

Oboe Recording Reviews

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Jiri Tancibudek: The Landmark Recordings. **Jiri Tancibudek**, oboe; Adelaide Chamber Orchestra; Daniel Blumenthal and Noreen Stokes, piano. Australian Heritage ABC Classics 461 703-2, 2001.

In my hands is a copy of the above CD belonging to **Dan Stolper**, a gift from **Jiri Tancibudek**. The liner notes outline an unusual career, that of the Czech expatriate who fled the Communist regime with his wife in 1950, walking across the border into West Germany for thirty hours, carrying only an oboe. The former principal oboist in the Czech Opera and the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra landed in Australia, becoming the oboe teacher at New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music in Sydney. From there his performing career expanded, as he soloed with various major orchestras and spent many years as principal in the Melbourne Symphony and as a member of the University of Adelaide Wind Quintet. His greatest impact on the discipline of oboe playing seems to rest, first, in the strength of his teaching in Australia, setting a standard for the development of many professional oboists in that country, and second, in inspiring the composition of one of the most useful and delightful oboe concertos, written by his countryman, Bohuslav Martinu.

So for the definitive recording of the *Concerto for Oboe and Small Orchestra*, look no further than this Australian Heritage label. The Adelaide Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Elyakum Shapirra supported this 1976 performance of the work, made twenty years after its premiere with Tancibudek and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The oboist himself contributed a good bit of information about the inception and early life of the concerto to the well-planned liner notes by Anna-Lisa Whiting. Here is the performance with the correct notes, some of which are not in the published score. Here also is the original double cadenza in the third movement, left out of the published version, according to Tancibudek, at his suggestion.

It could not have been more than a year or two after this 1976 recording that I first heard the Martinu *Oboe Concerto* myself, as played by **Marion Gibson** with the Louisville Orchestra. The excitement of hearing a live oboe concerto for the first time in a professional performance has not left me; Martinu's work encourages that reaction with its bustling, trumpet-laced opening. How wonderful to experi-

ence Jiri Tancibudek's strong, clear timbre begin the high B-flat! His guileless clarity, robust and warm, is not unlike the way I remember Marion's sound some quarter century ago. His approach is straightforward, clean, and accurate. The movement is over too soon, its fresh syncopations and poignant tonal touch-points fleeting.

The second movement is extraordinarily well-played by oboist and orchestra alike. Filled with somber, dark effects, the score calls for extensive solo horn and careful pacing. The oboe part is perfectly balanced against the orchestra, every note in the passionate diatribe distinctly rendered. Tancibudek's high notes are strong and full, his low register large but focused. From the marvelous confusion of dissonant, off-beat two-note gestures passed around the orchestra in the third movement emerges the jubilant, frothy oboe first theme. The liner notes describe the style as incorporating elements of Czech polka music and make reference to Martin's interest in American jazz. That the Czech expatriate composer absorbed the lessons of his French teachers and the Western popular music of his time is certainly evident to the casual listener as well to the scholar.

This recording also offers two chestnuts and two novelties: Haydn and Britten; Feld and Sutherland. Tancibudek's (attr. to) Haydn *Concerto*, recorded in 1979 with the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra under Richard Divall, follows Evelyn Rothwell's edition mostly to the letter, including cadenzas. One of the least convincing licks in the first movement cadenza has been eliminated; Tancibudek was no slave to the score. It is an open, honest performance, tempi normal, sans surprises—the sort of recording one could offer to a student and say, “this is the right way to do it,” without reservations. I would prefer slower trills in the slow movement, but that's splitting hairs.

The intelligent liner notes tell the vital facts surrounding Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*: it was composed in the midst of *Billy Budd* for **Joy Boughton**, and here are the basics on *Ovid*, and some programmatic issues in the pieces. Tancibudek plays “Pan” with exuberant virtuosity, “Phaeton” receives a carefully studied tempo (and takes on a more meaningful shape as a result), “Niobe” gets a little too steely (or too closely miked in 1977), “Bacchus” is very straight-forward, “Narcissus” like “Niobe” suffers from a timbral harshness in the louder sections, and “Arethusa” lends itself more to this approach with

its magnificent, almost perpetual motion before the final cadence.

Jindrich Feld's *Oboe Sonata* of 1982 sounds like it belongs to an earlier era with its old-fashioned twelve-tone counterpoint between oboe and piano. It has traditional thematic character within the dissonant idiom, the oboe spinning long, expressive lines against percussive piano parts, then later dissolving into pointillistic gestures. This Czech composer met his countryman Tancibudek while Composer in Residence at the University of Adelaide in the late 1960s. Described as one who understands the importance of a more international approach to composition, he dedicated his sonata to Tancibudek, who plays it with conviction, assisted by able pianist David Blumenthal. In contrast to the Krenek-like atonality of Feld's piece, the concluding *Sonatina* by Australian pianist-composer Margaret Sutherland, recorded in 1976 with pianist Noreen Stokes, follows the neoclassicism of the British and French schools, with a hint of Hindemith. She is brief and to the point with her 1954 three-movement piece, but not predictable or derivative. The lively, technical first movement is succeeded by a three-minute slow movement with original harmonic material worthy of its name, "Singly." The *Sonatina's* last short movement has the oboe and piano trading driving, irregular phrases and moving to extended chromatic relationships in a surprising conclusion.

Fine, historic oboe playing, wonderfully diverse, meaningful repertoire, beautiful packaging with good liner notes and loads of engaging photographs, and not just incidentally excellent orchestral work put this CD on a must-have list. Much good oboe-playing is coming out of Australia these days, and this individual played a big role in making that happen.

Joseph Robinson: Principal Oboe New York Philharmonic. **Joseph Robinson**, oboe; Pedja Muzijevic, piano; Jeanne Baxtresser, flute; **David Carroll**, bassoon. New York Legends by Cala Records CACD0518, 1998.

The "New York Legends" (with principal players of the New York Philharmonic) Series continues with **Joseph Robinson** in a program of modest 20th-century recital pieces. It is hard to believe that nearly a quarter of a century has passed since Robinson took the permanent position left by the late **Harold Gombert**, perhaps even harder to process the fact that interim principal **Ronald Roseman** is no longer living. Robinson's biographical notes emphasize the respect he has earned as a humanitarian through his work in arts administration. His list of teachers includes **Marcel Tabuteau**. Also a pupil of **John Mack**, he invites comparison by opening the disc with Saint-Saens' *Sonata*, op. 166. His first movement tempo is brisk, but smooth, with a precise attention

to the long line, and delicate control of *accelerando* and *ritardando*, from a meaningful lingering on one note to a masterful drive in the *stringendo*. There seems to be an odd note at the bottom of the first descending triplet arpeggio-how strange! It flashes by with a peculiar twist every time I listen to it. His second movement *cadenza* is refreshing in its rhythmic direction; the *Allegretto* moves along but has plenty of space to breath at various phrase points. In comparison to John Mack's classic recording, Robinson, within his ever-so-refined parameters, takes more expressive chances, and offers a coquettishly clipped interpretation of the dotted-eighth/sixteenth-note figure. His tone, like his teacher's, is velvety and completely homogeneous throughout the registers, effortless in articulation as well as *legato*. But there is a little more grit in Robinson's sound, a tad more character. Pedja Muzijevic (given no biographical space in the liner notes) seems always in exactly the place the oboist would have wanted him. The second movement concludes as written, with the piano chord sounding on the release of the oboe's last note, rather than sounding early and releasing with the oboe, as some others have recorded it.

Two outstanding trios for oboe, one other woodwind, and piano, grace this album, those of Madeleine Dring and her aesthetic forbear, Francis Poulenc. Dring's *Trio* needs a fine recording like this one-it is all its commission intended, "contemporary but audience-friendly," and should be more widely known. Dring, the wife of London Symphony oboist **Roger Lord**, simply wrote well for the instrument. This delightful performance features former New York Philharmonic flutist Jeanne Baxtresser along with Robinson and pianist Muzijevic. The first movement rollicks along with its witty turns of phrase and sinuous twining between flute and oboe, underpinned by the piano's irregular boom-chick accompaniment. The second movement's bitter-sweet nostalgic theme is amplified by the juicy chordal piano part, but suffers from too many exaggerated phrase endings. Sometimes a meaningful idea might be stronger left unadorned. Throughout the third movement one wonders how the two woodwind players managed to articulate with their tongues stuck so firmly in cheek! Baxtresser and Robinson make short work of Dring's parodies of flashy flute fluff and ubiquitous oboe licks. What a marvelous sense of humor Madeleine Dring must have had, and would that she had stayed longer!

Pianist Muzijevic has definite ideas about Poulenc's *Trio for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano*. It's fun to hear such aggressive piano playing and so many sticky, rolled chords. Bassoonist **David Carroll**, former associate principal of the New York Philharmonic, gives a deft reading of his alternately cantabile or acrobatic part. A judicious tempo is chosen for the

circus-like last movement, making it carefree without scrambling.

The rest of the collection is devoted to works for oboe and piano, including a number of smaller character pieces. Walter Piston's *Suite* is offered-good to have another interpretation of this set of miniatures available. The Prelude is brisk, with Robinson letting go of his covered sound as both instruments take advantage of more resonant acoustics at one of the two recording venues listed. Still, the oboist's melting, limber tone gives him a wider range of expressive extremes in dynamics and articulation than the last performance of this work I reviewed. Piston's score has much substance in sophisticated harmony and counterpoint with minimal business; Robinson and Muzijevic make the most of it.

William Grant Still's *Incantation and Dance* also becomes a far more interesting work than I had previously thought in the hands of these musicians. Consisting of a rhapsodic introduction with evocative modal flourishes, followed by an oddly-accented fast section framing a central recitative, the five-minute character piece makes good recital material. Frank

Martin's *Petite complainte* has a similar pattern of two sections, slow and free-sounding followed by a moderate dance-like part. Benjamin Godard's *Légende pastorale*, a popular recital piece from days gone by, sounds like it. Tastefully and romantically rendered, its sentiment is nonetheless a cliché almost beyond tolerance. Joseph Robinson's elegantly focused low register is especially gratifying in the dark middle section. Having used Carl Nielsen's *Two Fantasy Pieces* too many times for pedagogical reasons, I am hard-pressed to hear them as they are, a lovely, lyrical bit of melancholy before a perfectly silly humoresque, characterized by an annoying, high-pitched hiccup in the oboe's main theme. Robinson whispers, hiccups gracefully, and sings his way through both Fantasy Pieces without ever losing his dignity. Finally Peter Schickele's *Gardens for Oboe and Piano* is aphoristically brief. The liner notes call it "post-impressionistic" and minimal in the Webern-esque sense of the word. The three tiny movements are quiet and thought-provoking—my thoughts: if Joseph Robinson chose it, it might be worth re-examining.

