

## Chronicle by Marc Vallon

*Professor at the University of Madison-Wisconsin*

*Member of the Nielsen Quintet and the International Double Reed Society*

The *Quintette à vent de Marseille* is a prominent wind ensemble based in the major French eponymous city. Founded in 1987 by the principal players of the *Orchestre Philharmonique de Marseille*, it has acquired over the years a well-deserved reputation for the caliber of its members and its enthusiasm for the creation of diverse new repertoire. The ensemble is also well-known in Europe for its constant efforts to promote wind music. Its five musicians have created two notable international events, the Henri Tomasi Competition and the International Wind Quintet Biennial, which have brought together wind players from all continents.

*Voyage*, which takes the listener on a musical journey from Armenia to Spain with a detour to Corsica and France, is a perfect illustration of the ensemble's creative work. All the pieces featured on the album, whether new arrangements or commissioned premieres, show the ensemble's capacity to think outside the box. They are likely to be unfamiliar to most wind players, yet completely worth their attention.

Armenian born Arthur Aharonyan's *Contes Russes* is inspired by the sayings, proverbs, and tales of his childhood. Short and witty, often sarcastic, they offer the composer a wide variety of options to portray the situations and the different characters involved in these appealing short scenes. The music often reminds the listener of the sweet fondness of some of Stravinsky's works, such as the *Berceuses du Chat* or *Pribaoutki*. Deceptively unpretentious and simple, these short and delightful pieces convey at times a subtle sense of nostalgia that is quite moving. The quintet members render each piece with clarity, crisp articulation, a lovely palette of tone colors, and careful attention to details. *Contes Russes* is an appealing piece that nicely brings out all the qualities of the wind quintet and should attract the attention of performers in search of attractive newer repertoire.

Vache Sharafyan is a world-acclaimed Armenian composer. His work, *Esquisses Nostalgiques* (Nostalgic Sketches), was commissioned by the ensemble and premiered in 2011. Its originality is that it integrates two traditional Armenian double reed instruments, the duduk and the zurna, into the quintet. The first two movements prominently feature the singing high register of oboist **Patrice Barsey** and the supple arabesques of **Daniel Paloyan's** clarinet. The entrance of the duduk is striking. The wonderfully plaintive voice of **Levon Chatikyan** emerging from the dark tone color of the piece is one of the most memorable moments of the album. The second movement, which features some beautiful playing from flutist **Thomas Saulet**, ends with a festive dance in which the sonorous and joyful sound of the zurna invites the listener to a world of cheery wedding parties.

Henri Tomasi's music is well-known to most wind players worldwide. Born in Marseille to a Corsican family, Tomasi maintained a particular fondness for his origins during his prolific 50 year composition career. (Wind quintet players might be familiar with his first published piece from 1925, *Variations sur un thème corse*). Tomasi's *Quatre Chants Corses* must have been very close to his heart as its melodies originate from the Coscione region, the geographic origin of the Tomasi ancestry. The original version for soprano and piano has been adroitly arranged for low voice and quintet by Bernard Boetto, a Marseille-born pianist with a busy international career as a performer and arranger. The choice of baritone voice is interesting even if the music seems to lend itself at times more to a higher register. The quintet members do an excellent job playing expressively yet staying *sotto voce*, (special mention to bassoonist **Frédéric Baron** and hornist **Didier Huot**) allowing baritone **Jean-Christophe Maurice** to freely unravel the stirring melodies of *Chants Corses*.

The coupling of the Don Quixote songs by Maurice Ravel and Jacques Ibert makes sense historically. In 1933 director Georg Pabst filmed three versions of Don Quixote with the legendary bass Feodor Chaliapin in the title role. He commissioned Ibert and Ravel to write songs for the project. Ravel could not meet the deadline but nonetheless completed the cycle of *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée*, his last work. Ibert provided the songs of his *Chansons de Don Quichotte* in different versions, one for full orchestra, the others for small ensemble and piano. Boetto's version of the Ibert songs works well as a possible compromise: it loses the flexibility provided to the singer in the piano version but pays tribute to Ibert's fondness for wind instruments. The Ravel wind quintet arrangement seems somehow less convincing as the listener might miss Ravel's exquisite piano writing. Maurice's voice is sonorous and his diction excellent. He seems to be holding back on the expression, particularly in the Ravel songs in which the slow tempi of the outer movements do not render well the silly bravura of the character and the wittiness of the music.

Congratulations to the *Quintette à vent de Marseille* for providing to the public five original and appealing new works in an attractive album. The ensemble displays a beautiful blend and the playing is musical and refined throughout. The quintet is allocated an accompanying role for a sizeable portion of the album, which leaves listeners wanting to hear more of the group on their own. For those, the *Quintette à vent de Marseille* has published two other CDs currently available: one dedicated to the music of the Marseille-based composer Lucien Guérinel, the other to French music featuring works by Henri Tomasi, Darius Milhaud, and Maurice Ravel.

The *Voyage* album stands out for the quality of the performance as well as for the spotlight it provides to the music of two remarkable Armenian composers. This album will be of high interest for wind players in search of new musical territories.