

**Jeanne Belfy**, Boise, Idaho

***Très Française: Chamber Music by Jean Françaix.***

**Jeremy Polmear**, oboe and English horn; Diana Ambache, piano; Anthony Robb, flute; Sandra Skipper, flute and alto flute; **Christopher Hooker**, oboe and English horn; Neyire Ashworth, clarinet and bass clarinet; Alan Andrews, clarinet, bass clarinet, and basset horn; **Philip Gibbon**, bassoon; **Damian Brasington**, bassoon and contra-bassoon; Susan Dent, horn; Alexia Cammish, horn; David Juritz, violin; Martin Outram, viola; Rebecca Knight, cello.

Oboe Classics

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No sadness here! At least not until the second to the last piece; **Jeremy Polmear's** latest CD on his OboeClassics label presents almost nothing but the sunny, if slightly spicy craftsmanship of consistently neoclassical Jean Françaix. I love how this CD begins: the introduction to *Variations sur un thème plaisant* (1976) for piano and ten winds (double wind quintet with one bassoonist doubling on contra) slides through a downward sequence of high winds, playing complicated harmonies, into the most amiable solo piano tune you think you've known all your life. Touching, nostalgic chord changes underlie the simple but wandering melody, a theme that has to support nine variations. Each variation is cleverly described by Mr. Polmear's program notes; the first is the obligatory tango *syncopa*. As part of a second generation of French neoclassicists, one who cut his teeth (at least his twelve-year molars) in the circle of Nadia Boulanger in the 1920s, Françaix was familiar with the Latin popular musics, but perhaps he became more aware of tango when Astor Piazzolla showed up in Paris in the 1950s to study with Boulanger. I digress, which is easy to do when in mental dialogue with Polmear's nine fine pages of historical and descriptive liner notes. By the way, all the written apparatus is also translated into French, an industrious nod to the culture that produced this consummately skilled composer.

Careful attention to listening seems more important than usual with Françaix's work. Superficial hearing may overlook the exceptionally interesting details of his style, for example, his extended tertian harmonies and the imagination behind his expressive about-faces. I am reminded of one of my favorite passages in the original writing of Donald Grout (prior to later editions, which bowdlerize his unique prose):

... [French] music may be anything from the simplest melody to the most subtle pattern of tones, rhythms, and colors; but it tends always to be lyric or dance-like rather than epic or dramatic, economical rather than profuse, simple rather than complex, reserved rather than grandiloquent; above all, it is not concerned with delivering a Message, whether about the fate of the cosmos or the state of the composer's soul. A listener will fail to comprehend such music unless he is sensible to quiet statement, nuance, and exquisite detail, able to distinguish

calmness from dullness, wit from jollity, gravity from portentousness, lucidity from emptiness.<sup>1</sup>

Though here Grout refers specifically to French music of the late 19th century and earlier, his meaning can be felt throughout this all-Françaix recording. In this first piece, the beauty of various wind timbres come and go with such speed and subtlety that one wishes to stop the action and savor the melting oboe or horn solo, or the amazing blend of the two low-register flutes. The concertante relationship between solo piano and the double quintet is quintessentially balanced, and flows with perfect logic. Over his 65-year career, Françaix had plenty of experience composing both chamber music for winds and piano music. That he had mastered both media is completely evident in the endless variety of his scoring, and the effective, idiomatic ways he uses these many, disparate instruments. Of course with Françaix, idiomatic is not synonymous with easy to play.

Luckily, Jeremy Polmear is a richly skilled, expressive oboe and English horn player, and his colleagues on this album are all of the highest caliber, beginning with his long-time piano partner, Diana Ambache, whose sparkle and joyous rhythmic expression also grace the CD's last selection—*L'Heure du Berger* (1947) for wind quintet and piano. The title of *L'Heure du Berger* seems to refer to the hour in the evening at which romantic assignations may occur, and we may presume they occur at a café or perhaps the restaurant mentioned in the subtitle, *Brasserie*. The first movement requires both double reeds to bleat descending motifs by means of glissandi; Polmear and bassoonist **Philip Gibbon** do amazing pitch bends. The centerfold movement is titled "Pin-up Girls," and features the frisky clarinet antics of Neyire Ashworth. The "nervous" final movement is crammed with rapid, staccato work in all parts, but especially in the extremely active contributions from bassoon and horn (Susan Dent). The meticulous precision of the ensemble, through breakneck tempi and tutti accelerandi, brings the CD to a triumphant close.

In between these works with piano are three other pieces without. The one that jolts the ear a little is the *Quatuor* (1971) for English horn and strings—yes, strings—a small shock in the midst of the riotously colorful wind music. But it makes sense; the composer had decided to write for English horn in response to **Janet Craxton's** request for a concert piece, because he said he was afraid that if he wrote for oboe, he would imitate his *Flower Clock* of 1959. According to a quotation in the liner notes, Françaix specifically cited "the paucity of my inspiration, which has been pointed out many times by the critics." And once he chose English horn, string trio makes a more comfortable platform for its less incisive timbre. Jeremy Polmear handles the English horn as adroitly as if it were truly English. You can watch him do it on YouTube—just Google "Jean Françaix - 'Très Françaix'." From the jaunty syncopation of the Allegro vivace and the Vivo assai (extra kudos to the *cor anglais* player for negotiating some of the quickest twists I've ever heard), through the lyrical Andante tranquillo and the march-like Andantino, to the final Allegro giocoso, the ensemble is clean and tight, with clear distinction between the solo wind and the strings. The final movement starts with a short fiddle figuration that is quickly handed to

the English horn, and Polmear must hold his own against the bowing techniques, translating them brilliantly into the language of air and tongue. The heady, rapid counterpoint concluding this work adds yet another facet to our understanding of Françaix's style.

*Sextuor* (1992) combines bass clarinet (Alan Andrews) to the standard wind quintet. Also in five movements, each generally longer than the preceding composition's, its opening *Risoluto* divides the six players naturally into two groups of low and high. After the typical two-measure, splashy introduction, Françaix gives the tune to the high parts and the supporting *syncopa* to the low trio. But the texture is denser, with more melodic and accompanying layers and changes than are heard in the pieces described previously. Even flutist Anthony Robb's part pins the virtuosity needle. The addition of an extra bass voice frees the horn and bassoon for more melodic opportunities. Lush harmonies in both *Andantes* are fuller and/or more progressive—how beautifully this relatively large wind group adjusts intonation and creates a homogeneous blend when appropriate. Also, Polmear masters (with engineer Dave Rowell) a clear, organic, un-manipulated sound.

*Elégie* (1990) for ten winds was created to recognize the 200th anniversary of the death of Mozart. The ten winds are essentially a double wind quintet, but the second woodwind players must also play alto flute, English horn (**Christopher Hooker**), bass clarinet, and contra-bassoon; while the other clarinetist must play basset horn. This last bit is a nod to the source of the theme that Françaix chose as the basis for his elegy, Mozart's K. 580a, for three basset horns and clarinet, also known in a version ("Adagio") for English horn and strings. Here is Françaix composing with gestures darkly different from anything familiar to me, for nearly 4'33". Could this, together with the previous work discussed, represent the climactic style of a well-schooled, practical, prolific, French neoclassicist? The spare solo lines just before the coda are especially thought-provoking. I will venture just one disagreement with Jeremy Polmear—if this superlative recording effort were my product—if I were ever to have worked at this high a level—I would have taken the chance and ended the CD with this composition.

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***Cuarteto Emispheria: Quartets for Oboe & Strings***

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