



Eduard Franck: String Quartet and Piano Quintet

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EAN: 4022143200334



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This disc shows two sides to a consistently enjoyable and unjustly neglected composer

From the list of his works, Eduard Franck seems to have been mainly drawn to the major keys; there were two minor key symphonies that now appear to be lost but there is only a smattering of pieces in minor keys among the chamber works. This disc, then, offers an opportunity to view two different sides to this essentially genial and warm-hearted musician, combining as it does a string quartet in F minor with a piano quintet in the sunny key of D major.

There seems to be some debate over when the quartet was composed and it sounds like an early work, given the seemingly strong influence of Mendelssohn's quartets. It would perhaps be too much to describe it as relentlessly bleak or tragic in tone, but throughout its length only the tender, song-like 'adagio molto espressivo' offers a period of consolation. In contrast to Franck's customary vivacious and folksy scherzi, the 'menuetto' in this work maintains the serious tone of the piece overall. These two movements are preceded by an 'allegro risoluto' of sustained and disciplined energy, its polyphonic working out (including a fugal section in the development) underlining the seriousness of Franck's intent from a technical perspective as well as an emotional standpoint. The finale brings no easy resolution and returns to the spirit of the first movement, with driving energy. It is a fine piece overall, more dramatic and concentrated than the elegiac piano trio in E minor recently released by Audite, Franck - Piano Trios Op.11, Op.58.

With the D major piano quintet we are in more familiar territory. Like so many of his chamber works, at around 37 minutes in length, this work has the expansive feel of a musician at one with his mode of expression and comfortable in taking his time saying what he has to say. The opening movement is one of Franck's most passionate - in the exposition, listen to the surging restatement of the opening melody in the high registers of the violin, before Franck moves on to the well-contrasted fanfare-like figure that forms the second subject; it leads after the exposition repeat to an ardently expressive development section. The scherzo (one of Franck's best, in my opinion) has an ebullient energy and picks up on the fanfare-like elements in the first movement, transmuting them into hunting horn signals - it is as exhilarating as it is delightful; the trio section opens with a stomping rhythmic figure that heralds an engaging rustic dance.

After the passionate first movement and the energy of the scherzo and trio, the tone of the extended 'andante con moto' is perfectly judged. It opens with a long-breathed, hymn-like melody in the strings - answered, as if antiphonally in a cathedral, by the piano. There is a contrasting central section, but not one that makes its point dramatically and the beautifully poised tone of repose is maintained

throughout the movement. It is good to have this opportunity to draw breath mentally, as the finale is a tour-de-force - a sort of 'perpetuum mobile' in its general effect, though not without some sweet-toned contrasting episodes, it carries the work to its close with bubbling wit.

I probably don't need to say at this stage that I recommend this disc. I seem to have become something of a solitary advocate on the British Amazon site for this composer, but there are several reviews of Eduard Franck recordings on the US site that you can check should you require a second opinion on this - to my mind - unfailingly delightful and satisfying musician.

