

The New Zealand Quartet:
clearly love Mendelssohn



Detailed and confident readings from the impressive New Zealand Quartet

Mendelssohn

'String Quartets, Vol 2' – No 2, Op 13; No 5, Op 44 No 3. Four Pieces for String Quartet, Op 81 – Capriccio in E minor; Fugue in A flat
New Zealand Quartet (Helene Pohl, Douglas Beilman *vs* Gillian Ansell *via* Rolf Gjelsten *vc*)

Naxos © 8 570002 (79' • DDD)

Quartet No 2 – selected comparisons:

Leipzig Qt: (12/01) (DABR) MDG307 1055-2

Quartet No 5 – selected comparisons:

Pacifica Qt: (9/05) (CED) CDR900000082

Eroica Qt: (9/05) (HARM) HMU907288

Mendelssohn's quartets exhibit a remarkable blend of fantasy, emotion and intellectual rigour, allied to an insider's expertise in writing for strings. The best performances, it seems to me, give due weight to each aspect. The New Zealand Quartet clearly love this music, and their strong sense of internal balance allows them to bring out many telling details that often go unnoticed: one example occurs just before the end of the first movement of the Quartet in E flat where a final recall of the second theme is accompanied by double-stopped cello *pizzicati*; given extra emphasis here, these dark tones cast a deeper shadow over the coda's E flat radiance. In the same quartet's finale, which can seem rather superficial, the New Zealanders' confidence as ensemble players permits a flexible approach; the rhythmic momentum is never destroyed, but bends a little so that the characters of the different motifs can be enhanced.

Whenever Mendelssohn's ardent, Romantic temperament comes to the fore, these players respond. Their passionate finale of Op 13 may not quite have the intensity of the Leipzig Quartet's, but, at a slightly more measured tempo, the focus here is rather on expressive detail. Conversely, in Op 44 this version may not rival the rich tonal variety of the Eroica Quartet, with its historical approach, but maintains more forcefully the music's vigorous impetus, while keeping that essential warmth of expression that's missing from the brilliant, energetic, but dispassionate Pacifica Quartet.

With one more volume to come, this promises to be an outstanding set.

Duncan Druce

INTERVIEW

The New Zealand Quartet's cellist Rolf Gjelsten

Despite the anniversary year, Mendelssohn's string quartets are neglected. One reason is that his language isn't understood in the right context. People want to compare him to Brahms and Schumann, when actually he's looking back to the models of Bach and Mozart. And, stylistically, the counterpoint is so expressive that it leads you to want to play in a heftier style. In fact that doesn't work, it has to be leaner so the music can flow. So misconceived interpretations have caused these works to lose charm and magic.

Mendelssohn has a reputation of being emotionally lean and so he often loses out in concert programmes to other Romantic composers. That's really sad, because he was probably the greatest musical prodigy who ever lived and was constantly studying throughout his life the laws of expressive counterpoint. By doing this project we've discovered that he has a remarkable sense of expression and form in his quartets. You can't look for the same things that you find in the other Romantics. In a way there's less room for subjectivity in his music, you have to find how he's steering you through the texture. He's a bit of a control freak in terms of the amount of notes he puts into those textures, he likes to control the flow. But the more you live with it you adjust to the timing and find the freedom.

Through the two quartets you feel him growing up. He moves from adolescence until finally, after Fanny dies, there was no other way to compose than to write terror into his music. There's a delicate, extremely sensitive human being evident behind it all. He breathes in a different way to other composers. And, like with Mozart, you have to find the sound to unlock the genius.

Interview by James Inverne

disc amply illustrate his personal synthesis of the prevailing styles, reflecting the influence both of his older contemporaries – Corelli and Vivaldi, Couperin and Rameau – and of his own considerable mastery of the violin.

Hence, we discover in Leclair's opening *Adagios* a more optimistic, cosmopolitan Corelli and in the *Allegros* a love of wide tessitura, *bariolage* and repetition worthy of Vivaldi. But the refreshing innocence of his C major Sonata and the sophistication of many of the dance movements (particularly the finales) represent Leclair's own voice. Couperin and Rameau might well have admired the extended A minor *rondeau*, with its delightful upward turns of phrase that briefly suspend the music in mid-air.

Adrian Butterfield is a worthy champion. He has grasped the gentle Arcadian spirit of the French Regency era that inspired Leclair's work and the extent to which the music represents a departure from the formality and introspection of much of the music of the Louis XIV period. The sweetness of his tone, aptness of his tempi and the lightness with which he wears his virtuosity perfectly complement the music, and Alison McGillivray and Laurence Cummings provide unfailingly stylish support. This is one of those recordings you will want to return to again and again.

Julie Anne Sadie

Schubert

Fantasie, D940. Marches militaires, D733.

Divertissement à l'hongroise, D818

Ykeda Duo (Tamayo Ykeda, Patrick Zygmanski *pf*)
Lontano © 2564 690744 (72' • DDD)

Intimate and exuberant performances from the Ykeda duo



Perhaps only Mozart compares with Schubert in achieving poignancy through economical means. At the same time it has to be said that Schubert will always remain a singular and distinctive instance of poetic genius. This is rarely more applicable than in the F minor *Fantasie*, Schubert's greatest work for four hands, as cyclical as his very different, ultra-virtuoso *Wandererfantasie* and evoking in its opening and closing "long-legged" theme a despondency made all the more heartfelt for its restrained eloquence. Yet, as so often with Schubert, there is a case of going both gently and ungently "into that good night" and the *Fantasie*'s alternating drama and introspection is realised to the full by the Ykeda duo, even when momentum or impetus is threatened. The three *Marches militaires* take us from the familiar No 1 (music later embellished by György Cziffra with some very un-Schubertian squibs) through No 2 to the rumbustious final march where the Ykedas compensate for their earlier lack of exuberance