

A1

### **STANFORD SQs No. 1, 2, & 6**

**STANFORD String Quartets: No. 1 in G**, op. 44; **No. 2 in a**, op. 45; **No. 6 in a**, op. 122 • Dante Qrt • SOMM 0607 (79:17)

With this third release, the Dante Quartet completes its survey of Charles Villiers Stanford's eight string quartets. The No. 6 in A Minor is asterisked as a first recording, not surprising, given that it was published only as recently as 2016, never having been performed in the composer's lifetime.

It may appear from the range of opus numbers between Stanford's First and Sixth Quartets that his contributions to the medium were widely spaced in time. But in reality, they weren't all that far apart, for Stanford put out a great deal of music in fairly short order. Getting off to a fairly late start in the string quartet business, Stanford composed his First and Second Quartets together in 1891 at the age of 39. His Sixth Quartet came in 1910, 19 years later, which means that not only are there 77 opus numbers between them, but that three of those intervening opus numbers are string quartets: No. 3 (op. 64, 1896), No. 4 (op. 99, 1906), and No. 5 (op. 104, 1907). The last two quartets, Nos. 7 and 8, opp. 166 and 167, composed as a pair like the first two, came in 1921.

One assumes the usual suspects Stanford would have turned to for guidance in composing his First Quartet—Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms—but in this case, assumptions mislead. A mostly lighthearted, tuneful lyricism and bouncy rhythms lend the first movement of Stanford's G-Major Quartet an open-air, folksy, divertimento or serenade-like character. A turn towards the minor momentarily darkens the development section, but overall, the impression conveyed by the music is that of happy-go-lucky contentment. The mood is more or less maintained in the *grazioso* second movement, with intervening *Presto* sections that sound nothing like Mendelssohn's elves and fairies. The heart and soul of the quartet is the *Largo con molto espressione*. Here, for the first time, Stanford seems to be taking a cue from the slow movements of Beethoven's middle quartets, specifically the first Razumovsky, op. 59/1, and the "Harp" Quartet, op. 74. But Stanford reminds us that he was Irish, not English, with a finale that can only be described as an Irish jig. It's quite a sophisticated one, though, working its theme midway through into a fugue. For a first string quartet, this is quite an impressive accomplishment.

The Quartet No. 2 in A Minor is no more indebted to earlier models for its style than the Quartet No. 1 was. Save for a slow introduction in A Minor that flirts with E Minor, the main business of the first movement largely betrays its minor key.

Perhaps not quite as jaunty and happy-go-lucky as the corresponding movement in the First Quartet, this is still music that projects a fairly carefree atmosphere. Once again, Stanford places the scherzo second. An energetic, country-folk, peasant-like dance, it reminds a bit of Dvořák. The slow movement begins in similar fashion to its corresponding movement in the First Quartet, with distant echoes of Beethoven. But suddenly Stanford steps out of character, as the piece erupts into an agitated *Sturm und Drang* episode. Calm, of sorts, returns, but from that point forward, it's an uneasy tranquility, a repeat of the upheaval always nearby. For the finale Stanford dresses himself in Gypsy attire, as if to imitate or emulate all of those Hungarian/Roma-style movements from the finale of Haydn's Piano Trio No. 39, Hob XV/25, to the finale of Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 1, op. 25. It's Dvořák with an Irish brogue.

From here, we leap forward almost 20 years to Stanford's previously unrecorded String Quartet No. 6, which, for its first few measures, bears an uncomfortably uncanny resemblance to the opening of Schumann's String Quartet No. 1 in the same key of A Minor. The work is in three movements rather than the conventional four. Jeremy Dibble's album note tells us that the quartet was composed rapidly at the end of August 1910, while Stanford was on a fishing holiday in Northumberland, and that following a performance of the work in London in the spring of 1911, it fell into neglect and remained unpublished until quite recently. It's heard here in an edition by Dibble. While there's no question as to Stanford's technical grasp and command of writing for the medium, I think it has to be admitted that his tossed-off Sixth Quartet is somewhat lacking in a strong musical profile. There's not much in it that arrests the ear while listening to it, much less remains in the memory afterwards. It seems to be a fairly nondescript, perhaps generic, placeholder between Stanford's five earlier quartets and the last two that would come a decade later.

The Dante Quartet, as has become expected of it, performs the music before it with the greatest of technical poise and polish, and with a beauty of tone and conviction of expression that may just convince the most skeptical listener that Charles Villiers Stanford was one of the great string quartet composers of all time, though he probably wasn't. **Jerry Dubins**

**This article originally appeared in Issue 44:1 (Sept/Oct 2020) of *Fanfare Magazine*.**

### **Sir Charles Villiers STANFORD (1852-1924) - MusicWeb 1,2,6**

String Quartet No 1 in G major, Op. 44 (1891) [29:33]

String Quartet No 2 in A minor, Op. 45 (1891) [26:41]

String Quartet No 6 in A minor, Op. 122 (1910) [22:45]

Dante Quartet

rec. 2019, St Nicolas Parish Church, Thames Ditton, UK

## **SOMM CÉLESTE SOMMCD0607 [79:17]**

With this release the Dante Quartet and SOMM conclude their project to record all eight of Stanford's string quartets and in so doing they bring us the first recording of the Sixth Quartet. I very much enjoyed the previous instalments which featured the Fifth and Eighth Quartets ([review](#)) and Quartets 3, 4 and 7 ([review](#)).

All three of these quartets were the fruits of summer holidays. Jeremy Dibble relates in his booklet essay that in August 1891 Stanford spent a holiday in the Welsh resort of Llandudno. In a burst of creativity, he composed his Quartet No 1, most of it within the space of a week towards the end of that month, and then immediately began work on its successor. The first three movements of the Second Quartet were finished by 1 September. What a productive holiday! The finale was written shortly thereafter, at the end of September, while Stanford was visiting an old friend in Yorkshire.

Both of the quartets are in four movements. The opening movement of the First is genial yet animated. There's excellent dialogue between all four instruments in this engaging movement. You might say that the following movement is a scherzo in reverse in the sense that the two trio sections are *faster* than the rondo music that surrounds them. The rondo material is rather dainty. The two trios are interesting because they derive from the same material but are by no means identical. The slow movement, marked *Largo con molto espressione*, is the longest of the four movements. The movement is founded upon what Jeremy Dibble rightly calls a "broad, generous diatonic melody" and it's a lovely creation. The music proceeds on what seems like an endless flow of melody. The members of the Dante Quartet play this music with exceptional understanding and mutual empathy; it's a real team performance. The finale, a highly energetic gigue, offers abundant contrast with the preceding movement. This finale is a sparkling invention and the music dances along infectiously. Stanford's first essay in the string quartet medium is a fine achievement.

The Second Quartet, again cast in four movements, is another highly accomplished composition. Jeremy Dibble draws attention to the "sinewy counterpoint" that we hear at the very start; this music seems rather severe to me. The second subject is more upbeat and lively. Thereafter, these two ideas vie with each other for the listener's attention. They are very different in nature but it seems to me that as the movement progresses the two ideas, and the music they spawn, seem increasingly to complement each other. There follows a vivacious Scherzo; Jeremy Dibble's comparison with Beethoven is apt. The movement is very short – there's no time for the dalliance of a trio. The third movement, *Andante espressivo*, contains lyrical and deeply felt music, though there's a central episode which is much more urgent in character and this is strongly projected by the Dantes. The lively finale's opening idea, heard initially on the first

violin and pervasive thereafter, has, as Jeremy Dibble observes, an 'Eastern European' aura. He wonders if this was a tribute to Dvořák who Stanford had entertained in Cambridge earlier in the year when the Czech composer had received an honorary degree from the university. As I listened to the movement, the shape of this 'Eastern European' motif nagged more and more insistently; I'd heard something very similar before. Eventually the penny dropped; Stanford's motif bears an uncanny resemblance to the theme of Dvořák's *Symphonic Variations*, Op 78 (1877). Stanford may well have known the work because Hans Richter performed it in London in 1887. Stanford's music is full of vitality, as is the present performance.

The Sixth Quartet is another holiday composition; Stanford completed it during a fishing holiday in Northumberland in August 1910. The piece was premiered in London the following year but then seems to have vanished from view completely – it was unpublished – until the violinist Carl Pini rediscovered and performed it in 1980. The present recording, the work's first, uses a new edition prepared by Jeremy Dibble. This time we have a work cast in just three movements.

Jeremy Dibble draws attention to the restless character of the first movement; I found this trait became more marked as the movement progressed. The slow movement offers a fine contrast; for the most part the music is tranquil and warm – indeed, I understand that the first violin part is marked *con calore*. In mid-movement we hear a much less relaxed episode which is bedevilled by tremolandi, which lurk under the melodic lines. Soon, however, the opening mood of the movement is reasserted. The last movement combines elements of scherzo and finale. Here the Dante Quartet demonstrate really crisp ensemble; that's vital given the highly contrapuntal nature of Stanford's writing. It's good that this quartet has at last made it onto disc and it receives fine advocacy from the Dantes.

Thanks to the Dante Quartet we now have all eight of Stanford's string quartets on disc – all but the first two are new to the catalogue. Taken as a whole, the quartets constitute a significant achievement and I'm astonished that no one has recorded them all previously. Admirers of Stanford's music and/or of British chamber music are indebted to the Dante Quartet, to Prof Jeremy Dibble and to SOMM Recordings for making these excellent quartets readily accessible at last. This third and final instalment in the series maintains all the presentational virtues of the previous releases: the performances are consistently excellent and committed; the documentation is comprehensive; and the recorded sound, engineered by Paul Arden-Taylor, is very pleasing

Having completed their Stanford quartet project, the present Dante Quartet is disbanding – amicably, it would seem from the message on their website – after some 25 years. A new Dante Quartet will be formed by cellist Richard Jenkinson

while the other three members pursue other directions. With this imported recorded cycle of Stanford quartets, the Dante Quartet, as constituted until now, has gone out on a very high note.

### *John Quinn*

Performers: Krysia Osostowicz & Oscar Perks (violins); Yuko Inoue (viola); Richard Jenkinson (cello)

#### **STANFORD SQs No. 3, 4, & 7**

**STANFORD** String Quartets: **No. 3 in d**, op. 64; **No. 4 in g**, op. 99; **No. 7 in c**, op. 166 • Dante Qrt • SOMM 185 (Download: 76:09) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44 kHz/16-bit

These are premiere recordings of Romantic-era string quartets. The Dante Quartet seem to be engaged in recording Stanford's string quartet output, the first release coming in 2017 with Quartets 5 and 8 which both Jerry Dubins and I reviewed positively in issue 40:4. I'll take a moment to correct my math from that earlier review—Stanford's first two quartets were composed when he was 39 years old (not 59), though the point that Stanford came to string quartet writing rather late in his career still stands. The booklet notes for this current release also flub his age when composing those first two quartets saying he was "almost 50" when they were written. Not. This present set of quartets are all in minor keys (at least for first movements). Quartet No. 4 was unpublished despite having several performances at the time of composition. It is performed here in an edition by Colleen Ferguson, assistant professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a performing violinist.

Despite Stanford's Irish heritage, this music is firmly rooted in German Romanticism. They have Brahms written all over them—not a bad thing. String Quartet No. 3 came to be in 1896 and received its first performance by its dedicatees, the Joachim Quartet, two years later. A 27-minute, four-movement work, it is a delightful piece. The *Andante* third movement is in G with a soulful first violin part reflective of Joseph Joachim. This performance by the Dante Quartet is clearly more than a mere run-through. The ensemble is musically tight and dynamics are well thought out. First violinist Krysia Osostowicz handles the demanding lead voice with authority and firm pitch control.

The Fourth Quartet picks up where the Third left off despite a 10-year difference (1906). The "specs" are nearly identical—four movements, 28 minutes, with a third-movement *Adagio* in C Minor as the heart of the piece. The turbulent opening movement has plenty of drama, with surging phrases and a singing lead violin part. A playful scherzo in 6/8 time lightens the mood, incorporating brief pizzicato accompanying phrases. Things turn back to somber and serious in the

minor-key slow movement. First violin and cello share the lead in portions of this movement to good effect. The playing is top shelf, conveying every emotional nugget. The energetic Finale, in 9/8, captures the spirit of an Irish jig. It culminates in a rapid-fire passage that leaves the listener satisfied.

The Seventh Quartet was composed in late 1918 and first performed in February the following year by a student quartet from the Royal College of Music in London. Stanford shows little, if any, compositional advancement—this work could have come from his pen 20-plus years earlier. The melodic content is, perhaps, a bit less memorable and I sense a bit of “note-spinning” here that I did not detect in the earlier works. Nevertheless, it is another example of faux German Romanticism that is quite pleasing to the ear on first and subsequent hearings. At 21 minutes duration, this four-movement quartet is shorter than the others here. It places the slow movement in second position after a contrapuntal opening movement that seems to be striving for gravitas but falls a bit short. A rollicking scherzo third movement in F Minor follows. A lively, brief Finale brings the music to an exhilarating close.

The Dante Quartet are fully invested in these performances. Their playing is excellent throughout and the recording captures them in a moderate acoustic, with a nice blend of hall and direct sound. I enjoyed this music and these performances a lot, especially upon repeated listening. If you are drawn to German Romantic string quartets, I think you will like them too. **Mark Novak**

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**STANFORD String Quartets: No. 3 in d**, op. 64; **No. 4 in g**, op. 99; **No. 7 in c**, op. 166 • Dante Qrt • SOMM 0185 (76:09)

Hard to believe though it may be, these are first-ever recordings of these three string quartets by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). He was a composer of stature in his own time, amassing a catalog of some 200 works in virtually every musical genre of the day. At least half of his works were published and performed in his lifetime, a large number of them have been recorded, and unlike some composers, Stanford never vanished into the limbo of the lost and forgotten of music history. His sacred choral works, in particular, have long been staples of Anglican church choirs.

Of Stanford’s eight string quartets, Nos. 1 and 2 were recorded by the RTÉ Vanbrugh Quartet for Hyperion, a disc that was reviewed by me in 28:6. They, too, were first recordings, and remain the only recordings to date, as far as I know. More recently, in 40:4, I reviewed the Dante Quartet’s release of Stanford’s String Quartets Nos. 5 and 8, the arrival of which was announced as the launch of a complete cycle of the composer’s quartets. With this new album, the Dante

Quartet appears to be making good on that promise, filling in the Quartets Nos. 3, 4, and 7.

Irish by birth, Stanford received his early musical education at a small private school in Dublin that offered a solid, if strict, conservative grounding in the classics and not much beyond. Contemporary culture, including the latest musical trends of the day, was outside the scope of Stanford's early schooling. His parents, however, both of whom were musicians, encouraged their son's apparent musical talent, employing professional teachers in piano, organ, violin, and composition to instruct their budding "genius." Before he entered his teens, Stanford had been fed and raised on a diet of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and early Beethoven. And by the time he applied for a scholarship to attend Cambridge in 1870, at the age of 18, Stanford had already composed a good deal of vocal music and a number of orchestral works.

Most boys go through a rebellious stage in their teens against their parents. Stanford's rebellion was a bit late in coming, but when it did, it was against the university. Long story short, the Cambridge University Musical Society chorus was not open to women, which, aside from charges of sexism and discrimination, severely limited the ensemble's repertoire. In protest, Stanford started up his own choir, the Amateur Vocal Guild, which welcomed female choristers, and in short order his new ensemble eclipsed that of the CUMS. In no time flat, the university chorus changed its tune and began admitting women.

Notwithstanding his act of youthful apple-carting of the status quo on behalf of women's rights, Stanford remained a deeply committed conservative, especially in matters pertaining to music. At a time when audiences in England were absorbing the works of Liszt and Wagner and musical tastes were changing, Stanford clung to the Classical models he had grown up with and to his idols Schumann and Brahms. In 1873, Stanford traveled to Bonn for the Schumann festival, where he met Brahms and Josef Joachim. That was a turning point for Stanford. The very next year, he made the pilgrimage to the Leipzig shrine, there to study under the leading lama, Carl Reinecke.

Back in England, as a teacher himself, at both Cambridge and the Royal College of Music, an institution he helped found, Stanford continued to promote the principles of musical Classicism, primarily through the works of Brahms. Two of his own students, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, would eventually surpass Stanford in name recognition and fame, but an even greater composer than either of them—and not a Stanford student—would prove to be the greatest challenger to Stanford's reputation. That would be Edward Elgar (1857–1934), another composer of conservative bent who was influenced by Schumann, Brahms, and the later 19th-century German Romantic Classicists.

Ironically, perhaps, Elgar, who put Stanford down as a "composer of rhapsodies," would himself be mercilessly flayed on the altar of Modernism. The critic W. J. Turner referred to Elgar's "Salvation Army symphonies," and no less a conductor than Herbert von Karajan called Elgar's *Enigma Variations* "second-hand Brahms."

Not everyone agreed with those assessments. Famed conductor Arthur Nikisch considered Elgar's First Symphony "a masterpiece of the first order." Today, of course Elgar has been rehabilitated; his symphonies, Cello Concerto, *Enigma Variations*, and many of his other works have gained a permanent place in the repertoire. The same can't be said for Stanford's output, possibly for cause. Read on.

The three string quartets on this disc date from 1897 (No. 3), 1907 (No. 4), and 1919 (No. 7). Jeremy Dibble, in his album note, describes the first movement of Third Quartet as "stern, agitated, and severe." I would have to agree, adding that the writing for the four string instruments sounds combative, in the sense that they are fighting against, rather than playing with, each other. Only in the third movement of this quartet is there anything to suggest that Brahms had anything to do with it. At 1:03 into it, there's a passage in massed chords reminiscent of the opening strains in the second movement of Brahms's Sextet in B $\flat$  Major, op. 18. Other than that, there's nothing of Brahms or anyone else I can readily identify. For this listener, Stanford's Third String Quartet leaves little impression to remember it by. It's a rather woolly-sounding affair that wears its compositional complexities on the outside, exposing the wheels and gears that make the hands of the clock go round, while lending little meaning to the time that's ticking by.

I'd completely forgotten what I had to say about Stanford's Fifth String Quartet in 40:4, but now that I reread it, I see that my reaction was uncannily predictive of my reaction to the Third Quartet before me now. I wrote then that the Fifth Quartet struck me as "somewhat nondescript, a musical language of gesture and intimation as opposed to distinct melodic phrases and clearly defined formal periods, music in a constant state of flux that hops, skips, and flits about from one fragmentary idea to another, without ever coalescing into a fully formed takeaway moment." I would have to characterize Stanford's Third Quartet, composed 10 years earlier than the Fifth, as pretty much less of the same. It just took him awhile to perfect his academic facelessness.

If any composer seems to inform Stanford's String Quartet No. 4 in G Minor, it's Mendelssohn. On that point I would agree wholeheartedly with note author Dibble. That the piece has not been previously recorded is no doubt owing to the fact that it was only published as recently as 2015. It's a bit of a curiosity that barely a year later, in the Fifth Quartet, Stanford would choose to revisit the desert of the Third Quartet, yet here in the Fourth we have a score from a land flowing with milk and honey.

Stanford's penultimate string quartet, the No. 7 in C Minor, is in much the same vein as the Fourth Quartet. It's richly melodic and, with a nod once again to Mendelssohn, beautifully harmonized and supple in its flow. The slow movement (*Andante*) is the jewel in this particular crown. It gives strong evidence of Stanford's forte as a composer of sacred choral music. Just listen to the final melting "Amen" benediction, and you're sure to hear the consoling consonance of a chorale ending.

I won't pretend that these quartets by Stanford are groundbreaking works that fundamentally alter the course or our understanding of music history, nor can I assure that they will be to everyone's taste. But if you are a dedicated chamber music maven, as I am, and you've graduated beyond the mainstream repertoire, I would certainly recommend you give these works a try. The Dante Quartet has proven itself time and again in a wide range of repertoire to be one of the UK's finest ensembles. Its track record for excellence in technical execution and musical judgment continues with this release. **Jerry Dubins**

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### **Sir Charles Villiers STANFORD (1852-1924)-MusicWeb 3,4,7**

String Quartet No. 3 in D minor, Op. 64 (1896) [26:45]

String Quartet No. 4 in G minor, Op. 99 (1906) [28:04]

String Quartet No. 7 in C minor, Op. 166 (1918/19) [21:32]

Dante Quartet

rec. 2017/18, St Nicolas Parish Church, Thames Ditton, UK

**SOMM CÉLESTE SOMMCD0185** [76:15]

I admired and enjoyed Volume 1 in this series which included the Fifth and Eighth Quartets ([review](#)) so I was very glad to receive this next instalment in the series. Stanford's quartets were previously unknown to me and getting to know them through the Dante Quartet's recordings is proving to be a most rewarding voyage of discovery. The booklet essay is by the Stanford expert, Jeremy Dibble, on whose knowledge I shall draw in appraising these performances. All the quartets on the present disc are receiving their first recordings and I think I'm right in saying that No 3 is the only one of them that has been published.

The Third was mostly composed while Stanford was on holiday in Italy in 1896. Like its two companions on this disc, it's cast in four movements. Jeremy Dibble uses the word "stern" to describe the first movement. I know what he means: there's no denying the rigour and purpose; however, it seems to me that there's a degree of cheerfulness also. The writing for four strings in animated conversation is very assured: this is a fine movement. After such a rigorous beginning it's good that Stanford provides a somewhat calmer second movement. This isn't a scherzo; rather, it's marked *Allegretto semplice* and the movement might perhaps be compared, in tone and structural terms, to comparable movements in some of the Brahms symphonies. The music is predominantly lyrical but there are some strongly rhythmical passages too. The third movement is the longest. The marking is *Andante (quasi Fantasia)* and the reference to 'Fantasia' gives a clue to what seems to me to be a certain freedom of form. The music is introspective and,

indeed, it becomes quite searching at times (try around 4:00). The quartet was dedicated to the Joachim Quartet and Jeremy Dibble is surely right to suggest that Stanford had the great violin virtuoso in mind when writing this movement's first violin part. The finale is abundant in energy; the music is dance-like and a good deal is made of dotted rhythms. This quartet seems to me to be a notable composition and the Dante Quartet give a splendid account of it.

The Fourth Quartet followed ten years later and, as Jeremy Dibble relates, a Joachim connection might be said to link it to its predecessor. The link comes in the shape of violinist Johan Kruse (1859-1927), who was Australian by birth. He came to Europe in 1875 and studied with Joachim. He was a member of the Joachim Quartet for much of the 1890s and in that capacity he took part in the premiere of Stanford's Third Quartet. He formed his own ensemble, the Kruse Quartet, based in London, in the late 1890s – its founding violist was Lionel Tertis – and it was Kruse and his colleagues who premiered the Fourth Quartet in 1907. The work is dedicated to Kruse. Unpublished, the work is here performed in an edition by Colleen Ferguson.

The first movement is an extensive creation based on two primary ideas, the first somewhat rhetorical in nature, the second lyrical. Both themes have a lot of potential which Stanford exploits inventively in an impressive movement. There follows a light-footed, good natured scherzo. Jeremy Dibble rightly describes the *Adagio* movement as "deeply felt". The music is characterised by an air of noble melancholy and the Dante Quartet plays it very eloquently. We need a contrast after that and Stanford provides it in the shape of a vigorous, jig-like finale. Here the music is very dynamic, as is the playing. The Dante's performance of this quartet is first rate.

The Seventh Quartet was composed probably in late 1918 or the first weeks of 1919, Jeremy Dibble believes: it was finished in time for a performance by four students at the Royal College of Music at the end of February 1919. It seems that was the last time the work was heard until 1974 when the Alberni Quartet played it twice in performances to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stanford's death. Has it been heard since then? Quite possibly not because Prof. Dibble has prepared the work for this recording, using a set of manuscript parts deposited at Newcastle University.

He describes the opening movement, very justly, as "a stern contrapuntal affair". That said, the music is still very attractive and it also strikes me as being expertly laid out for the four instruments. The *Andante* has gravely lyrical outer sections. In the middle some faster, more restless material is presented and developed. The very ending of the movement is hushed and affecting. Two short movements conclude the Quartet. First comes a high-energy Scherzo. The finale, which is

easily the shortest finale of the three to be heard on this disc, is based on two lively dances, one of them a jig. The whirlwind coda brings the work to a very spirited conclusion.

The three quartets on this disc are all very impressive compositions. Stanford displays a natural affinity with the string quartet as a form and his writing for the four instruments is always completely assured and full of interest for the listener. The Dante Quartet plays splendidly throughout; I enjoyed their performances very much indeed. Engineer Paul Arden-Taylor has recorded them expertly, allowing all four of the instrumental voices to register clearly and in excellent equilibrium. Jeremy Dibble's notes are authoritative, as you'd expect. I now look forward very much to the completion of the cycle with the first two Quartets and the Sixth; the latter, I'm fairly sure, will be another first recording.

*John Quinn*

### **STANFORD SQs No. 5 & 8**

**STANFORD** String Quartets Nos 5 and 8. **JOACHIM** 3 Pieces for Violin and Piano, op. 2: *Romance*<sup>1</sup> • Dante Qrt; <sup>1</sup>Krycia Osostowicz (vn); <sup>1</sup>Mark Bebbington (pn) • SOMM 0160 (Download: 67:12)

I've had nothing but glowing things to say about the Dante Quartet in previous reviews, and here the ensemble is again with another winning album, this time performing two string quartets by Charles Villiers Stanford. As a bonus, Krycia Osostowicz, who plays first violin in the Dante Quartet, joins highly regarded pianist Mark Bebbington in a performance of Joseph Joachim's *Romance* from the famed violinist/composer's Three Pieces for Violin and Piano. Osostowicz was much in the news last July when her £200,000 Francesco Goffriller violin was stolen at the Brixton tube station in London. The story had a swift and happy ending, though, when the thief was caught trying to pawn the instrument for £50. But it took a while for Osostowicz to be reunited with her beloved violin, as the police had to hold it for evidence. The recording at hand was made in December 2015, seven months *before* the incident.

A dozen years ago, the RTÉ Vanbrugh Quartet recorded the first two of Stanford's eight string quartets for Hyperion, and then was heard from nevermore. You'll find the review of that album in 28:6. Quite incredibly, no other ensemble has recorded the composer's remaining quartets, Nos. 3 through 8, until now. In large part, this is due to the fact that four of the quartets, Nos. 4, 6, 7, and 8 are still unpublished and require editorial work for performance and recording. This new release, however, is announced as the first in a series that promises to cover all eight of the quartets as performing editions become available.

Much is made of Stanford's friendship with Joachim and admiration of Brahms, which can easily lead one into false expectations for what Stanford's music *ought* to sound like. It *is* true that despite his living in England and well into the 20th century, the Irish-born Stanford (1852–1924) remained steadfastly rooted in the German Romantic traditions of the late 19th century. But Stanford seems only occasionally to conjure the spirit, if not the letter, of Brahms, as, for example in the second movement (Intermezzo) of the B $\flat$ -Major Fifth Quartet of 1907, which does seem to recall in a generalized way the melancholic mood in some of Brahms's late chamber works.

It's a bit difficult, though, to describe the actual melodic and harmonic content of Stanford's B $\flat$ -Major Quartet, because it ambles along in an easygoing, untroubled, and somewhat nondescript manner. It's a musical language of gesture and intimation as opposed to distinct melodic phrases and clearly defined formal periods. Listen to the finale in particular to hear a movement in a constant state of flux that hops, skips, and flits about from one fragmentary idea to another, without ever coalescing into a fully formed takeaway moment. Stanford dedicated the quartet to Joachim and, according to note author Jeremy Dibble, Stanford included his own personal gesture, a motto quotation from the opening bars of Joachim's *Romance* in the coda to the quartet's first movement, which lends a gracious touch to the *Romance*'s inclusion on the album. In fact, on the physical recording, the *Romance* follows immediately after the quartet to emphasize its connection to Stanford's work.

Far more striking and memorable, however, in my opinion, is Stanford's E-Minor Quartet (No. 8), completed in 1919. Now it's Mendelssohn who haunts its pages rather than Brahms. This is a score rich in the melodic inspiration and focused thematic development that felt lacking to me in the earlier opus. Joachim's *Romance*, composed circa 1850, prefigures, to some extent, the first of Dvořák's *Four Romantic Pieces* of 1887. There's a hint of the Gypsy or Hungarian flavor in what is essentially a very touching encore or high-class salon piece.

As in previous releases, the Dante Quartet once again offers warm and beautifully wrought performances that get to the heart of the music and reveal the fullness of its spirit. Since these are first recordings of the Stanford quartets, there are no other versions to compare them to, but the Dante Quartet seems to have the full measure of this music in its fingers and bows. Strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

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**Sir Charles Villiers STANFORD (1852-1924) - MusicWeb 5 & 8**

String Quartet No. 5 in B flat, Op. 104 *In memoriam Joseph Joachim* (1907)  
[34:49]

String Quartet No. 8 in E minor, Op. 167 (1919) [27:35]

**Joseph JOACHIM (1831-1907)**

*Romance*, Op. 2 No. 1 (c. 1850) [4:29]

Dante Quartet

Mark Bebbington (piano)

rec. 7-8 December 2015, St Nicolas Parish Church, Thames Ditton, UK

**SOMM CÉLESTE SOMMCD0160** [67:12]

Though Stanford's music is still sadly neglected in the concert hall – in contrast to his church music which remains firmly established in the liturgical repertoire – his output is reasonably well represented on disc. It's possible to acquire recordings of most of his significant orchestral music, for example. Hyperion in particular recorded quite a bit of his chamber music, albeit those recordings were made, as I recall, quite a few years ago now. I was mildly surprised to discover, however, that only the first two of his string quartets have been recorded – by the Vanbrugh Quartet ([review](#) ~ also released as Helios CDH55459). Now SOMM Records and the Dante Quartet are going to plug this sizeable gap in the Stanford discography with a complete cycle of the string quartets. This is the first instalment. There are eight quartets in all, composed between 1891 and 1919. Stanford published only the first three and the fifth.

For information on these quartets, both of which were new to me, I'm indebted to the excellent notes by the expert on [Stanford](#) (and Parry), Jeremy Dibble. He tells us that the great violinist, Joseph Joachim was a very longstanding friend of and influence upon Stanford. Joachim died in August 1907. The **Fifth Quartet** was written in November of that year and dedicated to Joachim's memory. Stanford personalised the tribute by including a short motto phrase in each movement. That motto is the opening violin phrase from Joachim's little *Romance*. Fittingly, the piece is included on the disc though had I been planning the programme I think I might have placed the Joachim before the Fifth Quartet rather than after it so that the listener gets to hear the theme in its original context. You can programme your player to achieve that if you so wish.

In a slightly unusual gesture Stanford makes his listener wait quite some time before hearing the motto. It doesn't appear until the coda of the first movement (at 8:08) and similarly its appearances are reserved for the codas of the succeeding movements, apart from the finale in which it plays a larger role. Though the Fifth Quartet was written in Joachim's memory it is not, for the most part, a mournful work. The first movement is outgoing and energetic, the mood positive. The music seems to me to be expertly argued. The second movement is an *Intermezzo* – the example of Brahms is instructive – and the marking is *Allegretto (sempre molto teneramente)*. Much of the music is relaxed and elegant.

The work takes a much more serious tone in the slow movement, the longest in the quartet. Here the music, for which the home key is F# minor, is often very intense. The writing is deeply felt and so is the playing of the Dante Quartet. If, as I suggested, the second movement betrays the influence of Brahms then in this movement we are, perhaps, closer to Beethoven. There's a lovely, wistful lyrical second subject (3:06) which calms the mood but it's not long before the dramatic tone of voice reasserts itself. The reappearance of that second subject later in the movement (just before 8:00) offers a welcome respite from the tension. The coda begins in impassioned vein (9:08) before the movement achieves a resigned, subdued ending which includes the motto. The finale is optimistic and the motto is much more prominent. There's a second Joachim tribute when Stanford makes use of a scurrying little phrase which the great violinist was wont to use as a warming-up exercise before going onto the concert platform. It's first heard on the viola (0:46) and quite a lot is made of this fragment. After much activity the music slows (6:26) for the thoughtful coda and, fittingly, the motto achieves gentle prominence in the closing quiet bars,

Before we hear the other Stanford quartet the leader of the Dante Quartet, Krysia Osostowicz plays the Joachim *Romance* for which she's joined by pianist Mark Bebbington, This is one of Joachim's *Drei Stücke für Violine und Klavier*, composed around 1850. It's a modestly charming vignette, which is nicely played here.

The **Eighth Quartet** was composed in 1919 but was probably unheard in Stanford's lifetime. It had to wait until 1968 for its first broadcast, Jeremy Dibble tells us. He's also traced another performance that same year; how many more have there been, I wonder? It's a serious work and one which is clearly the product of a composer experienced in the genre. Jeremy Dibble describes the first movement as "a restless, introspective essay". It's certainly that but notwithstanding the restlessness the music still sings. The major-key second subject is delightful. I enjoyed the movement, which is splendidly played. There follows a charming *Allegretto* which features some pleasing interplay between the instruments. Though much of the movement is, as I say, charming, the centre of the movement is more forthright.

The slow movement is marked *Canzona – Adagio*. The opening is solemn and we hear a violin melody which ranges over a very wide span. The first violin and cello are the particular recipients of long *cantabile* lines as the movement unfolds. I found the music very moving and it is given a very touching and expressive performance. The whole thing is lovely, not least the subdued ending. Where *has* this music been all these years? The finale is in Stanford's Irish vein; much of the movement is high-spirited and jig-like. However, the coda (6:38) returns us to the restless mood and what Jeremy Dibble refers to as "the uneasy shadows" of the

first movement. Despite this Stanford ends in the major; the conclusion to his career as a composer of string quartets is beautiful but wistful.

There are two very fine quartets on this disc and if the remainder of the series contains music of similar quality then we're in for a treat. I've been very impressed by this music and similarly impressed by the fine advocacy which it receives from the Dante Quartet. SOMM have recorded them in very pleasing, clear sound. Jeremy Dibble's notes give an authoritative introduction to unfamiliar music. I look forward to the next instalment of what seems likely to be an important series, auspiciously launched here.

***John Quinn***