

Handel Oboe Sonatas

Gonzalo X. Ruiz, baroque oboe; Kathy Shao, harpsichord and organ; Michael Eagan, archlute; Shelley Taylor, cello.

Well-Tempered Productions WTP 5174, 1995.
(1678 Shattuck Ave. Suite 156,
Berkeley, CA 94709).

Following the former effort with Gonzalo X. Ruiz's *Handel Oboe Sonatas* on the same Well-Tempered Productions label, I breathed the sigh of relaxation I associate with a live, early music concert. The previously-unnoticed body tension drops away, the shoulders sink, and the ears seem to drop their defenses as the lower pitch level, quiet, clever nuances, modest dynamics, and mellow timbres beguile the subconscious.

Ruiz is playing with some fine continuo partners: Katherine Shao's harpsichord has depth, warmth and shimmer. One never tires of the richness of her instrument, indeed, one never even gets the chance, as the musicians have made the unusual decisions also to include Michael Eagan on the archlute, alternating the sounds of the two harmony instruments, even in the same movement. On some sonatas, Shao even switches to the baroque organ, offering another color change. Shelley Taylor plays the discrete but indispensable baroque cello to complete the continuo. The total continuo is nothing but delightful, and the oboist is no slouch, either.

Playing a baroque oboe after Saxon models from 1720 by Levin and Robinson, this San Francisco Conservatory graduate can be found teaching at The Baroque Performance Institute at Oberlin College during the summers. A fine scholar as well as musician, he wrote the liner notes for this presentation of seven Handel sonatas (nearly one hour of music). His comments on each of the works are helpful in understanding their origins and relative appropriateness to the oboe. Questions of suitability to the instrument, such as range, are examined in ways players can understand; the importance of these works to our repertory makes Ruiz's efforts that much more welcome. So often are parts of these sonatas misinterpreted in their use as training material, and their real beauty lost — wouldn't it be a fine thing if young players grew up hearing recordings like this one? And if their studio teachers also were familiar with the general style including principles of articulation and ornamentation ...

These sonatas are deemed oboe-friendly by Ruiz: HWV 365 (B-flat), 364 (G minor), 359a (D minor), 357 (B-flat), 367b (A minor), 363a (F), and 366 (C minor). Several are not commonly played, but one of the most familiar of these is HWV 357, called *Fitzwilliam* and used by flutists. This one, along with HWV 363a and 366, are all included in David Lasocki's edition entitled *The Three Authentic Oboe Sonatas*.

The final repeat of the last movement of HWV 363a (Menuet) serves as a good example of Ruiz's approach to varied ornamentation. Three downward sequences, each offering identical melodic opportunities for embellishment, are varied, each in a different way. At no time is the

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By Jeanne Belfy
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ornamentation sequenced in the same ways as the basic melodic material. Ruiz's imagination takes him in directions that are at once surprising and natural.

Sonata in G Minor, HWV 364, is known as a violin work that challenges an oboist's staying power. Its haunting first movement rivals that of the C minor sonata, and the perpetual motion of the binary final movement is reminiscent of J.S. Bach. Gonzalo Ruiz is unflagging in his rendering of the triplet lines; his ability to phrase and find short shapes aids both the clarity of musical intention and the performer's endurance. *Sonata in C Minor*, HWV 366, is probably the most used of the lot, found in the old *Everybody's Favorite Oboe Solos* anthology, and heard as performed by Ronald Roseman (with Edward Brewer and Timothy Eddy) on Nonesuch. Ending the album, it seems much too short.

Having these splendid sonatas brought together in such fine performances is a service to our profession as well as an aesthetic pleasure. Handel's genius for musical framework and Ruiz and company's intelligent talent for baroque interpretation result in a disc that meets several needs at once.