Franz Schubert: String Quintet & String Quartet 'Death and the Maiden'

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GRAMOPHONE

The particular twist in the Quartetto di Cremona's coupling of Schubert's two most popular late string masterpieces is their use of four instruments once owned by Nicolò Paganini – one of only six quartet 'sets' made by Antonio Stradivari. Under the fingers of these players (actually Genoese, despite the name of the ensemble), the instruments sound rich and even, recorded in an acoustic that allows the sound an attractive bloom. Combined with thoughtful interpretations, this makes the present two-disc package recommendable as a coupling of these two monuments of the repertoire.

It's the same coupling with which the Pavel Haas Quartet won the Chamber category of the 2014 Gramophone Awards.

And, really, comparisons between the two recordings are encouraging. Perhaps the Czech ensemble receive the slightly more intimate recording, although the halo of glowing resonance in their Prague studio is one of the many winning joys of their set. Tempos differ only slightly between the two recordings and both groups demonstrate an acuity born of long and pleasurable experience with both pieces.

The PHQ, however, display an extra degree of responsiveness, for example in the repeated accompaniment figures that power so much of this music from within. Not that it ever becomes simply dogged repetition in the Cremona Quartet's reading; but the Pavel Haas players inflect these rhetorical figures with a unique, innate understanding. The PHQ's bearers of the two works' overflowing melody – not limited to the first violinist – react just a touch more acutely, refusing to play anything quite the same way twice. Nobody will be unhappy with the finely played, deeply considered readings of the Quartetto di Cremona. But the Pavel Haas Quartet are something else, and will take a lot of beating.

»audite« Ludger Böckenhoff • Tel.: +49 (0)5231-870320 • Fax: +49 (0)5231-870321 • info@audite.de • www.audite.de