

Reviews

CD REVIEWS

Han de Vries: The Radio Recordings Oboe Classics CC2024

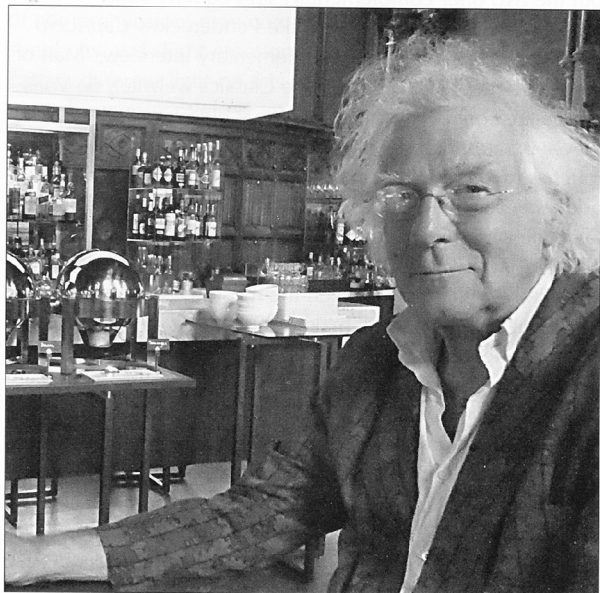


Photo: Jeremy Polmear

From favourites to the fantastic, rarities to the remarkable, *Han de Vries: The Radio Recordings* provides a spectacular showcase of the career of one of the most important oboists of the twentieth century. While perhaps not so well known outside his own country, in Holland de Vries (1941–) is a national celebrity. His technical prowess and musical dynamism is only equalled by the combined artistry of Goossens and Holliger; but whereas neither of these oboists is represented with a comparable anthology, this box of nine CDs and two DVDs is a major document of oboe playing in the late twentieth century. But even almost eleven hours of music cannot hope to cover all aspects of de Vries' prolific career.

His work as principal oboist of the Concertgebouw Orkest (1964–71) is not represented, nor was it possible to include recordings he made with the Netherlands Wind Ensemble (1960–70, though readily available from EMI). Likewise, a short review cannot hope to do justice to this remarkable issue, so I will have to restrict myself to highlights, but not before making the general comment that not one track is short of compelling.

The anthology provides an overview of de Vries' playing

across more than thirty years (1968–2002). In tonal terms, his playing was perhaps most beautifully poised in the '70s and, while he remains in full command in the most recent recordings (Breuker *Oboe Concerto No.2*, 2000, Pavel Haas and Stockhausen, 2001, Kox's *Lieder ohne Worte*, 2002), his tone is perhaps a little less rich towards the end of his career. Some may find his vibrato intense, but this signature of de Vries' playing never obstructs its charm. As the recordings are drawn from diverse sources and variable in recording quality, the way the oboe tone comes across shifts subtly from one track to another. Given the diversity of the recordings' sources, variations in sonic quality are minimal (the most noticeable occurring on discs 6 and 9). Still, there is far more than tone quality to recommend these performances. There is always an assurance and suavity to de Vries' playing that takes the listener well below the surface of tone production to musical interpretation and communication.

In addition to classics, like concertos by Strauss, Ibert and Bach, Mozart chamber music, and rarities by Malcolm Arnold, Peter Maxwell Davies and Richard Rodney Bennett, there are numerous works with strong ties to the player that will not be found anywhere else. Significant works written for de Vries by Bruno Maderna, Morton Feldman, Louis Andriessen, Schat and Janssen; and the two concertos by Willem Breuker are represented (Maderna's *Oboe Concerto No.3*, here available in a radio recording as well as a bonus film of the composer conducting a rehearsal).

De Vries is considered the primary living exponent of the Dutch oboe school, claiming his status in performances of showcases of oboe virtuosity written by Alexander Voormolen for his teachers Jaap and Haakon Stotijn. The distinctive style of oboe playing instigated by Stotijn is characterised by short, wide reeds (you can see close-ups of Han's reed on the DVD of the Maderna concerto) played with little cane in the mouth to produce a unique lyrical tone – fuller in the middle range and even across the entire range – coupled with clean articulation. This last aspect is, perhaps more than any other, a main hallmark of his style. As dazzling as it is delightful (notice the rambling cadenza in the solo concerto), Voormolen's music exhibits diverse influences and its distinctly cinematic flavour made it perfectly suited to theme music for a TV soap opera. In the double concerto de Vries takes up the mantle with his former student, Bart Schneemann, who has followed his teacher's career in the Netherlands Wind Ensemble as well as in early and modern genres.

More than his activities as concerto and chamber musician, and champion of new music, De Vries was also a serious collector of antique oboes, some of which he used in recordings. He never made radio or live appearances on baroque oboe, so all the performances of baroque works presented here are on modern oboe. (Commercial recordings of de Vries playing baroque oboe are available on the Virgin Veritas label and on an earlier release from Oboe Classics, CC2004.) Recorded across a period of sixteen years, the samplings in the new box set show de Vries' evolution as a baroque interpreter. The performance in the earliest – of the Bach *Double Concerto* with violinist Alberto Lysy (from 1975) – is well balanced in tempo and tone but anachronistic in ornamentation; whereas in the most recent of Bach's *Concerto in F*, the Combattimento Consort of Amsterdam accompanies with more appropriate performance practices, the oboe stands apart stylistically. Tempos in the eighteenth-century works are on the whole lively with the exception of the surprisingly staid Vivaldi sonata.

The Classical offerings will charm and surprise. In addition to a version of Mozart's C minor string quintet for oboe and strings, and his *Adagio and Rondo* with glass harmonica (presented here with harp), the four movements attributed to Beethoven (here arranged for oboe, clarinet and bassoon) are worthy of careful listening.

Americans will be eager to compare de Vries' recordings of Françaix's *L'horloge de Flore* and Ibert's *Sinfonia Concertante* (1981 and 73 respectively) with John de Lancie's versions from 1967. The more transparent sound of the Dutch oboist seems appropriate for Françaix's frothy bagatelle and, while his 'Belle de Nuit' lacks the dignified repose that de Lancie brought to it, it is no less beautiful, and provides a nice contrast to the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra's bawdy playing in the work's 'vaudeville' moments. The Ibert shows de Vries at his best. De Lancie's version is elegant, but de Vries makes the work sound as modern as it really is (written in 1959). The final allegro brillante is just that: an exhilarating ride with all technical passages played with utmost security and verve supported by the orchestra under David Zinman's brilliant direction. Even if the Dutch oboist's tempo is hardly faster than the Philadelphian's, the energy de Vries brings to the phrasing and articulation makes for a compelling performance.

A more obvious comparison would be with Heinz Holliger who, just a few months apart from de Vries in age, was not only a pre-eminent champion of new music, but alongside

de Vries was equally responsible for bringing the oboe to prominence on the international concert stage. Holliger's exclusive contract with the Dutch recording company Philips doubtless impacted de Vries' international exposure, but the two offer complementary and equally valid responses to shared repertoire like Penderecki's *Capriccio* and Holliger's *Mobile*. In a supplementary interview, 'Man of the Heart' (available on the Oboe Classics website), de Vries makes the controversial comment that his Swiss colleague 'never irritates the listener by imposing his personality. ... he touches my brain, I'm a man of the heart... What I admire about his playing is that it's so boring that it is never boring!' Even after listening to the entire anthology, I never tire of de Vries' musicianship. The consummate performer, he is seemingly undaunted by even the most demanding of technical challenges and makes compelling cases for music from a wide range of styles. His engaging musical communication has a personable edge on Holliger's steely perfection. De Vries also boasts that he 'gets' the Avant Gardists, and from the recordings it is clear that he indeed lived their era and spoke their language, and is not afraid to bring beauty to even the most abrasive works. Listen to how, in his hands, Stockhausen reads like an open book, Elliott Carter sounds romantic, or Stefan Wolpe's sonata becomes classic. De Vries does all this with wit: a specifically Dutch wit that can shift – as seen in Breuker's *Concerto No.2* – with beguiling nonchalance from heartfelt lyricism to dazzling showmanship or rollicking hilarity.

The quality of the recordings is even more remarkable when one realises that they are, for the most part, live. Not only are they close to technically perfect but, being unedited, they possess a high level of integrity as performances. A few are studio recordings that, up to now, have only been broadcast. An exception is Andriessen's remarkable post-modern parodic fusion of neo-classicism and minimalism, *Anachronie II* that, while already released on CD, is a welcome addition here, if only because it contains some of the most glorious melodies on the entire set.

The live performance videos are a definite plus. The video recording of Bruno Maderna conducting his own *Third Oboe Concerto* in 1973 provides a wonderful view of de Vries as he embarked on his career as soloist (a lack of synchronicity between audio and video is only occasionally disturbing), and two concertos by Willem Breukers show de Vries in different musical contexts. In the first de Vries is pitted against a jazz ensemble. He fits in surprisingly well, and even though he does not improvise his riffs, he still holds his ground against the genuine jazzers.

Two interviews with de Vries' sweet-toned Dutch speech, idiomatically subtitled in English, bring out the oboist's thoughtfulness as an interpreter. His comments on the 'glassy emotion' and lack of 'real flesh and blood' in the Strauss *Concerto* (the one piece that he admits to his lack of comprehension) may come as a surprise. But the simplicity and slight emotional detachment of his reading casts a different light on this familiar masterpiece, so often played in a romanticised manner that glosses over the work's creation in the aftermath of World War II.

The set has been expertly compiled, with notes on each of the 51 recordings by Peter Bree, a former student and radio producer, with a booklet including a complete discography of commercial releases organised by recording company. A chronological listing would have been more suited to the retrospective nature of this publication.

In addition to being a tribute to a great musician, the set provides a remarkable purview of oboe playing and trends in composition for the oboe in the course of the last three decades of the twentieth century. In short: a necessity for the oboist's studio and college library. Licensing agreements provided for only a short print run, with no possibility of reprints, so stocks are strictly limited. Place your order direct with oboeclassics.com.

Geoffrey Burgess

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