Camille Saint-Saëns: Piano Quintet & String Quartet No. 1

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Gramophone (Jeremy Nicholas - 2016.12.01)

GRAMOPHONE

The choice of the first of Saint-Saëns's two string quartets is a rather apt pairing with the Quintet in that the early Op 14 was written to showcase the keyboard skill of the 20-year-old composer, while Op 112 was written for (and dedicated to) the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. Not that the other parts in these works are negligible (far from it) but the piano in the Quintet and the first violin in the Quartet are the dominant protagonists.

This is especially true of the former, which boasts a brilliant piano part (it is easy to imagine the work being arranged as a concerto). The first of the four movements overflows with a superabundance of ideas, the second is a sustained and moving Andante, the third a perpetuum mobile that hurtles along and put me in mind of Alkan's Le chemin de fer, and the fugal finale is reminiscent of Schumann's Piano Quintet.

The String Quartet, like the Quintet boasting a lengthy first movement, is less obviously virtuoso, though much of the writing keeps all four players on their toes, not least in the teasing syncopations of the second movement (Molto allegro quasi presto). The exception is the slow third movement, which surely gives the lie to the idea that Saint-Saëns was all glitter and superficial emotion. Here is one of his most deeply felt and intensely personal statements.

The Quartetto di Cremona play with zest, bright colours, great assurance and a tight ensemble that can change direction on a sixpence. Andrea Lucchesini is the excellent pianist in the Quintet and gives Ian Brown a run for his money in the Nash Ensemble's benchmark recording, but is perhaps a little too forwardly placed in the balance.

Andrea Lumachi (double bass) is billed as playing in the Quintet's third movement, yet there is no double-bass part in the original score. Or is there? In fact, for some weird reason Saint-Saëns provided an independent part for the instrument with instructions that it remain tacet in movements 1, 2 and 4! There is no explanation for this unique (and, in this case, barely audible) addition anywhere in the booklet-note, which, moreover, misquotes Berlioz and assumes that its readers will have degrees in both musicology and waffle.

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