

## Oboe Recording Reviews

By **Jeanne Belfy**  
Boise, Idaho

**Color Factory.**  
**Jeffery Rathbun, oboe;**  
**Mark Shapiro, piano; John Mack, oboe.**  
**d'Note Classics 1075-51028-2, 1998.**  
**(800) 995-2657; www.dnote.com.**

*Color Factory* is a big recital program, intelligently chosen and performed by **Jeffrey Rathbun**, assistant principal oboist of the Cleveland Orchestra. Set up like a well-balanced concert, the recording opens with a tasty reading of Malcolm Arnold's short, snappy *Sonatina* (1951). Rathbun's highly controlled playing makes droll work of Arnold's three miniature movements—he gets the maximum expressive variety from each little filip and raspberry. Pianist Mark Shapiro matches and complements the oboist's articulations perfectly. Shapiro gives the changing ostinatos just the right amount of hesitation in the maudlin second movement, and coaxes a lovely, warm timbre from the piano. It's good to hear such clean and sensitive balance between these two instruments. Jeffrey Rathbun, who has studied, of course, with **John Mack** (among others), has a very conservative, normal, American sound, right in the middle in terms of tone color, with a subtle vibrato. He also has the ability to cover his sound and approach the velvety opacity of John Mack. Alternately, he can relax and let it sing.

The filling for the "Bartok sandwich" is Vladimir Ussachevsky's *Triskelion for Oboe and Piano* of 1982. Its three movements are headed by tempo markings. The first one, quarter note = 100, opens with the moderately pointillistic, moderately abstract texture we might expect from an American composer born in 1911 whose major efforts centered around the Columbia Princeton Electronic Music Center. Jeffrey Rathbun gives Ussachevsky's short melodic figures maximum expressiveness, helping to interpret what could sound like a pretty dry score into something more. This is a work that bears repeated, careful listening.

The second movement begins with a two-chord multiphonic ostinato for the oboe while the piano makes the linear gestures for a while. Surprising rhythmic twists and turns and sudden hints of tonal lyricism are followed by

unexpected detours into sparse, dissonant dialogues. Ussachevsky's impression of "the Blues" comprises the third movement, which, like the second, is close to seven minutes long. Some pitch bending and an almost Gershwin-esque slow bass line quickly give way to a fast, syncopated episode. The piece wanders on to a quiet end. *Triskelion* is an important work within our limited repertoire. I was not drawn to it initially, but Rathbun's and Shapiro's performance has convinced me that the piece should be studied, and will make a worthwhile experience in live performance for an educated audience. Ussachevsky wrote *Triskelion* in his early seventies, while he was on the University of Utah faculty; he died in 1990.

Composer Jeffrey Rathbun wrote his *Three Diversions for Two Oboes* in 1987 at the request of John Mack, who joins him on this recording. Mack used the piece for his annual recital at the Hidden Valley Music Festival in Carmel, California, and he and his assistant principal have performed it several times since. There is certainly room for interesting, listenable, and challenging oboe duets, and this one fills the bill. Both players are busy, but not unreasonably so, during each of the two-minute movements. The inner slow movement has some rich multiphonics which may be trickier than they sound. Neither of these oboists are inclined to reveal anything of the technical limitations of their instruments to the listener. It's fun to hear such perky multiphonics as are used in the third movement's percussive, accented passages. As for the burning question: can you tell who is playing which part? I think you can, well-matched though they are.

The functionality of this CD is further enhanced by Rathbun's choice to conclude with Charles Koechlin's huge oboe sonata of 1916. This rambling, thirty-minute, four-movement work should not be overlooked; we have little on this scale for oboe and piano. I will admit I was disappointed in the Sonata at first hearing, but several listenings later I was drawn into Koechlin's peculiar blend of bucolic French classicism and modernist harmony. It just takes time. The first movement is a frank pastorale—eight minutes of long lines intertwining the two instruments. The second movement scherzo

advertises itself as a “Dance of the Fauns,” its outer sections rolling by in compound meter. The harmonic coldness of this movement is described in the liner notes as one example of Koechlin’s pervasive use of “bitonality” or “polytonality,” for which he is credited as preceding Milhaud and the rest of *Les Six*. If so, it is a very personal, idiosyncratic bitonality, for it invokes none of the nostalgic wit or humor of the next generation. The conclusion of the Scherzo is nothing less than stunning—hear it to believe it! A poignant slow movement (“Evening in the Country”) brings the harmonic action to a snail’s pace—something I can follow—and I begin to hear late Debussy, perhaps Ravel-like modal inflections, occasionally lacing warm, tonal chords.

The final movement, nearly ten minutes long, returns to the rolling, pastorale mood of the opening. Gradually working itself into a loud passion, it finally pushes oboist Rathbun to the edge of his expressive capacity. This is one instance where a freer, more rambunctious performer might have the advantage. But then the Sonata pulls back for an introspective ending, and this oboist has the tonal control and flawless intonation to pull it off. All thumbs up on *Color Factory*: good pieces, good variety, fine playing.

**Thomas Stacy: Principal English Horn.**

**Thomas Stacy, English horn.**

**Various others.**

**Cala Records Ltd. CACD0511, 1996.**

When the “New York Legends” recording project permitted **Thomas Stacy** to choose the repertoire for his own CD, he packed in as much music and as many composers as he could, drawing from the twenty-five-plus world premieres and commissions he has already given. One of the twelve New York Philharmonic principals included in Cala Records’ “celebration of the orchestral musician as an individual,” English hornist Stacy had nearly completed twenty-five years with the New York Philharmonic by 1996, when the CD was made. Six composers, four of whom are American and still living, wrote the almost eighty minutes of music. The other two composers’ works interpolate striking contrast. Of them, Maurice Ravel’s *Pavane pour une infante défunte* as transcribed for oboe d’amore and piano by Thomas Stacy transcends the rest, even if the composer himself considered it flawed.

Thomas Stacy may have three different sized

oboes in his hands for this endeavor, but he plays one instrument. The homogeneity of his timbre from English horn to d’amore to oboe is phenomenal. He makes the English horn sweet and focussed and the oboe dark and reedy—they mesh perfectly in the middle. His oboe d’amore projects the most melting refinement you could hope to hear during this character piece by Ravel. Stacy’s thoughtful transcription leaves the wind instrument some breathing room from time to time, and the piano functions well alone, just as it does in Ravel’s original.

The other non-American composition chosen is Carlo Yvon’s mammoth English horn sonata in F minor of c. 1840. The well-researched liner notes by Ates Orga make reference to Carol Padgham Albrecht’s study of this sonata as published in *The Double Reed*. Reputed to be the only example of an English horn sonata from this time period, the three-movement work reminds me of compositions by other 19th-century oboe players who created oboistic showpieces based on bel canto opera. Because Yvon was the principal oboist at La Scala from 1817-1854, we can assume he was familiar with both the genre and the English horn. Operatic flourishes abound despite Yvon’s superficial adherence to sonata form in the first movement. The effect is similar to the clarinet works of Carl Maria von Weber. Yvon is at his apex with the lovely cantilena second movement, giving the English horn a particularly fetching theme in A-flat major. The piano takes much of the coloratura, leaving the English horn to present the simple melodies. Thomas Stacy produces a wistful, flute-like tone throughout this work. His dynamics are wonderfully restrained, and the strength and direction of his musical ideas never seem tied to the instrument. The final movement includes one quick variation for the English horn, but the lion’s share of the fancy note-work goes to the pianist, in this case, the able Paul Schwartz.

Perhaps the most unusual offering is the piece written for Stacy by former New York Philharmonic administrator Christopher Berg. Based on four poems by V.R. Lang, a close friend of Frank O’Hara’s, *Why Else Do You Have an English Horn?* is titled after the first poem. The text is recited by actress Elaine Stritch, line by line, interspersed with the melodies in the English horn part. Berg’s take on the urban, slightly daffy poetry is tongue-in-cheek. I would expect a fair amount of audience chuckling in a live performance. Stritch’s seasoned, whiskey voice is ideal for the four odd characters she

portrays, but it's easy to imagine a successful rendition with any number of different readers. It's harder to imagine many English horn players with the depth, flexibility, and downright beauty of sound to equal what Stacy does with Christopher Berg's stream-of-consciousness meanderings. His lines are usually tonal paraphrases of historical gestures, often commenting on the text, sometimes just moving along beside it, "with the listener," in Berg's words, "left to ponder the 'meaning' of their juxtaposition." The self-effacing, "self-taught" composer has more invested than he lets on. The English horn licks, probably more difficult than Stacy makes them sound, are clever, and the dramatic timing that the instrumental part imposes on the poetry makes sense. I have grown fond of *Why Else Do You Have an English Horn?*

I can't say the same for the remaining three works, though each is well-constructed and performed. John Downey's and Kenneth Fuchs' works are pleasant enough listening. The former's unaccompanied *Soliloquy*, composed specifically for the CD, takes the English horn through four short sections, each unified by a recognizable thematic idea. The four-minute piece favors an extended tonality within traditional rhythmic structures and does not sound overly taxing for the player.

Kenneth Fuchs's *Face the Night* opens with a raw oboe obligato, played with a wide-open sound. Percussion (vibes, cymbals, drums, bells . . .), harp, and three strings spell the oboe and extend the expressive range of this large, programmatic piece, which, according to its composer, represents moods suggested by Robert Motherwell's painting of the same name. Fuchs, currently a dean at the Manhattan School of Music, has a distinct compositional voice that holds the piece together through its changing levels of agitation and anguish. The accompanying ensemble makes for an efficient palette of colors that add substantially to the work's emotion. Notably effective is the turning point, a bit past the middle, when the frantic oboe dissolves into ringing percussive sonorities, only to re-emerge on the same pitch as an English horn. This gorgeous moment sounds even better because of Stacy's ability to meld the two instruments; I had a vivid picture of an oboe shape-shifting into its tenor brother. Fuchs weaves the English horn through a string counterpoint before giving it up to more cadenza passage work with undulating harp. Slowly shifting tonal areas bring a sense of

peace, but Fuchs wants the composition to end with a recapitulation of the negative emotion of its beginning. He dissolves the fleeting repose with sinister interjections by the drums and an unresolved final note in the English horn.

Speaking of negative emotion, Gardner Read has outdone himself with *Phantasmagoria* for English horn, oboe, oboe d'amore and organ. Finished in 1987 for Thomas Stacy and organist Leonard Raver, the piece was in response to Stacy's request for a work that used all three sizes. Read knows how to get the maximum dramatic effect from the king of instruments, and he exploits its sustaining qualities to an ominous extreme in the spooky first section for English horn. Then he pushes the oboe into wild multiphonics and altissimo effects. *Phantasmagoria* reaches a frightening climax with some amazing oboe techniques, overshadowed by terrifying chords in the organ, in this case, the N.P. Mander Organ (1993) of Concordia College in Bronxville, New York, played by Kent Tritle. The d'amore has a quieter, contemplative section, interrupted only by severe turbulence from the pipes. The oboe returns for a nimbly executed demonstration of range, and the piece closes where it began, with jarring discord in the organ and an English horn that finally wanders off on a tritone.

This is the last of three eighteen-minute works on the disc. Stacy's terrific musicianship, along with that of his several colleagues, renders the challenging repertoire accessible, though not without ups and downs. The recording is part of what Geoffrey Simon of Cala Records calls "a chronicle of discovery and of Americana," and the top picks of an amazing player.

***Esa-Pekka Salonen: Composer.***

**Jorma Valjakka, oboe;**

**Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra  
conducted by Salonen.**

**Finlandia Records 4509-95607-2, 1994.**

Born too late for the post-World War II avant garde, Esa-Pekka Salonen nonetheless assumes an ultra-modernist posture, speaking the language of Boulez, Stockhausen, and, most directly, Luciano Berio, with a Finnish accent. *Mimo II for Oboe and Orchestra* is the newest work on a disc of six compositions by this music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Salonen's (b. 1958) compilation spans works from his early twenties to his late thirties, including pieces for solo alto flute, piano, and

cello; a saxophone concerto; and a chamber work for soprano and five instrumentalists, called *Floof*. Throughout the range of compositions, Salonen demonstrates a vivid imagination for instrumental color, derived, in part, from long passages of extremely busy notes.

But the single-movement oboe concerto, written in 1992, has an obsessive tendency toward irregular ostinato figures that suggest Bela Bartók more than anyone else. The repeating intervallic combinations also remind me of fragments of octatonic structures similar to Bartók's proclivities. *Mimo II* is essentially linear in thought, as are all the works on this disc. Salonen does not deal in much counterpoint, which makes his rhythmic complexities and harmonic and timbral adventures fairly easy to listen to. *Mimo II* puts the orchestra in the service of the oboist as the other instruments heighten the dramatic action and lend power to the soloist, but seldom add new ideas. It is a powerful twelve minutes of accelerating tension and, despite its dissonant language, would generate a bit of excitement for a live audience both because of the virtuosic display the oboist must give, as well as the music's expressive strength.

Esa-Pekka Salonen has a cadre of young Finnish lions to perform his music for him. Their performances were recorded in a variety of venues from 1989 to 1993; slight variations in the audio quality may be heard. **Jorma Valjakka** seems to do a wonderful job on *Mimo II* as conductor Salonen chases the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra after him. The piece depends, in part, on a shimmering, trill-ridden use of the orchestra, French in character. Pekka Savijoki's alto saxophone work on the three-movement concerto of 1983 is also outstanding.

***20th Century French Wind Trios.***

**The Chicago Chamber Musicians:**

**Michael Henoch, oboe;**

**Larry Combs, clarinet;**

**William Buchman, bassoon.**

**Cedille Records CDR 90000 040, 1998.**

Chicago Chamber Musicians—**Michael Henoch**, oboe; **Larry Combs**, clarinet; and **William Buchanan**, bassoon—have made a good start on recording a catalogue of the unprecedented 20th-century French reed trios. The Oiseau Lyre edition in two volumes, of many, though not all, the works for this medium

is a rich compendium of playable, listenable chamber music. Included from the Oiseau Lyre series are Darius Milhaud (*Suite d'après Corrette* and *Pastorale*), Jacques Ibert (*Cinq pièces en trio*), George Auric (*Trio*), and Joseph Canteloube (*Rustiques*).

Canteloube's sixteen-minute effort is the centerpiece of the recording. While it entertains as well as any of these charming, witty, well-crafted compositions, this trio has the strongest sense of extended form. Liner annotator Andrea Lamoreaux points out Canteloube's unusual efforts of collecting and arranging traditional French folk music. She notes the similarity between "Shepherd's Melody" from Canteloube's *Songs of the Auvergne* and *Rustiques'* second movement, "Rêverie." Like most reed trios, this one depends heavily on the oboe as lead melodic voice; the practice is born of necessity since the oboe is capable of little else. The first movement's florid piping against the slowly moving drone from the clarinet and bassoon sets the stage for pastoral scenes of impish play alternating with soulful rhapsodies. Canteloube, like most of his compatriots, was no slouch at counterpoint. Everybody gets a turn, but the super-quick noodling is saved for the masterful fingers of clarinetist Combs, who has played principal for the Chicago Symphony for twenty years. Michael Henoch, assistant principal in Chicago for twenty-six years, negotiates the extended low register work in Canteloube's trio with unruffled ease. The second movement features the bassoon in recurring unaccompanied passages, revealing that William Buchman's instrument is indeed producing about fifty percent of the extraneous mechanical noises which are annoyingly heard throughout the disc. Oddly, the louder fifty percent comes from Henoch's oboe. Not to belabor the point, there is a lot of noise to make on a bassoon—I don't know how recording engineers deal with that—but a few fresh bumpers would certainly have made a big improvement for the oboe. The second movement "Rêverie" runs the rhapsodic gamut, with plenty of room for the noble bassoon to sing and weave its voice into intensifying counterpoint. The harmonies that result are extended and surprising, but beautifully tuned by this ensemble.

Afer a portentous but brief introduction, the third movement, entitled "Rondeau à la française," lets the oboe lead the others on an increasingly merry chase. With episodes of mocking sentimentality and capricious asides,

the rondo form sturdily asserts itself.

Less well known is Alexandre Tansman's *Suite for Wind Trio*. In four short movements, it employs a tighter, more dissonant style, with driving rhythms and obvious Stravinskian references. The "Scherzino" movement sounds like a mini "Sacrificial Dance" from *Rite of Spring*. Still perfectly approachable, it programs well as a contrast to the more narrow palette of French neoclassicism.

Paul Pierné's eight-minute *Bucolique variée*, as the title suggests, is a set of variations based on a lugubrious bassoon theme. What is bucolic about the simple part-writing must be the instrumentation. Darius Milhaud is represented by two trios in styles quite far apart. The *Pastorale*, in simple three-part form, includes his French modernist tendencies of bitonality and the simultaneous juxtaposition of melodies from different time zones. The oboe takes the primary lyrical theme while the bassoon plays a rhythmically awkward countermelody and the clarinet comments with inappropriately flashy runs. The *Pastorale* concludes on a quick, bluesy cadence. Milhaud's *Suite d'après Corrette*, on the other hand, is a succession of eight super short whiffs (one is less than half a minute) of 18th-century dances. The phrasing is fairly regular but the melodies are more French than Baroque. This is one of the easiest reed trios to perform. The personality of the Chicago Chamber Musicians jumps out in the sixth movement Rondeau where the bold, fanfarish oboe and bassoon parts suggest a brass ensemble, with the clarinet executing precise piccolo trumpet flourishes. Mr. Combs also makes a fine bitonal cuckoo in the last movement.

Jean Françaix's *Divertissement* is one of the more sophisticated and demanding of the reed trios, its four short movements well played by this tight ensemble. The *Cinq pièces en trio* by Jacques Ibert are predictably just as elegant and a bit more accessible. The bread-and-butter competence of these players is proven in the running polyphony of the third movement, where nary an overlap nor rhythmic dovetail is out of place by a nanno-second. The group is at its best in the rapid, aggressive, and rhythmically complex areas of their repertoire. Georges Auric's *Trio* makes an exuberant opener or closer; Michael Henoch's trio places it last. A vivacious, theatrical climax in the first movement brings the bassoon to the forefront, just before an hilarious soft-shoe routine. Auric neatly develops this tongue-in-cheek gesture

into a derivation of the first theme, which then bounds back on stage for a recapitulation. What clever, joyous wind writing! And what a smack-full CD of terrific music! It's probably evident that I'm a fan of wind trio music. Without the complications of flute and horn, reed players can get down to some seriously fun chamber playing. Hopefully the Chicago Classical Recording Foundation will support the Chicago Chamber Musicians in producing volume two.

### ***Oboe Concertos of the Classical Era.***

**Alex Klein, oboe.**

**Paul Freeman conducting**

**the Czech National Symphony Orchestra.**

**Cedille Records CDR 90000 045, 1999.**

Liner annotator Andrea Lamoreaux's lengthy, somewhat defensive justification for the choice of repertoire on this recording becomes superfluous upon listening. Bohemian composer Franz Krommer is a strong contemporary of Mozart (though he lived a lot longer) if his oboe concertos are indicative of the rest of his output. Ms. Lamoreaux has written a fine and informative essay on the aspects of Viennese classicism that pertain to the three works featured. In her notes, one finds a hint as to Krommer's relative obscurity. He became Imperial Court Composer in Vienna in 1818, the post that Salieri had held at Mozart's death. Lamoreaux quotes Krommer's biographer Othmar Wesseley who states that "With the *exception* [italics mine] of piano works, lieder and operas, Krommer cultivated all the musical genres of his time . . ." Those are significant exceptions for a late 18th/early 19th-century Viennese composer—all the oboe concertos in the world won't counterbalance these omissions.

But the oboe concertos, both in F, are convincing, clever works, at least in the hands of Paul Freeman's Czech National Symphony Orchestra, who play with a blazing, but accurate abandon. Both concertos, in standard three-movement patterns, have memorable themes with good contrast, witty interplay between soloist and orchestra, and occasional adventurous harmonies. Though Lamoreaux finds Op. 37 more like Mozart and Op. 59 akin to Beethoven, the Rondo movement of Op. 37 has considerable fire and flash. The slow movement of Op. 59 approaches the power and drama of a romantic *Requiem*, with huge dynamic gestures in the orchestra. Its various episodes present a succession of entertaining effects that are

imaginative and unpredictable.

Johann Nepomuk Hummel's *Introduction, Theme and Variations in F Minor* begins with a stormy introduction that gives way to the actual F major theme, an innocuous, symmetrical tune that is well-suited to the elaborate variations that follow. **Alex Klein's** solo playing is appropriately delicate, flexible and virtuosic. And what else dare I say about the extraordinary Alex Klein, hired by his countryman just a few years ago to fill the shoes of Ray Still? With his reputation built as a soloist, he should find himself in his element performing these concertos with Founding Music Director of the Chicago Sinfonietta Paul Freeman, and the Czech National Symphony, which hired Freeman in 1996. One certainly could ask for no cleaner articulation or smoother technique in these very fussy parts. I would have enjoyed a more expressive rhythmic interpretation, wider dynamics, greater sparkle and theatrics. Mr.

Klein's approach is conservative, perhaps a bit bloodless. His smallish, exceedingly silky timbre serves the perfection of technique. One wonders why, if the recording is so intimate that breaths and key slaps must be included, there can't be a more vigorous range of dynamics for the soloist. Still, technical perfection is nothing to sneeze at! And the orchestra, tastefully and often boldly led, supplies a good measure of sheer musical joy of its own.

Cedille Records, trademark of the Chicago Classical Recording Foundation, continues its mission to promote Chicago musicians by featuring Brazilian Alex Klein and this excellent Czech orchestra. ❖