

The recording of Donizetti's String Quartets

The complete recording of the quartets is a milestone in our reevaluation of Donizetti. There have, over the years, been the odd performances available, none better than the pre-war HMV German label (D.B.4649/50) recording of Quartet No 4 by the Quartetto di Roma (Zuccarini/Montelli/Perini/Silva), closely followed in performance on Telefunken LGX 66063 by the Quartetto della Scala (Minetti/Cambetti/Valdinoci/Grepax) of Quartet No 9; none worse than the perverse practice of performing the quartets as string ensembles, for example, Neville Marriner's "péché" to be heard on Argo ZRG 603, and a more recent effort on the Marco Polo label.

When I heard that a new young quartet were to record all the quartets, I could hardly bring myself to accept the news, due to so many failures in the past in trying to get players to perform the pieces. The *Revolutionary Drawing Room Quartet* is made up of Graham Croacknell, Adrian Butterfield, Judith Tarling and Angela East, and they certainly play with commitment and seriousness of intent. The first disc to be released (CPO 999 170-2) offers quartets 7-9, an intelligent start, for we have recorded at last the moving programmatic F minor quartet (1819) evoking the death of Marchese Terzi (in the second movement we have an outstanding insight into death right up to the last breath drawn by the dying Marchese), the B flat Major quartet (1819) dedicated to Marco Bonesi and full of fun and jokes shared between two fellow students, and the D minor (1821) No 9 which

has to stand comparison with the Quartetto della Scala's performance. The CD is also graced by programme notes by William Ashbrook which give well-due praise to Mayr, a fact that warms the cockles of my heart! However, forgive me Mr Ashbrook if I take you to task for your last paragraph which virtually dismisses the quartets as slight juvenilia. It's the old problem of showing critics a work of art, they have to make comparisons for security's sake. To compare these quartets to those of the Viennese masters is like comparing the strength of an oak to the delicacy of silver birch; one cannot and must not, for each has its place in the order the creation, and so it is with the quartets of Donizetti. To enter into their world is to share the intimate thoughts and development of the young composer and to be able to imagine responses from Signor Bertoli, Bonesi and Mayr as they played the works. Listeners and musicians should not be negatively critical if the melodic line is so often with the first violin. They would do well to remember Louis Spohr's *Autobiography* in which he stresses that he often took quartets to display his talents, expecting the melody to be with the first violin. Clearly, these quartets, with the exception of the last two, were created with the performing talents of Bonesi and perhaps Signor Bertoli in mind. The second violin, viola and 'cello were expected to be like an orchestra around a voice, accompanying, commenting, deepening, giving colour to the whole.

The reader will gather that I love these works, for like all good chamber compositions they are intimate, clear, transparent, exposed, and above all, unpretentious and mercifully free of the devices of the operatic stage. They are ways to communicate with Donizetti's inner life as he matured and considered his future. They reveal all his compassion, charity, humour and "joie de vie". Everything in them relates like good friendship enjoying a splendid meal, but here we are to envisage four string players meeting for pleasure in a room in Bergamo. One can imagine Mayr playing his viola 'at the centre of the sound being produced', listening intently, seeking true sensibility and simplicity, hence directness of expression from his pupil. He most likely encouraged the composition of the quartets as a form of exercise, with no pretence or arrogance being tolerated. I think it is true to say that these quartets represent not only the early, budding genius of Donizetti, but the essence of Mayr's School, and that is, a quality free of the pride and megalomania of the fallen ego which blights so much of the music of the romantic era.

Two things remain to be said. Firstly: the performances are most enjoyable leaving the listener with gratitude towards the players for taking to their task with commitment and intelligence. Here we have good CD's (and how many poor performances of Donizetti we normally have to suffer!) which should be on every Donizettian's shelves, to be played in the evening when the bustle of the day is done and the restoration of the soul is called for.

Secondly: the last quartet not only evokes the overture to *Linda di Chamounix* (see page 252 of my book on Donizetti) but also his only four-movement symphony which ought, now, surely be recorded as a fitting appendix to these quartets.

Thank you all concerned with this important enterprise. Perhaps the *Revolutionary Drawing Room Quartet* will now turn their attention to the quartets of Mayr's friend and colleague, Alessandro Rolla? We shall all be in for a few surprises!

John Stewart Allitt