

MOZART: Oboe Quartets; 2 Flute Quartets
 American Baroque—Music & Arts 1121—67 min

If these performances are any indication of the country as a whole, then the United States is beginning to catch up with its European counterparts in its espousal of period instrument recordings and performances. (Did I hear a sigh?) OK, it does seem as if the only way for an artist to get noticed these days is to play copies of old instruments—surely an anomaly that would have absolutely astounded performers and composers of previous ages—something akin to returning to surgery without anesthesia. But the technical and purely sound issues that seem to plague the earliest of period efforts have now been largely overcome, and it is easier to assess what the movement (or cult) is all about.

Records like this one go a long way in making the case, for the mastery of the instruments is such that no one can file a complaint; the music simply can't be played any better than here. This is some of the most musical Mozart I have heard. Sure, you still get the standard period-instrument swells and the lack of vibrato, but what is missing here are the choppy phrasing, the total lack of concern about flexibility in tempo, and the misconstrued absence of instrumental color. These players are *very* much concerned about all of these things.

If Music & Arts had made a two-disc set and added the horn quintet, clarinet quintet, and two other flute quartets, this would be heaven indeed. As it is, we must be satisfied with only two of the flute quartets (my favorite two, K 185a and K 285b), gorgeously interpreted and lovingly executed. The soft, pliant, almost motherly sound of flutist Stephen Schultz is a wonder, and the strings are no less plain spoken and heartfelt.

The header reads "Oboe Quartets", and I am sure that made some of you do a double take. In fact, when Constanze's publisher André (to whom she sold a full third of Mozart's output) offered a partial sale in 1799, a clarinet quartet showed up that was a transcription of the Trio, K 496. It amounts to a partial rewriting, a recomposition of some of this seminal work that perhaps Mozart himself had a hand in. And for this recording, the piece has been moved into the realm of the oboe. Listening to it proves revelatory, especially if you are familiar with the trio. It sounds as naturally conceived and idiomatic as the "real" oboe quartet that we all know and love, and you will come away from this reading feeling like you have just heard a new masterpiece.

And speaking of the "real" one, the oboe quartet has only had one "real" period reading—on Harmonia Mundi by Paul Goodwin and Terzetto. Goodwin was the first to meet the demands of the period instrument while offering us a reading of exceptional musical merit as well. His recording also gives us oboe quartets by Massonneau, Stamitz, and Krommer, and so will remain an essential purchase for those interested in the idiom (and in exceptionally spacious and vibrant sound), but I must confess that the performance here by Gonzalo X. Ruiz is superior in every way. Ruiz show a greater mastery of the instrument than Goodwin, and that is high praise indeed. The sound on the M&A is lighter and softer, more intimate and cozy, and even perhaps more constricted than the Harmonia Mundi, but not to detrimental effect. What we have here is now the single best period instrument reading of this work.

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