Darius Milhaud & Bohuslav Martinů: Complete Works for String Trio

aud 97.727

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Darius Milhaud is perhaps rivalled only by Paul Hindemith among twentieth-century composers for his substantial and varied oeuvre of chamber music. In a collection of published interviews with Claude Rostand (1952), Milhaud supplemented a characteristically droll statement that he would like to write eighteen string quartets, 'one more than Beethoven', with the explanation that writing chamber music was a way of defending the genre 'during a period when it was being sacrificed to the aesthetic of mass-produced music, to the aesthetic of the music hall and the circus'.

He also looked back to his childhood: 'I took part in too much chamber music in my youth: sonatas, trios, quartets-played with my father at home or with the quartet of my dear old Bruguier [his violin teacher], not to have retained the taste for it. And besides, it is a form, the quartet above all, that conduces to meditation, to the expression of what is deepest in oneself – it is very satisfying for its austerity, for its character as essentially a vehicle of pure music, and also for the economy of means to which one must adapt oneself. It is at once an intellectual discipline and the crucible of the most intense emotion.'

This disc, which presents not the string quartets but Milhaud's two works for string trio, alongside those by Bohuslav Martinů, confirms that the string trio medium can be every bit as intense, austere and disciplined as the more prevalent quartet idiom.

In the hands of the Jacques Thibaud String Trio, the first movement of Milhaud's String Trio No.1 (1947) springs nimbly into vibrant life, propelled by Bogdan Jianu's incisive cello pizzicatos which seem to flip forward the freely flowing contrapuntal interplay of the two upper strings. Vif is the first of five short movements in which brevity is no barrier to Milhaud's fecundity or breadth of invention. If not all the musical ideas are necessarily striking or memorable, the Jacques Thibaud Trio takes care to emphasise the melodic grace and rhythmic thrust of the small motifs which tumble forth. The lines are cleanly articulated and there is a good balance between the three voices as, even in this opening miniature, they range – often in the blink of an eye – from high to low, from diatonicism to dissonance, from strength to a whisper, from well-tuned unisons to vigorous counterpoint.

There's no lack of timbral contrast either. Modéré opens with grainy chords, which resonate with a warm folky jangle, while the gentle melodic probings unfold sweetly. In the central Sérénade the players take turns to dance in sprightly style above pizzicato strumming, coming together for more sentimental reflection. The counterpoint of Canons generates thoughtful intensity – the cello's songful tone, in

particular, draws the ear into the arguments – while in the concluding Jeu Fugué intertwining lines patter forth with wit and dexterity.

There was to be no String Trio 'No.2' from Milhaud, but he had composed a Sonatina à trois for the same forces in 1940. While the counterpoint here seems more 'scholarly' than ingenious, the Jacques Thibaud Trio's soft-toned warmth and appealing colours injects some charm into the first two brief movements, and the pizzicatos of Animé are pert and perky beneath Burkhard Maiß's high-rise surfing and Hannah Strijbos' rich slithers.

Martinů's interest in the music of Debussy and Ravel led him, in the early 1920s, from his native Czechoslovakia to Paris, where he studied with Albert Roussel, and it was during this time that his first String Trio (1924) was composed. The work inevitably reflects Martinů's exposure to a variety of new forms of musical expression. And, as Paris in the Twenties was a veritable musical melting pot, one hears robust folksiness alongside hazy jazz hues, as vigorous counterpoint is countered by impressionistic colorism.

The interpretative and virtuosic demands are more challenging here than in Milhaud's two slender trios. All three instruments are pushed to high-lying extremes, but the players sustain tonal beauty and precision – Maiß's violin glistens like a thread of silver – and they embrace the score's delicacies and abrasiveness with equal command and care. The Andante is played with especial beauty and real tenderness: perhaps it's fanciful, but one feels that one can hear Bohemian sentiments of love, longing and loss here, though in the chordal climax, as the strings combine in a rich blend that seems to comprise many more than three voices, there is a compelling sense of release and joy. The final Poco Allegro has an improvisatory and infectious joie de vivre, as if Martinů was rambling, in his memory, through a Czech village, hearing snatches of language, song and dance, as the music of modern-day Paris drifted through his open window. In this movement, the Jacques Thibaud Trio creates a driving dynamism, which is brusque, brisk and breezy.

The Second Trio was written ten years later. It is performed here with impressive accord and insight as romantic and modern sentiments again collide, or rather, are assimilated. The Jacques Thibaud Trio has a strong appreciation of the structure and idiom, and displays technical mastery in sustaining a persuasive tautness. In the Allegro, textures feel sinewy, whether the three string parts are conversing, sometimes ferociously, or melodising expressively. The motoring repetitions of the concluding episode are tremendously exciting and resolve into juicily satisfying fat cadential chords. Jianu's solo introduction to the Poco moderato is played with a heart-touching eloquence which avoids sentimentalism, and which takes a piquant turn in the ensuing Vivo, with its whipping glissandi, chuntering repetitions, fizzing trills and flutterings, and string-slapping pizzicatos.

This is a refreshing recording. The Jacques Thibaud String Trio has lavished care and attention on these small forms, confirming without doubt that 'slight' does not mean a lack of musical substance or sincerity.

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Darius MILHAUD (1892-1974)
String Trio Op.274 [17:12]
Sonatine à trois [6:51]
Bohuslav MARTINŮ (1890-1959)
String Trio No.1 H136 [19:04]
String Trio No.2 H238 [15:01]
Jacques Thibaud String Trio: Burkhard Maiß (violin); Hannah Strijbos (viola); Bogdan Jianu (cello)
rec. Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin-Dahlem, 2017
AUDITE 97.727 [58:16]

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