

Quartetto Italiano Reviews

MOZART String Quartets Nos. 1-23. • Qrtto Italiano (Paolo Borciani, Elisa Pegreff, violins; Piero Farulli, viola; Franco Rossi, cello). • PHILIPS 416 428-9-2 (eight compact discs; 70:14, 55:07, 64:58, 56:47, 56:15, 65:55, 54:20, 51:14).

String Quartets: No. 1 in G, K. 80; No. 2 in F, K. 155; No. 3 in G, K. 156 (plus original Adagio from K. 156); No. 4 in C, K. 158; No. 5 in F, K. 158; No. 6 in B^b, K. 159; No. 7 in E^b, K. 160; No. 8 in F, K. 168; No. 9 in A, K. 7 69; No. 10 in C, K. 1 70; No. 11 in E^b, K. 1 71 ; No. 12 in B^b, K. 1 72; No. 13 in D minor, K. 173; No. 14 in G, K. 387; No. 15 in D minor, K. 421; No. 16 in E^b, K. 428 (' Hunt"); No. 17 in B^b, K. 458; No. 18 in A, K. 464; No. 19 in C, K. 465("Dissonant"); No. 20 in D, K. 499; No. 21 in D, K. 575; No. 22 in B^b, K. 589; No. 23 in F, K. 590. - Fanfare Review

BEETHOVEN Late String Quartets. • Quartetto Italiano. • PHILIPS 416 638-2 (four compact discs; 63:57, 62:10, 42:25, 47:20).

String Quartets: No. 12 in E^b, Op. 127; No. 13 in B^b, Op. 130; No. 14 in C^{''} minor, Op. 131; No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132; Grosse Fuge in B^b, Op. 133; No. 16 in F, Op. 135.

The Quartetto Italiano embarked on its Mozart quartet project for Philips in August 1966 with the six quartets dedicated to Haydn, Between 1970 and 1972, they worked their way through all the early quartets, K. 499 in D and the three "Prussian" Quartets, K. 575, 589, and 590. In 1973, they topped it off with an LP containing Quartet No. 13 in D minor, K. 173, the three Divertimenti, K. 136-138, and the Adagio and Fugue in C minor, K. 546 (Philips 6500 645, out of print). Of the final issue, only K. 173 has been reissued in this massive CD set, although everything else could well have been squeezed in somewhere.

Luxuriant tone, polished attention to detail, and a sense of execution seem to me the salient properties of this long-lived but no longer extant ensemble. Their manner works well indeed in the early quartets; of the Haydn set, the most predominantly lyrical come off best: K. 387, 428, 465. The others, to my ears, seem often bland and lacking in tension, most particularly in a drained-sounding finale to K. 464. The "Prussian" Quartets and K. 499 are given very successful and convincing accounts.

Philips clearly doesn't just put through any old submaster into the digital hopper. Dynamics are distinctly expanded, detail gratifyingly more prominent. There is no other currently available complete recording of these 23 string quartets. The best of the competition for the "10 Celebrated" mature quartets is furnished by the Alban Berg Quartet for Telefunken, not to my knowledge available on CD, and in any case far short of ideal in fussily italicized accounts of the "Prussian" group. Those who want such a "complete" set, although the Philips production is not all

that complete in strict construction, will find these performances quite satisfactory.

I wish I could say as much for the reissue of the Quartetto Italiano's late Beethoven, but three of the six works in the set are given performances that seem quite unsatisfactory. The group seems to have no idea of how to organize the first movement of Op. 127—in which failure they are not unique on record—which becomes an oppressive stop-start-pause affair with uncharacteristically gritty tone. Similar if not so pervasive defects may be found in Opp. 130 and 132. In the latter, the “Canzona di ringraziamento” lacks tension and contrast, which takes the heart quite out of the work. Finally, the *Grosse Fuge*, although thoughtfully positioned where it may be programmed as an alternate finale to Op. 130, is as noncommittal a reading as I've ever heard. The digital transfer is first-rate throughout.

I feel that perhaps Philips is filling a CD repertoire gap with this reissue. I hope and urge that their current “house” quartet, the Orlandos, might take a flier into this repertoire, now or when they feel ready for it. An honorable successor to the Italianos, the Orlando Quartet has done some impressive performances, to the extent that anything they chose to do is automatically subject to pleasurable anticipatory curiosity.

John D. Wiser

Mozart: String Quartets; String Quintets [Box Set] Review by James Leonard AllMusic Review Rating: 5*/5*

Most of the volumes in Philips' original **Mozart** edition were quite fine, some were very fine, and some were as good as it got. This volume combining the quartets and quintets for strings was as good as it got. The Quartetto Italiano's mid-'60s through early '70s stereo recordings of the quartets are supremely refined, exceedingly lovely and ineffably beautiful. They are also from first to last deeply dedicated to the music, granting it the full measure of its sublimity. The Italiano's balanced sonorities, lucid textures, poised ensemble, infallible intonation, and, above all, their supple melodies ideally suit **Mozart**'s music and their performances are uniformly successful from the brilliant first G major Quartet to the masterful last F major Quartet. The Grumiaux Quintet's 1973 stereo recordings of the quintets were likewise as good as the Italiano's, albeit not in the same way. The quintet led by violinist **Arthur Grumiaux** did not have the long-term professional commitment of the Italiano, so the ensemble was as impeccable but more relaxed, the tone was as lovely but more focused, and the beauty less ineffable than tangible. And yet this feels equally appropriate for **Mozart**'s mature quintets. Though the lines still sing, there is more expressivity in the melodies, more depth in the harmonies, more heart in the chromaticism, and more brain in the developments. Above all, the more individualistic Grumiaux Quintet is, from top to bottom, profoundly in love with the music, cherishing in it the full depth of its

humanity. Philips' sound was stereo at its best: close but full, clear but warm, honest but beautiful.

BBC Magazine Review - Rating: 4*/5*

COMPOSERS: Mozart LABELS: Philips WORKS: String Quartets (complete)

PERFORMER: Quartetto Italiano

CATALOGUE NO: 462 262-2 Reissue (1966-73)

When it comes to the ten great string quartets of Mozart's maturity, there's hardly a shortage of recordings; but the baker's dozen of similar works he wrote as a precocious teenager are, for obvious reasons, much less familiar. Some of them are frankly experimental: the first and last in a set of six quartets composed in Vienna in 1773 end with a fugue in Handelian style, perhaps inspired by the fugal finales of Haydn's recently published Op. 20 quartets; while the Quartet in B flat, K159, from an earlier cycle written 'to keep boredom at bay' during a trip to Milan, begins as a string trio, with the eventual entry of the first violin serving startlingly to take the music into a new key.

The Quartetto Italiano performs all these early works with exquisite refinement. It takes a serious view of the music, to the point of sometimes seeming bent on making it sound like late Beethoven, though it's hard to complain when the playing itself is of so high a standard. Nevertheless, there are times – the opening Presto of the delightful K156 is a case in point – when the music-making ultimately lacks a sense of fun. The same is occasionally true in the great works here – the Italiano is rather ponderous in the opening movement of the Hunt Quartet, K458, and the Prussian, K575 – but there is much more to admire than to carp at. The obvious contender in this repertoire is the Amadeus, whose generally livelier tempi, coupled with a marked reluctance to observe repeats, means that the complete cycle is accommodated on seven CDs, rather than eight. I find greater warmth in the Amadeus performances, though you would be hard put to find better playing than Quartetto Italiano's; and the quality of the Philips recordings, some of them more than 30 years old, belies their age. Misha Donat

Quatuor Mosaïques Reviews

MOZART String Quartets: in D, K 499, "Hoffmeister"; in B^b, K 589 • Quatuor Mosaïques • ASTRÉE E 8834 (62:36) - Fanfare Review

With this release the Quatuor Mosaïques continues its survey of Mozart's mature string quartets that it began a decade ago with the half dozen dedicated to Haydn.

As in those performances, these new ones have merit and shortcomings. Tonally, the group proves more attractive than other period-instrument quartets: fuller in sonority and without the pinched, nasal thinness that is occasionally mistaken for 18th-century "authenticity." At the same time, its relatively pure timbre helps to clarify Mozart's remarkable command of chromaticism, a command so complete that its expressive colorations never jar.

Such merits notwithstanding, other factors work against these readings.

Paramount among them is what might be called (if I may invent a term) faulty rhythmic intonation. Put differently, often the pulse is not quite centered: Little, almost microscopic breath-pauses inhibit flow and impose an irregularity of the beat that produces a subtle—yet clearly perceptible—discontinuity. And the one thing these works are *not* is discontinuous. In addition, dynamics are peculiar: at times, particularly in slow movements, simply too loud; elsewhere, exaggerated in their marked contrasts. With every repeat that Mozart called for observed, these performances become increasingly wearisome. Excellent sound is pretty much beside the point here. Ignorance prevents my recommending alternative period-instrument versions, but I would suggest keeping an eye out for budget reissues of this repertory by the Talich Quartet, performances that are not listed in the current *Schwann*.

Perhaps someday, if the economy and classical-record business right themselves, we may see a resurrection of sonically fine monos from the fifties recorded when Alexander Schneider made his return to the Budapest Quartet. Mortimer H. Frank

QUATUOR MOSAÏQUES • Quatuor Mosaïques • NAÏVE E8935 (5 CDs: 318:57)

CD 1: HAYDN String Quartets, op. 77/1–3 (62:15)

CD 2: MOZART String Quartets: in A, K 464; in C, K 465, "Dissonant" (76:24)

CD 3: BEETHOVEN String Quartets, op. 18/1, 4 (55:30)

CD 4: SCHUBERT String Quartets: in E^b, D 87; in a, D 804, "Rosamunde" (67:50)

CD 5: MENDELSSOHN String Quartets: in E^b, op. 12; in a, op. 13 (56:58)

Naïve often releases box sets such as this one, in which several earlier releases are housed together in a cardboard sleeve. Nothing has been changed about the original releases otherwise; the booklets and even the catalog numbers are exactly the same. The price, however, is a fraction of what one would pay for the releases individually. In other words, for those interested in a generous sampler of the Quatuor Mosaïques, this is an outstanding bargain!

Founded in 1987 by four musicians in Concentus Musicus Vienna and still active, this essentially Austrian quartet, with a French name, plays on period instruments. Its members are violinists Erich Höbarth and Andrea Bischof, violist Anita Mitterer, and cellist Christophe Coin. Their repertory is largely composed of works from the Classical and early Romantic eras, but they play 20th-century works as well.

Some of these individual discs have been reviewed in *Fanfare*—mostly very positively. (The sole negative review, in fact, is from Mortimer H. Frank, whom I do

not strongly associate with period-instrument recordings.)

I compared some of these performances with others I had at hand to see how I felt about them. First up was the first of Haydn's so-called "Lobkowitz" quartets. Perhaps it is unfair or beside the point to compare Quatuor Mosaïques to the Alban Berg Quartet, whose members were not identified with the period-instrument movement. Be that as it may, the first thing that I noticed—apart from the lower pitch used by Quatuor Mosaïques—was the richer, more bass-heavy sound of the period-instrument quartet. In comparison, the ABQ sounded almost artificially bright and shallow. (I cannot completely rule out the role of the engineering in creating this impression.) Furthermore, there is more humor in the playing of Quatuor Mosaïques. For example, they capture the jauntiness of the first movement's first subject more surely than the ABQ, whose members adopt a rather serious tone. That might be appropriate for late Beethoven, but not for much of Haydn, especially not in this genial work. I have nothing but respect for the ABQ. However, if you want to fall in love with Haydn's string quartets, Quatuor Mosaïques is preferable.

The Smithson String Quartet, another period-instrument quartet, recorded Haydn's first two "Lobkowitz" quartets. I don't have that CD. I do, however, have the Smithson recording of Beethoven's opus 18 quartets (also dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz), so I compared it to the Mosaïques's Beethoven CD. Here, the choice is more complicated. The Mosaïques relates these quartets back to Haydn, whereas the Smithson emphasizes that, yes, these works are relatively newly-fledged Beethoven through and through. The decorum maintained by the Mosaïques—and decorum counts for something!—is repeatedly and delightfully ruffled by the Smithson. In short, I found the Smithson more interesting in the Beethoven quartets than I did the Mosaïques. (Now I am going to have to track down that Haydn CD!) That's not to say that I did not enjoy both ensembles on their own terms.

Given the profusion of larger period-instrument ensembles, the relative dearth of string quartets so identified is a little surprising. (Perhaps they are not given as many opportunities to record.) Thus, regardless of my feelings about individual recordings, I welcome this box set as an opportunity to expand my experiences in this area. I think it is important to state, however, that what makes these five discs worthwhile is not that they contain performances played on period instruments, but that they contain two fistfuls of terrific music that is sensitively performed ... and it just happens to be performed in period style. To put it differently, you might come for the gut, but you'll stick around for the general goodness of it all.

Raymond Tuttle

Below are 4 Amazon Reviews - two are 5* and two are 3* - some decent comments made

5* - The six quartets Mozart dedicated to Haydn are truly extraordinary works. For

once Mozart had only himself to please; he would have been certain that pleasing himself would also please Haydn. It is these works that caused Haydn to declare to Leopold Mozart: "I tell you before God, and as an honest man, your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by reputation. He has taste and, what is more, the greatest skill in composition."

When Mozart wrote, in his dedication, that these quartets were "the fruit of a long and laborious endeavour", he wasn't just flattering his dedicatee but simply telling the truth; countless corrections and rewritings in the original manuscripts are testimony to how hard he worked on the music.

I had the Quartetto Italiano's performances on LP and they were among the most played in my entire LP collection of about 850 discs. I bought the same performances on CD once they became relatively affordable in the Philips Complete Edition. If the members of Quatuor Mosaïques were around in those days it would have been in the early stages of the quartet's career. I certainly hadn't heard of them until they started making waves with their marvellous recordings of Haydn's quartets. As with the Haydn discs, Quatuor Mosaïques yield to nobody in the Mozart works. I hadn't heard the music for a long time and reacquainting myself with it through these performances merely reinforced my early impressions that these quartets are possibly the best works Mozart wrote, along with the last four quartets and the last three string quintets. No-one who loves Mozart's music should be without them and couldn't do better than choosing these performances. Alas, they are no longer available new on CD—at vaguely affordable prices anyway—and even second-hand sets are atrociously expensive. Anyone who doesn't have the income of a billionaire will need to buy the FLAC files from Prestoclassical, in the UK. Each disc is priced (as at the time I'm typing this) at £9.25 and the site allows customers to pay in a wide range of currencies.

If you are new to this genre of music by Mozart, you might not know where to start first. Quartet No. 17 K458 (The Hunt) is, I believe, the most popular, though I consider all the others in the set dedicated to Haydn are more interesting. Beethoven's favourite was No. 18 in A (The Drum). While for me it's a case of the one I last heard being my favourite, I think if pressed I would go for No. 15 in D minor K421. The other two discs in this set consist of the quartet Mozart wrote for his friend Hoffmeister (No. 20, the Hoffmeister) and the three so-called Prussian quartets, because they were written for the King of Prussia, who played the cello, which meant Mozart felt obliged to include a prominent part for this instrument.

3* - I am finding it extremely difficult to "enter" these interpretations - it just doesn't sound like Mozart to me. There is little spontaneity, the playing is stiff and contrived.

Courtly grace seems more appropriate to Haydn - and indeed the Haydn's Opus

33 recording by Q. Mosaïques, which I have, is very beautiful (I don't think Haydn playing could get any better) - but with Mozart, at least to me, they miss the lightness of step required to bring these works to life.

I am disappointed - I still feel the need to buy other interpretations for greater access to these quartets. This group (Q Mosaïques) has a cult following - and although their followers insist that they are "correct" and "accurate", I would say that perhaps they are predominantly "academic", which sometimes results in inauthentic-sounding performances - like these.

5* - PRESTO! An amazing box set by a fantastic group, production is excellent and sounds great as any CLASSICAL album for even the upper echelon Hi-Fi systems. I believe a UK website has this for download in 320kb mp3 or flac for a much more sensible price. QUATUOR MOSAIQUES is a fantastic group, their MOZART collection is one of their best.

For some reason these are as rare on cd as unobtainium so if you do a web search of what's in caps above, in order, you'll find said sensibly-priced site available for download in great price.

3* - These CDs are blessed with stunningly clear sound, every strand of the music being audible as it's being played, and the Quatour Mosaïques perform with great technical ability. But, for me, the music very rarely takes flight. One of the reasons for this is the slow tempi that have been used for the allegro movements. For example, the allegro of the first movement of the Bb quartet K454 sometimes falters to the point of complete stasis, something which is common to nearly all the fast movements. Instead of flowing the music seems to lumber along from one beautifully played phrase to the next with little sense of purpose or forward momentum. The final movement of the Eb quartet K428 is plagued with a similar problem as the Mosaïques don't seem capable of discovering a true pulse for each work. A similar problem affects the often deeply expressive slow movements. There is just no 'thread' that goes through from the first bar to the last. As a consequence the music is completely drained of much of its life, vitality and power. I'm a big fan of Mozart played on period instruments, and the sound of these particular instruments is fantastic. It's just a shame that the interpretative qualities don't live up to the sonic qualities. Therefore I would recommend the Alban Berg recordings (on Teldec, NOT the EMI ones) of all Mozart's late quartets. These aren't without problems (for example they sometimes don't obey important repeats e.g. in the first movement of K499 or the polyphonic finale of K590) but overall they offer much more musical, enthralling and satisfactory interpretations.