

## Oboe CD Reviews

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**Hong Kong, China**

*Johann Friedrich Fasch: Oboensonaten.* **Burkhard Glaetzner, Igno Goritzki, et al.** Berlin Classics BC 1069-2. Issued 1993.

The oboe trio sonatas of Johann Friedrich Fasch remind us once again that the Baroque era was the golden age of the oboe. At no other time in music history do oboe players compete successfully with vocalist prima donnas for composers' attention and dedicated output. Does anyone really know why?

Composed as incidental *musique de table*, these six sonatas are wonderfully varied and full of harmonic and rhythmic surprises. **Burkhard Glaetzner** and **Ingo Goritzki**, two of the finest German oboists working today, make the best of the music with performances that are polished and intense, and yet fully aware of the dramatic and frequently humorous qualities of the music and the trio sonata form. One remarkable aspect of the performance is the way the two oboists, who alternate performing the first and second parts, match each other in articulation, tone color and volume to the point where it is difficult to tell them apart. This "egoless" form of chamber music playing in which neither soloist seeks to assert himself elevates these performances to the realm of art.

The virtuosity that one finds in this recording can also be found in performances by the **Heinz Holliger/Maurice Bourgue** duo, for example in their several versions of the Zelenka trio sonatas, in which it is somewhat easier to distinguish the two players. Comparing these four epitomes of French and German oboe-playing is a pleasurable exercise in contrasting national styles and personalities.

In an age of "authentic" performance practices and virtuoso baroque oboists, the interpretations here raise some gentle questions. For example, the *Sonata in F major* (number 2 on the cd—there are three *F-major trio sonates*), is performed by two oboes and bassoon without harpsichord or other instruments to reinforce the bass line. This choice was made, as the liner notes suggest, because the pieces are "without basso continuo." However the absence of such "basso continuo," presumably in the surviving bassoon part, hardly proves that the piece was intended to be played without harpsichord or other low instruments. And it would require little imagination on the part of the experienced 18th-century (-style) harpsichordist to fill in the chords of this piece. In any case, with the rich sonority and complex overtones of the three double reeds, one does not miss the continuo, as one might if the piece were being played on a less substantial combination, such as two recorders and a viola da gamba.

The oboists are conscientious about ornamentation, and much of this is tasteful, if occasionally self-con-

sciously rehearsed. In a few places the slippery-slitery ascending runs on the *appoggiatura* might have been eliminated, but the players balance this with their incisively rhythmic playing.

The prize for best tune on this disc goes to the second movement, "Un poco allegro," of the *Sonata in D minor*. This dance-like melody has a "Turkish" flavor that had me singing it out loud for a week. The performers were evidently aware of the charm of this movement and played it in a properly droll manner. The final allegro in three continues the mood of the earlier allegro, an elaborately "*appoggiatura'd*" minuet that does not allow you to sit still.

Compared with the trios, another F-major sonata, this one for two oboes and two bassoons, gives Fasch more room—in the form of additional line—for structural and contrapuntal invention, with dialogues between pairs of oboes and bassoons. As expected, the performers exert good taste in juggling the options of articulation, ornamentation and volume that are the building blocks of these early 18th-century confections.

*Britten, Haas, Hindemith:* **Thomas Indermuhle**, oboe; Kalle Randau, piano. Camerata 30CM-449. Recorded 1994.

*J.S. Bach: Oboenkonzerte.* **Thomas Indermuhle**, oboe; English Chamber Orchestra, Simon Preston. Novalis 150 077-2. Recorded 1991.

Reviewing recordings of music that one has performed and listened to for 40 years is a double-edged sword. Familiarity with the music makes one zoom in on every minor detail, each particular technical and interpretive problem. At the same time, having a deep perspective on a work allows one to produce objective assessments of a performance, and well-considered evaluations of a work.

With the exception of the 1939 *Suite for Oboe and Piano* by Pavel Haas, these two recordings consist entirely of warhorses from the oboe repertory.

Only the *Suite for Oboe and Piano* by Pavel Haas is new to this reviewer. It is an excellent work that stands next to the all too familiar Hindemith *Oboe Sonate* written one year earlier, and could readily push the latter aside on oboe recitals that require a mid-20th century work that is musically but not technically challenging. According to the liner notes, Haas (1899-1944) studied composition with Leo Janacek, but died in a concentration camp. The three-movement *Suite* contains elements of ethnic and folk music as well as jazz, and some quiet moments of pastoral beauty.

Indermuhle's straightforward reading of Britten's *Six*

*Metamorphoses* glosses over the numerous opportunities for charm, play and nuance that I assume most oboists agonize over during their formative and mature years. The work, with its limited compass and two challenging slow movements, remains a reliable test piece for conservatory entrance and exit. I would have expected a more personal, interpreted performance from **Thomas Indermuhle**. Perhaps it's easier not to get so deeply involved in a piece of music, and just play the notes and instructions as one reads them, with the assurance that "style is the (wo)man" and "interpretation" is icing. On the other hand, it's all too easy to overplay a piece, fussing with interpretive details to the point of eccentricity. This all comes down to a matter of taste for all, as well as survival for some.

As an admirer, but not a fanatic one, of the Casals, Landowska and **Leon Goossens** school of "personality playing," I generally abhor generic interpretations, as much as I distrust generic oboe "tone." In an age of homogenization, it seems all the more essential to be able to identify a player, rather than a school of playing, within a few moments of hearing her play. Also, it seems critical for players to be able to distinguish themselves from others by learning to express themselves, rather than their teachers or their teachers' teachers, through their instruments or voice. But this state of affairs, rooted in the commercial culture of conservatories and orchestras as much as in the ethics of our era, is unlikely to change for the better in the near future.

I won't report the details of the thoroughly competent performances of the other Britten and Hindemith works, save to mention that in the *English Horn Sonata* of 1941, both cor anglais and piano seem unnecessarily muted in the recording, considering the already reclusive nature of the oboe's first cousin.

Indermuhle is a fine oboist and musician, the scion of **Heinz Holliger** and **Maurice Bourgue**, two pillars of late 20th-century French (and Swiss) playing. While technically flawless, I miss in his execution the passion, romance and "risk" that seems to have faded from much European playing since **Pierre Pierlot** stopped recording.

This lack of passion on Indermuhle's part is most evident in the sinfonias interlarded between the transcribed J.S. Bach oboe and oboe d'amore concertos. In particular, the B minor Adagio from the *Easter Oratorio*, a piece that I labored over for years to evoke its vocal and dramatic elements ever since I heard **Leon Goossens'** version on the yet-unreissued *Art of Leon Goossens* (ca. 1970?) with Gerald Moore on piano. Whatever one thinks of Goossens' playing, or more accurately, his "set up" of short-scrape reeds and thumbplate-and-ring World War I Lorée, I don't think any oboist can fail to appreciate the superb timing and phrasing (call it pain and contrition) that Goossens displays as he spins spider silk high above the five-line staff on Easter day.

The liner notes in the Bach disc provide all the necessary detail about the "reconstruction" of the *E flat major*

and *D minor oboe concertos* from harpsichord concerti and cantata sinfonias, and cite Donald Tovey's conviction (in 1939, an interesting year for the oboe!) that the *A major Harpsichord Concerto BWV 1055* was written for oboe d'amore. Cutting through the scholarship to the works and performance themselves, we end up with full-sized and technically demanding baroque concertos.

In the siciliano of the *E flat major concerto*, Indermuhle applies a bewildering litany of ornamentation, to the point where I wanted to shout: "Take it easy, Thomas." Here, when one expects a respite between two long and somewhat long-winded allegro movements, Indermuhle's breathless siciliano left me on edge of my seat as he surfed, rather than sailed, through the elegiac melody. This is not to denigrate his full-blooded, self-assured and elegant performance in the fast-forward movements, in which his unbridled energy and endurance serve him and the music well.

*Don J. Cohn studied the oboe with Melvin Kaplan, Melvin Berman, Josef Marx, Lois Wann, Leon Goossens and Jerry Sirucek. He attended Interlochen Music Camp and the Juilliard School, and obtained degrees in Chinese studies from Oberlin College and Columbia University. He has lived in Hong Kong, China and Taiwan, where he has worked as a teacher, journalist, editor, translator and tour operator.*

[Editor's note: We are happy to welcome **Don Cohn** of Hong Kong and New York to the pages of the DR. Oboists are more active in the recording studios than ever before, it would seem. This happy fact means that CD collectors have more and more interesting recordings to choose from. It also means that our reviewers face quite a backlog of CDs still waiting for review. If any of you readers would like to write for the DR, please let me know. My email and phone numbers are in the front of this issue. We are especially interested in oboists/writers who may have special expertise in baroque music and historical performance practice in general, and people with specialized knowledge of contemporary/avant-garde oboe repertoire.

Two Websites that have been introduced to me recently will be of interest to oboists who want to add to their CD collections. Arkiv Music ([www.arkivmusic.com](http://www.arkivmusic.com)) is an extremely convenient site to maneuver around. There are (as of today) 1,755 oboe CDs in their listings, 240 English horn CDs, and 1,030 bassoon CDs. You should be able to find all the most recent releases, nicely arranged by artist, as well as many historical recordings now being reissued on CD.

From the UK, news comes of oboist **Jeremy Polmear's** new CD label Oboe Classics launched in 2002. There are five releases in the catalog to date. (Web address: [www.oboeclassics.com](http://www.oboeclassics.com)) ~DS]