

**F. E. FESCA String Quartets: No. 1 in E $\flat$ , op. 1/1; No. 2 in F $\sharp$ , op. 1/2; No. 3 in B $\flat$ , op. 1/3; No. 7 in a, op. 3/1; No. 8 in D, op. 3/2; No. 9 in E $\flat$ , op. 3/3; No. 13 in d, op. 12; No. 15 in D, op. 34. *Potpourri No. 2 B $\flat$  for String Quartet*, op. 11 • Diogenes Qrt • CPO 777482 (3 CDs: 207:02)**

One thing the enterprising German label CPO can never be accused of is not taking risks; in for a dime, in for a dollar, as the saying goes. Having previously released two volumes of Fesca's symphonies—Volume 2 was twice reviewed in these pages, in 27:5 and 31: 6, but never Volume 1, which I have—the company has now committed itself to Fesca in a big way, promising a survey of the composer's complete string quartets, of which this three-disc set is the first installment. According to CPO's booklet note, Fesca's quartets number 16 (same as Beethoven's), so this first volume contains half of them.

Friedrich Ernst Fesca (1789–1826) was born late and died young. His short life spanned the years from the end of Mozart's life to within one year of the end of Beethoven's, a period which saw the production of some of the greatest music ever written, and a time of major cultural and social change that had significant consequences for the course of music history. Fesca was pretty much guaranteed his future obscurity by the many contemporaries with more recognized names that surrounded him—not just Beethoven, Schubert, and Weber—but those born around the same time as Fesca who outlived him by several years—Onslow, Spohr, Ries, and Czerny, to name a few.

Born in Magdeburg, Fesca trained as a violinist, distinguishing himself at an early age as both an accomplished performer and a composer of concertos for his instrument. Unlike his Italian contemporary Paganini, Fesca represented a German style and school of violin playing which led through him to Spohr, thence to Spohr's pupil Ferdinand David and eventually to Joseph Joachim. The road from Fesca to David runs through Leipzig, where Fesca was appointed the Gewandhaus Orchestra's concertmaster in 1804, and served in that post until 1806. Following stints in Oldenburg and Kassel, Fesca turns up in Vienna in 1814, but doesn't remain there for long either, soon departing for Karlsruhe, where he takes over as concertmaster in the orchestra of the Grand Duke of Baden.

All of this moving about and serving in various posts for only short periods suggests a restless, unhappy man of unfulfilled promise and ambitions. Among his works—in addition to the 16 string quartets being surveyed by the Diogenes Quartet for CPO—are three symphonies, some 40 songs, four sacred works, two operas, an *Andante and Rondo* for Horn and Orchestra, four string quintets, four flute quartets, a Flute Quintet, a String Trio, and four potpourris for a solo instrument.

The dating of Fesca's string quartets is uncertain. The first 10 of them—op. 1 through 4—were published in two volumes, one in 1815, the other in 1816. But it's believed they were composed a few years earlier, between 1808 and 1813. If that's the case, then six of the eight quartets in this two-disc set were written before Fesca arrived in Vienna in 1814, so the chances are he would not have encountered Beethoven's middle quartets of 1808 before he composed his own first 10 works in the medium. Of course, comparing Fesca's quartets on these discs to Beethoven's "Rasumovsky" set serves little purpose other than to underscore what we already know—that Beethoven was one of music's most radical thinkers and revolutionary figures.

The first six quartets listed in the above headnote are much closer in style to Haydn's later quartets than they are even to Beethoven's op. 18 Quartets, which already chart a new course. But the closer proximity to Haydn notwithstanding, you can tell at once that Fesca's quartets could not have been written by Haydn. Melody and harmony are of a later, more Romantic cast. Phrases of irregular lengths and/or of asymmetrical balance occasionally take strange tonal detours accentuated by the odd passing dissonance, and often seem to become lost in their search for resolution. Emotional expressivity, not infrequently of a sentimentalized persuasion, tends to take precedence over prudent restraint. An example is the concluding *Allegretto* of the F#-Minor Quartet, op. 1/2, which exudes a kind of oily, maudlin character. Whether it's the Diogenes's players themselves, who spare no portamento its due, or the music, which begs the players to schmaltz it up, the end result is either good music played badly or bad music played well. Having encountered the Diogenes Quartet before in a recording of Schubert quartets that made my 2013 Want List, I suspect the latter to be the case.

Nor is humor Fesca's strong suit; in a number of cases his scherzos are virtually indistinguishable from his minuets, and when he does write a true scherzo, as in the second movement of the D-Major Quartet, op. 3/2, the effects are more witless than witty. The minuets, on the whole, lack Haydn's drawing-room charm and manners.

After listening to two full discs and six quartets, covering the op. 1 and op. 3 works, I was pretty much ready to write Fesca off as a composer whose oblivion is well deserved. But there was one more disc to go, this one containing two of the composer's later quartets, so I still held out hope for something better.

The D-Minor Quartet, op. 12, was published in 1819, and it's definitely a huge improvement. Fesca's model now seems to be neither Haydn nor Beethoven, but Schubert—the Schubert, however, not of "Death and the Maiden" or his late quartets, but the Schubert of his early efforts, particularly the G-Minor Quartet, D 173. From here, we proceed to Fesca's penultimate quartet, the No. 15 in D Major, op. 34, a work in which the composer seems to have assimilated the Schubertian idiom to the point where many of Fesca's songful, soulful melodies and melting harmonies really do sound like they could have come from Schubert's pen.

I had to spend considerable time listening to a lot of dull and unrewarding music to get to this D-Major Quartet, but I'm on the verge of calling it a masterpiece and definitely worth the wait. If this gem of a work were the only string quartet Fesca wrote, he'd be a composer to take notice of; it's a real beauty. Perhaps, like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, true inspiration struck Fesca only once, but when it did, it transformed him from a *Kleinmeister* (Patrick Rucker's description in 31:6) into a talent of some consequence. Alas, if only he had lived longer....

The Diogenes Quartet goes from strength to strength. The ensemble has chosen to explore some unusual, out-of-the-mainstream repertoire—quartets by Onslow, Cherubini, Humperdinck, and now Fesca—but everything I've heard from them has affirmed my opinion that the Diogenes is one of the finest string quartet ensembles on the world stage today. As mentioned above, their recent Schubert disc, the beginning of a complete Schubert quartet cycle, earned a place on my 2013 Want List.

If I could recommend this release for just the op. 34 Quartet, I would, but it comes as part of a full-priced, three-disc set selling at Amazon for \$48.95. That's a lot to pay for a collection of works, most of which just aren't very engaging. So, I'm inclined to limit my recommendation to those who have an abiding curiosity in the almost-were, the never-were, and the left-behind of music history. **Jerry Dubins**

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Reviewing a release (CPO 999869) of two symphonies by Friedrich Ernst Fesca in *Fanfare* 31:6, Patrick Rucker described him as a "symphonist," and came to the conclusion that "though it's doubtful that anyone would argue for an elevation of Fesca's status above that of a *Kleinmeister*, this is music of considerable skill and charm." I think something important wasn't stated, there—namely, that Fesca wasn't a symphonist. He was a concertmaster and first violinist by profession in various court orchestras and chapels, but his compositional *métier* was chamber music, and especially the string quartet. As compared to the three symphonies he wrote very early in a highly successful career cut short by tuberculosis, he composed a total of 16 string quartets, not to mention four string quintets, four flute quartets, and a Flute Quintet.

And it was as a composer of string quartets that Carl Maria von Weber praised him in a published article in 1818. He notes that Fesca's models were Mozart and Haydn, that he is "careful and richly spices" his harmonies, and "often modulates sharply, and swiftly, almost like Beethoven," which is both shrewd and wide of the mark: both Beethoven and Fesca learned this from Haydn, and beyond Haydn, likely back to the more exploratory quartets of Gossec. Unlike Beethoven, he "feels too soft to ... suddenly seize us with a bold, gigantic fist," but "a certain

intelligent deliberation marks his works, and is coupled with depth of feeling, avoids dryness, and brings about an uncommonly fine bearing in the character both of the whole and of the individual parts. He develops his ideas clearly and manifoldly, the four voices are independent...." Weber notes a tendency towards what we term the *quatuor brilliant*, with a flashy first violin part, but that the other instruments aren't demoted to secondary roles.

This first volume in a projected series of Fesca's string quartets in general confirms Weber's comments. I find little mature Mozart in the mix. On the other hand, Haydn appears less in the shape of harmonies and themes than in distant modulations, a tendency towards regular motivic transformation, and subtle elements held in common among all four movements of each work. Fesca also has the interesting trick (for lack of a better term) of crafting beautiful *galant* themes that he tags, either midway or at their conclusion, with short motifs. These latter can be varied and developed at will, as well as making a perfect way to bridge back to the themes, themselves, usually with several transformed elements. Even the earliest works, believed to date from before or around his 20th year, demonstrate a mastery at handling what were by then the quartet's movement structures that would remain in place for over a century. There is also at times a sense of playfulness at work—figures reversed, details that suddenly loom out of proportion, bridges that don't end up where they traditionally should, thematic content from one movement inserted slyly into the accompaniment of another, etc.—though it almost never takes the form of Haydn's famous false endings. Weber's comment about four independent voices is only accurate in a limited sense. True, Fesca is willing to give the lead voice at any time to any of his instruments, but his greatest fault (at least, to modern ears) is a willingness at times to fall back on a lead with simple, repetitive bass accompaniment. That, too, was very characteristic of French quartets from the mid-18th through early 19th centuries. What Weber in turn considers with typically Romantic regard for the individual as personally expressive reticence was probably just a pragmatic matter of writing for the largest audience without compromising standards; for make no mistake, Fesca was extremely popular during his lifetime. (His quartets continued to go through multiple editions after his death and through to the mid-century.) The one stylistic kicker in this three-disc set is the String Quartet No. 13 of 1819. It stands out from the rest both for its concentration on motivic transformation, even in the central movements, and for its tonal instability. Fesca as a rule enjoys exploring distant keys and recasting thematic content with different leads and slightly altered harmonies, but here he deliberately undercuts notions of the tonic not merely in bridges but within the themes themselves, leading to several moments of precarious tonality during the opening movement. Chromatic passages abound. It's not later Schubert, by any means, but it is a curious sidelight that indicates one direction the composer might have pursued had he lived longer. The Diogenes Quartet is a new name for me. They are all technically proficient if not expert, but slurs in some faster passagework commendably don't cause them

to take movements marked as *presto* or *vivace* any slower. Their tone is commendably lean, and their application of vibrato on held notes, and at cadences, warm. Founded in 1998, they apparently keep to a busy concert and recording schedule. (Their first volume of the Schubert quartets has recently been released on Brilliant Classics.) I'm glad to see that none of this has meant any less attention given to this music, and they perform it with the kind of loving detail one would expect to hear in works by the Bigger Names. They make an eloquent case for this music, and for the volumes that will follow. **Barry Brenesal**

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### **Friedrich Ernst FESCA (1789-1826) - MusicWeb Review**

#### ***Complete String Quartets - vol.1***

Quartet no.1 in E flat, op.1 no.1 (1815) [29:09]

Quartet no.2 in F sharp minor, op.1 no.2 (1815) [28:31]

Potpourri no.2 in B flat, op.11 [8:21]

Quartet no.3 in B flat, op.1 no.3 (1815) [24:28]

Quartet no.7 in A minor, op.3 no.1 (1816) [20:07]

Quartet no.8 in D, op.3 no.2 (1816) [20:25]

Quartet no.13 in D minor, op.12 (1818-19) [32:10]

Quartet no.15 in D, op.34 (1814) [20:57]

Quartet no.9 in E flat, op.3 no.3 (1816) [22:16]

Diogenes Quartet (Stefan Kirpal, Gundula Kirpal (violins), Stephanie Krauss (viola), Stephen Ristau (cello))

rec. Bayerischer Rundfunk Studio 2, Munich, 18-20 October 2007, 3-5 June 2009, 7-9 July 2010.

**CPO 777 482-2** [3 CDs: 66:01 + 65:00 + 75:23]

Magdeburg-born Friedrich Fesca was a close contemporary of Schubert who, alas, also succumbed prematurely, dying from consumption aged only 37. He still managed to compose sixteen splendid string quartets, though, of which the German Diogenes Quartet present the first half on this three-CD set from the ever-providing CPO label.

Some adventurous collectors may recall that a decade or so ago CPO issued Fesca's three symphonies on a pair of recordings. These were substantial and impressive works, but as a violinist-composer, Fesca gravitated towards chamber music. Who else but CPO recorded his flute quartets fairly recently (777 126-2), whilst his four string *quintets* remain for the time being unrecorded. It is to the string quartet medium, though, that Fesca was clearly drawn most, and his corpus in this area was a staple of the repertoire for a good few decades of the nineteenth

century. According to his *New Grove* biography, he was, between 1816 and 1826 "the most frequently reviewed composer in this genre in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*" – some achievement, considering who else was writing quartets in this period.

Though Fesca's opus numbers are not an entirely faithful guide to publication dates – the folk-influenced op.34 quartet, for example, appeared a year before the op.1 set - these are all mature works, all likely dating from some time during his mid- to late-twenties. In some respects Fesca was a fairly conservative composer – not Beethoven or Schubert, but rather Mozart and Haydn tended to be his models. Yet, in a case made unequivocally here by the Diogenes Quartet, he was undeniably original – these quartets are outstanding exemplars by any measure.

Whilst retaining the dimensional elegance of Classicism, in their understated virtuosity and especially in their harmonic fullness they overlap with the early Romantics. The twelve movements of the three quartets of op.1 are formally and expressively majestic, resembling late Haydn but with added melancholy or wistfulness - surely among the most impressive of all nineteenth-century opp.1.

Fesca takes a cheerier approach, more reminiscent at times of Mendelssohn – to whom he bore some physical resemblance, incidentally, but who was at this time still a young child - in the three shorter quartets of op.3. The D minor op.12 came a few years later, at a time when Beethoven was still silent in this genre and shortly before Schubert's famous single movement in C minor, D.703. Fesca's work is five times as long as Schubert's, but it certainly shares some of its dramatic intensity, the minor key further heightening the emotional discomfiture that Fesca does not, however, allow to descend into melodrama. He is here more forward-facing; his son, Alexander, also to become a short-lived musician (1820-49) of some renown, was soon to be born. What a sad irony that he had only a few years more to live.

Even the Potpourri – not a work title normally associated with musical depth - has 'quality' stamped all over it. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that, should the quality of Fesca's writing reach the same levels in the second half of the CPO cycle – to be performed by the Amaryllis Quartet, by the way - then the connoisseur at least will understand the phrase "the sixteen string quartets" to have a *second* referent of exceptional merit! In fact, there can be no rational explanation for their disappearance and especially continued absence from the quartet repertoire. Without question, the Diogenes Quartet have an artistic advantage over rivals with these works in their stock. It goes without saying that their superb musicianship is an even greater asset: across the three years of these recordings their technique, togetherness and sense of expression are truly admirable.

Engineering quality is very good in all respects. Player inhalations, a bane of so many quartet recordings, have been laudably kept to the background. An error on the back inlay gives CD2's individual playing-times for CD 3 also; the latter does in fact give an extra ten minutes' worth of music.

***Byzantion***

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