

The New York Times

Tuesday, April 13, 2010

Navigating a Course Among 4 Composers

By ALLAN KOZINN

The Henschel Quartet, from Germany, made news last month when it performed for Pope Benedict XVI at his residence in Vatican City. Since then it has returned to more conventional concert spaces, though on Sunday afternoon the quartet turned up at a bona fide New York mansion, the Frick Collection, for a demanding, stylistically varied program. Its musicians performed early-20th-century scores by Erwin Schulhoff and Samuel Barber, and standard repertory works by Haydn and Schumann.

These players — Christoph and Markus Henschel, violinists, and Monika Henschel-Schwind, violist (they are siblings), and Mathias Beyer-Karlshoj, cellist — moved easily among the four composers' styles. But the most transfixing aspect of their performance was a hefty tone, both individually and as an ensemble. In solo passages, each produced a seductively buttery timbre, and throughout the performances

Mr. Beyer-Karlshoj drew a sound so uncommonly fat that his instrument often sounded more like a double bass than a cello.

The quartet began with the least familiar of its four works, Schulhoff's Quartet No. 1 (1924) and made a powerful case for it. Schulhoff, a Czech composer who died at the Wülzburg concentration camp in 1942, was an eclectic, and in this quartet, chunky Stravinskian rhythms and acidic figures that would have been at home in Bartok are offset by unabashedly tonal, folksy dance themes.

The Henschel players melded these influences seamlessly and gave the amalgam an otherworldliness that, in the finale, took on a compellingly eerie quality.

Haydn's Quartet in G (Op. 76, No. 1) is immeasurably sunnier and lighter in texture than the Schulhoff, but it, too, draws amply on rustic folk rhythms. The flexibility in tempos that the ensemble

brought to the opening *Allegro con spirito* was admirable, as was the humor it brought to the Menuetto, with its whimsical pauses and stark dynamic contrasts. But appealing as these lively movements were, the heart of the performance was the *Adagio sostenuto*, played here serenely and with a choralelike solidity.

Barber's Quartet and Schumann's Quartet No. 1 were contributions to this season's celebrations of those composers' anniversaries: Barber's centenary and Schumann's bicentenary. The Barber had the most inconsistent performance here: its opening movement sounded slightly shrill at times, and more Ivesian than it should have. But the *Adagio*, in its original single-string texture, was a thing of beauty.

The Schumann, which closed the program, was couched in warm hues and played with irresistible energy and high spirits.



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String Quartet Perfects Art Of Nuance

By **Jim Ruggirello**

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It started with the first note.

Yes, I know. All concerts do that. But from the downbeat of the Henschel Quartet's concert the other night at Daniel Recital Hall, the opening event of The Music Guild's 65th season, it was clear that we were in the presence of something very special.

That opening attack was firm, aggressive. The sound was an exemplary string quartet sound, well balanced and alive. Something about the opening phrase of Haydn's quartet in G, Op. 76 No. 1 announced to the world, and to the Music Guild's dedicated audience, that the Henschel Quartet really knows its business, and should be considered one of the top string quartets in the world.

Three of the four Henschels are really Henschels: violinist brothers Christoph and Markus, and violist Monika Henschel-Schwind. They are joined by cellist Mathias Beyer-Karlshøj to form as masterful, tight and distinguished an ensemble as you will ever hear. The Music Guild has never featured a bad group, but this one was maybe the best I've heard.

First of all, again, the sound. This group's string quartet sound was more vibrant, more interesting if you will, than your run of the mill foursome. Their mastery of nuance was simply a thrill to hear, the four musicians thinking, breathing and playing as one entity.

After about as perfect a performance of a Haydn quartet as anyone could wish for, the Henschels essayed Dmitri Shostakovich's great Op. 110 quartet in C minor. This was a revelation. Shostakovich's music came alive in a way that was, in the end, stunning.

The bleakness of the outer movements unforgettably depicted the horrors of World War II, which Shostakovich sought to memorialize in this work. But what I still can't get over was the controlled violence of the Allegro, a breathtaking display of instrumental virtuosity.

How do you follow that? Late Beethoven, of course. The Op. 132 quartet is widely thought of as Beethoven's towering achievement in this genre, and the Henschel's performance did not disappoint. This piece is a daunting technical and musical challenge, but it unfolded beautifully and naturally under the sure hands of this fabulous group.

Like I said before, I've never heard a bad Music Guild concert. They deserve a bigger audience than they currently attract, given the relative affordability of tickets and the quality of the musical offerings. Check out www.themusicguild.org, and if you appreciate good music well played, get yourself to a concert.

All of the groups on this series are at least very good, some more distinguished than others. Occasionally you will encounter greatness. This was one of the great ones.



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Los Angeles Times

Tuesday, February 24, 2009

Review: Henschel Quartet's powerhouse debut at UCLA

The Music Guild uses a quote from the Los Angeles Times in its promotional material that credits the organization with bringing some of the best groups in the world to the Southland. I don't know how old that quote is. The guild has been around for a quite a while and tends these days to function on the periphery, although with a devoted and sizable following.

It began 65 years ago as a chamber music series at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre. It has long been peripatetic. This year, it's presenting its main series of six programs at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall, Cal State Long Beach and Cal State Northridge. The ensembles are not yet name brands. Monday, the Henschel Quartet from Germany played for the first time in California at Schoenberg.

The quote stands. This is, no question, one of the best groups in the world, a great string quartet, and its debut here was long overdue.

The Henschel was formed in 1994 by three siblings and a cellist. The violinists, Christoph and Markus Henschel, both play Stradivarius instruments. Their sister, Monika Henschel-Schwind, uses an oversize viola, a deep instrument that gives the ensemble an unusually rich and dark tone. The cellist, Mathias Beyer-Karlshoj, is a powerhouse. On Monday, the men wore identical pinkish orange ties -- which looked a

little hokey, but you can't have everything.

This is an ensemble of tremendous brawn. Schoenberg is a pretty good hall, but it works best with performers who can give a little extra. Monday, these four extraordinary players gave a great deal of extra.

They began with Mendelssohn's String Quartet, Opus 13, and they gave it a Beethovenian heft that didn't entirely suit the score, Beethovenian though Mendelssohn tried to be. The players may have still been finding their way acoustically in Schoenberg. They may not have been warmed up. Or Mendelssohn may not suit them, although the Henschel has recorded the composer's complete quartet literature.

The program ended with Beethoven's Opus 127, the first of his late quartets, and this performance's Beethovenian heft was extraordinary. So too was the delicacy when that was needed. And so too was the ethereal quality, which is essential to making late Beethoven make sense. For all his railing against the heavens, Beethoven always lands on the side of the angels.

I don't know of any string quartet as capable as this one of reaching the opposite extremes of bluntmuscle and airiness. The flowing melodies in the first and last movements of

the Beethoven sailed through Schoenberg on wings. The slow, long variation movement operated throughout in mystery.

The Scherzo sounded as advanced as Bartók. Imagine, if you will, Arnold Schwarzenegger dancing on the head of a pin, and all the implications thereof, and you get an idea of the Henschel's accomplishment in achieving late Beethoven complete.

Also on the program was the First String Quartet by Erwin Schulhoff, written in 1924 when the Czech composer was 30. Of all the composers who perished in German concentration camps, Schulhoff may have had the most promise of a major career. He was a Modernist who treated Czech folk music with avant-garde techniques. He was also besotted with jazz. His voice was his own. **The energy in this early quartet is raw and thrilling. The Henschel's performance was commanding, making a gripping case for Schulhoff.**

The encore was the pizzicato-rich slow movement from Ravel's String Quartet. The performance was more German than French, but this was a very good night for the Germans. The plucked notes were ripe plums infusing the atmosphere with sonic perfume, and Ravel emerged larger than life.

The Music Guild caught a big one.

-Mark Swed



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SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL MusicWeb's Worldwide Concert and Opera Reviews

Schulhoff, Bruch and Schubert: Henschel Quartet (Christoph Henschel (violin), Markus Henschel (violin), Monika Henschel-Schwind (viola), Mathias Beyer-Larlshøj (cello) with Kazuki Sawa (viola), Wigmore Hall, London, 23.7.2008

Erwin Schulhoff: **String Quartet No.1 (1924)**

Max Bruch: **String Quintet in Eb (world première) (1918)**

Franz Schubert: **String Quartet in G, D887 (1826)**

Premières are always special occasions. Whether it be the first performance of a new work by a well loved composer, which one welcomes like an old friend telling a new story, or a new composer with, hopefully, something to say, there is always an air of expectancy in the concert hall. Tonight's première was somewhat different, Bruch's *Quintet* is already 90 years old, and the reason for the delay in performance is unusual. At the end of his life Bruch wrote three chamber works (two *Quintets* and an *Octet*). The manuscripts of one of the *Quintets* and the *Octet* were destroyed during the war and only exist because the composer's daughter-in-law made hand written copies. The manuscript of this *Quintet* went into private hands and it only became available to the public when it appeared for auction two years ago.

The question has to be – was it worth waiting for? The answer is a most definite yes. In four compact movements, playing for about 30 minutes, it's a playful, delightfully scored piece, tightly constructed in two sections, each in two movements. The slowish first movement was over almost before it began, lovely sustained music, and burst into a breathless *allegro*. The slow third movement acted as an introduction to the finale, which, itself, started with a slow introduction, and the work came to a joyous conclusion without any angst or troubles. It's a fine addition to the repertoire and, although the language is of seventy years earlier, and Bruch doesn't tell us anything new, it's pleasant and I thoroughly enjoyed it. So did the Henschel's and Sawa. They played it with authority – never an easy thing to do with a new work – and treated it as the divertissement it so obviously is. Let's hope it's not going to be another 90 years before we're allowed to hear it again!

The concert started with Erwin Schulhoff's *1st Quartet* – but his fourth work in the genre – a composition which plays fast and loose with form and content. Schulhoff is one of those composers who disappeared because of the war – he died in Wülzburg, Bavaria, of Tuberculosis in 1942. Many of his works were fuelled by jazz – the *Hot Sonata* for saxophone, *Esquisses de Jazz*, for piano and the *Suite for chamber orchestra [Suite in the new style], op.37*; the unusual (for want of a better word) *Sonata Erotica*, for moaning solo soprano, is another matter entirely – and these are the pieces for which he was best known for many years. Today there are recordings of most of his music and he regularly receives performances, which is more than he



did during his lifetime. The *1st Quartet* doesn't have anything to do with jazz but it does have a lot to do with the expressionist movement. Beginning furiously it contains a lovely slow movement, a folk dance-like scherzo and a slow finale which, after all the excitement and the various twists and turns of the music, ends in magical peace, the music fading away to nothingness, which took the audience by surprise. It's a very strong piece and it got a performance worthy of it. The Henschels weren't afraid to let themselves go when the music demanded it, and they tore into the music with a gusto. The final diminuendo was heart breaking in its intensity.

After the interval, late Schubert and another work of heavenly length. This is a disturbing work, full of strange *tremolandos*, quickly repeated notes, odd turns of harmony, and a high degree of violent gestures. The first movement is high drama, even in the lyrical passages there are disruptive elements and the Quartet pointed all the oddities Schubert throws at us, making it a most troubling listen. The slow movement, with its glorious writing for the cello, is more of the same but within a slower, more refined, atmosphere. Two huge climaxes disrupt the flow of the music, and the Quartet rose to the challenge and made them appear to be of titanic proportions. The other two movements are easier but still contain unsettling elements. The trio of the scherzo, for instance, is quite spooky and the finale, despite having an outwardly bucolic main theme contains such turns of harmony as to keep us wondering where the music is going. It's a difficult work to bring off successfully because of the unusual nature of the music but the Henschel Quartet understood how to make the music work and they gave a towering performance, full of energy, mystery and beauty in the slow movement.

Bob Briggs

<http://www.musicweb-international.com/sandh/2008/Jul-Dec08/henschel2307.htm>



Henschel Quartet – Schulhoff, Bruch & Schubert

Reviewed by: Richard Whitehouse

The Henschel Quartet returned to Wigmore Hall for a wide-ranging programme spanning almost a century and can fairly be said to have run the gamut of musical Romanticism.



Admittedly the First Quartet (1924) of Erwin Schulhoff does cross the boundary into Expressionism: from the period in which are concentrated most of this composer's best works, it reflects without imitating Hindemith – in its propulsive and rhythmically trenchant first and third movements – while suggesting Bartók in its capricious second movement or ominous introspection of its finale. A superb piece which, as with its successor and the equally fine String Sextet, is gradually making its way in the repertoire – thanks to such finely attuned performances as that which the Henschel gave here.

Hard to credit that the next piece was written less than a decade before, but even a late work by Max Bruch is unlikely to push the aesthetic envelope and this first public airing (actually billed as a world premiere) of his First String Quintet (1918) revealed a work that looked back fondly to the ethos of Mendelssohn and Schumann. Hardly surprising when one remembers the ageing composer all but considered himself the relic of a bygone age: what was unexpected was its expressive vibrancy, radiating experience without indulging in mere nostalgia.

Although nominally in four movements, the opening Andante is more an extended introduction to the

lively and equally compact Allegro that follows. A further Andante proves the emotional heart of the

work – allying its generous flow of polyphony to a harmonic subtlety that at times recalls 'American'-period Dvorák – and which is linked, via an anticipatory slow introduction, to a finale which touches on previous themes (and also earlier works by Bruch) on its way to a vividly affirmative conclusion.

As with the Second Quintet and Octet that followed, this piece was long known about but – unlike its successors – inaccessible through the surviving copy being in a private collection. Thanks in part to the redoubtable Bruch scholar Christopher Fifield, it has now been published and also recorded by these artists prior to this performance (hence 'first public performance'). This welcome act of rehabilitation and the persuasiveness of this rendering, made for an appealing work that may yet have a future.

The modest dimensions of these works were put in context by Schubert's last and greatest string quartet. Keeping its expansive proportions in perspective is never easy: the Henschel chose to omit the first movement's exposition repeat, emphasising the thematic contrasts and harmonic richness in this most radical of extended sonata designs from Schubert's last years. The Andante found a workable accommodation between its plaintive main theme and the powerfully rhetorical episodes that waylay its progress, while the scherzo unfolded with appropriate emphasis on its teasing rhythmic interplay – the trio lacking nothing in easeful warmth. In its oddly discursive manner, the finale can seem an anti-climax, but the Henschel once again found the balance between its obsessive formal backtracking and underlying buoyancy that sees it through to a decisive close.

Throughout the performance, passing intonational flaws were as little compared to the cohesiveness of ensemble and the assurance with which the musicians projected this most orchestrally-conceived of chamber works. An all-round success for the Henschel Quartet.

» LONDON

NICK SHAVE's survey of the second half of this summer's BBC Proms season encompasses chamber music as well as concertos

IT WAS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF

Sibelius's death that sparked the **Henschel Quartet's** decision to put his op.56 Quartet (*Voces intimae*) at the centre of its lunchtime Cadogan Hall programme in the Proms Chamber Music series (6 August). The work asks a lot of its players, not least in its elusive Andante exposition, which the Henschel approached with an economy of gesture, leaving the material to speak for itself. This was a confident delivery of Sibelius's rhetoric, with the players pursuing clarity of line at all times, taking the Vivace second movement at a slower tempo, too, in order to compensate for the hall's slightly reverberant acoustic. Sibelius's Adagio was prone to one or two moments of inertia, when overarching architecture became submerged in the movement's myriad of motifs, but the Henschel's technique was never in doubt, not least in the players' immaculately articulated exposition of the Allegretto, which took on a wonderfully earthy character. Elsewhere in the programme, they showed why they are still very much in demand on the international circuit. They executed the pyrotechnic fugato passages of the opening Mendelssohn Capriccio op.81 no.3 with startling eloquence and delivered the full-blooded argument of Janáček's String Quartet no.1 ('The Kreutzer Sonata') with invigorating bite. Only in Janáček's last movement, where the finale seemed to sprint away from grasp, was the players' approach to tempos – as set down by Milan Škampa – called into question.

April 2007



BEETHOVEN

String Quartets: in B flat, Op. 18/6; in E flat, Op. 127
 Henschel Quartet

Arte Nova 82876 63996 2 62:55 mins

BBC Music Direct £7.99 inc. p&p

The Henschel have obviously thought deeply about these great works. While the Takács Quartet, for instance, in their otherwise admirable recording for Decca, launches the late Quartet Op. 127 with all guns blazing, the Henschel take due account of the fact that each reprise of the imperious opening chords occurs in a progressively brighter key and more forceful sonority. The slow movement is impressive, too, with a deeply-felt account of the radiant E major variation that is its poignant heart.

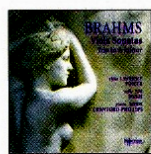
In the scherzo Beethoven interjects short passages in which the prevailing triple metre switches to two beats. Like almost every other ensemble, the Henschel keep the beat constant, thereby disregarding the new tempo marking – *Allegro*, as opposed to the underlying *Scherzando vivace*. As far as I know, only the Endellion Quartet in their recent Warner recording correctly interpret the duple-metre passages as being slower. But it's a small point, and the performance as a whole is eminently satisfying.

No less accomplished is Op. 18 No. 6, with the players again not afraid of using portamento for expressive effect. In the slow movement they produce an admirable change of tone-colour, as the music turns mysteriously to the minor; and unlike many of their rivals, they sensibly keep the scherzo's syncopated accents within its overall *piano* dynamic. I've recently been returning with great pleasure to the

Amadeus Quartet's deeply moving 1960s Beethoven recordings. They seem hard to beat, but as a single-disc alternative this newcomer is warmly recommended. *Misha Donat*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SOUND ★★★★★

BENCHMARK RECORDING
 Amadeus Quartet DG 463 1432



BRAHMS

Viola Sonatas in F minor & E flat; Trio in A minor

Lawrence Power (viola), Tim Hugh (cello), Simon Crawford-Phillips (piano)
 Hyperion CDA 67584 65:29 mins

BBC Music Direct £12.99 inc. p&p

Was it pity for viola players that induced Brahms to arrange his

two Clarinet Sonatas and Clarinet Trio for the Cinderella of the string section? Or was it genuine artistic necessity? It's hard to say. The viola can offer something special rather than just different – especially in the First Sonata and the Trio. The exquisitely slow dying fall of the slow movement melody of Sonata No. 1 becomes more confidential on the viola. And in many parts of the Trio the viola's instrumental dialogue with the cello is strikingly effective: as the two instruments often converse on the same material, the closeness in tone makes exchanges subtler, more nuanced. The end of the Trio's first movement, with viola and cello semiquavers intertwining quietly, has a smoky mysterious quality the clarinet version misses. But it does make the music more sombre, muted, far less liquid and agile in effect – disappointing in parts of the First Sonata and almost throughout the Second. And there

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BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE APRIL 2007 103



30 October 2006

Monika Henschel: interview

Time Out meets Monika Henschel of the Henschel Quartet, the German youngsters currently leading a chamber music revolution

The Henschels – Monika, Christoph and Markus – are assembling on Sunday morning. No, not on the principle that the family that prays together stays together, more that siblings who play together win acclaim in chamber music and prizes for recordings. Sunday finds the Henschel Quartet (the fourth is a non-family member, cellist Mathias Beyer-Karshø) giving a Wigmore coffee – or sherry, if preferred – concert in the middle of their latest English tour, sandwiched between Nottingham and Ripon. The German ensemble is happy to return to one of the first international halls to book them years ago, while the English provinces remind them of the network of music clubs that helped make their name. 'We made our career through Britain and Japan, not straight away in Germany,' explains Monika, 'through the cities with music societies and circles.'

Even Germany, a country that Kultur-hungry Brits regard as paradise, has financial problems. But Monika, a delightful and cheerful violist – yes, they have viola jokes in Germany too, she giggles – sees a glass half-full. The decline of an older chamber music public means there's 'room for the new'. And this apparently most staid of musical forms is undergoing a vibrant renaissance. The German director of a documentary film on chamber music's new popularity is accompanying the Henschels to the Wigmore. 'Even people with no classical background have a feeling that something's happening. We've had our portraits in German magazines.' The Henschel Quartet takes youth seriously. __'We have a trust fund to encourage the young. We go to kindergartens to talk and play.' The foursome are ambassadors for SOS Children's Villages, an organisation for abandoned children and orphans working in 132 countries: 'For ten years we've helped them with 1 per cent of our income.' The Henschels were brought up in an inescapably musical atmosphere. Father was a string-player in the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, mother played piano and harpsichord. The famous Sergiu Celibidache, the conductor's conductor, lived with the family for two years. When he moved on, 'Uncle Sergiu' asked the family to go with him.

The various Henschel households are now in Munich. As Monika points out, family ensembles are not that unusual – she reels off names from Belgium, Germany and America. The quartet doesn't share Uncle Sergiu's dislike of the recording process. 'We have a very good production team we trust,' says Monika, who's aware that chamber music, a precise form, combined with recording's all-hearing ear, imposes restrictions so that 'your style might simply not develop... We listen to records from over ten years ago and say we wouldn't be playing like that nowadays.' Sunday finds them performing Szymanowski, the second quartet and Brahms in C minor, 'written close to Munich,' says Monika. One of the advantages playing in a chamber group has over being a soloist, says Monika, is that you don't have to travel on your own. 'And you always have someone to listen to you, to question what you do.' She pauses. 'Which of course you might not always like.' But so far the family remains harmonious.

Martin Hoyle



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Süddeutsche Zeitung

26 June 2006

No Fear

Chamber music with no intensive interplay, forget it. That's what the long-since internationally renowned Henschel Quartet thought, too, and proceeded to install a chamber music committee at the Seligenstadt Monastery near Frankfurt. This year, the Kuss Quartet was invited.

It was two evenings this time; on the first, the Henschels played Beethoven's *Op. 18/1* and the Kuss Quartet offered Schumann's *A-Minor Quartet Op. 41/1*. The Henschel Quartet was charming, with great density of tone, emphatic sharing of abrupt accents and tender retreats. Beethoven's first quartet "six-pack" is indeed a treasure-trove of such energetic exercise, but here, the composer is much more advanced than are other works of the period, and in a spirit of creative affront, it perhaps surpasses even Schumann's *A-Minor Quartet*, originating forty years later.

In Mozart's resolute, thematically closely worked quartet, we met only some of the players; in the Shostakovich *Octet Op. 11*, everybody was onstage. These two movements by the nineteen-year-old composer are a bold throw of the dice, bursting with vitality; one felt the crackling tension with which this piece was created. So, one need have no fear for chamber music.

Reinhard Schulz



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22 June 2006

Shattering Trumpet Blasts

The outdoor concerts of the Strings Festival are the high point of the summer in the area. With the the Henschel Quartet, the three-day Festival has moreover had an outstanding *ensemble in residence*, loyal from the outset, since 1997.

For each Festival the Henschels invite another chamber music ensemble with whom three ambitious programs are fashioned. William Coleman started out with a most fitting contribution to the Mozart year. For after all, the *Quintet in C-Minor, KV 406*, is a version of the *Serenade for Eight Winds, KV 388*, created by Mozart himself, and hence eminently suited to this outdoor performance.

Coleman and Monika Henschel lent the middle voices a distinct profile in which fluent yet brilliantly contrasted execution often rightly presaged the young Beethoven. Especially finely differentiated, tender and without academic striving, the imitative minuet sounded, in part, canonically shaped.

The Shostakovich *String Quartet No. 3 in F-Major, Op. 73* followed as a composition of equally high rank. Its fresh, playful yet densely motified idiom was exactly gauged by the Henschels. With clean staccatos in finest *pianissimo*, they enforced precise listening in the second movement, where the sarcasm turns reductive, as well as in the grotesque march, which wittily ascribes shattering trumpets and brass figures, here acquiring great rhythmic power. The serious, introspective *Adagio*, a very fragile figure, was as impressive as the final static, paralyzing conclusion. Another colossus, Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major*, was played with masterful surety, winged and bright where required, and with tense, muted tone in many passages.

Guido Holze



The Henschel Quartet are making a considerable impact in the music world with consistently impressive performances, often sparkling and exhilarating with considerable empathic insights.

The quartet from Sindelfingen in Germany is notable in that three of the players are siblings: the brothers Christoph and Markus Henschel are violinists and sister Monika Henschel-Schwind the violist are joined by cellist Matthias Beyer-Karlshøj. As one of the leading new-generation quartets the Henschels together with the British-based ensemble the Belcea and the Skampa from Czechoslovakia are leading the way, superbly maintaining exceptionally high standards of performance. Following on the heels of their acclaimed complete Mendelssohn quartets on Arte Nova Classics 82876 64009 2 the Henschel have now turned their attention to two of Beethoven's quartets; one from the composer's first creative period and the other from his later years.

String Quartet in B flat major, Op. 18, No.6 (1798-1800)

The B flat major quartet contains one of the most tragic pages found in the entire Op. 18. The cheerful opening movement *allegro con brio* with its appealing and light-footed first subject is given a joyous and often exhilarating performance with spontaneity and refinement. In the *allegro ma non troppo* movement the ensemble produce seemingly effortless playing of raptly sustained serenity. The *scherzo* with its effective syncopations and whimsical *trio* is interpreted with considerable affection, wit and infectious playing. Beethoven entitled the concluding movement 'La Melinchoria (*melancholy*)' and insisted that it be played, "with the greatest of delicacy." Many writers have commented on the brief anguished slow passage at the start of the final movement as the real beginnings of Romanticism in music. Here it is performed with appropriate tenderness and subtlety. The quicker music that follows rejects sorrow and embarks on a more convivial mood that the accomplished Henschels interpret with a controlled vitality.

In this B flat major string quartet it is hard to look outside the recording from Quatuor Mosaiques (performed on period instruments). They are peerless in these Op. 18 scores (Naïve E 8899). Using modern instruments an alternative to the excellent Henschels is contained in the complete Op. 18 from the Italian Quartet, recorded in Switzerland between 1972-75 and presented in a three disc boxed set on Philips 464 071-2.

String Quartet in E flat major, Op. 127 (1822, 1824-25)

The E flat major quartet, Op. 127 opens with a slow six-bar introduction which is played by the Henschels in a manner more tentative than majestic. In the succeeding *allegro* the astutely chosen tempi provide a serene and pastoral mood. From this idyllic state we pass into the spirituality and mysticism of the *adagio*. The movement which is one of the longest in any Beethoven quartet uses a theme followed by six variations and is one of the most sublime and contemplative slow movements the composer ever wrote. A prominent *pizzicato* passage towards the end of the *adagio* leads into the *scherzo*. The Henschels prove to be understanding interpreters in the slow movement with a measured approach that repudiates sentimentality and displays superb control. The third movement *scherzo* is also one of the longest Beethoven wrote. The Henschels provide a suitably agitated and nervous mood, although slightly more vitality would have been preferred. The *allegro finale* provides occasional respite from the unrest of the *scherzo*. This largely cheerful and frequently robust movement is offset by excursions into warm and gentle lyricism. In the *allegro* all the players share this rewarding music as a well balanced team, although I would have appreciated a touch more weight and intensity.

This fine account of Op. 127 is well worth adding to any collection and will provide considerable pleasure. Surely it can be only a matter of time before the Henschel find their way on to one of the big name labels. The reputation of the Henschel continues to go from strength to strength and their playing serves Beethoven admirably with this superb release.

Michael Cookson, 2005



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