

Cuarteto Emispherio: Quartets for Oboe & Strings.

Sarah Roper, oboe; Vladimir Dmitrienco, violin; Jerome Ireland, viola;
Gretchen Talbot, cello.

Oboe Classics

CC2030, 2015.

New Zealand-born, British-raised (**George Caird** and **Celia Nicklin**), and German-trained (**Thomas Indermühle**), **Sarah Roper** has played principal oboe with the Real Orquesta Sinfónica de Seville for nearly twenty years. In 2005, she and three of her colleagues in the Real Orquesta formed a quartet named Cuarteto Emispherio. This album of oboe quartets celebrates their ensemble's tenth anniversary. An eclectic mix of 18th-century classical quartets, Malcolm Arnold's *Oboe Quartet* of 1957, transcriptions of piano pieces by Albéniz, and a 2007 work by Spanish composer

Ferrer Ferran in three movements called *Horus*, the CD gives wider exposure to music that may find new audiences.

Let's begin with the centerpiece, Malcolm Arnold's *Oboe Quartet*, Op. 61, written, as were his *Sonatina* and *Concerto* of several years earlier, for the father of modern British oboe playing, **Léon Goossens**. The occasion, according to Sarah Roper's illuminating program notes, was the oboist's 60th birthday, a few years before his devastating automobile accident. He gave the first performance in 1958 at Cambridge. Its three movements have some length, especially the slow movement; they add up to nearly thirteen minutes. It begins with a characteristic off-beat string vamp, and the oboe introduces a legato first theme reminiscent of a familiar trumpet call, bringing to mind the composer's own performing instrument, as well as his trenchant sense of humor. Sarah Roper's Howarth oboe produces a very liquid, transparent color with soft, seamless slurring. Her chamber music partners might be brought more to the fore for an occasional balance adjustment, particularly the cello's repetition of the theme against the cute oboe punctuations. Her sound does not dominate, being edgeless and easily able to blend into harmony, but still the oboe gains the upper hand, perhaps more than needed in this comparatively interactive work. Violinist Vladimir Dmitrienko partners her well in the fascinating, subdued Allegretto, and then melts into the accompaniment effortlessly. Roper is particularly effective in this ethereal movement, as she is so suited to playing long, quiet, sustained, potentially exhausting melody lines, without the slightest indication of strain, and with the utmost relaxed and smooth projection, all the way to its unresolved end.

The tutti strings begin the Vivace con brio in a finely-tuned unison; their syncopated pattern is informed by Arnold's signature Latin-based ostinato. Serving as both theme and accompaniment, it also yields a simple rhythmic motive to bind the entire rondo. The oboe part presents contrasting playful and sentimental tunes, Roper's adroitly bouncy articulations helping to drive the final section to its sudden, tongue-in-cheek close. Though the Quartet contains a number of gestures similar to our other works by Malcolm Arnold, after just a few hearings, its unique personality comes into focus and gains affection. It should be played more often.

Spanish composer and wind ensemble conductor Ferrer Ferran has written a popular concerto for oboe and wind band entitled *El Bosque Mágico* (2002), programmatically descriptive of three supernatural creatures. His newer *Horus, Concertino para Oboe y Trio de Cuerdas* is based on a foundational Egyptian god (or many gods) with the head of a falcon, and symbolized by the protective, all-seeing eye. Relating this bit of information to the three-movement oboe quartet takes imagination. The first movement is aggressive and melodically angular, with ostinatos and repeating themes, perhaps in a tonal language meant to suggest something pre-Christian. It is a fine vehicle for Sarah Roper's velvety low register. The tentative unfolding of the dissonant counterpoint in the second movement requires repeated listening, even as it sorts itself into sweeter harmonies. A fast episode interrupts the nostalgia; staccato, pizzicato, and a well-controlled ascending chromatic scale to the oboe high G shape a climax, after which the strings conclude the movement in the opening tempo. The final movement uses a great deal of scalar motion—mostly octatonic

and chromatic—that is rapid, and edged with heavy articulations and tremolos. The oboe takes the spotlight with more melodic solos as well as argumentative dialogue with the strings. The ending is abrupt.

The two classical quartets included are more well-known, but certainly not as well-known as Mozart's. The first movement of Johan Baptist Wanhal's op. 7, n. 6 (in C major, 1771) makes for a splashy entrance, as Sarah Roper's joyous, repeated high Cs are followed by C-major scales floating to the ground on flawless articulation. The dramatic intervallic spans in its sonata form themes seem to me more operatic in nature than *Sturm und Drang*—not unlike those of his contemporary, Mozart. There are also figures in the second movement Andante that possibly were inspirational to the younger composer as he completed K. 370 in 1781. This is a big, four-movement quartet, including a precisely classic minuet and trio. The fourth movement in sonata form returns to the C-major scale athletics with charm and grace. You get all the repeats in this performance.

The quartet by Franz Vincent Krommer in F major, P IX:21, has just three movements, and none slow. The more elaborate first movement begins with strings and solo violin. The oboe enters with solos, but also duo and accompaniment figures—here, later, and earlier, as in the last work, this listener would prefer more string sound to balance the mix, for more chamber music interaction. As light and balletic as the oboe playing can be, she sounds closer to the microphone than the others. The minuet is amazingly inventive, scurrying in a number of unanticipated directions. The violin takes the thematic lead in the trio, both parts, a nice color break. The Rondo is unambiguous, perky in its theme and melodramatic in the first episode. The oboist's clean, dry staccatos characterize Krommer's rondo theme to a "T."

Finally the two Albéniz piano transcriptions (unattributed) are as lovely a set of interlude and postlude as you might imagine. They also convey a respectful nod to the nation that brought these four fine musicians together, though none is Spanish by birth. (The Spanish translation of the entire liner notes is also a meaningful effort.) Tango in D from *España*, op. 165, n. 2, is an old-style, dignified example of the Parisian salon tango of the late 19th-century. Sarah Roper's lilting drag triplets are elegantly accompanied by the strings. The CD closes with "Córdoba" from *Chants d'Espagne*. Here, Trio Emispherio does some of its most compelling work, melding into a sophisticated unit of dynamic control and sonic blend. The subtleties of tempo and thematic changes clearly delineate the fragility of the lines where East meets West.

If the ink I have spilled is unclear, or even if it is not, don't take my word for it. You can access any of the selections described in this review in an instant, as Sarah Roper has uploaded them all to Youtube at this writing. Or you can purchase individual tracks on Spotify.

JEANNE BELFY, 'THE DOUBLE REED'

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