



Louis Massonneau: Oboe Quartets

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Louis Massonneau was brought up and educated at the court at Kassel, where his French father was chef cuisinier. Given a good musical education, he went on to develop a successful career as violinist, player of the viola d'amore, conductor and composer. He worked in the court chapel of Landgrave Frederick II, in Göttingen, Frankfurt am Main, Altona and the prince's chapel in Dessau. From 1802, until his retirement in 1837, he worked in various musical capacities at the Mecklenburg-Schwerin court in Ludwigslust. As a composer he wrote church music including a Missa Brevis and a Requiem, symphonies, some string quartets, duos for violin and piano and songs. Before 1800 he published a number of works, including the music recorded here, which was probably published in 1798; most of his compositions after that date are preserved in manuscript in the Schwerin Landesbibliothek (though some have undoubtedly been lost).

On the evidence of these oboe quartets he was a thoroughly competent composer, well-schooled in German classicism. His quartets are consistently well-made, subtle and full of attractive themes. They belong in the company of works such as the Quartet (op.7) by Vanhal, the quartets by Stamitz, Hofmeister, Krommer and Danzi (and are by no means outclassed by such comparisons). Though little-known they would well-deserve a place in concert programmes alongside better-known oboe quartets such as that by Mozart or modern quartets by composers such as Britten, Lennox Berkeley and Gordon Jacobs.

The First Quartet's opening movement is interesting for its willingness to put the oboe in a subordinate position at times, and for its attractive use of syncopation. In the Adagio the oboe holds centre stage and is allowed to revel in some poetic minor-key passages. The third movement is a set of variations and Massonneau's expertise as a violinist seems to inform some of his writing for strings in this movement. The Second Quartet echoes some material previously used in the First Quartet, and the second subject of the first movement 'sings' beautifully. This fine, complex movement is succeeded by a lamenting slow movement and a lively, dancing finale. This is perhaps the most striking of the three Quartets. The Third Quartet's andante con variazioni is delightful, by turns lyrical and mildly humorous – one senses Haydn looking over Massonneau's shoulder, as it were.

All three Quartets have essentially the same sequence of three movements – quick, slow, quick and, as the excellent booklet notes by Anje Kathrin Bronner point out, they are unified by their related tonalities, "F, B flat and C being tonic, subdominant and dominant respectively". As mentioned above, some materials are shared between Quartets. This results, it must be stressed, in a sense of unity and progression, rather than mere sameness.

It would be wrong to claim any startling originality for these Quartets, but they are eminently worth hearing. Their instrumental interplay, their formal subtlety and their moments of lyrical beauty mark them out as deserving the attention of anyone who loves the classical tradition of German chamber music.

Ensemble Più – who have previously recorded the Oboe Quartet by Gordon Jacobs – play the music with evident love and understanding. The Second and Third Quartets are here recorded for the first time; the First Quartet was recorded some seven or eight years ago by Paul Goodwin and Terzetto on Harmonia Mundi (as part of a programme of oboe quartets by Mozart, Stamitz and Krommer). This CD by Ensemble Più comes as a Hybrid SACD recording, which I have heard only on a conventional player, where the sound is close, but clear and smooth, nicely capturing the blend of oboe and string tones. It is, however, disappointing that the CD contains only just over 40 minutes of music. Might it not have been possible to supplement these three Quartets by a Quartet by one of his contemporaries?