word with solo English horn. Sometimes the two are completely separate, and other times they comment on and dialog with one another. Elaine Stritch does a fine job with the poetry, making me laugh out loud more than once. Stacy of course plays like a god, though I doubt this is something I will return to again — the surprise and novelty will have worn off. (Also, the thought of spoken word and music together usually makes me cringe.) The piece works, but I suspect it will have limited appeal.

The Ravel *Pavane* will be familiar to anyone with even a slight interest in great music, and Stacy's oboe d'amore closes the book on solo renditions of this work. What a sound! *Soliloquy* for solo English horn by John Downey is a jazzy, bluesy, slow-walking kind of piece that is full of logical sequences and satisfying, quasi-atonal cadences. Attention span is no problem in this brief, four-minute strut.

The sonata of Carlo Yvon (1798-1854), besides being the oldest work on the disc, is, alongside Donizetti's concertino, one of the two major English horn works composed in the classical period. Sounding for all the world like early Schumann in spots — and second-rate salon music in others — it is given as good a rendition as any. This is not great music — one gets the feeling that Stacy could make a peg

board sound good. Paul Schwartz's piano is immaculate.

The most disappointing work is Gardner Read's *Phatasmagoria*, written for organ and (alternately) English horn, oboe, and oboe d'amore. Though the triple play is managed very well by Stacy, who offers some intense sonorities, the work fails to sustain interest. Other works of Read are much more interesting. In this case the many tone clusters and multiphonics, no matter how well executed, are still ugly.

If you are even remotely interested in the English horn, or in the greatest musicians of the century, acquisition of this wonderful collection becomes top priority.

Marcel Tabuteau's Lessons

Marcel Tabuteau, oboe
Boston 1017 (Albany) 72 minutes

Boston Records has supplied us with an invaluable document that every serious music student will be interested in. Marcel Tabuteau enjoyed a pristine reputation in the music world such as few orchestral musicians ever attain. His nearly 40 years in what may have been the greatest orchestra in the world at the time (Philadelphia) helped him to lay the foundation of all modern oboe performance. His students — on many different instruments — are legion, and his legacy inviolable. Tabuteau made a series of about 5 hours of tapes under the auspices of a very thoughtful Wayne Rapier (of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a student of Tabuteau's), and what we have here are the highlights. These recordings, though probably for specialists (made in Tabuteau's Nice apartment in 1965), are charming and full of humor, apart from their obvious pedagogical value. The notes inform us that all of the orchestral excerpts were performed from memory, as he had no music with him in Nice. In one poignant moment he speaks of his "audition with St. Peter", an audition he was to keep in January of 1966, depriving us of what he now graces heaven with, except these sterling 72 minutes.

French Oboe

SAINT-SAENS: *Sonata*; RAVEL: *Pavane*; *Habanera*;
BOZZA: *Divertissement*; *Pastoral Fantasy*;
POULENC: *Sonata*; MAUGUE: *Pastorale*;
GROVLEZ: *Saraband & Allegro*
Kurt Meier; Karl-Andreas Kolly
Pan 510092 (Qualiton) 58 min.

Sensitive, lithe playing. The sound is just-so-bright and perhaps too dry, but a few adjustments to the system and we are ready to roll. And roll we do, with brisk, bracing interpretations that are well thought out, immaculately executed, and technically relaxed. Meier produces a sound that could knock over a brick wall, had he a mind to do so; but most times he is admirably in control, presenting these works with a delicious, water-in-the-face jauntiness. No sloppiness, no hesitancy, and no worries translate into a thoroughly engaging recital. My only complaint is that the Ravel *Habanera* would have sounded much more sultry if played on English horn. The oboe just doesn't cut it. But the right level of pretended French sophistication is present everywhere. Partner Karl-Andreas Kolly matches Meier's suavity every cheeky step of the way.

Italian Oboe Concertos

Corelli, Bellini, Cimarosa, Fiorillo, Righini,
Barbirolli
Anthony Camden, Julia Girdwood; City of
London
Sinfonia/Nicholas Ward
Naxos 553433 - 61 min.

Camden offers fine, alert, bright playing in a release that includes some off-the-beaten-path oboe concoctions. The orchestra is a little scratchy in some places and suffers generally from an undernourished string section but stylistically conveys the enjoyment to be found in all these works.

The Bellini and Righini are smiling trifles, the former a student work (what a student!), while the latter was entered into a production of Mozart's *Idomeneo* in 1806 at the Royal National Theater, used to extend a first act chorus. The Cimarosa is cleverly adapted from his keyboard sonatas by English composer Arthur Benjamin. The work is very enjoyable and deserves further exposure in oboe recitals.

The Corelli was arranged by conductor Sir John Barbirolli for his oboist wife Evelyn Rothwell. The work is not without charm,

though it is hardly from the composer's top drawer. Barbirolli's "concerto" is actually lifted (a la Stravinsky in *Pulcinella*) from music of Pergolesi. How much is Barbirolli and how much is Pergolesi remains uncertain, yet it is nicely constructed. Camden gives committed renderings of both works.

By far the most impressive piece on the disc is the *Sinfonia Concertanta* by Federigo Fiorillo, who died sometime after 1823. The work establishes an enchanting dialog between two oboes and deserves a much wider audience. Camden and partner Julia Girdwood (principal oboist at Covent Garden) manifest in every phrase their obvious bewitchment with the piece. Nicholas Ward, fast becoming a much-recorded conductor (and an underrated one) once again demonstrates his remarkable chameleon-like ability to be at home in many types of music. Pleasant listening pleasantly priced.

British Oboe and Strings

Rawsthorne, Routh, Lutyens
Robin Canter; Redcliffe Ensemble
Redcliffe 6 (Albany) 62 min.

Robin Canter and the Redcliffe Ensemble (with Nicholas Ward on first violin — *the* Nicholas Ward?) give it their all in a program of 20th Century not-so-lovable English works. The oboe quartet by Alan Rawsthorne sounds like an elaboration of the trumpet part in Ives's *Unanswered Question*. The notes indicate the influence as Bartok, but I perceive far more middle Schoenberg here than anything else, with perhaps a Bartokian rhythmic schema superimposed. This is tightly structured, highly organized music that nonetheless gives the impression of being improvisatory. The Redcliffes present us with an engaging, post-romantic reading (romantic plus neurosis) that does little to dispel the gloom inherent in the work. His second work, the *Theme and Variations* for two violins (why is this here?) outstays its Bartok-like welcome after only the third variation.

The angular, sharp tonal palette of Francis Routh is used to good effect in his oboe quartet. The oboe and strings avoid commenting on the same melodic material yet borrow from one another. You would never know that these are variations, but musical logic is discernible. This piece grows on you, leading you forward just as

you are about to lose interest. If the Rochberg quartets whet your appetite, you will find common ground here.

The *Tragic Interludes* are six character pieces on the themes of Warfare, Divide Refuge, Human Suffering, Doubt, Decision, and Pity and Sorrow. These are rather large themes for very short movements, and evidently Routh does not trust himself to sustain a solo work without all of the 70s gimmicks — quarter tones, multiphonics — all designed to make the oboe sound as if it is crying with pain. A disappointment after the quartet.

Driving out the Death, an oboe quartet by Elizabeth Lutyens, almost drove me out of the house. This is strictly serial music, though harmonically static — no progression, just reiteration. There is NO musical interest here; it's like serial minimalism with the worst characteristics of each.

The mild interest generated by the Routh quartet is not enough to deflect an emphatic thumbs-down.

Danish Oboe

NIELSEN: *Fantasy Pieces*; BENTZON: *2 Pieces*;
MORTENSEN: *Sonata*; HOLMBOE: *Sonatina*;
NORGARD: *Images*
Max Artved, oboe; Per Salo, pianist
Marco Polo DaCapo 8224043 (Naxos) 55 min.

The claim on the back of this disc that these five oboe-and-piano pieces offer "a perspective on Danish music in the 20th Century" isn't as exaggerated as it might sound. Nielsen's *Opus 2 Fantasy Pieces* — charming but conventional — suggest the late-romantic point of departure (though with an indefinable "Danish" flavor). Niels Viggo Bentzon's *Two Pieces* from 1946 and Otto Mortensen's sonata from 1947 embody the twin poles of early modernism: both show a strong awareness of Nielsen, but Bentzon takes off from Hindemith's neoclassicism while Mortensen uses French sources and sounds halfway between Saint-Saëns and Poulenc (especially in the enchanting opening movement). By the 1990s, when Holmboe and Nørgård penned their contributions, the innovations of Schoenberg and Stravinsky and Boulez were ancient history and "modernism" no longer in vogue. Holmboe's personal synthesis of folk music and Sibelian thematic transformation is so complete and individual that his sonatina really doesn't sound like

anyone else; those familiar with his symphonies will detect his personality “in miniature” at once. At a modest just-under 14 minutes, this work is a repository of quiet loveliness and deep — one might even say wise — feeling. I will return to it again and again. Per Nørgård’s five-movement *Images of Arreso*, a prismatic and modern-impressionist composition, reveals a different but also very personal kind of beauty as it ranges from the rapid, hockey-like polyphony of disjunct motives to melismatic oboe wanderings over aquarelle chordal washes.

I admired and enjoyed everything on this very nicely played and well recorded program that reminded me how smoothly the oboe blends with the piano — perhaps better than any other instrument.

LEHMAN

Telemann: 12 Oboe Fantasies

François Leleux - Syrius 141318 - 59 min.

These are the same famous flute fantasies that currently occupy around 12 or 13 slots in *Schwann*. Some believe that these were originally destined for the violin. But a comparison with the 1835 violin fantasias show immediately that these works were intended for flute. Authorship has also been a nagging question, yet the virtuosity and skill implicit in these works either confirm Telemann or greatly enlarge — almost beyond belief — the reputations of any number of lesser contemporaries who may have sired these. To my knowledge, they have never been recorded complete on oboe before. Heinz Holliger included a couple of them on a Denon smorgasbord baroque issue that should still be available. We can now add, with great fanfare, this marvelous, extraordinary account by oboist François Leleux.

The metaphysical mumbo-jumbo notes tell us absolutely nothing about this miraculous musician. But his sportive playing speaks volumes. The sound is rich, seductive, and fruity. Vibrato is just right, changing when expressive demands warrant. Technically, he could play the want ads — I have simply never heard such effortless spontaneity in any woodwind recital of any kind. The fast movements emphasize all of the right notes to

produce exquisite harmonic delights, and the slower ones explode with a pure of unalloyed euphony. Much time is taken over carefully-wrought phrasing, and the voice-like declarations of his instrument bespeak great love and affection for this music. Seek this out and grab it, folks. Such communicative offerings are rare in this, and any other, age.

Telemann: Sonatas & Trios;

Bach: Trio Sonata transcriptions; Suite, S 997

Tripla Concordia

Cantus 9701 (Qualiton) [2 CD] 100 min.

Music Oberlin/August Wenzinger

Gaspara 1008 (Allegro) 66 min.

The philosophy underlying the first recording is to pair sonatas by Telemann and Bach to show “two quite different (but complementary) images of baroque creativity”. The Telemann pieces — all for recorder with either obbligato or continuo harpsichord and cello — come from *Essercizii Musicii*, *Der Getreue Musikmeister*, and other sources. The Bach works are transcriptions of the organ trio sonatas in E-flat, C, and C minor as well as the suite for lute (or lute-harpsichord) in C minor.

I feel as if I’m always discovering new Telemann pieces! One of the sonatas on the disc, in A-major, includes a continuo part *and* an obbligato harpsichord part that doubles the recorder at the third and sixth; one of the movements combines duple and triple meters, and the final movement is a witty *passepied*. The playing is affectionate but also unnecessarily lightweight. Two exceptions are sonatas in F minor and D minor for recorder and continuo. The F-minor work’s opening movement is richly expressive. In the D-minor work, the playing is passionate and very convincing, with supple recorder passage work in II and dramatic flourishes from the cello and harpsichord in I.

For the Bach trio sonata transcriptions, one treble part is assigned either to transverse flute or recorder, and the harpsichordist takes over the remaining treble part and pedal bass; in the C-minor Sonata the harpsichordist switches to chamber organ, with lovely results. All of these instrumental combinations suit the music well and the performances are consistently stylish and convincing, generally on a higher level than the Telemann.

In 1981, the Baroque Performance Institute at Oberlin devoted its program to Telemann's music, with a roster of great musicians including oboist James Caldwell, gambist Catharina Meints; cellist Kenneth Slowik, harpsichordist Lisa Goode Crawford, and many others. Gasparo released a recording from this festival in 1982 and I am grateful to have it on CD now. These musicians capture the fluency and suavity of Telemann's music without making sound superficial — that's no mean feat! And the choice of repertoire makes an equally powerful impact. James Caldwell's masterly performance of the A-minor Oboe Sonata (which he describes as "almost every oboe student's first sonata") is an impressive opening for the disc. Another high point is the lively Allegro from the Quartet in G for flute, two gambas, and continuo — a fascinating combination of German (or maybe French) melodic gestures with thoroughly Italian, Vivaldi-like roulades of great difficulty.

The disc concludes with a cantata, *Du Aber Daniel, gehe hin* with such vocal luminaries as Derek Lee Ragin and Max von Egmond. Sound is most disappointing for this piece: the singers must be standing behind the instruments, and the microphone sounds as if it was placed in the middle of the hall; the singers sound very far back and are sometimes covered up by the band. Still, the disc is a treasure made still more priceless because it includes a printed version of August Wenzinger's lecture on Telemann and his world from the festival. An essential early music purchase.

ROB HASKINS