

CD Review

By James Roe
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Mozart Vent, *Transcriptions pour ensemble à vent* Ensemble Philidor

In Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, John Ferrillo once remarked to me, the oboes don't get to play in the most beautiful arias. In its recording, *Mozart Vent, Transcriptions pour ensemble à vent*, Ensemble Philidor remedies this situation. The group of young French musicians was founded in 1992 to "promote as yet unknown music for oboe and bassoon ensembles (mostly French or written under French influence (and for wind bands (chiefly from Bohemia).") On the present CD, they perform arrangements of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* by Viennese english hornist, Jan Vent (1745-1801) for an ensemble of oboes, english horns, french horns, and bassoons. Vent was the head of Joseph II's "harmonie" and worked in concert with two other Viennese arrangers, Joseph Triebensee (also an oboist), and Wezel Sedlak. These three effectively monopolized the lucrative, and highly regarded business of transcribing popular operas for their continued consumption by Viennese aristocracy in the form of the highly portable wind band, as opposed to the, by comparison, stubbornly stationary fully staged opera. (Ergo, a sort of 18th-Century "boom box," if you will.) These arrangements were discovered in the Schwarzenberg collection in the archives of the Cesky Krmlov chateau. They are notable, not only for the rustic sound achieved by the grouping of oboe, english horns, and bassoons with horns, but because the arrangements themselves were made within a year of the premiere of each opera.

Of course, with today's technology, one does not have to employ a wind band to hear a Mozart opera while, say, working out on the treadmill or fixing dinner. There is a truly post-modern irony in hearing these most charming precursors to the portable stereo on my Sony Discman. That being said, these pieces are not merely anachronistic visions of a time when men generally wore wigs in public and one could make a fortune playing the english horn (as Vent apparently did). The singular charm and grace of these arrangements attains a certain informal eloquence, not often found in other chamber music. That these arrangements work so well, speaks of the virtuosity of Vent, both as a musician, and as an arranger. Until these

works are undertaken by period-instrument players, we can only imagine the sweet blended sonority that must have made this particular "harmonie" configuration so popular for some fifty years in 18th-Century Bohemia.

Ensemble Philidor matches the wit and grace of this music in every sense. The inherent technical challenges in music of this kind are never brought to mind as their seemingly effortless performance recreates beloved characters, scenes, romances, and plots from these two works. Music such as this would seem to be a prime candidate for "music that only an oboist or bassoonist could love," but, in fact, Ensemble Philidor offers a long hidden view of the popular Viennese response to Mozart's genius, with a CD that is technically polished, musically charming, and, by all means, simply fun.

latinoamérica

the Quinteto de Vientos *Miravalles*
Enid Ulate, flute; José Manuel Rojas, oboe;
Yamileth Pérez, clarinet; Luis
Murillo, horn; Carlos Ocampo, bassoon
Palma Tica Label

It seems an overstated fact that the wind quintet's appeal is limited, both because of the lack of literature for this ungainly combination of disparate wind instruments and its resultant monochromatic timbre. If I may quote an either real or by now mythical statement made by the oboe-legend John deLancie to an expectant group of young woodwind students at the Aspen Music Festival Wind Quintet Seminar that he lead, "If you make a program of the best wind quintets ever written, nobody would want to come to the concert." That being said, what are we to do, but continue to form quintets, and make the best with what we've been given?

In their 1993 recording, the six year old Costa Rican quintet, Quinteto de Vientos *Miravalles*, does just that. They present six quintets by Latin American composers, some well known, most rescued here from utter obscurity outside their own countries. Indeed this group of young musicians from the National Symphony Orchestra of Costa Rica has, as its self-stated purpose, the "investigating, cataloguing and performing works of latinamerican [sic] composers."

The CD opens with a work from 1965 by Mexican composer Mario Kuri-Aldana called *Candelaria Suite* for wind quintet. This short work has colorful movement titles, but, alas, they are not translated for non-Spanish speakers/readers. (Nor is, for that matter, the very name of this ensemble. The program notes for this CD are embarrassingly amateurish, replete with grammatical and spelling errors.) The mercifully short 17 seconds that make up the first movement is by far the most unpleasant music on the CD, making *Candelaria* a curious and unfortunate choice to open this recital. Its sour dissonances, poking accents, and unbalanced rhythms, brings out the worst qualities and the inherent problems of the wind quintet. The simple song-like slow movement that follows struggles with its complex harmonization. The remaining movements offer more of the same, with a *Rondo Provinciano* bringing this little, forgettable work to a quaint close.

The concert continues with a work by the 19th-century Costa Rican bandsman cum composer Rafael Chavez Torres. He is represented here with his best known work, a funeral march from 1882 entitled, *El Duelo de La Patria* (The Mourn of the Motherland). It is interesting to hear this work from 19th-Century Latin America which, in fact, achieved a fame outside its hemisphere, being played at noble funerals in England, France and Spain.

Venezuela is represented by Inocente Carreño. His *Wind Quintet for Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Horn, and Bassoon* presents a much more austere musical world than the preceding works. Its darkly sardonic and rhythmically driving march-like opening movement closes with a violent flourish, giving way to an equally dark Andante, whose dissonant, unsettled harmonies create a bleak, forlorn landscape for painful outbursts from each instrument. The final Scherzo almost manages to break the gloom of the previous two movements with its rambunctious melodies and raucous cross rhythms, but darkness pervades to the end of this work, which might provide a interesting curio to a quintet's repertoire.

Narura 2 was written for the Miravalles Quintet in 1992 by Costa Rican composer, Luis Diego Herra, and the ensemble's affinity for the piece is evident from the beginning of this bright, charming work. Including a bolero middle section, this exuberant work percolates along with dashing orchestrations and an infectious swing that would have made this a perfect opener for this recording.

The Quintet closes its CD with two familiar works in adaptation: Astor Piazzolla's famous *Tema De Maria*, arranged by Argentinean clarinetist, Mariano Frogioni, and Heitor Villa-Lobos' dense,

exotic *Quinteto en Forma de Choros*.

Whereas Piazzolla's music is infectious in its charm, melodic ingenuity, rhythmic drive, and passionate rhetoric, the Miravalles are no match for its stylistic demands. Where the music calls for rubato and passionate expression, the playing is square; and the rhythmic swing that makes a Piazzolla performance so entrancing is beyond the reach of this ensemble. This performance, though technically polished, lacks the style which would have made it a success.

Though scored for flute, oboe, english horn, clarinet and bassoon, Villa-Lobos' *Quinteto en Forma de Choros* is most often heard with french horn playing the english horn part, creating an entirely different sonority and balance from the one Villa Lobos composed. Since english hornists are not difficult to find, it is unfortunate that more groups don't give their brass colleague a break when programming this work. The plangent reediness achieved with Villa Lobos' orchestration evokes a truly exotic sonority. (If you're unfamiliar with this version, I recommend the wonderfully wild performance on Hyperion with William Bennett, Neil Black, Janice Knight, Thea King, and Robin O'Neill.) Nevertheless, this fiendishly difficult masterpiece always makes for exciting listening. Its technical demands are admirably met, though rarely surpassed by the Miravalles players, which is indicative of the entire performance. Though they play with a very high level of technical proficiency, even virtuosity, and are dedicated exponents of their unusual (and oddly spelled: *latinamerican*) repertoire, they haven't yet achieved the maturity of music-making that could one day make them a world-class ensemble. ❖

About the author ...

James Roe is a freelance oboist in New York City where he appears with many orchestras, including the American Composers Orchestra, American Symphony Orchestra, Brooklyn Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, and the orchestra for the Broadway musical, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. He is a member of the award winning Zephyros Wind Quintet, with whom he has concertized throughout the United States and for NPR's "Performance Today." He has recorded for the Atlantic, Koch, Varese Sarabande, Newport and Vox labels. He has performed with James Taylor, Tony Bennett, Pavoratti (on Saturday Night Live), and appears in a music video of Shania Twain. Since 1993, he has been the Executive Director of The Helicon Foundation, an organization in New York City which presents concerts and produces recordings of chamber music performed on period instruments. Mr. Roe holds degrees from The Juilliard School and Michigan State University.