



# BASSOON

## RECORDING REVIEWS

**Marc Vallon, Madison, Wisconsin**

### **Première**

**Ryan Romine**, bassoon with Sangmi Lim, piano

Blue Griffin Recording, BGR299; 2013

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This disc contains performances of the following works:

Gabriel Pierné—*Solo de Concert, op.35*

Charles René—*Solo de Concert*

André Bloch—*Fantaisie Variée*

Henri Büsser—*Récit et Thème Varié, op.37*

Max d'Ollone—*Romance et Tarantelle*

Paul Vidal—*Adagio et Saltarelle*

Henri Challan—*Suite*

J.M.L. Maugüé—*Divertissements Champêtres*

Henri Martelli—*Thème Varié, op.74*

Henri Challan—*Fantaisie*

Martial Solal—*Seul contre tous*

Philippe Hersant—*Niggun*

*Première*, the new CD of French music by **Ryan Romine** and pianist Sangmi Lim, is very appropriately titled. It actually could have been called “*PremièreS*” since it is not only Ryan Romine’s first solo album, but also the first appearance on a recording of eight forgotten Paris Conservatoire’s *morceaux de concours* that did not make it into the bassoonist’s standard recital program. It took Mr. Romine four years of research and performances to establish this very generous (twelve pieces, seventy-two minutes of music!) and engaging playlist, filling the gaps left by other recordings and giving us a more complete picture of one hundred years of the Paris Conservatoire commissions.

Most of the pieces presented, excepting the two most recent ones, follow the classic template of the typical *morceaux de concours*, (informally called *morceaux de fin d’année*): A slow, often recit-like, introduction where the candidate shows off his tone quality and ability to shape a beautiful phrase, followed by a mandatory fast tempo section where the student is intended to exhibit the product of years of intense scale and arpeggio training. Written for the *basson*, they require from the performer precise fingers, a fast tongue, as well as a fluent high register.

The first piece on the CD, the celebrated *Solo de Concert* by Gabriel Pierné gives Romine a chance to demonstrate his technical facility and ability to catch the listener’s attention. His playing is straightforward and energetic, displaying an impressive evenness of sound in all registers, a very clear articulation, appealing phrasing and a full open tone that allows for a good natural balance with the piano. Pianist Sangmi Lim and he give a very convincing introduction that leaves the listener wanting more.

The rest of the CD is full of great moments like the beautiful melodic climax on high D in René's *Solo de Concert*, the virtuosic passages in the final section of the Henri Büsser's *Récit et thème varié*, the poetical beginning from Max d'Ollone's *Romance et Tarantelle*, or the stunningly beautiful top C-sharp passage at the beginning of the Challan's *Fantaisie*. Romine's attention to detail and flawless playing, combined with Lim's sensitive presence give full recognition to the carefully assembled playlist.

One could divide the *morceaux de concours* written before 1984 into two categories: those which have been forgotten and very well deserve their fate, and those which have become standard repertoire. Many bassoonists will survive the fact that they have not played Maugüe's *Divertissements Champêtres*, which belongs to the category of what the Conservatoire students ironically called *saucissons*, a very ordinary charcuterie that does not compare to *foie gras*. But there are also some masterpieces and, besides the universally known Saint-Saëns *Sonate* (1924 Concours) or Jolivet *Concerto* (1954), one of the merits of this CD is the bringing back to light of the gorgeous *Suite* by Henri Challan [not a *concours* work but from the same time period]. For many, this work will be the revelation of this CD: a beautiful Ravelian piece, full of luscious harmonies and melodic invention, that is a real pleasure to listen to. The piece had vanished from the repertoire and it will certainly make a comeback thanks to this CD and the new edition prepared by Romine and published by Trevor Cramer. This is great news for anyone looking for challenging solo repertoire that is also a treat to play.

*Première* includes two more recent works that have been on the program of the *Conservatoire's* contests: Martial Solal's *Seul contre tous* has become a classic for French bassoonists but has remained mostly unknown to the American public. The work, which shows jazz influences without being "jazzy," is technically challenging (flutter-tonguing, singing while playing) and musically demanding since it consists mainly of a series of seemingly discontinued sections. Romine's energetic and incredibly precise version will very likely trigger quite some interest in this part of the world for this distinctive work.

The last piece on the recording is the most recent: *Niggun*, by Philippe Hersant, is based on a Jewish chant stated at the beginning of the piece which becomes a set of variations involving advanced techniques, a pattern also used in *Hopi*, Hersant's other engaging bassoon solo piece. Romine again provides a meticulously precise version, setting high technical standards in the unusual virtuosic passage that requires fast alternation of staccato, multi-phonics, and flaps. Bravo!

There are moments in this CD when Romine's qualities of precision, his absolute respect of the tempi and dynamic markings, all desirable qualities per se, do not quite fit the music. The "French style," all these tacit conventions established during decades of interactions between composers and musicians, is fundamentally based on the notion that musical notation can only be an approximate indication of what the piece is supposed to sound like. It calls for a considerable amount of flexibility and elasticity in the tempi and it is easy to imagine that a native performer, acculturated to distinguish between *la lettre* and *l'esprit*, would use more rhythmic suppleness in the introduction of the Büsser *Récit et thème varié* or in the cadenza of the Challan *Fantaisie*, for instance. One could also imagine more flexibility in the interpretation of dynamics in the slow passages in general. **Maurice Allard**, one of the guardians of the French musical traditions, used to tell his students, "The most important dynamics (*nuances*) are the ones that are not written," encouraging them to add colors and shades between the marked dynamics.

In spite of this trace of an accent in his French, Romine brings to us an absolutely brilliant CD. It brings back from oblivion some truly beautiful music, played with precision and lyricism as well as a perfectly recorded balance between both instruments. But if this CD is a performance accomplishment, it is also the product of years of research as the scholarly

impeccable liners attest. They include a general introduction to the history of the Conservatoire commissions, a well-documented biography of the composers and a list of their other pieces for the bassoon if there are any. Rarely CDs come with this quality in the liners.

There is no doubt that Mr. Romine deserves a *Premier Prix* for his outstanding performance of these challenging works. He makes them sound easy and it is certain that anyone who will listen to his “Première” CD will definitely want to hear the “Première bis” in the near future. There are still some wonderful gems to be discovered in the dusty drawers of the libraries and Romine is definitely someone we can trust to bring them back to life.

*Marc Vallon is associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A student of Maurice Allard at the Paris Conservatoire, he received a “Premier Prix à l’unanimité” in 1976, playing Thème et Variations by Pierre-Petit.*