

**SCHUBERT Quintet in C for Two Violins, Viola, and Two Cellos, op. post. 163, D. 956.** • Qrtto Fóné (Paolo Chiavacci and Marco Facchini, violins; Luciano Bertoni, viola; Ilaria Maurri, cello); Franco Rossi, cello. • ERMITAGE ERM 406 [DDD]; 60:15. Produced by Alberto Spano. (Distributed by Quali-ton.)

**SCHUBERT Quintet in C for Two Violins, Viola, and Two Cellos, op. post. 163, D. 956.** • Emerson String Quartet (Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, violins; Lawrence Dutton, viola; David Finckel, cello); Mstislav Rostropovich, cello. • DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON 431 792-2 [DDD]; 53:29. Produced by Christopher Alder.

A recent *Schwann Opus* lists twenty-three CDs featuring Schubert's late, long, lyrical masterpiece. Some are historic recordings featuring Pablo Casals, Jascha Heifetz, Gregor Piatigorsky, the Vienna Konzerthaus Quartet, and other legendary figures. Some represent the work of chamber groups only recently departed, such as the Amadeus Quartet, and some represent older recordings by groups still very much with us, such as the Melos Quartet. Those who crave "authentic instruments" should be more than satisfied by Anner Bylsma and friends on Sony-Vivarte. At least nine are recent enough to be original digital recordings; the present offerings from Ermitage and Deutsche Grammophon raise that number to at least eleven.

Our two new discs both present a young string quartet joined by a venerable second cellist. "Slava" Rostropovich needs no introduction; Franco Rossi was, for thirty-five years, cellist in the Quartetto Italiano, surely one of the best groups of its era. He played an important role in training and launching Quartetto Fóné (founded 1985), and one can hear something of the Italiano style in the new group. Both new recordings are outstanding, but they differ quite markedly from one another. The warm and brilliant sound of the Emerson Quartet, enhanced by a borrowed Stradivarius violin and the big sound of Rostropovich, gains further richness from characteristic DG recording. There is plenty of low-frequency information for your woofers. Ermitage provides an excellent recording for Foné-Rossi, but here the leading virtues are clarity and dynamic range. The Italian recording sounds dry compared to the German one, but then the German recording sounds tubby compared to the Italian. Neither has quite the perfect balance between delectable tone and perfect clarity achieved by St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble and producer-engineer Gregory K. Squires on a MusicMasters disc—still my favorite version.

But, as expected, the Emersons and Rostropovich play superbly, combining virtuosity with penetration into the depths of this amazing score. If I do not count this the best recording of the work ever made, many others undoubtedly will; I certainly place it within the top three. And what of Foné-Rossi? Please note that they take 6:46 longer to play the work than Emerson-Rostropovich, and both are

taking the long exposition repeat in the first movement. Three of my other favorites, St. Luke's Ensemble, Cleveland Quartet with Yo-Yo Ma (CBS), and the Tátrai Quartet with László Szilvássy (Hungaroton White Label), time out at 55:23, 54:32, and 52:10 respectively, and all take that long repeat.

No question about it, Quartetto Fóné and Franco Rossi not only have the longest performance of Schubert's quintet I have ever heard; they manage to hold the record for each individual movement. This is not to say the performance is in any way dull or lethargic. Indeed, their Finale, at 10:05, sounds a good deal more like the Allegretto Schubert indicated than the quicker, more aggressive—and, let's face it, more exciting—9:22 reading by the Emerson String Quartet and Mstislav Rostropovich. I also prefer the Fóné tempo for the haunting melody which serves as second subject in the First Movement. Most of my favorite performances slow down a bit for that melody, which offends certain purists; the best score we have (Schubert's autograph, alas, has disappeared) indicates no change in tempo there. Foné-Rossi, emphasizing the moderato in Schubert's allegro moderato, hit it just right without slowing down! Many other felicities in the score seem also to be heightened by the Italians' leisurely pace; their performance rivals the St. Luke's for graceful shaping of Schubert's melodies.

By the most objective criteria one should, no doubt, award a slightly higher score to Emerson-Rostropovich for a performance conventional enough in overall outline, but superbly realized in detail. Foné-Rossi have given us a fine performance that is somewhat unconventional. I have enjoyed listening to each several times and, with whatever cautions this notice may suggest, strongly recommend both.

**Robert McColley**

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### **Franz SCHUBERT (1797-1828) - MusicWeb - Recording of the Month**

String Quintet in C major, for two violins, viola and two cellos, D.956 (1828) [53:11]

String Quartet No. 15 in G major, D.887 (1826) [52:26]

String Quartet No. 14 in D minor *Death and the Maiden*, D.810 (1824) [43:49]

Belcea Quartet: (Corina Belcea-Fisher (violin); Laura Samuel (violin); Krzysztof Chorzelski (viola); Antoine Lederlin (cello)); Valentin Erben (cello: Quintet)

rec. 5-10 May, 22-24 June 2009, Potton Hall, Westleton, Saxmundham, Suffolk,

**EMI CLASSICS 9670252** [75:28 + 74:20]

I was delighted to receive this new set of Belcea recordings made at their favourite venue. The double CD package includes Schubert's final two string quartets and the famous String Quintet in which the Belcea are augmented by the services of Valentin Erben of the late lamented Alban Berg Quartet.

On several occasions I have attended Belcea Quartet recitals and know the majority of their recordings well. In anticipation of the arrival of this release I have been playing their 2002 Potton Hall recordings of Schubert's String Quartet No. 13 in A minor, D.804 '*Rosamunde*'; *Quartettsatz* in C minor, D.703 and String Quartet No. 10 in E flat Major, D.87 reissued on EMI Classics 5 18182 2. For a recording made relatively early in their career these performances would be remarkable for an established quartet. This is highly impressive playing from the Belcea Quartet full of vibrancy, colour, precision and their enviable trademark ensemble.

I have particularly enjoyed their 2003/4 Potton Hall recording of the Brahms String Quartet in C minor, Op. 51/1 and String Quintet in G major, Op. 111 on [EMI Classics 5576612](#). I made this release one of my 2004 Records of the Year. Another of theirs that I highly rate is the 2004 Potton Hall recording of Benjamin Britten's three officially numbered String Quartets and the Three Divertimenti on [EMI Classics 5579682](#). This was one of my 2005 Records of the Year.

Opening the Schubert set is the String Quintet - one of the true masterpieces of all nineteenth century music. I have seen the score described as, "*one of the most pessimistic documents in all chamber music*". Schubert wrote it in 1828 for the combination two violins, viola and two cellos. Schubert on the verge of death reached deep into his soul but could find only extreme melancholy and anguish. This is an intensely moving account from the Belcea with the realistic feel of a live performance. I was struck by the wide dynamics from delicate feathery strokes to storms of awesome power. One senses the players have spiritually attuned themselves to Schubert's deep emotions. Although the outstanding quality of the performance makes this an extremely difficult choice my recommendation remains the superbly refined and highly moving 1982 evergreen by the Alban Berg Quartet with Heinrich Schiff on EMI Classics 5 66890 2.

Completed in 1826 the Quartet in G major, D.887 was Schubert's last string quartet. It had to wait until 1850 for its premiere and was only published the next year. The Belcea give an enthralling performance: characterful and splendidly phrased. In the *Allegro molto moderato* the assured playing of this unsettling music of wide extremes is impressive. I was struck by the relentless vigour and forward momentum of the Mendelssohnian *Scherzo* interrupted only by the *ländler*-like *trio* section. Unfortunately it has had to be spread across two discs. This performance rubs shoulders with the wonderfully expressive 1977 account from the Italian Quartet on Philips 446 163-2.

The '*Death and the Maiden*' Quartet, D.810 is one of the most renowned in the repertoire. It's a powerful work full of melodic invention. The theme of death is at its heart and the music is sombre at times but never morbid. The title '*Death and the Maiden*' stems from Schubert's early song setting '*Der Tod und das*

*Mädchen* ('*Death and the Maiden*'), D.531 which appears in the *Andante* as the source of the theme and set of variations. In the opening *Allegro* the bold and intense writing verges on the manic and is communicated here with considerable skill and utmost confidence. I found highly effective the playing of the theme and six variations that comprise the second movement *Andante con moto*. The extremely popular '*Death and the Maiden*' Quartet has numerous versions in the catalogue. This account from the Belcea Quartet is up there with my primary recommendation from the Italian Quartet, a 1965 account remarkable for its sheer technical excellence and impressive imagination, on Philips 446 163-2.

The chamber music world has seen the disbanding of the Guarneri, Lindsay and Alban Berg quartets. An elite group of outstanding quartets has moved into the limelight namely the Emerson, Henschel, Talich and Takács. With this impressive Schubert release the Belcea Quartet has now firmly established their position within this premier league of chamber ensembles. Their splendid unison and beautiful tone is a consistent feature together with their impressive ability to communicate the music to the listener.

In the notes Richard Wigmore provides a fine if rather concise essay. From the Potton Hall studio I found the splendid sound quality to be clear and well balanced. Received too late for consideration as one of my '2009 Records of the Year' this release deserves considerable praise.

**Michael Cookson**

### **Schubert: The Late String Quartets; String Quintet Review by Blair Sanderson AllMusic Review Rating: 4 1/2\*/5\***

Deutsche Grammophon's affordable Trio series revives great recordings from the past, many long unavailable and coveted by collectors. Yet this 2004 triple-disc set of **Schubert**'s late string quartets and the Quintet in C major, performed by the Emerson String Quartet and Mstislav Rostropovich, is identical to the 1999 release in all respects except for packaging and price, and will be superfluous to owners of the first edition. That said, the performances are largely praiseworthy, and the digital sound is still extraordinary. These are fairly extroverted interpretations of the quartets, and the players are at their best in fast movements, where their clarity, impeccable execution, and physical prowess are always apparent. The Emerson is less convincing in the slow movements, and **Schubert**'s deepest expressions seem instead somewhat rarefied and remote. The Quintet presents the greatest test of this ensemble's technical abilities, cohesion, and capacity for emotional depth. The group plays with exciting vigor, resonant sonority, and coherence in the *Allegro ma non troppo*, *Scherzo*, and *Allegretto*, and though its

tone is rough at times, this brusqueness mostly works. However, the sublime Adagio and the Scherzo's transcendental Trio fall short of being compelling and profound, and **Schubert's** most moving music seems to have stymied these musicians, despite their best efforts.

## **Schubert: String Quintet; String Quartets in D minor & G: Erben/Belcea Quartet - The Guardian (EMI, two CDs)**

### **Andrew Clements - Rating: 4\*/5\***

Fitting Schubert's heavenly string quintet and the final two quartets, all substantial works, on to just two discs is quite a feat, but the price to be paid is that the G major quartet is awkwardly split, with the first movement following the quintet on one disc, and the remaining three movements preceding the complete D minor quartet on the other. That aside, the set is undeniably attractive, for the Belcea Quartet's performances of all three works are beautifully judged and technically polished. There's something refreshingly brisk and business-like about their approach, resisting all temptations to dwell on the more lyrical episodes of the quintet and the G major quartet, concentrating instead on making even Schubert's most discursive passages taut and cogent. Those who like their Schubert honeyed may find it antiseptic, but nothing is pressed too hard, and the pacing always seems natural.