



Debussy & Rivier: String Quartets

aud 97.710

EAN: 4022143977106



www.musicweb-international.com (2021.12.14)
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A very fine account of the Debussy, and with fascinating unfamiliar couplings

The Mandelring Quartet's previous release paired the famous and the obscure in French repertoire, coupling Ravel's quartet with the one by his contemporary Fernand de La Tombelle. This second release of French repertoire offers Debussy's quartet and both of Jean Rivier's works in the medium, the first of them in a world premiere recording.

Jean Rivier wrote more than two hundred works in most genres, including eight symphonies and an opera. His style has been described as neoclassical, although some passages of his quartets could equally well be called neo-impressionist. There is only occasional, slight harmonic acerbity to modern ears, and a good variety of texture. The two quartets will appeal to anyone who enjoys the Ravel, Debussy or Fauré quartets, and given they are from 1924 and 1940, they are in a fairly conservative idiom.

Rivier's First String Quartet opens beguilingly with a single string line, the others enter with complementary lines and soon we have an attractive quartet texture. With a fierce unison around 1:35 there begins a more rhythmically emphatic passage. Things now move on quickly until what I take to be the second subject at 3:20 arrives is restrained and simple. These materials make a convincing start to a sonata structure with a compelling sense of direction. The second movement has much pizzicato (as in the Debussy and Ravel equivalent movements) and, although the other three movements have the conventional Italian initial markings, this is marked *Assez vif et très rythmé*, - the same as the scherzo in Ravel's quartet, itself a reference to Debussy's *Assez vif et bien rythmé*. There is though rather more lyrical music in Rivier's piece than that expression mark suggests. An *Andante espressivo* slow movement follows, then the finale has plenty of rhythmic life before a slow fade concludes an attractive work.

That first work in the quartet genre is very professional in its craft. Rivier was in his late twenties when he wrote it, and still a student as his studies were delayed by service in the Great War and years of subsequent convalescence from the effects of



a 1918 gas attack which killed all his comrades in the column. The Second Quartet might have been affected by wartime also, coming in 1940 and apparently using the word "violent" several times as an expression mark. Nonetheless it opens in a lyrical fashion that draws the listener in, and the first movement again has plenty of rhythmic and textural interest. The Lento second movement is restless and generates considerable intensity in its dissonant moments. The finale carries on in this vein and packs a lot of fast-changing musical incident into its five-and-a-half minutes. The booklet note writer is reminded of Bartok, and I can hear why. No.2 is recognisably by the same composer as No.1, but one who now has shed much of the influence of his great French predecessors. Although I had never heard this music before, I find it hard to imagine better performances than the Mandelring Quartet provide here, as they sound so sympathetic and committed to these works.

Their performance of the Debussy Quartet has all the same qualities, as well as careful balance, blend and sensitivity to mood. They are also very accurate and attentive to the details in the score. In the first movement every switch between p, pp, crescendo and forte is observed, and illustrates how important precise attention to the dynamics are in this music. In the second movement the pizzicati are always together - no accidental "strumming" effect. The lovely slow movement is properly *doucement espressif*, that "sweet expressiveness" never tipping over into sentimentality, in part because the tempo is a flowing one, with no indulgence in passing beauties. Thus they complete in 6:37 a movement for which the much-praised Ebène Quartet take 8:18. But the Mandelring tempo feels just right, never rushed, the long fade at the end (*aussi pp que possible*) exquisitely poised.

But it is likely that purchaser of this disc might well have one or more recordings of the Debussy and will be more curious about the Rivier works. Suffice to say that those pieces, while not quite of the same calibre as the finest French quartets, are well worth getting to know, especially the first of them. And you can be sure that you will also get a fine account of the Debussy. The sound is very good, and the booklet notes as helpful as the format allows.

Claude DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

String Quartet in G minor Op.10 [24:02]

Jean RIVIER (1896-1987)

String Quartet No.1 [23:36]

String Quartet No.2 [18:43]

Mandelring Quartet (Sebastien Schmidt, Nanette Schmidt, violins; Andreas Willwhol, viola; Bernhard Schmidt, cello.)

rec. 10-12 October 2019 (Debussy, Rivier No.2) & 28-29 January, 2020 (Rivier No.1), Deutschlandfunk Kammermusiksaal, Cologne, Germany

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Roy Westbrook

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