

Bartók

String Quartets – complete

Hagen Quartet (Lukas Hagen, Rainer Schmidt
vns Veronika Hagen va Clemens Hagen vc)

Newton Classics @ 2 8802011 (154' • DDD)

From DG 463 576-2GH2 (8/00)

Bartók • Weiner

Bartók String Quartets – No 3, Sz85; No 4, Sz91

Weiner Pastorale, Fantasy and Fugue (String
Quartet No 3), Op 26

Párkányi Quartet (István Párkányi,
Heinz Oberdorfer vns Ferdinand Erlich va
Michael Müller vc)

Praga Digitals © PRD/DS250 228 (61' • DDD/DS2)

Bartók • Haydn

Bartók String Quartet No 4, Sz91 **Haydn** String
Quartets – Op 54 No 2; Op 77 No 1

Quartetto di Cremona (Cristiano Gualco,
Paolo Andreoli vns Simone Gramaglia va
Giovanni Scaglione vc)

Genuin © GEN10172 (74' • DDD)

Three different takes on Bartók's Fourth Quartet that each have something to say

The pivot here is Bartók's Fourth Quartet, a late-Twenties ear-teaser that must have either confused or blown the minds of all who witnessed its first performances. At its centre sits a rhapsodising *Lento* led by the cello, with scurrying fast movements either side (one breathless and muted, the other all spidery *pizzicatos*) and, at either end of the work, muscular *allegros*, the last movement a sort of primeval war dance. Previous hot CD contenders for this particular quartet have included the Végh Quartet's second recording (Naïve, 3/87), the Fine Arts' first (Music & Arts, 4/06) and the Juilliard's second (Retrospective, 4/02), but the Hagens stand up well to all three. When I originally reviewed their set, I wrote that "theirs is a keen, stylised, animated view of the music, leaner than most and especially strong on colour". Revisiting the recordings now for Newton's



fine-sounding reissue if anything increases my admiration for the quartet's technical agility and feel for Bartók's idiom, whether in the romance-inspired reverie of the First Quartet, the mystical paragraphs and racy folk dances of the Second, the challenging experimentation of the middle two or the mixture of pathos and humour that characterises the last two. Colour is, as I say, very much the Hagen's thing, widely spaced dynamics too, which are vividly projected; and

where keeping to the letter matters most, they don't disappoint either.

The Second and Sixth Quartets, both of which inhabit emotionally fragile worlds, come off especially well, but the middle two are also vividly played with only the coda of the Third vaguely missing target. The sound is very realistic, more so than on the other Fourths considered here. The Párkányi Quartet's 2008 coupling with the Third and Leó Weiner's affably tuneful and beautifully written *Pastorale, Fantasy and Fugue* (his Third Quartet) has many virtues. Best perhaps is its central *Non troppo lento* where cellist Michael Müller plays with great feeling; but listen carefully from roughly 20 seconds into the finale and the tempo dips marginally and the tension with it. The Third is well argued and overall I preferred the Párkányi's prioritised voices to the Hagens, even though Praga's sound isn't as vivid as DG's. Incidentally, with this release the Párkányi Quartet completes its Bartók quartet cycle, which viewed overall is well worth a visit.

The origins of the Quartetto di Cremona's CD programme lies in the "Movimentos" Festival Weeks (Wolfsburg's Autostadt) – this is part of Genuin's "Movimentos Edition" – and interestingly sandwiches Bartók's maverick essay between two of Haydn's greatest quartets. I say "interestingly", but not entirely surprisingly, given that Bartók admired Haydn, who in turn had fathered the genre and brought it to unparalleled heights of expression. Both Op 54 No 2 and Op 77 No 1 are remarkable as much for the profundity of their slow music as for the vitality and harmonic daring of their fast movements and in both Quartetto di Cremona combines keen attack with a wealth of feeling (just sample their breathtaking *pianissimo* at 2'51" into the *Adagio* of Op 77 No 1). As to their Bartók, the muted *Prestissimo* second movement is extremely deft

vibrato-less leanness replaces the dreamy and the exquisite; and though the balance is a little biased towards the violin, Govier's copy of a 1795 Anton Walter fortepiano cuts through.

The tuning in unequal temperament adds a degree of asperity as well. Try the second movement of K378 and the usual understanding of the direction *Andante sostenuto e cantabile* is likely to be stretched. No conventionally sweet or sustained violin line, no smoothly flowing keyboard realisation. Intriguingly Gary Cooper coaxes a different sound from his copy of a 1795 Walter and with Rachel Podger plays in a manner that would be considered less intimidating. So it's people not instruments. And Duo Amadé doesn't flinch from immoderate demands, for instance the first-movement development of this same sonata where they offer a searing exposé of the series of modulations beginning in F minor. It's sinewy, and sinew binds every movement in these sonatas. Here's Mozart interpretation in the raw, not overlaid with effusive graciousness, neither apologetically insipid nor crude, but very expressive on its own terms. Listen and ponder. These are committed performances throughout.

Nalen Anthoni