Bruckner

String Quintet in F major*
String Quartet in C minor

Leipzig String Quartet
Andreas Seidel *vn*, Tilman Büning *vn*, Ivo Bauer *va*, Matthias Moosdorf *vc*
With Hartmut Rohde *va**

Deutschlandradio Berlin MDG 307 1297-2 (67 minutes: DDD), $17.98
Notes and translations included.

Bruckner's chamber music is problematic in many respects. His two principal chamber works, the String Quintet in F and the Quartet in C minor, are undoubtedly anomalous for a composer who focused almost exclusively on symphonies and sacred music. They consequently occupy a difficult position historically and culturally, comprising excursions away from Bruckner's normal generic habitat of the monumental symphony, and into the Brahmsian domain, with its connotations of political liberalism and cultural conservatism. In fact, the specific contexts and motivations of the two pieces are quite different. Completed in 1879, the Quintet is a work of maturity, falling chronologically, and in many respects stylistically, between the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. The Quartet, in contrast, comes from the so-called *Kitzler Studienbuch*. Dating from 1862, it comprises one of the exercises in extended forms that Bruckner submitted in completion of his studies with Otto Kitzler in Linz.

The new recording of these two works from the Leipziger Quartet and Hartmut Rohde is much to be welcomed, not least because renditions are disconcertingly thin on the ground. The Quartet has an especially sparse discography; although other works from this period – especially the Symphony in F minor and, to a lesser extent, the Overture in G minor – have proved intermittently popular, the Quartet has been almost completely ignored. There are, to my knowledge, only two extant recordings, by the Keller Quartet on Oryx and L'Archibudelli on Sony Classical; even the formidably inclusive Naxos catalogue overlooks the piece. This neglect is a shame, since the Quartet, although not representative of Bruckner's mature style, nevertheless deserves serious consideration. Any estimation of the present recording is therefore impeded by a dearth of comparable alternatives.

In other respects, the Quartet is a much easier proposition than the Quintet. Its style and design draw relatively straightforwardly on late-classical and early nineteenth-century models, especially Haydn and Mendelssohn. Occasional prophecies of Bruckner's maturity notwithstanding, the Quartet's anchorage in the classic-romantic tradition of Austro-German chamber music is clear, and the interpretative difficulties to which it gives rise are correspondingly transparent. Any performance of the Quintet, in contrast, must tread a difficult path between the domestic implications of the work's genre and the symphonic inclination of Bruckner's style, a tension that, at the time of its production, would have fed into a pressing cultural-political debate. In short, the piece projects a basic dilemma: does one emphasize its points of stylistic contact with the symphonies, or does one stress the genre's more domestic, anti-monumental properties, as a result of which a rather different Bruckner might emerge?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This recording leans predominantly towards the former approach. The tempi in the Quintet are spacious at best; in the first movement, the indication *Gemäßigt* is treated generously, producing a performance time of nearly 13 minutes (compare this, for example, with the Raphael Ensemble's rather more compact 11 minutes and 25 seconds). Similarly the Finale, which is one of Bruckner's most economical and indeed formally eccentric last movements, occupies a comfortable 10 minutes (the Raphaels, again, weigh in with a pithy 8 minutes, 46 seconds). The attitude here, in other words, reflects the symphonic performance tradition, evident in the recordings of Klemperer, Karajan, Celibidache and others, of treating Bruckner's structures as slow-moving, monolithic and essentially static, contrasting the dynamic notion of form associated with Beethoven and Brahms. The result is a considered, but decisively monumental, rendition.

In the first movement, many of the details of expression and articulation reinforce this impression. The Leipzigers and Rohde are careful to hold their lugubrious tempo largely invariant, and employ rubato as a means of marking significant structural downbeats in a highly selective way. Sometimes this approach yields dividends. The gradual intensification towards the start of the closing section in the exposition, for example, has a cumulative impact, which a more flexible reading might diffuse; the ascent that follows in bars 61–69 is effective for the same reason. In other passages, this consistency produces the opposite effect. The uniformity of tempo means, for instance, that the troublesome issue of where the second theme begins is not really resolved in performance. The dominant is attained by bar 29, and this is marked by a quaver-long break in the texture at the end of the previous bar, but the material is a largely unvaried continuation of the transition. The aftermath of the exposition's climax also appears curiously underplayed, even though the phrasing, tone and ensemble are admirably precise. The extraordinary harmonic and gestural dislocation in bars 72–75, whereby the music shifts from C major to F♯ major via a G–F♯ semitonal pivot, is presented with an evenness that diminishes its impact, both as a gesture in its own right and as a formal event, notwithstanding the conviction with which the forte return to C major in bars 80–81 is played.

The steady tempo is more persistently detrimental in the development and recapitulation. The clear distinctions between pre-core, core and retransition in the development (bars 99–110, 111–150 and 151–170 respectively) deserve more demarcation than they receive. The sense of stasis is especially acute in the treatment of second-group material in bars 131–138, which sounds more like the presentation of material in an adagio than its development in a first movement. In keeping with Bruckner's practice from the Fifth Symphony onwards, the thematic structures of the exposition are seriously distorted in the recapitulation, in terms of tonal, thematic and gestural organization. Again, the invariant tempo minimizes these extraordinary dislocations; in consequence, the music's disruptive modernity is obscured by the anti-dynamic manner of presentation.

The tempo is more sprightly in the Scherzo; we are spared the practice, all too common in recordings of the symphonies, of insisting that a Bruckner scherzo is always really a *Ländler*, regardless of the character of the material. The sections of the rounded continuous binary form are moreover very clearly distinguished: the slower pace of the central section is carefully maintained, and the *ritardando* preceding the reprise nicely accentuates the return of the principal theme. The cliché of the rustic Brucknerian scherzo is, however, perpetuated in other ways. In particular, there is a persistent roughness of tone and bluntness of phrasing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that, although effective in its own way, sometimes underplays the music's subtlety. For example, although ostensibly an uncomplicated eight-bar phrase, the first theme contains a wealth of internal rhythmic and thematic detail of which more could be made, not least the hemiola in bars 5–6 between the first violin, and the cello and viola. If the bucolic implications of the Scherzo are overplayed, the eccentricities of the Trio could surely bear more emphasis. The fragmentary material presentation and unmediated chromatic harmonic shifts are surely too measured, with the consequence that one of Bruckner's most unusual creations fails to stand out sufficiently from the surrounding Scherzo.

The great glory of this disk is without doubt the Adagio. The atmosphere of devotional rumination that is often emphasized in Bruckner's adagios to the exclusion of formal clarity is kept well in check here, being subservient to an ever-present sense of line and a careful balance of expression and articulation. The tempo is slow, but a little more flexible than the first movement, and many of the principal structural junctures are perfectly weighted. In the transition to the second theme, bars 18–34, the players achieve a sustained pianissimo of astonishing control and clarity. Throughout this passage, there is a gradual dissipation of the rich vibrato that characterizes the broad first theme, culminating in the repeated quavers in the violin and viola ushering in the second theme. As a result, the second theme emerges in the first viola against a beautifully transparent underlying texture, which imbues the whole theme group with an almost Cecilian plainness. From bar 47 the thematic material is shared between the instruments; the relative levels of thematic articulation, however, remain perfectly controlled, the edge of vibrato in the theme and its counterpoints offsetting the material against the accompaniment. In the central developmental section, the players faultlessly sustain the gradual intensification building from the restatement of the first theme, and in the reprise of the second group and the movement's valedictory conclusion the sense of the music's structural and expressive trajectory is maintained and brought to a satisfying conclusion.

The Finale encapsulates both the advantages and disadvantages of the approach adopted here. In terms of design, the movement is one of Bruckner's most unusual conceptions. It eschews a clear sonata form in favour of a symmetrical material order, in which the return of the first theme is reserved for the coda. The third group of the exposition is moreover elided with the development to form a long central section, from which first- and second-group material is almost entirely absent. The first theme itself is highly elusive, comprising two dominant pedal points, on D♭ and C respectively, above which Bruckner stacks up motoric figures reminiscent of the discarded *Volksfest* Finale of the Fourth Symphony. The performance has the usual hallmark clarity of phrasing and intonation, and the rustic edge in the tone of presentation is perhaps more warranted here than in the Scherzo. The fragmentary character and tonal evasiveness of the first group also lend it an introductory quality, which is rendered beautifully in this recording. The *Gesangsperioden* are similarly well observed. In the exposition and recapitulation forms of this material, performers must navigate a difficult path between statement, continuation and repetition: frequently, phrase groups conclude not with a cadential liquidation in the classical manner, but with a type of circling repetition, which can easily court monotony. In the exposition especially, the players strike a consistent balance between the exhaustion of thematic momentum and its renewal in ensuing statements, culminating in the written-out ritardando by augmentation with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which the second group concludes. The dance character of the *Gesangsperioden* is less clearly evident. Like so many of Bruckner's finale second themes, this is a species of polka, a characteristic that is underplayed, or even obscured, by the rather studied articulation.

In the third group and development, the monumental Bruckner once more comes to the fore, again with questionable results. In the fugal presentation of third-group material, bars 71–86, the tempo is slow, and the articulation is heavy, occasionally to the point of being ponderous. On the largest scale, the design of this section is made clear: the tempo is slightly pulled back at bar 87, emphasizing the shift to an elaboration of the third theme with textural features of the second group, and the recovery of the fugato at bar 97 is marked by a similarly transparent return to *pesante* articulation. The fragmentary alternation of second and third-group material from bar 99 is also paced well, and the pianissimo of the ensuing retransition is sustained with admirable control. I remain unconvinced, however, that the broad narrative sweep of this account really captures the more intimate, less goal-orientated aspects of the formal process. This issue comes to a head in the coda. When the first theme returns over a C pedal at bar 159, its presence is highly problematic, since it implies a tonic that has played no substantial part in the movement, and carries the dual, and essentially antithetical, functional burdens of recapitulation and closure. These competing structural demands undermine the rhetoric of closure embodied in the fortissimo blaze of F major with which the work concludes. Although the Leipzigers play this passage with verve and much attention to detail, the general impression is of a culminating gesture of the kind Bruckner employed to conclude his most forcefully end-directed symphonic finales: this is the monumental symphony transplanted into a domestic context. The possibility that Bruckner is seeking a more private or ambiguous idiom here, or that there might be a dichotomy of formal process and gesture in these closing bars, is not pursued.

The C minor Quartet is altogether less problematic. There is scarcely a hint of the harmonic and formal complexities that characterize the Quintet, and only scattered indications of the composer's mature style. Instead, Bruckner provides an expertly composed cycle of classical structures after the manner of late Haydn or perhaps Mendelssohn. The material is strong, if uncharacteristic, and the players deliver it here with great conviction. In the first movement, a number of overly scholastic gestures, including the rather inflexible transitional dominant in the recapitulation, are carried off convincingly; in general the intonation, phrasing and tone are uniformly immaculate. In the slow movement, no effort is made to present the material with the gravity normally accorded to a mature Bruckner adagio; instead, the classical lineage of the music is quite rightly stressed. Many of the cadential patterns Bruckner employs draw unashamedly on Mozartian and Haydnesque precedents, rendered here with utter conviction and a considerable lightness of touch, which underscores Bruckner's absolute mastery of a more conventional idiom. The same confidence pervades the Scherzo, which has much of the character of a Beethovenian or Schubertian menuet. The composer's classical appropriations are perhaps least successful in the Finale. Notwithstanding interesting features (the second theme, for instance, is a loose augmentation of the first), the movement's pedagogical motivations are often all too evident, especially in the rather peremptory reworking of the transition leading to the reprise of the second theme. The performers do their best here, but in the end Bruckner's own distinction between a compositional exercise and a genuine work cannot be entirely effaced.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In sum, this disk has much to recommend it. The ensemble is very well blended throughout, the intonation is immaculate, and there is beautiful playing from all concerned. The C minor Quartet, in particular, is splendidly played, and it is hoped that this recording will do much to raise the piece above its current stature as a rarely performed historical curiosity. At the same time, the reading of the Quintet clearly aspires to a symphonic breadth of a kind that is not always germane to the character of the material and its formal organisation. This is especially problematic in the Finale, the design of which moves away from symphonic teleology, and towards a species of anti-monumentality, in which public, rhetorical gestures are undercut by a highly idiosyncratic formal design. It is possible that Bruckner really was seeking a more private mode of expression in this work, which steered the style nurtured in the symphonies in a more introspective direction.

Julian Horton
University College, Dublin

Busoni

Lustspiel-Ouvertüre for Orchestra op. 38
Indianische Fantasie for Piano and Orchestra* op. 44
Gesang vom Reigen der Geister op. 47
Die Brautwahl op. 45

Nelson Goerner *pf*,
BBC Philharmonic Orchestra
Neeme Järvi *cond*

Chandos CHAN 10302 (65 minutes: Recorded in 24-bit/96 kHz: DDD), £12.99
Notes and translations included.

This 2005 Chandos release is the second in a series of recordings dedicated to Ferruccio Busoni's orchestral music.[1] Neeme Järvi conducts the BBC Philharmonic, and is joined by pianist Nelson Goerner. The recording opens with the *Lustspiel-Ouvertüre*, described by Calum MacDonald as 'a modern essay in the spirit of Mozart's comic-opera overtures',[2] and which shares with the Overture to the *Marriage of Figaro* the distinction of having been written in a single night. The influence of Mozart is suggested in more than one of the orchestral pieces contained on this disc: it is similarly from the genre of comic-opera that the suite *Die Brautwahl* (The Bridal Choice) is distilled. (The original opera, composed between 1906 and 1911, received only four performances after opening at the Stadtheater, Hamburg, on 13 April, 1912.) It is not unusual to find borrowed materials, or clear stylistic inferences in Busoni's work. This is not to

[1] See also CHAN 9920 (released 2002) including the well known *Berceuse élégiaque* op. 42.

[2] Calum MacDonald, *Booklet Notes*, Chandos CHAN 10302: 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000173 Published online by Cambridge University Press