

PFITZNER Piano Trio in F, op. 8. Piano Trio in B \flat • Robert Schumann Tr • cpo
 999 736-2 (65:23)

This is luxury, indeed, to have within a year two complementarily excellent performances of Pfitzner's early and heretofore obscure Piano Trio, op. 8. Clamorous, clangorous, brooding, and ruminative, but brimful of arresting ideas, this manic-depressive essay forecasts the composer to come with youthful extravagance. Already, in 1896—his 27th year—his music possesses a wounded, embittered pathos unassuaged by oases of lyricism or halting, Beethovenian meditations. The Schumann Trio strides through these Faustian episodes with mordant swagger, while Claudius Tanski, Clemens Hagen, and Benjamin Schmid (MDG 312 0934-2; 24:1) do not shy before earnest sentiment, slipping occasionally into schmaltzy sentimentality. You can't go wrong with either, though MDG's detailed but distant sound allows the proceedings to be dwarfed by cavernous ambience, while cpo's is gratifyingly, transparently up front—but both allow the cello's lower register to be covered by the piano. If you care for this work, you'll want both, though if you're having only one, discmates may be the deciding factor. MDG couples the Trio with the late, lyrically effusive Violin Sonata. The Trio in B \flat , heard here, is a three-movement student work dating from 1886. Less ambitious than the op. 8 but revelatory and not without charm, it has an irrepressible impetuosity that constantly breaks through Biedermeierish rule-of-thumb writing with an obsessive glint. Complicating matters, a 1994 go by the Pallas-Trio in closely detailed sound (Musicaphon M 56813, coupled with trios by Friedrich Kiel and Friedrich Koch) takes this teenage work to heart in a marginally more exuberant performance, though they eschew a first-movement repeat included by the present musicians. Pfitzner's allegiance to a circumscribed past, of which Schumann is the exemplar and fountainhead, is reminiscent of his contemporary Magnard's commitment to an ideal balanced between Beethoven and Franck: In both a deceptive conservatism harbors a pathological intensity that could as well have taken an Expressionist turn. Both offer new wine in old bottles. The present offering allows us to hear Pfitzner's pathology in the making. Recommended. **Adrian Corleonis**

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Piano Trios: F, Op. 8 (1896) [44'19]; B flat (1886) [21'01].

Robert Schumann Trio (Kees Hülsmann, violin; Marien von Staalen, cello; Josef De Beenhouwer, piano).

Rec. in SWR Studio 5 on November 4th, 1998 (Op. 8); Kleiner Sendesaal, WDR, on November 22nd, 1999 (Trio in B flat). [DDD]

CPO 999 736-2 [65'23]

A piano trio by Pfitzner may seem a daunting prospect, especially when the piece in question lasts for three-quarters of an hour (Op. 8): perhaps this was the reasoning behind CPO's 'special price' for this product. That said, it is difficult to imagine anyone with a penchant for late-Romantic music being disappointed by this release.

Chamber music was part of the entire gamut of Pfitzner's creative life - his Op. 1 was his Cello Sonata in F sharp minor. The major work on this disc, the Piano Trio in F, Op. 8, dates from 1896; it is the longest composition of his early period. Pfitzner's cup positively overflows with invention. One of his compositional credos was that one idea naturally gives birth to another, and certainly there is a momentum of ideas which makes the eight-minute first movement ('Kräftig und feurig, nicht zu schnell') so compelling. This is in fact true of both of the outer movements (the last movement, 'Rasch und wild', is quite invigorating to listen to). The very opening shows where Pfitzner's 'difficult' reputation comes from. The texture he creates is best described as 'large', full of late-Romantic sweep. But this just emphasises the contrasts Pfitzner is able to call on: try the beautifully calm patch around 5'50, as fragments are exchanged between instruments.

All three members of the Robert Schumann Trio get chances to shine. Perhaps it is Kees Hülsmann's sweet-toned violin which should come in for special mention. His sound suits the lyrical basis of this music and he excels himself in the slow movement, which moves to a tender, yet impassioned, climax.

The B flat Piano Trio, which dates from 1886, a full decade earlier, is much less demanding fare. The author of the booklet notes, Hans Rectanus, claims to have reconstructed and published the trio from material in the Austrian National Library in Vienna and the Bavarian State Library (Munich).

This is the music of youth. The booklet notes accuse the first movement of being 'a little long', something the Robert Schumann Trio set out to disprove: and what a convincing case they make! The second movement is similarly fresh, inspiring the booklet note writer to purple prose. The Romanze 'could be a scene with two lovers. "She" (violin) and "he" (cello) flirt with one another, let go, and finally come to rest in perfect happiness'. Again however, Rectanus feels the third movement Scherzo makes a 'somewhat clumsy impression'. Actually, it is great fun, and the Trio is really affecting. Well worth exploring.

Colin Clarke

PFITZNER String Quartets: in D; C^b, op. 36 • Franz Schubert Quartet • cpo 999 526-2 (73:17)

Dating from 1886, the composer's 17th year, the D-Minor Quartet is a lengthy but charmingly *gemutlich* essay in the adolescent moodiness that would deepen into a perpetual manic-depressive *Schmerz*, of which the C#-Minor Quartet of 1925 is one of Pfitzner's finest, most trenchantly concentrated and compelling expressions—one, incidentally, with which he was pleased sufficiently to have orchestrated as a symphony (cpo 999 136-2, *Fanfare* 16:5; see also *Fanfare* 17:6, p. 356ff). Where the Reger Quartet (Vox Box CDX 5134) works the C#-Minor's hectic, lending a fillip to its truculent shrillness, the present performance—tautly, propulsively—explores its melancholia, its somber colors, its tenebrous eeriness. The former is gripping, the Schubert Quartet's is deeply moving, while both are eminently persuasive. Pfitzner's *sol niger* radiance will draw you in—a weekend planned for other urgent matters was largely absorbed in obsessively hearing and rehearsing these albums. Cpos sound is transparently immediate. Dolefully recommended.

Adrian Corleonis

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PFITZNER String Quartets: No. 1 in D, op. 13; No. 3 in C Minor, op. 50. • Franz Schubert Quartet (Florian Zwiauer and Helge Rosenkranz, violins; Hartmut Pascher, viola; Vincent Stadlmair, cello). • cpo 999 072-2 [DDD]; 54:01. Produced by Helene Steffan and Burkhard Schmilgun. (Distributed by Naxos.)

Forty years separate these works, yet the air of winsome wistfulness set off by a subdued jollity verging on melancholy is the same, if revisited more deftly and with wry nostalgia in the C-Minor Quartet. A Quartet in D Minor from Pfitzner's student days (performed by the Sinn-hoffer Quartet and licensed from Da Camera in 1979 on MHS LP 4101) is cut from the same cloth. Realizing that this D-Major Quartet, the official No. 1, is the product of Pfitzner's mid-thirties, or that the arrestingly turbulent Quartet No. 2 in C minor (one of his finest works, which Pfitzner saw fit to orchestrate as a symphony) fell between the quartets heard here, one is the more taken aback by their emotional naïveté and lack of exploit. A recording of the Third Quartet by the Austrian String Quartet from twenty-five years ago (VoxBox CDX 5134) knocks nearly six minutes off the running time—20:42 against the Schuberts' 26:21—adding a small but welcome sense of adventure. That is not to deny interpretive insight to the present performances; but while the Pfitzner enthusiast will want them as a matter of course, the uncommitted listener will

probably remain unpersuaded by Pfitzner's wan *Gemütlichkeit*. Open, detailed recorded sound.

Adrian Corleonis

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MusicWeb Review of String Quartets

Only in the field of the string quartet was there more than one example of each grouping. He wrote four quartets and all are featured on a this pair of well documented (French, English, German) CPO discs.

Pfitzner is sometimes mentioned in the same breath as Reger. In fact there is about as much in common between those two as between another pair often bracketed together (Bruckner and Mahler) in the dark ages of the 1950s and 1960s. Pfitzner is not a man to write wild and woolly mammoths of works and Max's penchant (to which he sometimes capitulates with joyous indulgence) for prolixity is not something you can associate with Pfitzner.

The two quartets stare at each other across a void of forty years: one written 12 years before the Great War and the other written in old age during World War II. Both are attractive works and the style has hardly changed over the years. The Bachian purity and Dvorák-like romance of the first movement of Op. 13 puts not a foot wrong. There is a delightful second movement with a refrain recalling *Three Blind Mice*, a third movement of bruising emotionalism and a finale in the spirit of some cheery German drinking song - brimming steins and all! The Op. 54 work is hooded and reserved in the first movement and in the *langsam* (III) assumes the Mozartian mantle of wit and dignified beauty. The finale (*Allegro*) is alive with a fantasy familiar from Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*.

CPO's sensitivity to artistic needs is usually high. This is noted in a hundred and one little features: for example the good long gap between the end of the 1902 work and the start of the 1942 work. Documentation excellent.

Rob Barnett



PERFORMANCE: *** / SOUND: ***** BBC Magazine Review Violin Sonatas**

That Hans Pfitzner was far more than just the composer of Palestrina has been triumphantly demonstrated by CPO in its exploration of the composer's orchestral

works a few years back, and more recently by the five-volume series of songs. Now the label turns to the works for solo piano and the Violin Sonata, both fascinating discoveries. Pfitzner's entire piano oeuvre (discounting three undated short pieces) consists of two sets: the Five Piano Pieces of 1941 and the Six Studies of the following year. Curious that it's so little, so late, for Pfitzner was an accomplished pianist and an inveterate admirer of Schumann. Less surprising is the fact that his own pieces owe so much to Schumann's example – not least the final Melodie of the Op. 47 set, which is an unashamed homage to Schumann's Romance in F sharp, Op. 28/2. Even more welcome is the opportunity to make the acquaintance of Pfitzner's only Violin Sonata. Dating from the time of Palestrina – it was actually begun immediately after the premiere of the opera in 1917 – the Sonata is an exhilarating outpouring of inspiration in late-Romantic style. Ulf Wallin and Roland Pöntinen are exemplary advocates, and violinists looking for an attractive addition to their repertoire should seek out this disc urgently. I look forward to further neglected treasures of Pfitzner's chamber output from CPO, preferably with better translated booklet notes.

-- **Barry Millington**, [BBC Music Magazine](#)