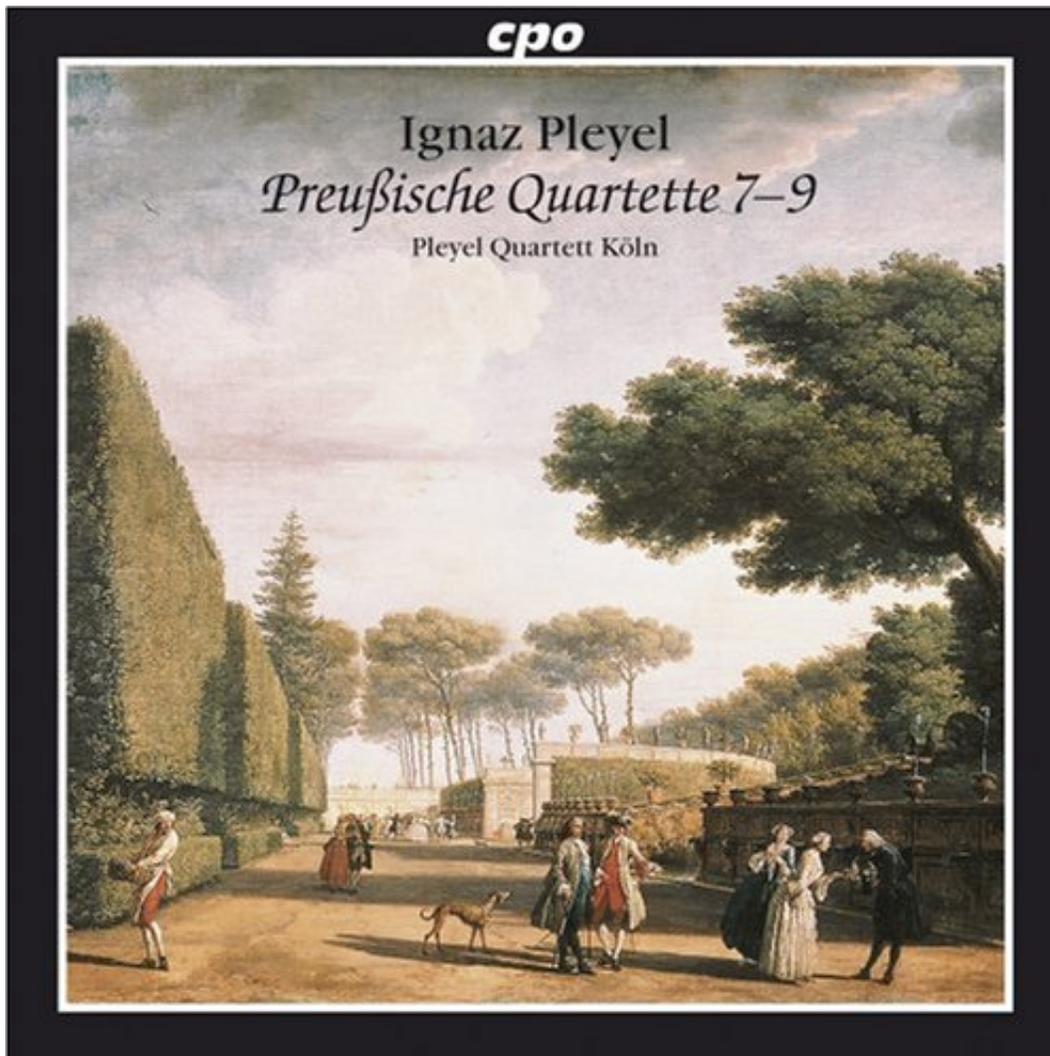


 PLEYEL String Quartets: in D, B 337; in F, B 338; in g, B 339 • Pleyel Qrt Cologne (period instruments) • cpo 777 315 (58:26)



Herewith, a condensed chronicle of the life and times of Herr Ignaz (Monsieur Ignace) Pleyel (1757–1831). Born in Lower Austria, he is believed to have studied in his youth with Johann Baptist Vanhal. By 1772, we find him in Eisenstadt, where he is taken on as a student by Haydn. Pleyel's next move is to Strasbourg in 1783, where he takes up the post of assistant Kapellmeister under Franz Xaver Richter, inheriting the full Kapellmeister position upon Richter's death. He marries and fathers four children. The French Revolution in 1791 makes for an unhealthy climate for music and musicians, so Pleyel betakes himself and his family to London, where he is engaged to lead the Professional Concerts organized by Wilhelm Cramer. In this position, Pleyel finds himself unintentionally in competition with his former teacher but still good friend, Haydn, who is in London at the same time leading the concert series organized by Johann Peter Salomon. Their professional rivalry does no lasting injury to the relationship.

Pleyel achieves widespread recognition and his fame spreads—indeed all the way across the Atlantic to the then remote island of Nantucket, where a Pleyel Society is founded in 1822 to “purify the taste of the public”—those damned Puritans at it again. Is Pleyel, in fact, the composer of the tune attributed to Haydn by Brahms in the latter composer's Variations on a Theme by Haydn? Some recent sources say he is. That question notwithstanding, Pleyel did write 41 symphonies, somewhere between 57 and 70 string quartets (depending on which source you read), a number of string quintets, and even an opera or two. But perhaps his most important contribution as a composer was to the genre of the symphonie concertante, a type of symphony-concerto hybrid that featured two or more instruments in solo roles.

Pleyel grows fabulously wealthy, and in 1795 moves to Paris. But rich is never rich enough. He decides there is even more money to be made—and probably with less effort—in the publishing business, so he establishes Maison Pleyel, a firm that would go on to publish over 4,000 titles over the next 39 years, including an edition of Haydn's complete string quartets and works by Beethoven, Clementi, Dussek, and Boccherini. Pleyel maintains warm and reciprocal relations with the Austrian and German publishing houses of Artaria, Breitkopf, and Simrock, until he sends his son, Camille, to Vienna to establish a branch of Maison Pleyel. A French competitor in their own backyard riles the Austrian and German firms, and Pleyel's only business venture to go sour goes bust.

Unfazed, the ever-resilient entrepreneur establishes yet another new company, Pleyel et Cie, reinventing himself as a manufacturer of pianos. His early technical innovations, primarily in the design of the hammers, give his instruments a sound that is "pure, even, and intense," gaining them favor among many pianists of the day, including Chopin. Amazingly, the company is still in business today. Not content to rest on his laurels, Pleyel next heeds the call of the market for a new type of harp, one that is capable of navigating the increasing chromaticism of 19-century music without subjecting the player to a pedal exercise in spinning. And thus is born Pleyel's double-strung chromatic harp sans pedals, an instrument for which Debussy wrote his *Danses sacrées et profanes*. Unlike his pianos, however, Pleyel's harp has no future. Pedals, notwithstanding the challenges they pose, are ultimately seen as the lesser of the evils over all of those extra strings.

The three string quartets on the present disc represent one-quarter of a set of 12 that Pleyel produced in 1786–87 and had issued in four serial sets of three each. There is no evidence that at the time Pleyel was seeking royal patronage or a court position, so his reasons for dedicating the quartets to Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia, are unclear. It does explain, however, why they are referred to as the "Prussian" quartets. Note author Allan Badley claims that of Pleyel's 57 authenticated quartets, these were the most popular during his lifetime. If true, it is not borne out by the current catalog, which lists this as the only available recording, and then only of three of them, there being zero entries for the other nine.

Had I never heard anything by Pleyel before encountering these quartets, I'd be inclined to say that he was wise to change careers. If Pleyel was such good buddies with Haydn, wouldn't you think he would have been familiar with Haydn's op. 50 set of "Prussian" quartets written at exactly the same time? Apparently not, for if Pleyel's quartets can be compared to any by Haydn they would have to be compared to Haydn's op. 0. The D-Major and F-Major quartets, in particular, contain some of the most stupefyingly stupid music I've ever heard. But these not being the first and only pieces I've ever heard by Pleyel, I know that these quartets give a false impression of a composer who was far more talented and often far more interesting than this. Only in the G-Minor Quartet do we hear flashes of Haydn's influence and of the freshness of Pleyel's imagination.

The Cologne Pleyel Quartet is a period-instruments ensemble, a fact one is hard-pressed to forget. The sound they make often turns astringent, desiccated, and raspy. That they play in tune is a saving grace, but to paraphrase something I believe Itzhak Perlman once said, it's sad to think that an entire generation has now grown up having been led to believe that this is how string instruments are supposed to sound. For personal reasons then, a less than enthusiastic endorsement. If you are of a different mind, I won't try to dissuade you from purchasing this release. Jerry Dubins

This article originally appeared in Issue 32:2 (Nov/Dec 2008) of *Fanfare Magazine*.