

Four composers in search of colour and sprightliness

More than two hundred years ago, Paris was *the* centre of the repertoire for wind instruments. In few other cities was so much sheet music being printed for players of wind instruments. Few other cities had so many important instrument makers, to cite only the Raoux dynasty of horn builders. One linchpin in the development of this tradition was the Paris Conservatoire. From the time it was founded in 1793, famous players of wind instruments gave lessons there, in particular horn players Domnich and Duvernoy. No wonder that the Bohemian composer of music for wind instruments, Antonin Reicha, shrewdly opted to settle in Paris in 1808. The wind quintet grew into an ensemble thanks to his compositions, as he was to write no fewer than 28 works for this line-up. The first performances of Reicha's wind quintets were given by players of wind instruments that had trained – and in turn taught at – the Paris Conservatoire, such as the flautist Guillou, the oboist Vogt and the horn player Dauprat. From these virtuosos can be drawn long teacher/student lines that stretch far into the 20th century. Some wrote handbooks for their instruments or etudes that are still used down to the present day. One of them was the flautist Paul Taffanel (1844-1908), author of the *Méthode de flûte*. His efforts gave new impetus to players of wind instruments in the last quarter of the 19th century. An important step in this direction was the creation of the *Société des Instruments à Vent* [Society of Wind Instruments] in 1879. This organisation stimulated the composing and performing of new music for players of wind instruments. The Society's important feats include the world premieres of Gounod's *Petite symphonie* in 1885, d'Indy's *Chanson et Danses* in 1898 and Enesco's *Dixtuor* in 1906. These works were created at a time when the typically French elements were being marked off with ever greater clarity: the fine use of colours and nuances, a transparent sound image, the pure Romanesque spirit and a virtuosity that did not stand in the way of the light touch. Furthermore, countless non-French composers felt attracted to these style elements, such as Delius of Britain, Pijper of the Netherlands and – on this CD – the Walloon composer Joseph Jongen.

Unmistakably French, and yet with its own, inimitable idiom is the music of Albert Roussel (1869-1937). Roussel started his career as a navy officer. In 1894, he decided to devote himself fully to music. He resigned from the French navy, and went to study with Vincent d'Indy at the recently founded Schola Cantorum. In his later work, Roussel reacted against every form of vagueness, but his first compositions are still connected to impressionism. An exception to this is the fresh *Divertissement*, which was premiered on 10 April 1906 by the *Société des Instruments à Vent*. Roussel had undoubtedly been present at the premiere, eight years earlier, of his teacher's *Divertissement*, likewise at the *Société*, but Roussel's piece is much more daring. The opening measures, with the ostinato in the piano and an obstinate figure in the oboe, break with the connections of the age. The famous musicologist Marc Pincherle was to go as far as to state in his book on Roussel that these measures anticipate Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. The *Divertissement* consists of four parts, which flow over each other through slowed and accelerated passages. The lively opening is indicated as *Animé*. This then changes to *Lent*, with a dazzling flute solo, indicated as *dolce*. The music is re-enlivened to an *Animé* to come to rest again in *Lent*. The opening motif is resumed in the coda, but in a more moderate tempo, to have the music close in complete rest. Nearly twenty years after the creation of the *Divertissement*, the public at a Salzburg festival in 1923 was still impressed by the progressive character of this work.

The pièce de résistance of this programme is the *Quintette* by André Caplet (1878-1925), one of the most gifted students at the Paris Conservatoire. His *Quintette* was awarded a prestigious prize shortly after it was created. Three years later, he defeated Ravel for the Prix de Rome with the cantata *Myrrha*. Caplet embarked on a double career as a composer and a conductor. In 1907 he befriended Debussy, who entrusted him in particular with the orchestration of *Le martyre de saint Sébastien*. Owing to his other activities, Caplet has left only a small, but refined oeuvre, with emphasis on vocal music. Caplet's few chamber music works include the *Quintette* for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and piano. It was premiered on 30 March 1900 by the *Société des Instruments à Vent*. The flautist at this premiere was Georges Barrère, a student of Taffanel, who like his teacher, was solo flautist at the

Opera and also played an important role in the *Société*. Unlike Roussel's *Divertissement*, the *Quintette* did live up to the expectation of the times. The opening section is written in sonata form. With a broad expansion, it is concluded triumphantly *Allegro con brio*. The lyrical, slow part is full of splendid atmosphere. Here, a star role is reserved for the clarinet, which gives a beautiful, melancholic solo, for which Caplet had noted 'avec un grand sentiment de tristesse'. The Adagio is followed by a short but vivacious scherzo, where the piano and the players of wind instruments tumble over each other. A largely bloated finale brings the work to a close. The coda gives a summary of the thematic material from the first part. This early but charming work of Caplet was, strangely enough, seriously neglected in the twentieth century. Fortunately, interest in Caplet's work has been on the rise in recent years, thanks to societies such as the Hexagon Ensemble.

With the *Six Épigraphe Antiques* by Claude Debussy (1862-1918), the Hexagon Ensemble brings out an interesting first disk. Debussy, the most interesting of the four composers on this CD, wrote the *Épigraphe* 'pour piano à quatre mains'. This CD features, for the first time, the six small sections in the arrangement for flute, horn and piano that Arie Boers, the first pianist of the Hexagon Ensemble, made in 1987 specially for three members of the ensemble. The *Six Épigraphe* owe their origin to the friendship that Debussy cultivated with writer Pierre Louÿs after 1893. This poet wrote the collection of *Chanson de Bilitis*, the French "translation" of poems by the fictitious Greek poetess Bilitis, in 1895. A couple of years after the publication of these poems, Debussy composed the well-known song cycle *Chansons de Bilitis* on three of the poems. Then, two years after that, he composed a few instrumental numbers as a musical frame for "tableaux vivants" with a recitation of the poems of Louÿs. Shortly before World War I, he decided to adapt four of these pieces for fourhanded piano, which were premiered on 17 March 1917. The series opens with *Pour invoquer Pan*, in which a pastoral atmosphere is invoked. In *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, a girl muses, together with the poetess, by the tomb of her mother's lover. This is followed by the nocturne-like *Pour que la nuit soit propice*. The calm is broken in *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, that describes how a dancer carries out an erotic dance in which she accompanies herself with crotala (rattles resembling castanets). *Pour l'Égyptienne* depicts an Egyptian courtesan. Finally *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, an invocation of a soft, morning rain brings the cycle to a close. Boers's version leaves Debussy's music fully intact. The flute fits naturally in Debussy's world of sound, and the horn also adds beautiful colour to the whole. The way in which horn's possibilities are exploited in *Pour la danseuse* is very effective. Boers was not the first Dutchman to arrange this music. Rudolf Escher preceded him ten years earlier with an orchestral arrangement.

The sole non-French composer in this company in the Walloon Joseph Jongen (1873-1953), who studied at the Liège Conservatoire. After numerous peregrinations he wound up in Paris at the turn of the century, where he came into contact with the composers of the Schola Cantorum. Although he chose his own direction, Jongen would remain true to the principles of Franck and d'Indy throughout his life. In 1905 he settled in Brussels, where he was to play a leading role in the city's musical life. He became director of the Brussels Conservatoire, and supervised the most important series of concerts there. Jongen is nowadays known chiefly for his organ music, but his immense work includes numerous orchestral works, vocal compositions and chamber music. The *Rhapsodie* opus 70 was completed in the summer of 1922. Jongen dedicated the work to the Quintette de Bruxelles, which premiered the work in the 'concerts spirituels', one of Jongen's concert series. The work was received with accolades in *L'Indépendance Belge* of 17 February 1923: "striking pages of verve, fantasy and colour, with delicious timbre effect." As the title already announces, opus 70 is a flighty work, with many changes of mood and tempo. The beginning is tinged with a dreamy wonderland reminiscent of Ravel. The music livens up as a habanera by the piano sets in. This dance flows into a *Molto vivo*, where the rhapsodic character finally comes to the fore. Calm is restored in the *modéré*, with attractive solos from the various players of wind instruments. The music is once again afforded every opportunity to sing out in full, only to calm down again in a slow coda. Unlike Caplet's piece, the *Rhapsodie* was performed fairly regularly, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, opus

70 was poorly represented in Jongen's discography, and the Hexagon Ensemble should be commended for changing that.

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