

A2

William WALTON

String Quartet (1922)

String Quartet in A minor (1947)

The Emperor Quartet

Recorded at Potton Hall, Suffolk August 14-16 2000 DDD

BLACK BOX BBM1035 [58:51]

Hearing these two works side by side makes for fascinating listening. The Walton we know in the A minor Quartet, a composer quite clearly at the height of his powers, supremely confident and lucid in his inspiration, coupled with a tantalizing glimpse of a musical avenue that he ultimately chose not to pursue.

That is not to say that the early 1922 *Quartet* is devoid of any recognizably Walton-esque touches. Indeed as early as around 1:55 in the opening *Moderato*, the climax into the gently rocking lyrical material that follows will give the game away for some listeners. Overall however it is the shadow of Alban Berg that hovers over the work, the harmony surprisingly chromatic with an intense, at times deeply felt, lyricism particularly in the outer two movements. By contrast, whilst still incorporating passages of sometimes plaintive melancholy, the central *Allegro molto vivace e ritmico* is a gritty extended scherzo that brings to the mind the closely argued counterpoint of the Maconchy, or perhaps more tellingly, Bartók quartets. The booklet note tells of how the Emperor Quartet were sent the music by Oxford University Press, subsequently finding a multitude of errors and revisions between the composer's autographed score and the parts that they originally received. The music presented here therefore incorporates the cuts and alterations that are considered to reflect Walton's own final version of the piece. It may lack the concision and structural direction of his more mature works but on the evidence presented here this is a quartet that deserves to be heard.

On more familiar ground in the 1947 *Quartet*, the Emperor give a performance of impressive maturity for a relatively young ensemble. In contrast to the earlier work, the hallmarks of Walton's mature language are on display in abundance. The languorous opening of the initial *Allegro* subsequently transforms itself into a fugue of considerable substance. The brittle, biting scherzo and the touchingly poignant Lento which follows are coupled with the driving, jazz influenced syncopations of the *Allegro molto* finale. Throughout, the Emperor play with a deeply committed passion for the music, their rhythmic articulation taut, the

tenderness of the *Lento* moving in its intensity. The dynamism and forward propulsion of the finale had me on the very edge of my seat and you can't ask for more than that!

This is probably the finest Black Box disc I have heard to date. The recorded sound is spot-on for the music, the acoustic natural and realistic. Above all the Emperor Quartet play with verve and panache, bringing a freshness to the later work that is particularly invigorating. Couple this with the first class performance of the 1922 *Quartet* and the result is a disc that I can whole-heartedly recommend to anyone with even a passing interest in Walton's music.

Christopher Thomas

Walton, String Qts./Black Box C

Review by: ClassicsToday *Artistic Quality: 8* *Sound Quality: 9*

Regardless of the strong affection that the up-and-coming Emperor Quartet has for William Walton's two string quartets, there's just no way to convince a listener that the English composer missed his true calling by not focusing on chamber music. His two string quartets (the first written in 1922 and the other in 1947) are decidedly not among Walton's best works, far less confident or focused than some of his compositions in other genres. Even the 25-year span between the two pieces was not enough for Walton to master the form; the 1947 quartet overstays its welcome by restating its ideas far too often.

Be that as it may, this recording still is an excellent calling card for this British ensemble, which was founded in 1992 and went on to win the prestigious Evian International String Quartet Competition a scant three years later. It's a fine group, with an exemplary sense of ensemble playing and a pointed, deliberately sharp-focused sound. (I'd be curious to hear them in more mainstream repertoire to see how consistent their tone actually is.) And yet the players don't always keep the lines taut where required; it's hard to tell if the too-leisurely tempo of the A minor quartet's Presto is the result of a laid-back approach or sheer timidity. On the other hand, that restraint sometimes works to the music's advantage, as in the beautifully understated violin solo in the 1947 quartet's Lento. The close sound lends these works an appropriate warmth and intimacy. However, the ballyhooed "exclusive online extras" for this enhanced CD are easily skipped, as you're led to the Black Box website for press clippings, a repeat of the CD's liner notes (!), a brief Walton biography, and links to the rest of the Black Box catalog.

