Robert Schumann: Piano Quartet & Piano Quintet

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EAN: 4022143925749

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Gramophone (David Threasher - 2010.12.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Claire-Marie Le Guay takes centre stage in joyful and engaging performances

This is an outgoing performance of Schumann's Piano Quintet, one able to stand its ground among the recordings that topped my survey of the work (12/07). Claire-Marie Le Guay is the dominant personality among these players and clearly leads from the piano; as recorded she is the microphones' centre of attention too. Not that she's unable to play quietly – the first Trio of the Scherzo is exquisitely done – but she's forceful right from the work's arresting opening chords to the final fugal apotheosis and is clearly the motor that propels the performance. The impression is of musicians audibly enjoying the music, especially in the Scherzo's cascading scales and the give-and-take of the opening movement's second subject (the melody that was such an influence on Cole Porter), although perhaps the slow movement is a touch strident, more of a goose-step than a funeral shuffle, and the poor viola struggles to be heard when he gets the main theme in the Agitato episode.

The Piano Quartet, too, comes in a winning performance, even if these players struggle to achieve the Mendelssohnian lightness of touch offered by Martha Argerich and her all-star Lugano line-up. The balance is slightly better here, the strings more audibly separated and better able to penetrate in the occasionally thick textures. In all, this pairing offers Schumaniacs an enjoyable and often compelling hour, and would equally provide an ideal introduction to those wishing to make the acquaintance of these two pinnacles among Schumann's chamber music.

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