

## GRAMOPHONE *Collector*

### QUARTETS FOR OUR TIME

**Richard Bratby** listens to a clutch of releases demonstrating contemporary approaches to the classic medium



'Genuinely mind-expanding': the Kepler Quartet have recorded three of Ben Johnston's works quartets on New World Records

A grand minor-key flourish, and the players of the Arcadia Quartet dig passionately, gutsily into their strings. Yes, it's exactly what it sounds like: the sonata-form first movement of a big, stormy string quartet in four movements, complete with discernible keys, melodies and heart-on-sleeve emotions. This is **Leo Samama's** *Le grand quatuor*, Op 79, and there's nothing particularly startling about it until you read that it was composed in 2011.

A certain type of new music aficionado may find that profoundly shocking. Hence the piece's knowing, only partly ironic title. Composing a full-scale classically structured quartet was, says Samama, the fulfilment of a dream, and he cites Beethoven, Debussy and Tristan Keuris as presiding spirits. Elsewhere on this set the Valerius Ensemble perform a darkly atmospheric Clarinet Quintet

and the Matangi Quartet play a nine-minute *Treuermusik* that unfolds its melancholy with a quiet eloquence that leaves little doubt that Samama is no mere postmodernist magpie but a composer writing the music he feels he has to write.

Is that really so controversial, in 2016? As recently as 1983 Paul Griffiths could plausibly write (in *The String Quartet*, Thames & Hudson) that Bartók's were the only quartets since Beethoven to hold an undisputed place in the repertoire. Since then, there's been a step-change. Bartók is now as familiar as Mendelssohn, amateurs play Shostakovich and young ensembles make their reputations with Dutilleux and Tippett. This hasn't just been a revolution of technique but one of outlook too. Capital-M Modernism is only one language among many. The 21st-century string quartet is a world of boundless stylistic variety and today's

performers are superbly equipped to explore it.

The results – as on the Kepler Quartet's latest disc of quartets by the American microtonalist **Ben Johnston** – can be genuinely mind-expanding. This recording of Johnston's String Quartet No 7 (1984) is the first-ever performance (let alone recording) of a work that until last year was believed to be unplayable. Reputedly the most difficult string quartet ever written, its finale comprises a 16-minute sequence of microtonal variations whose mind-boggling structural complexity is belied by the intense concentration, poise and sincerity of the Keplers' playing. This may not be an easy listen for those unfamiliar with Johnston's music; nonetheless, simply listening is probably the best approach.

Because – make no mistake – this is a labour of love. The Keplers exist solely to play Johnston's music. They've worked

closely with the composer, and everything about this disc speaks of deep sympathy and devotion. The ordering of the works is particularly thoughtful. After the Seventh Quartet, the more conventionally classical Eighth feels positively lucid (the slow movement is luminous), and by the time you get to the single-movement Sixth, you're ready to dive straight in. Then, as an encore, we hear Johnston's own rough-hewn singing voice in *Quietness*, an exquisite little setting of Rumi, and feel an immediate human connection. There's no artistic or emotional compromise on this disc, and it yields enormous rewards.

I was sorry not to feel the same way about the Quartets Nos 3-6 by **Petros Shoujounian**. These works, based on liturgical chant, are mellifluous if slightly static and the performances, by the Canadian Quatuor Molinari, are highly polished. But I simply couldn't find here the depth of emotion that Shoujounian's subject matter – the Armenian Genocide – implies. Ben Johnston has said that a work isn't fully composed until it's performed well. This disc prompted the thought that 'well' may sometimes mean more than merely accurately and beautifully.

That it's not just a question of idiom is shown by three **Pēteris Vasks** quartets on Wergo. This, too, is music with an unabashedly spiritual inspiration: the rapturous closing Meditation of the Fourth Quartet evokes the flight of an angel. For Vasks, born in Soviet-occupied Latvia, this is anything but a sentimental gesture. Here, and in the lovely, cruelly interrupted Melodia that ends his First Quartet, spirituality is a radical act, achieved after a sometimes brutal struggle (the two Toccatas that punctuate the Fourth Quartet echo the two world wars). The Riga-based Spīķeru String Quartet (founded in 2011) understand that. There's a real inwardness about their playing – though, when Vasks demands it, they can find a flashing brilliance to match any of their Western contemporaries.

It's also hard to fault the concentration and virtuosity of the JACK Quartet in their premiere recording of the late **Horațiu Rădulescu's** 29-minute-long String Quartet No 5 (1995). Each of its movements takes as its starting point a line from the Tao te Ching; but Rădulescu was nothing if not his own man (the very act of writing works entitled 'quartet' and 'sonata' was an affront to his fellow Paris-based spectralists) and the Quartet creates a tension between precision and freedom amid flickering, warping monochromes. After the high abstraction of the quartet, the Romanian

folk influences of the Fifth Piano Sonata (another debut recording, from the pianist Stephen Clarke) jump out in vivid colour.

As does everything on the aptly titled 'Glow' – a collection of chamber music composed between 2000 and 2013 by the Finnish violinist and composer **Jaakko Kuusisto** (Pekka's brother), and captured in sparkling sound by BIS. Here's a prime case for ignoring the booklet-notes and just listening. *Play II* and *Play III* are respectively an energetic single-movement piano quartet and an exuberantly inventive string quartet (performed by the Finnish ensemble Meta4). They're filled with allusions to film music, tango and minimalism – though there's nothing minimal about the personality and verve of this music. Kuusisto himself plays two pieces for violin and piano, and it's all great fun.

Kuusisto's compositional style won't be for everyone. Salonen came to mind, and I can already hear the cries of 'modern music for people who don't like modern music'. To which it's tempting to respond: who cares, when composer and players are so evidently enjoying themselves? As with almost all the works reviewed here, there's no sense of performers grappling with an alien language: these are fully realised interpretations, intelligent and expressive. That we can experience voices as diverse and rewarding as Samama, Johnston, Rădulescu and Vasks in performances of such quality is further evidence of what many of us have suspected for a little while: that, in the 21st century, the string quartet is the true ensemble of possibilities. **G**

## THE RECORDINGS



**Samama** I fear not wave nor wind!  
Various artists  
Etcetera **B** **2** KTC1561



**Johnston** String Quartets Nos 6-8, etc  
**Kepler Qt**  
New World **Ⓜ** NW80730-2



**Shoujounian** String Quartets Nos 3-6  
**Molinari Qt**  
ATMA Classique **Ⓜ** ACD2 2737



**Vasks** String Quartets Nos 1, 3, 4  
**Spīķeru Qt**  
Wergo **Ⓜ** WER7330-2



**Rădulescu** String Quartet No 5, etc  
Various artists  
Mode **Ⓜ** MODE290



**J Kuusisto** Glow  
Various artists  
BIS **Ⓜ** **Ⓜ** BIS2192

Kennedy opt for a marginally more deliberate tempo in the *Très vif* second movement of the Ravel Duo, though I preferred Harrell's expressive way at the start of the *Lent* third movement. Müller-Schott all but suspends vibrato – a gesture that suggests a certain level of sensual bliss – but I'd rather stick with Harrell's warmth and Kennedy's heartfelt response to him. Fischer initially mirrors Müller-Schott's affectedness but thankfully tempers it somewhat as the musical line proceeds.

There's not much to choose between the two teams in the finale, whereas at the start of Kodály's Duo Kennedy's natural penchant for folk-style music lends a spot of added pungency to his attack, and when it comes to the gypsy-style fiddle solo over a cello drone at 4'24" into the finale (Fischer/Müller-Schott) or 4'34" (Kennedy/Harrell), Kennedy captures the music's sense of improvisation to a T. Fischer sounds just a little too formal, even urbane. Talking in conversation about Erwin Schulhoff's Duo of 1925 (in the booklet), she's admirably honest about how she finds certain passages elusive, whether slow or fast, though I'd never have guessed as much had I not read the interview before listening to the CD. The fast Zingaresca has real drive, the finale a dogged, insistent quality.

Filling out their CD, Kennedy and Harrell add a Bach two-part Invention and the brilliant 'encore' that Fischer and Müller-Schott also include, the Passacaglia after Handel by Halvorsen. Kennedy and Harrell open the piece emphatically and stretch its duration a minute beyond that of Fischer and Müller-Schott. Kennedy and Harrell offer a far more eventful reading, opting to turn some of the slower music into a shimmering tremolando. Fischer and Müller-Schott, on the other hand, rest content with the odd added embellishment, though both employ *sul ponticello*.

Choosing between the two duos is difficult but for me the presence of Schulhoff's enigmatic work on the new CD is a little too much of a draw to resist. Paradoxically, were that not the case, I'd incline more towards Kennedy and Harrell, simply because they throw themselves at the Ravel and Kodály works with such wholehearted abandon. Fischer and Müller-Schott are evidently en route to the same destination but they never quite get there. **Rob Cowan**

*Halvorsen, Kodály, Ravel – selected comparison:*  
Kennedy, Harrell (5/00) (WARN) 556963-2

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