

OBOE DIVAS: OPERATIC DUOS AND ENSEMBLES FROM HANDEL TO WAGNER.

Emily Pailthorpe and Elaine Douvas, oboes.

Oboe Classics CC2018, 2008.

The goddess Athena would be astounded: oboe playing never looked so glamorous. The "oboe divas" Elaine Douvas and Emily Pailthorpe present a cover image befitting their joint program of "operatic duos and ensembles from Handel to Wagner." I remember Pailthorpe performing in a distinctly sophisticated gown at the Muncie Conference two years ago. Clearly, the lady has class. Douvas hasn't rubbed elbows with opera singers for over thirty years without figuring out what looks stunning onstage. That they are both beautiful women to begin with makes the effort believable. Inside, however, we find more than duets for fetching sopranos one and two. Ten additional wind players take turns backing and fronting the widely varied repertoire. The nine major selections begin with both featured oboists in a ravishing rendition of Delibes "Flower Duet" (*Lakmé*). One senses that Douvas has heard this sweet, lilting tune a few times before and relishes her opportunity to give voice to her own interpretation. The simple, subtle, and unaffected solo oboe in the middle section speaks to her hard-earned musical wisdom. Pailthorpe partners her former teacher tastefully and effortlessly in the A section; her Howarth oboe shows its stuff in the velvety lower arpeggios. This musical jewel invites us into an album that will explore more weighty works as well.

Bam! Exploration starts with Henri Brod's oboe and bassoon duo based on Donizetti's *Lucia*. Bassoonist Andrea de Flamminis joins Emily Pailthorpe, with CONCHORD Ensemble pianist Julian Milford accompanying. Both double reed players have such sensuous, vocal timbres that the performance is a joy to listen to on any level. Their sensitivity to each other infuses each section of the scene as they match their rhythmic push/pull and dynamic give and take. Their phrasing convinces the listener that the text is not far from their thoughts. The intelligent choice of Jeremy Polmear as liner annotator adds a further dimension to the experience. He has taken great care to write both an introduction to the whole project's concept and a detailed but entertaining explanation for each selection. In the case of the *Lucia* duo, he explains how Brod set

his oboe-bassoon dialogue as a faithful representation of the scene between Lucia and Edgardo before the end of the first act. Guess who gets to be the crazed heroine. And the oboe is also the first to introduce the iconic final melody, which is reprised in the famous mad scene.

The career of opera orchestra oboist Henri Brod highlights the historical continuity of this profession, exemplified by the already long career of Elaine Douvas. She returns as first oboist in Beethoven's variations on "La ci darem la mano" (*Don Giovanni*), along with Pailthorpe and de Flamminis. Here the tune serves merely as a structural vessel for Beethoven's imagination, not a small one. These players are a joy to listen to, not only for the dramatic gestures they emphasize in Beethoven's amusing score, but for their impeccable ensemble and intonation, and the way Italian bassoonist de Flamminis can match Douvas' technical aplomb measure for measure. The Allegretto giocoso is a supreme test of oboistic patience as both players easily supply the cascades of endless finger-wiggling. I can't say why the excerpt from Handel's *Artodante*, played by two oboes instead of sung by two high voices, is my favorite of this collection. Maybe it's just great music. Though neither oboist professes to period performance practice, together with pianist Elizabeth Martyn they make a poignant, eloquent statement, underlined by how perfectly in tune they manage both the close and distant intervals in their melodic duet.

The most unusual operatic foray is a *Portrait of Hans Sachs* by Richard Blackford, a wind quintet written in 1989 to honor Blackford's friend, Bernard Levin. Blackford weaves the themes of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* into a synopsis of the plot, with the major characters interacting in a ten-and-a-half-minute miniature. If you like condensed versions of Wagner's music, this is a fine one. The high degree of integration of the five voices makes it an unusually effective wind quintet; clarinetist Anthony McGill must double on bass clarinet, but otherwise, just the usual five timbres are able to evoke the full sonority of Wagner's grand ideas. The blend during the trading of one voice for another is superb. Each of Douvas' Metropolitan Opera Orchestra colleagues—Stefán Ragnar Höskuldsson, flute; clarinetist McGill; Daniel Shelly, bassoon; and Brad Gemeinhart, horn—should be recognized for their exceptionally fine collaborative work here.

Apparently Emily Pailthorpe and flutist Daniel Pailthorpe have worked together before, also. The way they interact in Demersseman's arrangement of Rossini's music from *Wilhelm Tell* (Duo Brilliant) would indicate so. According to Polmear, oboist Félix Charles Berthelémy contributed to this composition, which features the iconic English horn solo in its central section, against graceful flute filigrees. Madame Pailthorpe returns to the oboe for the rousing "Lone Ranger" finale. These two players, discreetly partnered by pianist Julian Milford, have a particularly fetching manner of moving together, shaping and finessing phrases in novel ways.

Polmear speculates that our joppig duets on themes by Mozart were probably based on flute duets written in the late 18th century. The melodies of *Marriage of Figaro*, *Magic Flute*, and *Don Giovanni* held widespread popularity, and duets such as these served a pleasant function in home music-making. But they are not pieces that necessarily engage anyone beyond the players. Two such stellar oboists make a strong case for listening. Elaine Douvas leads the way with their first choice, "Non più andrai," pushing the tune forward with stately drama. "Voi che sapete" is treated as innocently and tenderly as its words imply. Throughout, Emily Pailthorpe supplies the background noodles, sedately or frantically, as required. Douvas returns the favor, allowing Pailthorpe to take the final prima donna role, that of the enraged Queen of the Night.

Following this somewhat light-weight effect of two unaccompanied oboes, the fullness of the wind ensemble setting of three parts of Beethoven's *Fidelio* by Wenzl Sedlak thunders in with clarinets and horns front and center. The overture is a tremendously effective arrangement handsomely played by Douvas' colleagues from the Met orchestra, and including bassoonist Douglas Brown, a Juilliard pupil of Whitney Crockett, conducted by Mark Gould. The instrumentation is standard wind octet except that there is a contrabassoon part, here performed on string bass. This recording also includes the Terzetto, the Introduction and Aria, and Duetto movements—a judicious serving of a medium and style that might overbalance the project's mix if done in its entire ten parts. These movements were chosen to have a logical sense of direction, and they fill more than eighteen minutes on their own. Of course it is a revelation to

have performers of this caliber play wind ensemble music. My only disappointment was in the slightly distant mixing of bassoonist Daniel Shelly.

The Oboe Divas found a moving conclusion to their joint project by having Daniel Pailthorpe arrange the opening scene from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* for two oboes and piano. The liner program indicates exactly who is playing each part in every selection, so we must conclude that the unearthly, rich, low register oboe sound at the opening of the scene is coming from Elaine Douvas' Lorée. Both players have melodic roles as Daniel Pailthorpe combines two successive female duets into one coherent four-minute piece. They weave and match their sinuous timbres, but when Douvas returns to the low register, you can just about eat it with a spoon. What an amazingly dark signature she leaves on the album! You can access the Tchaikovsky arrangement by contacting Daniel Pailthorpe at pailthorpe@maculimited.net.

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