



REVIEW: RECORDING

Cayetano Brunetti: Complete Oboe Sextets

Gaetano (Cayetano) Brunetti (1744–1798)

Il Maniatico Ensemble / Robert Silla (oboe)

IBS Classical IBS92021; two discs, 130 minutes

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This release is advertised as a ‘world premiere recording’, though given that the works in question were written by Brunetti, that might just about go without saying. Very little of Brunetti’s predominantly instrumental oeuvre was published during his lifetime, and the obscurity has lasted until relatively recently. The oboe sextets on the current recording (L273–278) were among the last pieces that Brunetti composed, having been written over the period 1796 to 1798 ‘per divertimento di S. M. C.’ (for the amusement of His Catholic Majesty), the majesty in question being Carlos IV of Spain. It seems that composition was prompted by the appointment of the oboe player Gaspar Barli as musician to the Royal Chamber in June 1796. Although the combination of oboe plus string quintet might appear to be an outlier, Brunetti had earlier written for the same forces, again including Barli, on a commission from the house of Benevente-Osuna; these works, dating from about 1785, are now lost. While the composer is unlikely to have foreseen any wider public promulgation for his new sextets, he nevertheless produced a group of six, which was the standard job lot for instrumental publications of the time.

The only known source for the sextets is now found in the Fondo Borbone of the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma: full scores of these three-movement works were made in Madrid in the early nineteenth century, not long after Brunetti’s death, and parts exist for the first four of them, having been made for María Luisa de Borbón (daughter of Carlos IV) by one of her copyists in Florence. The recording booklet, by Raúl Angulo Díaz, who has also edited the works for *Ars Hispana* (Madrid, 2020), is rich in circumstantial information and offers some style analysis. The latter includes an intriguing reference to the theatrical genre of ‘comedia sentimental’, popular in 1790s Madrid, as a possible source of inspiration for the quickfire dialogues found in Brunetti’s sextets, though more needs to be said to make such a connection stick. A more serious omission is the lack of any commentary on individual works or movements. Given that this is a premiere recording of unknown repertoire, and that Díaz rightly vaunts the ‘peculiar beauty’ of these sextets, such an absence seems odd.

The booklet is also silent about the performers, oboist Robert Silla and Il Maniatico Ensemble, the string group clearly taking their cue from Brunetti’s remarkable programmatic symphony of the same name (L322, written in 1780). Yet they are wonderful advocates for these sextets, aided by a warmly resonant recording. Particularly noteworthy are their flexibility of timing (dramatic pauses, gentle *ritenutos*) and their approach to ornamentation. Most fermatas are stylishly decorated with a flourish from the oboe, and repeated sections typically include some variation in delivery. This is especially the case with the three variation finales to Sextets Nos 2, 5 and 6. These movements are arguably the highlights of the release. They are built on the basis of themes that have sufficient harmonic incident to bear the weight of many reiterations; a signature move in that direction in all three (major-mode) movements is to veer towards the relative minor and its dominant at an early

cadence point. The textural basis for the variations involves every member of the ensemble taking the spotlight for at least one section. (The first variation one encounters, in the finale of No. 2, involves the two violas pairing up for a *sul ponticello* version of the tune, a startling sonority.) On the repeat of each half of each variation, the respective soloists offer some delicious embellishments, often delivered in a slightly dishevelled fashion that makes one believe that the variants are really being made up on the spot.

In the second movement of No. 5, on the other hand, there are several passages where embellishment could have been applied, but is not. Of all the middle movements of the set, this one comes closest to an outright aria style, and within the oboe's line a few phrases consist of plain minim values against a more fluid accompaniment. Each involves wide leaps from a relatively low to a high register, in imitation of vocal models. It is a moot point whether such notation is self-sufficient or is rather to be understood as a cue for an expansive filling-in of the leap; similar ambiguities are found in a number of Mozart's concerto slow movements. In this case Robert Silla leaves well alone, and speaking for that decision is the fact the Brunetti's notation is generally full and precise.

One less welcome aspect of these renditions is that, with the exception of Sextet No. 1, exposition repeats for first movements are ignored. This seems a poor decision given the richness of Brunetti's writing; a second hearing of exposition sections would give the listener a chance to catch up on events before the music moves further afield. This richness inheres less in outright thematic variety, since the composer tends to make resourceful use of a limited amount of material, than in the ever-changing palette of textural colours. There seems to be no end to the varied combinations of the six protagonists that Brunetti can devise. The cognitive load that this music demands also derives from the fact that the composer operates almost exclusively in four- and eight-bar cycles, with each new unit bringing a marked change not just in scoring, but also in dynamic level or style of figuration. Since phrase expansion via internal prolongation is rare – cadence points arrive punctually, without delay – this means that on a higher, hypermetrical level regularity is also the rule. These factors together with a typically accessible brand of thematic invention should make listening easier, but somehow the discourse ends up feeling dense. Phrase syntax takes on a mosaic aspect, and as levels of tension remain fairly even throughout a movement, this also contributes to the sensation of density. There are few very marked high or low points by means of which listeners can orientate themselves.

The sense of a smooth, even flow in these six works also derives from other properties of Brunetti's style. He avoids categorical statements at the outset of a movement; openings are more likely to be low-key than forceful. Often enough the listener is eased in gradually: the finale of Sextet No. 1 starts with several bars of *pianissimo* accompaniment alone, and when a melodic line enters, it sounds more like a continuation than an enunciation. In other words, we have the sensation that the music has emerged softly in mid-course. Similar fade-in effects, as it were, can be found in such movements as the finale of No. 4 or in the Larghetto introduction to the first movement of No. 3. Endings are also liable to conduct themselves modestly. While Brunetti makes some use of the standard *forte* repeated-chord formula to signal the conclusion of a movement, this normally arrives without any sort of build-up. Just as often, though, he prefers soft endings involving textural dispersal. In either case, though, endings are concise, achieved without fuss or expansive gesture. Brunetti is, of course, hardly alone in his cultivation of the understated soft ending at this time, but he may well be unsurpassed in the charm he brings to the operation. And it cannot be solely explained with reference to generic circumstances, with these works to be delivered 'for the amusement of His Catholic Majesty' in the Royal Chamber. Brunetti also favours soft endings in works performed by larger forces: the finales of Symphonies Nos 9 in D major and 35 in B flat major provide instances.

This avoidance of strong signposting is also apparent on a large formal scale. Most notably in first movements, Brunetti decouples harmonic and thematic return. The double return – opening

material and tonic key returning in tandem to mark the start of the recapitulation, an event that is normally set in relief – is only occasionally employed. Often enough, the tonic has already been reached before any familiar material recurs, which immediately softens the potential structural impact. And when such material does recur, it never amounts to a substantial formal rhyme. The reprise of the first movement of No. 1 begins not with the antecedent, but with the consequent phrase of the initial period. The reprise of No. 2's opening movement does begin in orthodox fashion with a replaying of the opening unison rising scale, but that segues immediately into the continuation part of the sentence that opened the second theme, and that in turn gives way to what was originally a much later cello theme in the tonic minor. Three separate events that covered the first sixty-seven bars of the exposition are here telescoped into the space of a mere five. In all instances the first group is greatly truncated compared to its appearance in the exposition.

In the case of Sextet No. 6 Brunetti simply omits the first fifty-two bars of the exposition, and the transposed return of material begins with unstable repeated diminished-seventh chords! These are made even more unstable by being written against the beat, played by all five strings in rhythmic unison, effectively heard as syncopated minim chords. (It is possible that Brunetti picked up this effect of total syncopation from a passage in the first movement of Haydn's 'Lark' Quartet, Op. 64 No. 5, published in 1791. It is highly likely that this work was known to Brunetti by 1798, as the Spanish court owned a comprehensive collection of Haydn's works.) In this movement in particular it appears that Brunetti is treating the second half of a sonata-form movement as a single rotation: material from the first-theme group is intensively worked in the first part, and then the second group is subsequently recapitulated in fairly faithful transposed form. The formal operations conducted in these first movements correspond most closely to James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy's Type 2 category of sonata form, in which the sense of a true return may only manifest itself with the onset of second-group material (see *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 353–387). But, of course, Type 2 can represent only an approximation of Brunetti's elusive formal practices, which extend beyond what he does in first movements, and which clearly merit intensive theoretical study. His exposure to so much imported music – not just by Haydn but also by Pleyel and other prominent figures of the time – guarantees that Brunetti's formal practices can be no accident. He shaped his highly individualistic forms with eyes wide open.

If Brunetti's formal sense cries out for detailed scholarly exploration, this applies even more to his harmonic practice. I have characterized this elsewhere as involving 'a low centre of harmonic gravity' (W. Dean Sutcliffe, *Instrumental Music in an Age of Sociability: Haydn, Mozart and Friends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 526). This impression derives from a nearly exclusive creative preference for moving to the flat side. On the smaller scale, Brunetti makes abundant use of the voice-leading pattern in which, over a local tonic pedal, the leading note is flattened and moves to scale degree 6 before being raised again so as to lead back to the tonic. This $\hat{8}-b\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{4}\hat{7}-\hat{8}$ schema, dubbed the Quiescenza by Robert O. Gjerdingen (*Music in the Galant Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 181–195), leans towards the subdominant before restoring the tonic. The first movement of Sextet No. 2 in F major begins with three successive Quiescenzas before expressing its hankering for the flat side on a larger scale. True, the tonality soon pushes towards and reaches the dominant key of C major, but this might be regarded less as a positive move in a sharpwards direction than as a basic part of the tonal grammar of the time. From that point modal mixture takes us into C minor, and this briefly gives way to its relative major E flat, the key of the flattened leading note of F. The second section of the movement quickly takes us to B flat major, achieved by flattening the leading note of the C major affirmed at the end of the exposition, and the process is replicated at yet another level when the leading note of B flat major is in turn lowered so as to take us once more to a tonicized E flat major. This means we have arrived on IV of IV of F major. Since subdominant colouration is widely associated at this time with relaxation and reinforcement (as indeed the Quiescenza schema acts to reinforce a local tonic), these are

aberrant procedures for a development section that is generally supposed to provide a stretch of relative instability. Not only that, but the two key areas, while not sustained at length, are presented in a thematically stable manner. The passage in E flat major is in fact expressed as a sentence structure. From that point yet another local leading note is altered – moving us further flatwards on the circle of fifths – as a D \flat takes us to F minor, followed by a brief taste of the tonic (F major) before a lengthy standing on the dominant of D minor, V of vi, prior to the return to the tonic. This emphasis on the relative minor towards the end of a development section at last accords with a widespread practice of the time.

The composer's predilection for the flat side is apparent on a yet larger scale, in the very choice of keys for these six works. None is in a tonality that features sharps in its key signature. The nearest we get to that is the use of C major for Sextet No. 5, and of the others, two are set in F major, two in B flat major, and the other in E flat major. The keys selected for middle movements are also revealing: the second movement of No. 3 is set in the dominant, that of No. 4 in the relative minor, that of No. 5 in the tonic minor, and the other three move to the subdominant. Statistically, this represents a fairly normal spectrum of key choices for an interior movement, but it acquires greater weight when placed alongside other aspects of Brunetti's harmonic practice in this set. It must be conceded, though, that flat-side keys were often associated with wind-band music at this time, if not specifically with the oboe, and it is also possible that Gaspar Barli had expressed a preference for such keys to the composer.

Nevertheless, the strong preference for flat-side colours fits with the formal practices described above. Both contribute to a peculiarly fluid and soft style of utterance, one that avoids sharp edges of all kinds. This should not imply that there is anything bland about the contents; Brunetti provides the listener with an irresistible parade of delights throughout this set. But it is significant that topic theory will not be able to make much headway in explicating this music. While the constant permutations of texture, dynamics and the like certainly fit with the general changeability of discourse that characterizes most art music of this time, the composer seems uninterested in the straight juxtaposition of stylistic traces that topical analysis celebrates. Instead, Brunetti writes in a consistently middle style, often with a gentle pastoral flavour, often with echoes of popular music, but without any strong sense of lifting materials from the outside (musical) world.

This could be explained with reference to the nature of Brunetti's employment, with his main task being to write 'for the amusement of His Catholic Majesty' rather than having to consider the reception of his music beyond a courtly world, but, as implied earlier, that seems deterministic. In fact there is yet another aspect of these sextets that supports the picture of an artist who wants to avoid hard edges: Brunetti's tempo indications. These indications hover distinctly around the middle range of the tempo spectrum. Of the six opening movements, one is marked *Allegro vivace*, but all the others moderate that speed, with one *Allegro comodo* and four instances of *Allegro moderato*. For the middle movements, we find one *Larghetto*, one *Andantino* and four instances of *Andantino con moto*. This latter indication has its own interest in light of the sharply differing opinions of the time about whether *Andantino* denoted a speed quicker or slower than plain *Andante*. Clearly Brunetti understood it as moving somewhat more slowly, given the fourfold addition of 'con moto' – which raises the question why he never chose to indicate a plain 'Andante'. Of the six finales, three stipulate *Allegretto* and two *Andantino* (one with an added 'con moto'), while No. 3 asks for *Allegro moderato*. All told, this is a quite remarkably middling, moderating collection of speeds for a full set of multi-movement instrumental works. The only outright slow tempos are found in connection with the three works that feature slow introductions (*Largo* twice, *Larghetto* once), and the only outright fast speed arrives in the scintillating *Presto* coda to the set of variations that concludes Sextet No. 2. Here for once a strong external reference is suggested, to the world of comic opera, with hectic short-range dialogues eventually giving way to an apparent slowing of rhythmic values that teases the listener and only makes the final resolution all the more satisfying.

Altogether these six works, brilliantly played by Robert Silla and Il Maniatiko Ensemble, make for compelling listening, and, in light of the features highlighted above, they demonstrate an intriguing mixture of attributes. This music is accessible and easy on the ear, yet in many ways also oblique in its style of utterance; Brunetti is economical in his use of thematic material, yet his continual short-range permutations of that material via differing textures can create a diffuse impression. This, after all, was why I thought the decision to avoid exposition repeats in five of the six first movements was ill advised. Above all, this release has the excitement of discovery – or at least rediscovery – of works that merit much further study and performance.

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