

Ligeti

String Quartets – No. 1, 'Métamorphoses nocturnes'; No. 2. Solo Cello Sonata'. **Quatuor Bêla** (Julien Dandegard, Frédéric Aurier, violins; Julian Boutin, viola; Luc Dedrual, cello).

Aeon ACCD132 (full price, 50 minutes). www.aeon-music.com. Producer: Olivier Ligeti. Engineer: Benjamin Maurus. Date: May 1st-4th, 2012.

Comparisons:

String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2:

André Q (Sony Classical) 882338 (1994)

Keller Q (ECM New Series) 881 3224

(2007, 2011, rev. Jan 2016)

String Quartet No. 2:

LaSalle Q (DG) 423 280-2 (1988)

Cello Sonata:

Harmoritz (DG) 423 813-2 (1992)



Quatuor Bêla

Ben-Luc Ferencsik

Its name suggests that it is of Hungarian origin, but Quatuor Bêla is French – formed in 2006 by four graduates of conservatories in Lyon and Paris. They specialise in contemporary music – and have commissioned a healthy portion of it – and in collaborating with artists of a very different stripe. (Among these is singer/songwriter Albert Marcoussé, who has been described as France's answer to American rock iconoclast Frank Zappa.) This is their debut release on the Aeon label, and it bodes well for their future.

Ligeti's two string quartets come from two different periods in his creative life. The first, composed in 1951-54, is a work that the composer wrote without having much hope that it would be performed in his Hungarian homeland, given the culturally repressive atmosphere there at that time. (For example, although Bartók was venerated as a great Hungarian composer, his more difficult works were not played at all, and Ligeti knew Bartók's Third and Fourth String Quartets only from reading their scores. One understands why he left the country, with so many of his fellow Hungarians, in 1956.) 'Métamorphoses nocturnes', as he subtitled his First String Quartet, is an edgily playful work in 12 continuous sections. Especially in

this new recording, the juxtapositions of style and mood are so surprising that they could make an unwary listener jump. In the January 2014 issue I reviewed a recording of this work by the Keller Quartet. At that time, I wrote, 'As I was listening to the Keller Quartet play this work, it occurred to me that some of the humour is heavy-handed, and the jokes are not very funny. It then occurred to me that perhaps that was precisely the point that Ligeti was trying to make?' Comparing the two recordings, however, Quatuor Bêla clearly has the upper hand. In playing it responsive and muscular, it can swirl and change directions on the head of a pin. In contrast, the Keller Quartet is quite glassy and sluggish. Although its reading lasts only a minute longer than the Bêla's, the emotional distance between the two is significant.

The Second String Quartet, which dates from 1968, is a mature work – not that the First String Quartet is any negative way – in which Ligeti, now residing in the West, could follow his impulses and be guaranteed both performers and an audience. (The inclusion of some of his earlier scores in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey that same year hardly hurt, even though Ligeti disapproved of the manner in which the music was used, and sometimes altered, in that film.) Themes, at least in the usual sense, are replaced by textures and tones of sound. A brutal sense of humour still applies, however, particularly in the third movement, which is marked 'Come un meccanismo di precisione'. (As I noted before, this is an ironic marking, as the music seems to illustrate a mechanism whose precision is falling apart.) The present performers play up the dynamic contrasts in this movement. You won't know whether to marvel at their collective techniques, to laugh, or to turn pale. There's a feeling of youthful bravado throughout this reading which is absent even in the classic reading from the LaSalle Quartet. The Keller Quartet provides a mellower alternative, which is provocative in its own way, but not, I think, what Ligeti had in mind.

Celloist Luc Dedrual steps into the spotlight for a reading of the Cello Sonata, a work even earlier than the First String Quartet. (The first movement, marked *Duogo*, dates from 1948, and the second, marked *Caposia*, from 1951.) He is very touching in the first movement, and brings out the music's tugside like a native Hungarian. Matt Harmoritz, in a recording made early in his career, doesn't come close, although he and Dedrual are more evenly matched in the busy second movement.

The booklet notes by Simon Gollor is very perceptive and well researched. Also, it has been printed in a painstakingly small font. As for the engineering, it gives the musicians considerable immediacy and presence. My only complaint (a small one!) is that the First String Quartet is given just one tracking point, where Sony gives the Arditi Quartet, on its excellent recording, eight.

String quartets which specialise in contemporary music sometimes turn silly, but I sense a lot of integrity and seriousness of purpose flowing from Quatuor Bêla, and I am looking forward to its next project.

Raymond S. Tatler

Duos Duette Duos

Martinů Three Madrigals, H313.
Mozart Duos – G, K423; B flat, K424.
Penderecki Ciaccona 'in memoriam Giovanni Paolo II'.

Spohr Duo in E minor, Op. 13.
Evgenia-Maria Popova (violin); Dimitar Penkov (viola).

Remix Records 7301 (full price, 1 hour 19 minutes). www.remixrecords.com. Producer/Engineer: Rita Vermeij. Date: January 2012.

Why should music for a violin and viola duo be considered more unusual than music for an unaccompanied violin? Does anyone ever ask, 'Why didn't the accompanist show up?' when a violinist walks onstage alone? (Some readers will be aware, however, that Robert Schumann wrote piano accompaniments for all six of Bach's solo violin sonatas and partitas – inspired, the story goes, by a performance by Ferdinand David of Bach's Violin Partita No. 2, during which Felix Mendelssohn improvised a piano accompaniment.) I expect full-length recitals of violin and viola duos are fairly rare, and I am guessing that the repertoire is not voluminous. Nevertheless, hearing this CD, I regretted that this should be the case, and at no point did I feel that something was missing, and ask, at least rhetorically, 'Why didn't the accompanist show up?'

These performers have extensive solo careers and nothing in their biographies indicates that they perform together regularly. In fact, nothing indicates that they have performed together even once until these recording sessions, except for the technical and interpretative unanimity of the playing, which suggests that the two of them are, if not artistic colleagues, then at least old friends who are on similar wavelengths. Both are Bulgarian. Evgenia-Maria Popova was one of Leonard Kogan's last pupils – and there's quite a bit of Kogan in her playing. (No bad thing!) Dimitar Penkov, after finishing his studies in London, was a member of the Bulgarian Radio String Quartet and the NDR-Radiophilharmonie in Hannover.

These are sunny and outgoing performances in which both musicians have their feet