

Bassoon and Double Reed CD Reviews

By Ronald Klimko
Moscow, Idaho

Live! Bassoon Images:

Stefano Canuti, bassoon; Massimo Somenzi, piano.
Stradivarius Datum CD (STR 80013)
(Distributed by Milano Dischi s.r.l., Via G. Fantoli 7,
20138 Milano, Italy, tel: (02) 55.40.332 / 382, fax: (02)
55.400.385. e-mail: stradiva@tin.it
<http://qnet.conecta.it/stradivarius>.

If you needed further affirmation that Italian bassoonist **Stefano Canuti** is one of the greatest of the young generation, then you will want to get this CD! Once more Stefano has given us a beautiful disc, performed with faultless beauty and artistry, and recorded and mastered to perfection as well. The most startling factor of all of this is that this was done in a LIVE PERFORMANCE at the Festival di Musica da Camera di Portogruaro, Venice, Italy, at the Biblioteca Antica del Collegio Marconi, on January 31, 1998! In the footnotes the artists point out that the live performance often carries with it an excitement that is sometimes lacking in studio-recorded CD's. This disc can certainly bear witness to that-it is a gem!

Equally interesting (if not as unique) with the live performance aspect is that Stefano and Massimo perform some of the "standards" of the bassoon literature; The Hindemith and Saint-Saëns *Sonatas*, the *Sarabande et Cortège* by Henri Dutilleux, contrasting these with a storehouse of new and relatively new works with a Spanish and Latin American flair arranged for bassoon and piano by Stefano, himself. These include *Canciones populares españolas (1914) (Seven Popular Spanish Songs)* by Manuel de Falla (1876-1946); *Aureana do Sil* and *Combat del Somini* by the Spanish composer Federico Mompou (1893-1987), and *Le Grand tango* by the Latin American composer Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992).

His performance of the "classics" is superb. In the second movement of the Saint-Saëns, he flies at the speed of light, a recent tendency in performances of this work that I don't particularly like. I think it could be equally convincing a little slower, and he does not disappoint with his incredible facility. But more important is his overall sensitivity to the lyricism of the Saint-Saëns and the Dutilleux. Even the Hindemith succumbs to Canuti's incredible lyricism.

But it is the de Falla that is most attractive to the ear in this CD. The seven songs are characteristically Spanish and Moorish in their flavor, and Stefano plays them with a flair that is totally irresistible. The two

songs by Federico Mompou are quite contrasting to one another and very interesting as well. The second: *Combat del Somni* is particularly striking. With Piazzolla's well-known *Grand Tango*, Canuti ends this delightful disc with tons of flair and panache. This is a bassoon CD well worth getting, and I give it my highest recommendation. Bravo, Stefano and Massimo!

RATING: 3 Crows



Duos: Christopher Millard: Bassoon and Friends.
Summit Records ,Box 26850,
Tempe, AZ 85285-6850. Tel: (1) 800 543 5156
(www.summitrecords.com) Christopher Millard,
bassoon; Rena Sharon, piano; Desmond Hoebig,
cello; Salvador Ferreras, percussion;
Camille Churchfield, flute.

... And speaking of great bassoonists of the late 20th Century, here's another jewel by **Christopher Millard!** In his fourth album, Chris joins forces with other solo musicians to perform a variety of old and new "duos". With pianist Rena Sharon he gives us some exciting new works: *Sonata for Bassoon and Piano* by Lubos Sluka (b. 1928), *Sonata for Bassoon and Piano* by Oskar Morawetz (b. 1912), and *Portuguesa for Bassoon and Piano*, a morceau de concours based on Portuguese folk songs by Henri Busser (1872-1973). Chris also joins cellist Desmond Hoebig for the Mozart *Sonata for Bassoon and Cello*, percussionist Salvador Ferreras for *Tombeau de Mireille* originally for galoubet (fife) or oboe with tambourine accompaniment, and flutist Camille Churchfield in a performance of Pierre Max Dubois' *Petite Suite for Flute and Bassoon*.

Every work is beautifully performed and recorded. I had heard bassoonist **David McGill** play the Morawetz *Sonata* before, but the Sluka *Sonata* was new to me and impressed me most of all on this entire CD. Lubos Sluka is a Czech composer and the work is full of pathos and passionate beauty. It is in two movements: Andante sostenuto and Allegro energico, both of which contain moments of high drama and delicate beauty. This is a major new work for the bassoon repertoire. Regretfully, however, the program notes fail to mention whether it is published or not. Hopefully it is. For me the Morawetz is an interesting, if somewhat less impressive work. Like

Sluka, the composer was originally Czech, but he immigrated to Canada in 1940 after the Nazi occupation of his native land. It was originally written for New York Philharmonic associate principal **David Carroll** in 1982 when he was still in Toronto. In a standard three-movement format, it displays a nice collaboration of effort between the bassoon and piano, but despite the craftsmanship of the composition, its severe and harsh style overall does not have the immediacy of appeal that the Sluka has. I suspect it would “grow” on one, however, with greater familiarity.

The other works on the CD are all a delight to hear—the delicacy of Mozart, the wit of Dubois, the colorful and exotic quality of Tomasi, and the technical wizardry of Busser all add up to a CD of absolutely superb performance and execution. The presence of the recording is also very good, except for the Tomasi, which has a “distant quality” to the bassoon – I suspect because of the problems encountered in recording the percussion and all the exotic “bird calls” in the background. It still is a delightful work to hear, however, and transposes to the bassoon very well. With the exception of the Tomasi, the rest of the works have a nice “concert hall” sonority in both balance and clarity. It is such a pleasure that these wonderful bassoon artists are giving us these exquisite recordings to enjoy! Put this one on your “must get” list!

RATING: 3 Crows



Basson Seul: Charles Holdeman, composer, improviser, playing French bassoon (Soundhound Music, 1806 Mt. Salem lane, Wilmington, DE 19806, tel. (302) 658-3475)

This is a unique CD from a unique individual. **Charles Holdeman** began his musical career as a **Sol Schoenbach** student, but because of his passion for the French-system bassoon, he sold his Heckel and took his family to Paris where he studied with the great “maître” of the French bassoon **Maurice Allard** and one of Allard’s greatest students **Michel Denize**. Since then he has forged a distinguished career as a free-lance bassoonist playing his Buffet bassoon. This album gives us all a rare opportunity to enjoy his wonderful artistry.

I share Chuck’s love for the French bassoon. It has a lovely, nasal tonal quality which is inherently quite different from the dark, silky quality of the German bassoon. To me, the French instrument always sounds more wooden, more “primitive,” more closely related to the Baroque bassoon. It always comes as a surprise to most American musicians, even

bassoonists, when they hear a French bassoon for the first time. It is, however, an embattled instrument. In recent years conductors have insisted more and more on bassoonists switching to the German instrument, even in France. Admittedly the French instrument is more difficult to control, especially in the lowest register. Also it tends to blend less well with the other woodwinds. But it would be an incredible loss to the bassoon world if this most beautiful instrument were to die out. Thank God for artists like Chuck who keep the rich tradition of this instrument going.

The CD is divided into two large sections. The first is called *Bassoon Works* – a series of fifteen etudes for the unaccompanied bassoon in styles varying from jazz to minimalism, to modal, to atonality. They are all beautifully performed. My personal favorites were probably numbers nine and ten: *Rubato* (dedicated to the memory of Chuck’s father) and *Elegy*, a slow, mournful modal chant.

The second section of the CD is entitled *Cistern Cuts*. They were recorded in a unique acoustical space called the Cistern, located in Fort Worden State Park in Port Townsend, Washington. Originally, the Cistern was a round, cement, underground water storage tank, which is now dry and no longer in use. Composers and performers such as Pauline Oliveros, Stuart Dempster, and Bud Shank have recorded there as well. It features an up to 40 second reverberation time, which provides the bassoon with pretty unique opportunities for a variety of musical effects. It is particularly interesting to hear the last cut of the Bassoon Works repeated in the Cistern as the first cut of Cistern Cuts! The bassoon becomes a harmonic instrument with the incredible reverberational qualities of this unique space!! The 19th cut: *Blue H* is particularly effective, having been composed specifically with the Cistern in mind. It provides a haunting harmonic haze of absolutely gorgeous sounds, reminiscent of impressionism at its best.

This is a wonderful CD—absolutely unique. The overall recording technique is superb. With its rich acoustical smorgasbord of sounds it will put your stereo to the test! Bravo, Chuck, for a fantastic creation!

RATING: 3 Crows



Franz Danzi: Three Quartets for Bassoon and Strings, Op. 40: Robert Thompson, bassoon, with the Coull String Quartet (Roger Coull, violin; David Curtis, viola; John Todd, cello) CRD Records, Ltd. (London) CRD 3503

This is a nice CD of the three well-known Franz Danzi (1763-1826) *Bassoon Quartets*, Op. 40, (No. 1 in C

major, No. 2 in D minor, and No. 3 in B flat major) packaged together in one recording. Originally recorded in 1995 at St. Mary's Church, Adderbury, Oxfordshire, England, these are very solid performances of three popular works of the bassoon repertoire. Bassoonist **Robert Thompson** plays with a beautiful shimmering tone and good intonation (except for an occasionally sharp middle-register g). Most of the time his technique is also very solid, despite some minor cracking from time to time on the middle register notes in rapid passage work. The members of the Coull String Quartet provide Thompson with wonderful collaboration throughout. The balance of the CD is very good between all four instruments, and the recording has a nice "live" presence to it. The program notes by Robin Golding, tracing the life and lineage of Franz Danzi are excellent. This is a solid CD and I can recommend it strongly to you. Normally one does not have the opportunity to hear all three of the Quartets back-to-back, and this CD affords us this unique opportunity.

RATING: 2 1/2 Crows



Franz Krommer: Bassoon Quartets Op. 46, and Antoine Reicha: Bassoon Quintet. John Heard, bassoon; Veronika String Quartet with Mary Harris, viola. Carlton Classics (The Waterfront Elstree Road, Elstree, Herefordshire, WD6 3BS, England. Website: <http://www.Carlton-ent.co.uk>

Similar to the previous CD, bassoonist **John Heard** has compiled a trilogy of well-known bassoon/string chamber works in this CD – the two *Quartets* of Opus 46 by Franz Krommer (1759-1831), and the *Quintet* for bassoon and string quartet by Antoine Reicha (1770-1836). Like Danzi, Krommer and Reicha were all contemporaries of Beethoven but with roots deeper in the Classical style of Mozart than their more revolutionary contemporary. These are, like the Danzis above, all standard 4 movement works in the standard sonata form-song form-minuet trio da caporondo format. Designed basically as showpieces for the bassoon, John Heard displays himself very admirably in this regard. His performance is at once tonally, technically, and musically very solid. His full, dark bassoon tone is very pleasant on the ears. The first of the Krommer *Quartets*, in B flat, is particularly curious because the string accompaniment is for two violas and cello, rather than violin, viola, and cello. This gives the work a darker overall quality and allows the bassoon to "shine" even more brilliantly than in the standard quartet accompaniment. The second

Krommer, in E flat major, is with the normal string background.

The Reicha *Quintet* in E flat major is the most Beethovenesque of the three works. The third movement particularly has the quality more of a Beethoven *Scherzo* than that of a *Minuet*. But even here its tradition is that of the Classical style with occasional more Romantic tendencies than both Krommer and Danzi. Overall the CD is very well done. The string accompaniments are as beautifully performed as the bassoon parts are, and the recording technique and "presence" are very natural. I can recommend this CD very strongly to you with only one small complaint—nowhere in the program notes or on the cover are the members of the Veronika String Quartet (in residence at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, where John Heard is Chair of the Music Department) identified by name.

RATING: 2 1/2 Crows



John Downey: The Edge of Space : Fantasy for Bassoon and Orchestra. Gordon Jacob: Concerto for Bassoon and Strings. Jurriaan Andriessen: Concertino for Bassoon and Wind Ensemble. Robert Thompson, bassoon; English Chamber Orchestra; London Symphony Orchestra, Geoffrey Simon, Conductor. Chandos Records Ltd. Colchester, Essex, England (CHAN 9278)

This is a very nice bassoon/orchestra CD by **Robert Thompson**, who is professor of bassoon at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. It features a new work for bassoon and orchestra by John Downey, with "standard" bassoon works by Gordon Jacob and Jurriaan Andriessen filling out the recording. It is particularly enjoyable to hear the Jacob *Concerto* with its original string/percussion accompaniment, rather than with piano, as it is more often performed. It really is a wonderful work for bassoon. It was originally written for British bassoonist **Archie Camden**, and Thompson does a particularly fine interpretation of the work. The bassoon, however, sounds a bit too "distant" in the recording technique for my taste. The Downey work, originally written for and dedicated to bassoonist **Stephen Basson** of the Milwaukee Symphony and premiered there by him in 1978, is essentially an atonal, but highly colorful work. Downey surrounds the bassoon with a myriad of orchestral colors that have a fantasy-spatial-like quality to them. He is particularly adept at not allowing the accompaniment to "drown out" the bassoon, keeping it quite light when the bassoon is playing. The shortcoming of the work for me is that

the musical material, while impressive, is not particularly interesting to hear. There is a nice lyrical theme that finally does enter the work about 7 and 1/2 minutes into the 19 minute work. Unfortunately, it soon moves away from that theme back into more austerity. From there, however, the work moves into a "third-stream" jazz section reminiscent of Gunther Schuller, but sadly also leaves that concept too soon as well. Nowhere in the entire work is there a feeling of "Allegro" or a consistency of tempo that gives the listener the sensation of a distinct change or regularity of tempo, the possible exception being the brief section of jazz mentioned above. It is, however, a very colorful, if uneven work and deserves to reach a larger audience. I wish, however, that the composition had more of a feeling of "completeness" to it.

The Jurriaan Andriessen (b. 1925) *Concertino for Bassoon and Wind Ensemble* completes the recording. Once again it is a colorful contemporary work in a non-tonal style. But here there is more cohesion and a sense of direction to the work that the Downey lacks, with distinct changes of tempo throughout. The wind ensemble accompanying Thompson features some of England's finest wind performers, including oboists **Neil Black** and **James Brown**, and bassoonists **Graham Sheen** and **Ian Cuthill**. Once again, however, as is true in both the Jacob and Downey, the bassoon has been recorded too "distant" in balance to the rest of the ensemble. Nevertheless, this is a well-performed CD of unique works, well worth getting for the Jacob and Andriessen works in particular.

RATING: 2 1/2 Crows



Anton Liste (1772-1832) Bassoon Sonata, Piano

Sonatas: William Waterhouse: Bassoon;

William Fong: Piano. Guild Music Ltd.

(Wiesholz 42 B, 8262 Ramsen, Switzerland,

Tel: +(41) 52 743 16 00. Fax: +(41)52 743 15 53.

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e mail: guildmusic@bluewin.ch

Website: <http://www.guildmusic.com> or

<http://www.zahzah.com>.

GMCD 7154.

Anton Liste, who was born in Hildesheim, Germany, was primarily active as a composer in Switzerland. Following his death in 1832 he was virtually forgotten. This is actually the first recording of his music, which was made possible with financial assistance from the Czslaw Merek Foundation administered by the Zentralbibliothek, Zurich, Switzerland.

Of the Opus 3 *Bassoon Sonata*, bassoonist **William Waterhouse**, who rediscovered the work in 1950, has written the following description:

"This work is remarkable for its time as being a sonata conceived as a true duo for two equal partners. In this respect it is comparable to Beethoven's *Sonatas op. 5* for cello (1796)...There are several features of striking originality. In the working-out section of the first movement the main theme is subjected to successive transformations. In the last of these, marked *con espressione*, the rhapsodic solo line is accompanied by swirling arpeggios in the piano. The central section of the slow movement, marked *Grave senza Tempo*, dispenses with barlines altogether. Here the bassoon rhapsodizes in free recitative on a minor version of the theme to a mysterious accompaniment consisting of tremolo chords. The only documented performance of the work is that given by Liste in Strasbourg in 1822 with the bassoonist **Theobald von Hurt** (1793-1858) who subsequently became a member of the Viennese Court Orchestra in 1840."

I recommend this CD very strongly to you. It is a rare opportunity to hear the masterly artistry of **William Waterhouse**, whose recordings are, sadly, too few, especially as a soloist. No other bassoonist in the world plays like Bill. His phrasing ability, ease of performance, style, and fabulous technique make him a "bassoonist's bassoonist". I have often felt that few bassoonists can match Bill for control of dynamics and for playing the phrase with an incredible sense of "rightness" about it! It seems the harder the music is technically, the more relaxed his playing becomes, reserving the "labor" for remarkably varied nuance in each musical phrase. His tone is light, yet always projecting, and in this recording the Liste work provides a particularly full accompaniment to balance against. And yet the bassoon is never covered or overpowered even in the loudest of passages. Besides the *Bassoon Sonata*, the other two *Piano Sonatas* (in E flat and G major) are also interesting works. But get this CD for the bassoon work and the bassoon playing by one of the unique master bassoonists of our time. (For those interested in this nice, rare, romantic work, the *Bassoon Sonata* is published by Universal Editions, edited by Bill Waterhouse.)

RATING: 3 Crows



Opera Transcriptions and Paraphrases:
Barrick R. Stees, bassoon; Randall Fusco, piano;
Sylvia Norris, harp. Claves Records (3600 Thun,
Switzerland. Internet: www.claves.ch)
CD 50-9815

In his second CD bassoonist **Barrick Stees** has scored a fine hit! With his beautiful “bel canto” tone, and sure technique, he is a natural to “sing” these great arias and operatic transcriptions for us. He is ably accompanied in this task by the excellent pianism of Randall Fusco, and in Donizetti’s *Una furtiva lagrima* from *L’Elisir d’amore* and *O du mein holder Abendstern* from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* by harpist Sylvia Norris.

Most of the works on the CD are arrangements by Stees himself of the original arias, all of which fit the cantabile quality of his bassoon style very well. Along with *Una furtiva*, these include Mozart’s *Il mio tesoro* from *Don Giovanni*, and *Ha! Wie will ich triumphieren!* from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*; Lenski’s aria *Kuda, Kuda* from *Eugene Onegin* by Tchaikovsky; and *Il balen del suo sorriso* and *Di quella pira* from Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*. Interspersed between these are some famous transcriptions for the bassoon mostly by bassoonists from the 19th Century: Carl Jacobi’s (1791-1852) arrangement of the Louis Joseph Hérold (1791-1833) *Zampa Fantasy*, a neat virtuoso work that opens the recording; Frederic Berr’s ((1794-1838) arrangement of Rossini’s *Cavatina* from *La Gazza Ladra*; Stees’ own arrangement of the *Variations on a theme from Handel’s Judas Maccabeus*, WoO 45 by Beethoven—originally for cello and piano; and Antonio Torriani’s (1829-1911) *Divertimento on Themes from Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor*—another virtuosic “show-off” work that closes the CD.

The arias all sound great on the bassoon. Particularly effective is *Kuda, Kuda* as a mournful ballad, the two *Trovatore* arias, and the *Tannhäuser* excerpt. In the transcriptions Barry is able to display his sure-fire technique as a compliment to his beautiful dynamic and phrasing control. This is a fine CD. The program notes, written by Stees and in three languages, are very informative and interspersed with pictures of the composers and some of the opera houses. The recorded sound has a realistic “concert hall” quality, (although the harp doesn’t record as well as the bassoon and piano—some of the notes are overbalanced and distorted). But overall this CD gives the listener a chance to hear the beauty of the bassoon at its very singing best. I recommend the recording strongly to you.

RATING: 3 Crows



The Essential Northwind Quintet (Angeleita Floyd,
flute; Tom Barry, oboe and saxophone;
Jack Graham, clarinet; Thomas Tritle, horn;
and David Rachor, bassoon)

This is a very nice recording of the Northwind Quintet, which is available from the School of Music, The University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0246, (tel. 1-800-535-3171), where the ensemble is in residence.

The program of the CD features an interesting variety of works, some of which are recorded for the first time. The opening work is an arrangement for quintet of the Allegro and Allegro molto movements of the Bach *Italian Concerto* by the clarinetist in the group, Jack Graham. This is followed by the Reicha *Quintet in E flat*, Op. 100, No. 6, a work rarely heard these days. It is somewhat uneven, as is often the case in Reicha’s works, with some sections simply too repetitive to sustain interest, though there are occasional brilliant passages as well. Following this is the *Quintet for Winds* (1985) by American composer Robert Muczynski, probably the most well known work on the CD. It is a three-movement dramatic work of solid technique and artistry, a favorite modern work of the quintet literature. *Quintet No. 2* (1969) by Hungarian composer Frigyes Hidas (b. 1928) is a lot of fun. Hidas is neo-classical, combining elements of both a classical and jazz style, with interesting rhythmic complexities, a characteristic of Hungarian music. This five movement work calls heavily on the jazz idiom for its conception. It would definitely be a “crowd-pleaser” on a typical quintet program. The final two works on the program are *Panama* by Alberto Galimany, featuring neat Latin American rhythms, and good old *Saxophobia*, featuring Tom Barry on the sax, in a quintet arrangement again by Jack Graham. (It’s a nice arrangement, but the lightning-speed of the tempo makes it too much of a blur for my taste.)

All in all this is a very well done CD by a talented ensemble. It does, however, highlight the problems one encounters balance-wise in recording a wind quintet. Both the bassoon and at times the oboe, sound too distant and muffled, compared to the consistent projection of the other three members of the ensemble. I suspect the hall used in recording didn’t favor either double reed player. This is my only complaint, however, in a very nice recording that might bring to light some interesting, new quintet literature for your own ensemble.

RATING: 2 1/2 Crows

