

Ludwig August Lebrun, one of the most prestigious of the Mannheim school of composers and a first-rate oboe virtuoso, is once again popular with musicians and music lovers, – mainly for his numerous oboe concertos, among the best of their time. As Christian Schubart wrote in 1784 in “Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst”: “His compositions are extremely fine and sweet as drops of nectar. The ethereal rays of his genius quiver in everything he writes or performs. He has rightly earned the admiration of France and Germany.”

Ludwig August Lebrun was born in 1752 in Mannheim, where his father was oboist and répétiteur at the Elector’s court. Conforming to Mannheim tradition, he joined the court orchestra as a ‘Scholar’ at age twelve. As a court musician from 1767, he soon acquired a considerable reputation as an oboe virtuoso all over Europe. In 1773 he performed in Winterthur and shortly afterwards “charmed all of Paris with his divine oboe” (Schubart, “Teutsche Chronik”). It was around this time that he entered into a friendly contest with the famous oboist Besozzi. In 1778 he married his colleague (also employed by Elector Karl Theodor, in the Mannheim court opera) Franziska Danzi, sister of the composer Franz Danzi and one of the outstanding singers of her time. On their extensive concert tours around Europe, their perfectly matched instrumental and vocal artistry in arias with obligato oboe – written for them by leading composers such as Salieri, Holzbauer and Georg Joseph (Abbé) Vogler – was enthusiastically fêted. Renowned music historian Charles Burney wrote: “In the summer of 1778 she went into Italy and sung at Milan with Pacchierotti, Rubinelli, and the Balducci; and during this journey it was imagined that she would have improved her style of singing; but travelling with her husband, an excellent performer on the hautbois, she seems to have listened to nothing else; and at her return to London she copied the tone of his instrument so exactly, that when he accompanied her in divisions of thirds and sixths, it was impossible to discover who was uppermost.” On a concert tour to Vienna in the spring of 1785 they visited the Mozarts, renewing their friendship. Despite being frequently away on tour, the pair remained in the employ of the Bavarian

Palatinate until the end of their lives. Lebrun died unexpectedly during a guest performance in Berlin in 1790, his wife a few months later.

Of Lebrun’s 13 concertos to appear in early prints, the 6 oboe concertos (in d minor, g minor, C major, B flat major, C major and F major) published by André in Offenbach in 1804 had a wider circulation and are therefore known in various libraries. However, the 7 concertos (in G major, C major, F major, C major, ?, G major and F major) published by Sieber in Paris between 1776 and 1787 appear only singly in collections, and it seems the 5th of the series is nowhere to be found.

The joint title page of these concertos reads: CONCERTO / A Flute ou Hautbois Principal / Premier et Second Violon Alto et Basse / Composé / Par / MR. LE BRUN. / Musicien de S.A.S. Electorale Palatine / Prix 3^l / A PARIS / Chez le Sr Sieber Musicien, rue St Honoré à l’hôtel / D’Aligre où l’on trouve plusieurs nouveautés. / A.P. D.R.

The solo parts of the 1st and 6th concerto are headed Flauto Traverso Principale. Our concerto in F major is the 7th of this collection. Unlike the concertos later published by André, which – partly because they include up to 6 obligato winds and timpani in the orchestra – point to early romanticism, these still represent the Mannheim spirit with its famous crescendo above constant harmonies, tremolos and drum basses, melodies with sighs and suspensions and abrupt general rests.

The set of parts for our concerto, in very cramped print, contains many careless mistakes, inaccuracies and errors of notation, articulation and accidentals; we were able to rectify most of them by analogy and by comparing parallel passages. For the rest we strictly followed the source. Editorial suggestions for cadenzas and Eingänge (brief improvisatory passages) feature in the solo part in smaller print. One noteworthy detail: the first movement’s introductory motif (bars 4–8) is strikingly similar in both melody and harmony to bars 53–57 of Mozart’s Rondo for piano K 485, dated Vienna 10th January 1786! Our oboe concerto is roughly contemporary! So who plagiarized whom?

Lebrun left little chamber music, only a few duos and trios for strings, which include his Duos op. 4 for violin and viola (Amadeus BP 2344).

COVER

France, 18th century: *The Toilette of Venus*