



Colin Clarke, May 2019

The repertoire on this disc is described by Alex Klein “the meat and potatoes of oboe playing”; all of the composers are familiar names to wind players, in fact.

The York Bowen Sonata (1927) is, as always from the pen of this composer, expertly crafted, and superbly written for the instrument in question. Happily, Klein is partnered with a pianist who could almost be an extension of himself, Phillip Bush, whose playing is extraordinarily clean, precise, lyrical, fine-toned and always sensitive. As for Klein, his sound is beautifully formed. Phrases seem to expand forever in a magical piper sort of way. This is one of those performances wherein one could guess the movement indicators purely from the playing, and not just in terms of speed: *Allegretto grazioso* states the first movement, and we experience the *grazioso* in our hearts. The central *Andantino espressivo* has a pastoral glow about it, and the shadow of Fauré in particular looms large (Debussy hovers over other aspects of this work). The finale, with its superb, spiky staccato from Klein and fluent exchanged between oboe and piano, is a delight; dissonance adds a certain piquancy, while a contrasting section takes the carefree opening on a walk into shadier woods. Melinda Maxwell of the Endymion Ensemble on Dutton previously offered a fine performance, although that disc may be tricky to find these days; Klein offers as fine a replacement as can be imagined.

Written in 1950 when the composer was only 21, Petr Eben’s op. 1 Oboe Sonata takes us to a different sound world. The first movement, “Militare,” has a real momentum and yet harmonically and melodically remains ever unstable. Klein and Bush are like a single chameleon, inhabiting the languages of the different pieces on this disc perfectly. Worthwhile pointing out also is a delicious melody in the first movement, one that actually we do not want to end. Klein was introduced to this work at the Prague Spring Music Festival, where it was one of the available competition works. Although Klein chose another work for the actual competition itself (where he went on to win the prize for the Best Interpreter of Czech Music), he did become enamored, and rightly so, with Eben’s piece. The central “Pastorale” is glorious, the tint of sadness and regret perfectly conveyed by the present performers; while the finale, with its dancing, Bartókian slant, and wide-ranging remit, implies a composer of real depth. For those wishing to explore Eben’s output further, Toccata Classics offers a full disc of chamber music by Eben that includes oboe (including a fine performance of this sonata by Marien Vavříková and Radana Foltýnová); Eben’s organ works are most definitely worth a listen, too.

Personally, I still consider Henri Dutilleux an under-rated composer. His output was incredibly significant, especially some of the orchestral works. Unsurprisingly, his wind pieces are very popular with players. (His Flute Sonata is a joy; the piano part of that piece is incredibly satisfying to play, incidentally.) There are over 10 recordings available of the Oboe Sonata of 1947, a work that Klein states asks the impossible of the player, requiring adapted fingerings and much reed work. A world marked by gray clouds is offered at first; the determined slant of the second movement is wonderful, not least from Bush's perfectly attacked chords. Messiaen's sound world is often nearby, without being strayed fully into. The easy gait of the theme of the finale, stated so deliciously nonchalantly here by Bush, masks an underlying sophistication so characteristic of French composers.

Eugène Bozza is another composer known for his wind output (as it were); particularly the flute works. It's nice to encounter the Oboe Sonata (1971). To give an idea of the sound world, it is good to echo Klein's reminder in his notes that Bozza wrote 13 works for oboe between 1939 and 1979, and four of the 13 have the word "pastorale" in the title. Eminently approachable, fetchingly fragranced, tender, the first movement in this performance is the epitome of its indication, *Très calme*, while the slow movement exudes calm and peace, with Bush's pianissimo chords forming the perfect backdrop to Bozza's shepherd-piping melodies. What a gloriously bonkers end to the work too, with its gestural drop for both players. There is fun here too.

The name of Poulenc brings us back to significantly more familiar territory, and his 1962 Sonata for Oboe and Piano offers balm. Its astonishing reference to Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in the first movement, using the same material but in a very different, Poulencized way, enables one to celebrate diversity: two major composers taking the same music on very different walks. Poulenc's is actually titled "Élégie." That Klein and Bush can create an atmosphere of held-breath delicacy at the movement's end on disc (one can imagine the stillness in a packed concert hall) is remarkable. The Scherzo is deftly negotiated by both players, with a real throwaway gesture to close before calm returns for the finale. Poulenc's harmonies here allow the music to explore more profound places than elsewhere in the piece; the low piano resonates cavernously before the music opens out, passionately. Fabulous!

The Saint-Saëns Sonata, dating from 1921, is an absolute joy. Leon Shernoff's notes refer to this piece as "neo-Baroque," and certainly there is a distanced sense of dignity about the first movement, with Klein and Bush giving it plenty of space, while the central movement is a splendidly relaxed sicilienne, replete with oboe roulades that seem to speak of freedom, a freedom achieved in the free, *ad libitum* passages. The brief, scampering finale poses technical challenges, easily negotiated by both players here. There is significant competition in the catalog here, not least from Gareth Hulse and Ian Brown on Hyperion (an all-Saint-Saëns disc that includes the quirkily-scored Septet for Piano, Trumpet, String Quartet, and Double-Bass).

Far from being Klein's first release for Cedille (I counted six, and I would love to hear the Vivaldi disc), this is a wonderful testament to his work. He is open about his battle with focal dystonia, which may well limit his remaining playing time. His remarks in the booklet around this recording are rather valedictory ("this recording has more to do with closing than anticipating ambitious projects for the future"). There is a tinge of sadness and concern when one reads these remarks, for the present disc offers fine playing indeed; and, most of all, interpretations of the highest musical integrity caught in superb sound. He is fortunate, also, to have such a fine musical partner as Phillip Bush.