

# CHAMBER



theStrad **SELECTION**

Polished Haydn from the Modigliani Quartet



**HAYDN** String Quartets in G major op.54 no.1, in G minor op.74 no.3 'Rider' & in B flat major op.76 no.4 'Sunrise'

**Modigliani Quartet**  
Mirare MIR 065



These musicians ooze musical insight, unanimity and polish. Their interpretations of the outer movements of op.74 no.3 are powerfully dramatic without ever going into overdrive, and their account of the slow movement flows freely, even if it lacks some of the profundity and contrasts of Haydn's inspiration. Their Menuetto

is on the brisk side for an Allegretto, but little of the trio's chromatic and contrapuntal detail is obscured.

The players use silence wisely in the first movement of op.76 no.4 and contribute some finely wrought playing and delicacy of rhetoric in the grave, ethereal Adagio. They reproduce the joyous, rustic character of the minuet and trio with élan and negotiate the finale with pleasing sforzandos in rubato and well-graduated tempo increases towards the brilliant coda.

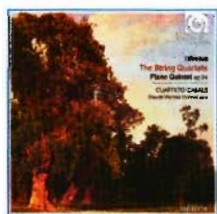
Careful shaping and weighting of the line continue effortlessly from one to another in the opening movement of op.54 no.1, though the ensemble of the final cadence is slightly untidy. These players fashion a flowing account of the Allegretto with striking delicacy and well-blended sonority. Leader Philippe Bernhard's spontaneous rubato is delightful, though his execution of the dotted rhythm of the Menuetto seems unusually severe. Cellist François Kieffer contributes neatly to the dance-like trio. The final Presto seems somewhat steady, but nevertheless combines lean athleticism, lightness and appropriate bonhomie.

Close microphone placement allows various unscripted noises to be audible and reduces the dynamic range such that Haydn's *mezza voce* indications seem to be ignored. Nevertheless, the resultant sound quality is spacious, warm and clear.

ROBIN STOWELL

**BRAHMS** String Quartets in C minor op.51 no.1, in A minor op.51 no.2 & in B flat major op.67, Piano Quintet in F minor op.34

**Casals Quartet, Claudio Martinez Mehner (piano)**  
Harmonia Mundi HMI 987074/5 (2 discs)



This is rather iconoclastic Brahms. And while I applaud the Casals Quartet for trying to do something a little different, I am not persuaded to abandon the traditional ways. The set starts well with a C minor Quartet that is fine-boned, delicate and sensitive – the very antithesis of the 'big' performances

we normally get – yet hangs together convincingly. Violin sound is slim but the lower strings are lovely and much of the playing from all four musicians is exquisite. The opening of the work is quite urgent and all tempos are on the swift side, though not rushed.

The style is less distinctive in the A minor Quartet and there are even touches of coarseness from the leader, Vera Martínez Mehner, including late-start vibrato in the Andante moderato. Violin intonation is not as good as in the C minor. Curiously, whereas in the C minor I felt the approach was less dramatic than usual, in the A minor I felt it was more dramatic. With the B flat major Quartet we are back to the delicate approach. The difficult opening movement does not quite cohere, and a certain metallic quality creeps into the violin tone.

Violist Jonathan Brown is superb, although initially in the Romanze he puts fewer bow hairs on the string than I would ideally like. Much of the tonal quality is exquisite.

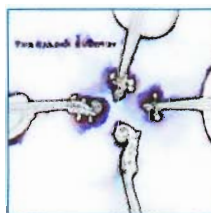
The pianist in the Quintet, presumably related to the quartet's leader, does his part well and it is a fair performance; but the urgency and swiftness are overdone, especially in the Andante, the fastest (by a full minute) that I can recall. The players begin the introduction to the finale beautifully but are too impatient to move on, getting through it in 1:10 mins (Busch and Serkin on Pearl take 1:50). Recording quality is a little variable but basically good.

TULLY POTTER

**MOZART** String Quartet in F major K590  
**RAVEL** String Quartet in F major  
**ADÈS** Arcadiana op.12

**Calder Quartet**

Calder Quartet ([www.calderquartet.com](http://www.calderquartet.com))



I have very much enjoyed getting to know the Calder Quartet, which since the 2007–8 season has been in residence at the Colburn School in Los Angeles. These superb young musicians seem to be Californian trained but have also taken artist diploma courses at the Juilliard School.

Their Ravel, which begins this introductory disc, is ravishingly played and although there is a fair amount of tempo variation in the first movement, it is basically up to speed. Perhaps the pizzicatos in the Scherzo are a bit brash and perhaps the trio is a little slow, but it sounds gorgeous. The slow movement and finale are lovely.

Thomas Adès's *Arcadiana* manages to sound 'modern' in its seven brief movements, without advancing quartet technique beyond Bartók. It is well-made music and a further recording is very welcome, especially as the performance is absolutely tip-top. The Calder Quartet is named after the visual artist Alexander Calder, and it rises to the challenge of trying to portray miniatures that had their starting points in paintings by Watteau and Poussin, among other things. Students who can listen regularly to this standard of musicianship are lucky indeed.

The Mozart quartet is well shaped, stylish and impeccably Classical, with unexceptionable tempos. Do you sense a slight reservation in that description? Well, yes, I do like my Mozart to be a little more ingratiating. But in all conscience, this well-recorded disc is a splendid advertisement for standards at the Colburn School.

TULLY POTTER

## ROPARTZ String Quartet no.1, Fantaisie brève

Stanislas Quartet  
Timpani 1C1121



Joseph-Guy Ropartz (1864–1955) is a name I will always associate with the solfège exercises I did as a child. I didn't know it then, but the Breton composer was a student of Jules Massenet and César Franck, and wrote prolifically in all genres.

This CD completes a traversal of his six string quartets by the Stanislas Quartet, which is based in Nancy, where Ropartz was active at the beginning of the 20th century as director of the conservatoire.

The earlier piece here is the *Fantaisie brève* from 1892, based on the letters of the name of Albéric Magnard, a fellow Franck pupil and a close albeit highly critical friend. To its dedicatee's surprise, the motif (A–B flat–E–C sharp–A–G–A–D) yielded wonderful material for a prelude and fugue, a joyfully light-hearted serenade and a finale.

Whatever Ropartz's First Quartet, completed the following year, is, it is not light-hearted. Written in the wake of Franck's own monumental essay in the genre, this 45-minute piece seems to want to encapsulate everything of which its composer is capable. Thus, all the themes are related to one another (by techniques such as inversion or augmentation) and are combined with each other in a display of contrapuntal prowess. True to Franckian convention, the piece's macrostructure is cyclic, with motifs recurring at decisive moments of the musical argument.

The Stanislas players (members of the Nancy Symphony Orchestra) are well within the musical idiom. Truthfully recorded in a friendly acoustic, they do Ropartz's work proud in a technically sovereign, musically convincing performance.

CARLOS MARÍA SOLARE

**SCHUBERT** String Quartet in D minor D810 'Death and the Maiden' (arr. Lieberman)

**BARTÓK** String Quartet no.1 (arr. Lieberman)

American String Project

MSR Classics MS 1269 ([www.msacd.com](http://www.msacd.com))



Feeling disenfranchised from participation in the world of chamber music, double bassist Barry Lieberman set himself the task of adding a part for his instrument to major string quartets and quintets. He soon realised that the music's centre of gravity then became totally changed and required more upper strings, and so he began creating arrangements for a small chamber orchestra.

That in turn required many judicious decisions as to when full strings could be employed, and as to where he should return to the original solo voices. Since then Lieberman has toyed with many works before adapting those where he considers the composer would have been pleased with his additions.

Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' has already been arranged by Mahler – not always, Lieberman believes, with the best results. Having compared them I would take Lieberman. Here you have the feel of a beautifully balanced chamber symphony, the lower voices bringing new warmth to the general texture.

I am less convinced by Bartók's First Quartet, for though the angular rhythms remain, the astringent aspects become lost in the lush surroundings, and the resulting timbre leans towards Shostakovich.

For his American String Project, Lieberman has called on friends from around the States and further afield to form a 15-piece string ensemble. The performances were recorded during concerts last year, the playing is technically good throughout, and, despite the size of the ensemble, is often of intimate delicacy.

Though aesthetic question marks may remain, I much enjoyed this disc, and if the recorded sound is nothing special, it is always pleasing.

DAVID DENTON

## MADISON

Tine Asmundsen (double bass) Richard Davis (double bass)  
Vidar Johansen (tenor saxophone/flute/bass clarinet)  
Robert Shy (drums)

Hazel Jazz HJ5 ([www.hazeljazz.com](http://www.hazeljazz.com))



The key selling point of 'Madison' is that it features two double bassists, teacher and ex-student, within a jazz quartet format. This opens up new possibilities of timbre, which the group goes some way towards exploiting in originals that span hard bop, free jazz and a more contemporary but uncomplicated approach to melody.

For instance, the tenor sax and arco bass perfectly suit the closely interwoven part-writing and sombre, Scandinavian gloom of