

Reviews

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Contrabassoon Concerto by Roger Smalley
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Roger Smalley's *Concerto for Contrabassoon, Double String Orchestra, Harp and (untuned) Percussion* was premiered in the Perth Concerto Hall, Western Australia, on March 26, 1998. The soloist was **Natasha Woodley**, for whom the *Concerto* was composed, and the composer himself conducted the West Australian Symphony Orchestra at short notice, following cancellation by the intended conductor.

The distinguished English-born composer and pianist, Roger Smalley, first came to Western Australia in 1974 as a composer-in-residence at the University of Western Australia, after a three year spell as a Research Fellow at King's College, Cambridge. He is now an associate professor at the School of Music at the University of Western Australia and has been honored by election to Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. His compositions have been performed and broadcast worldwide.

Natasha Woodley, born in Perth, is a pupil of another English expatriate, bassoonist **Peter Moore**, now Head of Woodwind Studies at the University of Western Australia's School of Music. Currently completing a master's degree specializing in baroque and classical bassoon performance, Natasha has taken up a freelance career including playing with Australia's best known period instruments ensemble, the Brandenburg Orchestra in Sydney, as well as performing on the modern bassoon and contra with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra in Perth some 3500 km away.

While Roger Smalley was Composer-in-Residence with the WA Symphony Orchestra in 1995-96, the Orchestra purchased a new Heckel contrabassoon and the composer was attracted by its sound. He felt that because it is so rarely heard, he would give the instrument a rare moment of glory as a soloist. And because he felt the sound was not loud enough to compete with a full orchestra in a concerto, he decided on a double string orchestra with harp and untuned percussion.

To quote the composer, "the *Concerto* is in five movements - the first, third and fifth are the most substantial; the second and fourth act as brief intermezzi... Each of the three central movements is based on a tiny quotation from one of the piano sonatas of my friend and erstwhile teacher John White ... these seem to have had the effect of bringing my music closer to tonality than ever before."

Completion of the work was apparently more time-consuming than the composer had anticipated, and at the time of writing his note the preparation of the first copies of the score has only just been completed. The *Concerto* uses nearly the entire range of the contra, from bottom A to top B flat; while the composer has commented that arrangements can be made for a contra descending only to the low B flat, repeated low A at the end of the fourth and fifth movements would be less remarkable transposed up an octave.

In performance the solo part did not sound particularly difficult, but that probably reflects the skill of soloist Natasha Woodley. Rather than trying for virtuosic fast passages, the composer has used long melodic lines and less frequent contrasting short staccato phrases which give a better appreciation of the contrabassoon's characteristics. When the solo part moves into the upper register of the instrument it occasionally becomes more difficult for it to be distinguished above the accompanying ensemble; this appears, though, to be a deliberate intention of the composer, seeking recognition of the solo instrument through temporary resolution of the normal soloist/orchestra duel. Smalley's scoring also revealed some lovely movements of sonority, e.g. contrasting the soloist with double basses in the first movement, and with the harp in various parts of the work. Particularly noteworthy in the extended last movement, entitled *Elegy*, the staccato use of the bottom notes is contrasted with sharp sounds from the unpitched percussion and legato concluding phrases from the harp. The latter has a prominent role in the *Concerto*, almost approaching that of a secondary soloist.

The serious development of the musical material, as the composer has noted, is carried out mainly in the first, third and fifth movements (*March*, *Barcarolle*, and *Elegy*); there are some good, light, contrabassoon jokes in the characteristic Tango and Waltz which constitute the second and fourth movements. The mood

changes dramatically in the final *Elegy* where Smalley's characteristically modified tonality is less notable than the change to an intense, dramatic, almost tragic mood. Yet overall, this twenty-five-minute long work is eminently approachable and appropriately it received a very enthusiastic welcome from the audience at its premiere performance. All in all, we have been given a very welcome and significant addition to the slim repertoire for solo contrabassoon.

Donald Casson
(North Fremantle, Western Australia)

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**International Double Reed Society
25th Anniversary
Crystal Records CD 870, copyright 1997.**

Trio for Hautbois, Basson et Piano (1994)

Jean Françaix (born 1912)

John Mack, oboe

David McGill, bassoon

Elizabeth DeMio, piano

Six Arias from The Barber of Seville (1816)

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868) arranged for two bassoons by François René Gebauer (1777-1823)

Stefano Canuti and Sergio Azzolini, bassoons

Duo Pour Hautbois et Bassoon (1957)

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Alex Klein, oboe

George Sakakeeny, bassoon

Trio for Piano, Oboe and Bassoon (1994)

André Previn (born 1930)

Cynthia Koledo DeAlmeida, oboe

Nancy Goeres, bassoon

André Previn, piano

Reviewing a recording of this caliber is a sheer delight. The CD was produced by the International Double Reed Society in celebration of its 25th anniversary. It is a collection of virtuosic showpieces performed by some of the greatest double reed players of today. This recording certainly dispels the all too frequent notion that oboes and bassoon cannot execute technical passages. Perhaps this CD's only flaws are that, with the exception of the two bassoonists performing the Rossini, all of the artists are currently performing in the United States and again, with the exception of the Rossini, all of the works are from the second half of the twentieth century. The recording quality is excellent and consistent throughout.

It is interesting to note that there are two trios for oboe, bassoon and piano included in this recording. It is not a common combination, but nonetheless not rare. Jean Françaix expressed his opinion of this instrumentation in notes provided for the premiere performance of his Trio at the 1995 International Double Reed Society Festival in Rotterdam. He said, "This instrument combination is better balanced than that with Violin-Cello-Piano. In fact, the two string instruments are often engulfed by the power of the Steinways, whereas the oboe and bassoon are able to make head against them without obliging them to play on velvet legs, what too many pianists hate."

The Françaix *Trio pour Hautbois, Basson et Piano*, from 1994, was the result of a commission from the International Double Reed Society in cooperation with the British Double Reed Society, IDRS Deutschland e.v., the Japan Bassoon Society and the 24th International Double Reed Festival of Rotterdam. This is the premiere recording of the *Trio*, which had its world premiere at the Festival in Rotterdam in 1995. The *Trio pour Hautbois, Basson et Piano* is very French and very Françaix. It demands technical facility and lyric expression from all three players. The first movement is marked "Adagio," but is only adagio for a short introduction. It then leaps into a spirited display. "Resolute," the second movement is another rhythmic romp. The third movement is pensive and introspective with beautiful melodic lines for the wind instruments. The Finale is another playful showcase for the trio. Mr. Mack, Mr. McGill and Mrs. DeMio met the challenges of this work while managing to make their work seem effortless. All three performers have held faculty positions at the Cleveland Institute of Music. **John Mack**, oboe, has been principal oboe of the Cleveland Orchestra since 1965. **David McGill** is currently principal bassoon of the Chicago Symphony and has held similar positions in the Cleveland Orchestra and the Toronto Symphony. Elizabeth DeMio is an active soloist and performs with the Plymouth Trio with Mr. Mack.

It is likely that François René Gebauer transcribed Rossini's *Six Arias from The Barber of Seville* for his students at the Paris Conservatoire. The familiarity of these arias and the lyric, yet technical nature of these duets provide great contrast to the remaining works on the recording. The two Italian bassoonists, **Stefano Canuti** and **Sergio Azzolini** have divided the arias so that they each play the first

bassoon on three of them. They demonstrate great expression, technical facility and panache. Mr. Canuti is primarily a solo and chamber music performer. In addition to a solo career, Mr. Azzolini teaches bassoon at the State College of Music in Stuttgart.

Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Duo pour Hautbois et Basson* was written late in his career. This work incorporates the contrapuntal and rhythmic complexities typical of the works of Villa-Lobos. The two performers show sensitivity and variety in their performances of the three movement work. The first movement, "Allegro," is almost a melodic competition between the two voices. The second movement, "Lento," is more of a collaboration of the two instruments. The third movement, "Allegro Vivace," combines the collaborative sense and the almost adversarial roles of the two voices. Some sections have the oboe and bassoon reacting to each others' lines while other sections require the two instruments to join forces. Because of this contrast of treatment of the two voices, the third movement is perhaps the most intriguing. **Alex Klein** is principal oboe of the Chicago Symphony, a position he acquired after establishing a distinguished career as a performer and teacher. **George Sakakeeny** is the bassoon professor at Oberlin College and principal bassoon of the Pro Musica Chamber Orchestra of Columbus. He has performed and recorded extensively worldwide.

André Previn is the pianist for his *Trio for Piano, Oboe and Bassoon*. He is joined by two members of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, **Cynthia Koledo DeAlmeida**, oboe and **Nancy Goeres**, bassoon. The *Trio* was commissioned in

1994 by the Orchestra of St. Luke's the National Endowment for the Arts and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust. It was premiered in 1996 by the Orchestra of St. Luke's. Mr. Previn has written a work that is very French in character, but also very definitely American. It is a jazzy, rhythmic and demanding work showcasing all three instruments. The first movement, "Lively," has a distinctly French flavor, with a vitality and freshness of rhythm and melody. The second movement is very pensive and fairly stark in comparison to the outer movements. The program notes indicate that the initial oboe entrance is marked "lonely" and that this is fitting for the entire movement. It is somber, yet transparent - terrific contrast to the fast movements. The finale, "Jaunty," is a piece you are thankful never appeared on a musical dictation exam. It is very complex melodically and rhythmically, changing meter almost every measure. This movement has the most jazz influence, having contrasting sections of jazzy, rhythmic riffs and more subdued interludes that should leave the listener smiling.

In fact, this entire CD should leave the listener smiling. The quality of literature and the performances are top-notch. Any double reed player can be inspired by the performances on this recording and any musician should be impressed by the musicality and facility of the performers.

*Review by P. Bailey Sorton
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