



Louis Massonneau: Oboe Quartets

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Fanfare (James Reel - 01.07.2006)

Despite his Gallic name and parentage (his father was a French chef), Louis Massonneau was essentially a German composer. Born in Kassel in 1766, Massonneau started out holding posts, as a violinist and part-time composer, in Göttingen, Frankfurt, and Dessau. Severe gout forced Massonneau to curtail his playing; from 1802 until his retirement in 1837, he worked mainly as a music director and composer at the Mecklenburg-Schwerin court in Ludwigslust. He died in that town in 1848. His duties at the Schwerin court required him to focus on the composition of vocal music; his instrumental pieces mostly predate the turn of the century.

The three oboe quartets here were probably written in 1798. The works are quite pleasant, very much in the spirit of Mozart's Oboe Quartet (in fact, Massonneau often employs the upbeat-motif familiar from the Mozart work), but with a slightly more Italianate turn of phrase. It's perfect dinner music, at the same time sufficiently free of the period formulas to reward attentive listening. Massonneau doesn't allow the oboist to get away with mere noodling; some of the leaps, as great as a 13th, must have tested the players of the time. I haven't heard the Harmonia Mundi version of the first quartet in a program mixing works by several composers of the period; the second and third seem to be receiving their debut recordings.

The performance has a nice variety of attacks and dynamics; this is not the prissy sight-reading we used to get in obscure music of this period, but neither is the playing as combative as what is becoming the current norm. Ensemble Più is a well-integrated, full-toned foursome of musicians from regional (formerly "provincial") European orchestras, and oboist Andreas Gosling has a sure sense of when to recede into the general texture and when to come forward. The SACD's five-channel sonic perspective is from halfway back in a small recital hall, so while the imaging and timbres are quite true, the instruments lack a sense of physicality. At 40 minutes, the disc is scandalously short; surely, other material could have been added to this not earth-shaking yet enjoyable program.