

Artist Management

American Record Guide

September/October 2007

Schumann: *Quartets, all*

Fine Arts Quartet – Naxos 570151 – 79 minutes

There is much joy in this music, but much sadness, too. Robert Schumann (1810-56) wrote his three string quartets in a creative burst in June and July 1842 at the peak of his powers. 1840 had been his great “year of song”. In 1841 came two of his four symphonies as well as the much underrated Overture, Scherzo, and Finale. In that same year he finally overcame huge obstacles (including the strenuous objections of her father, whom Schumann finally had to take to court) to marry the celebrated pianist Clara Wieck; they would have eight children. Later in 1842 came the marvelously extroverted piano quintet. Clearly these were golden days for the composer and yet he was haunted by the silhouettes in his mind that would eventually cause a complete breakdown in the last years of his life.

Sorrow being one of the support beams of romanticism – Goethe saw to that – the veteran Fine Arts Quartet takes it all in stride as they give us one of the very finest chamber-music recordings of the year. Besides, there is all that joy to balance the sadness. Schumann dedicated the quartets to his friend Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47), who, we feel comfortable in saying, would not have appreciated any extended lugubriousness. He must have loved the scherzo of the first quartet.

When necessary, the Fine Arts bring a sweet melancholy to the tender occasions, even whitening their tone to underline the mood. In the more con brio moments, they play like the seasoned professionals they are, giving a bravura nod to Beethoven in 1:III or to Schubert in 3:II. The group clearly demonstrates that the quartets have more emotional range and depth than a lot of Schumann’s other works – more introspection certainly. The recordings were made at the Library of the Wittem Monastery in The Netherlands and are wonderful. Florian B. Schmidt was producer, engineer, and editor, and deserves huge credit.

The Fine Arts Quartet was founded in 1946 in Chicago. It is about the same age as the Juilliard and over the years has probably had about the same number of personnel changes. The current members are artists-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and three of them have been together for 26 years. Among their many recordings are Mozart’s String Quintets, which ARG editor Donald Vroon designated a Critic’s Choice in 2003.

BENDER