



RECORDING OF THE MONTH (APRIL 2011)



Manfred TROJAHN (b.1949)

String Quartet No. 3 (1983) [12:39]

Fragments for Antigone (Six pieces for String Quartet) (1988) [21:46]

Song to Insomnia III (Movement No. 6 from Love Letter) (2007) [10:16]

String Quartet No. 4 (2009) [20:43]

Henschel Quartet (Christoph Henschel (violin); Markus Henschel (violin); Monika Henschel-Schwind (viola); Mathias Beyer-Karlshøj (cello))

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NEOS RECORDS 11017 [66:04]

My experience has been that Manfred Trojahn's music is rarely encountered. I have come across his *Symphony No. 3* with the Berlin RSO under John Carewe as part of a six CD box set titled *German Symphonic Works 1950-2000, Volume 2* on RCA Red Seal. In addition his opera *Enrico* 1989/90 is available on the CPO label.

The present fine release of music for string quartet should assist Trojahn to gain notice by a larger audience. The performers the Henschel Quartet inform me that all scores contained on the disc are world premiere recordings.

Trojahn was born in 1949 at Cremlingen Braunschweig in Germany. Studying mainly at the Hochschule Hamburg he later spent a year of study at the Villa Massimo, Rome. From 1991 Trojahn has been professor of composition at the Robert-Schumann-Hochschule, Dusseldorf. A close contemporary of fellow German composers Wolfgang Rihm and Detlev Glanert, Trojahn's work list shows he has composed a substantial body of scores including operas and five symphonies.

I have been following the career of the outstanding Munich-based Henschel Quartet for some time and was excited to hear that a disc of contemporary works for string quartet by Manfred Trojahn was in the process of being recorded.

Trojahn's four movement *String Quartet No. 3* was composed in 1983 and premièred the same year by the Auryn Quartet in Hamburg. Stark and uncompromising the score initially seemed uninviting and even a touch threatening. With repeated hearings this highly absorbing music became far more engaging.

The opening movement greets the listener with a wall of harmonics. Cold as steel, there is an unwelcoming quality to this bleak writing. From 0:52 the singing tone of the violin serves as a gleaming shaft of light through all the gloom. This is music of significant tension and heavily laden with harmonics. Dying away quietly the writing could depict a lonely figure walking towards a distant horizon. Movement two inhabits a warmer more tranquil sound world. At 0:54-1:33 the doleful cello plays its deep rich line. The slowly shifting music provides a sense of the metaphysical, leaving a breathlessness that fades to nothing. Unquestionably unsettling the extremely short third movement consisting of sharp contrasts just thrusts and surges forward. In the *Finale* the atmosphere is similar in many respects to the opening movement but with a more prominent cello. The fluctuating patterns and varying tempi and textures are predominantly austere and unwelcoming. Overall there is a surprising degree of tranquillity in the writing that at times suggested to me the late quartets of Webern and Berg.

From 1988 *Fragments for Antigone* are a set of six pieces for string quartet. Trojahn created the series as incidental music for a staging in Bochum of the Friedrich Hölderlin version of Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone*. Considered inappropriate for the play the music wasn't actually used. Described in the accompanying booklet notes as "*aphoristic pieces*" the titles for each of the six have been allocated titles extracted from Hölderlin's text. I have been provided with an approximate English translation of each of the six titles to serve as a guide. The score was premièred by the Auryn-Quartet at the Goethe-Institute at Barcelona in 1988.

The opening piece *....wenn uns nicht im Finstern hält die Zeit (...if not time holds us in the darkness)* is music of severity, recurrently prodding, punching and screeching. The hostility of the writing conveys an atmosphere of gathering anxiety.

Piece number two *....nicht kam ein Wort zu mir... (...not came a word to me...)* uses a nervy *ostinato* that just flashes by. The writing is interspersed with numerous silences that seem almost as important as the music.



Containing liberal use of high harmonics the third piece titled ...*marmornen Glanz*... (...*marble shine*...) projects an eerie tension. I was struck by the wide and often razor-sharp dynamics of the writing. From 1:17 and 2:43 there are short shifts of mood and texture after which any remaining vitality seems to burn itself out.

Playing tightly as a unit the febrile fourth piece ...*dieselben Stöße... der Seele*... (...*the same convulsions... of the soul*...) contains a strident and unrelenting *ostinato* like a septic throb. The overload of tension created is of neurosis proportions. On first hearing the uneasiness that the writing creates was quite overwhelming.

Contrastingly piece five *O mir, grad vor dem Tode ist dies das Wort*. (*O me, just before death this is the word*.) is marked by feather-light textures. A mesmerising drone is interrupted by an abundance of silences.

The final piece six ...*und nicht wohin ich gehe*. (...*and not where I go*.) is underpinned by incessant and deeply resonant beats on the cello that ever so gradually lessen in weight. A remarkable grief-laden sound created by the cellist hitting the string very near the bridge with his right thumb. Intermittent dancing *pizzicato* impedes only fleetingly on the cello texture.

Chant d'insomnie III (Song to Insomnia III) is the penultimate movement of the seven movement score *Lettera amorosa (Love letter)* for 2 sopranos, 2 violins and string quartet (2007). The Henschel premièred the piece in 2007 at the reopening after fire damage of the Duchess Anna-Amalia Library in Weimar, Germany. This substantial nocturne-like movement is probably the most immediately accessible work on the disc. Long melodic lines create a dreamlike and mainly romantic setting. From 4:33 the intensity increases to form music that borders on the delirious. At 5:04 the mood lightens becoming one of essentially calm reflection with a curious sense of weightlessness. A terse, acrimony-filled episode from 7:35-7:59 is the only real disruption. From 8:45 birdlike fluttering accompanies the sorrowful melodic line and brings the score to a close.

The most recent score on the disc the *String Quartet No. 4* was written for and dedicated to the Henschel Quartet. At its première in 2009 at the Haus der Stadt, Düren the four movement work garnered considerable acclaim for both composer and performers. With its broad melodic lines the Elysian opening movement is an engaging mix of the amorous with an occasional sense of heartbreaking despair. Trojahn could easily be depicting a torrid love affair.

The Henschel asked Trojahn to design a Mendelssohnian link in the score and they got it in movement two. Subtitled '*First strange scene*' the movement comes across as a contemporary version of an elfin *Scherzo* in the manner of Mendelssohn. This is intriguing and highly virtuosic writing from Trojahn creating thrilling and vibrantly imaginative music twisting and weaving that just gallops on and on with great momentum. Quartet violist Monika Henschel-Schwind has described this writing as a contemporary *Sommernachtstraum (Midsummer Night's Dream)* movement.

Broad languid melodies in the third movement provide a warm and comforting blanket. The prominent *ostinato* figure first heard at 1:40 could have come from a Dvorák quartet. Wistful introspection strangely draws the listener in. From 4:29-5:04 harmonics surround the singing melodic line. A romantic close to the movement provides an ethereal sense of floating. This would make a wonderful independent piece.

The concluding movement subtitled '*Second strange scene*' is an uncommon mix of *tarantella* rhythms and cheerful melodies of a distinct folk feel. Although maintaining Trojahn's unique style the writing seemed on occasions suggestive of Romantic composers: Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann. A race at breakneck speed sends the listener hurdling to the conclusion.

Clearly the preparations for these demanding Trojahn scores, all world première recordings, must have presented the quartet with innumerable challenges. Scrupulously prepared as always the Henschel Quartet demonstrate an impeccable unity to their expressive playing. With an enviable control notable is their outstanding phrasing, articulation and tone. Yet to reach their peak I marvel at how much better these hard-working and talented players can become.

Trojahn doesn't seem an overly derivative composer; he has his own unique sound-world. These are challenging and rewarding contemporary scores certainly within the compass of the average listener. They can be best appreciated with an open mind and a reasonable degree of concentration. The two most immediately accessible scores *Chant d'insomnie III* and the *String Quartet No.4* are quite exceptional and deserve to be staples of the contemporary string quartet repertoire. Lovers of progressive chamber music repertoire should search out this outstanding Neos music release from the Henschel Quartet. A cast-iron certainty to be one of my 'Recordings of the Year' for 2011.

Most discerning about their choice of repertoire it would be good to see the Henschel turn their attention to the string quartets of Haydn and Schumann or maybe Schulhoff and Britten.

Michael Cookson

