**Schoenberg**

String Quartets

Presto in C major
Scherzo in F major
String Quartet in D major
String Quartet No. 1 op. 7
String Quartet No. 2 op. 10

(with String Quartet No. 3 op. 30 and String Quartet No. 4 op. 37)

Aron Quartet with Anna Maria Pammer *sop*
Preiser Records PR 90572 (3 CDs; 177 minutes)
Notes in German and English.

This box set is the first recording of Arnold Schoenberg's complete works for string quartet, including, along with the four numbered quartets, the undated Presto for string quartet in C Major, the Scherzo for string quartet in F Major of 1897, and the D Major Quartet of the same year. There are a number of recordings of Schoenberg's four numbered quartets. These include the original recordings of the works by the Kolisch Quartet (1936–37), La Salle Quartet (1968), Juilliard Quartet (1975), Schoenberg Quartet (1985), and Arditti Quartet (1993). Of these recordings, the Kolisch Quartet's is of greatest historical significance. Recorded in Hollywood in collaboration with the composer, this rather romantic rendition of the quartets has found few rivals since, if one can overcome the grating surface noise. What makes the Kolisch set even more attractive is the spoken personal commentaries by Arnold Schoenberg, with further comments by Alfred Newman (at that time the music director at United Artists) and Frank Maher (the mixer on these recordings). It is, of course, impossible for a composer to notate for musicians precisely. The fact that Schoenberg collaborated with these artists resulted in a rare performance whereby the composer had the opportunity to be more prescriptive and specific than he could have been in the score alone.

It is interesting that the Aron Quartet's Schoenberg recordings contain excerpts from Schoenberg's spoken commentaries on the Kolisch recordings. This explicit association with the original recording of the quartets, and with the authority of Schoenberg himself, could be understood as an attempt on the part of this ensemble to align themselves with a tradition of Viennese string-quartet playing. It indicates to their audience that they are aware of the historical worth of Schoenberg's comments on these original recordings, and of the significance of these recordings as a historical document in their own right.

The Aron quartet was founded in 1998 and shortly afterwards became the quartet in residence of the Arnold Schoenberg Centre in Vienna. The aim of the quartet is to devote itself to the classical string-quartet literature, and also to the works of the Second Viennese School. This recording of Schoenberg's complete works for String Quartet amounts to the first such contribution in a recorded format. It seems quite fitting for a quartet to align themselves in this Schoenbergian manner with an Austro-German performance tradition of the quartet literature. Schoenberg had a tendency to align himself with a tradition

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of 'Austro-German' music both in his compostitions (as for example in his Variations for Orchestra op. 31), and in his writings on music. For Schoenberg this was arguably a method of associating himself with his inherent Germanness and an attempt on his part to claim his place in the Austro-German musical canon. For the Aron quartet, this association with the recordings of the Kolisch Quartet can be understood as aligning themselves with the Viennese string-quartet tradition and an attempt to invoke Schoenberg's authority on their recordings.

The First Quartet op. 7 of 1907 is a four-in-one-movement work. As Schoenberg himself testifies in his album notes, the practice of writing a combination of four-movement design with one-movement sonata form was influenced by such composers as Liszt and Mahler. This quartet presents many challenges for the ensemble, among them the difficulty of conveying the monumental form of the piece to an audience within one uninterrupted performance. Here the Aron Quartet excel. The architecture of the piece is not lost in the detail of the intricate counterpoint and the complicated rhythms. Their technical assurance with these very features is certainly not at the expense of their sense of the whole. Rather, it is from their understanding and mastery of these very aspects that the players construct the large form. Moreover, the listener senses an active communication among the players, a confidence in their collective understanding and portrayal of a complex work. It is evident that this is a piece the players have studied intimately, and care about passionately. Their delivery is as confident structurally as it is in terms of timbre, with a wide range of dynamics that enhance this often impassioned work.

The Second Quartet op. 10 is the only one among Schoenberg's quartets that has found a place in the musical canon. A cursory glance at the list of recordings testify to the fact that opp. 7, 30 and 37 have not been accorded a historical significance in the recorded repertoire equal to that of the 1908 quartet. Indeed, op. 10 occupies a prominent place both at the centre of a shift of compositional process for Schoenberg, and at a paradigmatic change within the history of music in general. In op. 10, Schoenberg reverted to the conventional four movements. The first two are purely instrumental, while the third and fourth introduce a fifth voice, a soprano, with Stephan George's poetic texts 'Litanei' and 'Entrückung'. (English translations of the poems are provided in the sleevenotes.) The soprano on this recording, Anna Maria Pammer, is perfectly balanced with the quartet. She seems to be equally comfortable in the upper and lower registers, rendering George's texts with a remarkable clarity and powerfulness. Her entry in the third movement in unison with the second violin is beautifully blended to the extent that the voice seems to emerge unintrusively from the texture of the string instruments. Her entry in the fourth movement with the famous line 'ich fühle Luft' again blends wonderfully with the strings. The soprano voice becomes increasingly prominent, thereby changing the function of the ensemble as a quartet. One of the outstanding features of this recording, however, is that while Pammer assumes a central role in the final movement, at no point does she overpower the quartet.

The inclusion in this set of earlier works without opus numbers makes it the first recording of Schoenberg's complete writings for string-quartet ensemble. The Arditti Quartet include both the Scherzo and Presto on their set of the numbered quartets, but not the D Major Quartet. This early repertoire is integral to an understanding of Schoenberg's early development as a writer of chamber

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music. In the D Major Quartet the influence of Brahms and Dvořák is particularly evident. The opening of unison and octaves in the first movement is played with a transparence by the Aron Quartet that is indicative of the clarity to follow throughout the entire work. Schoenberg's attempt to make all parts of this work thematically significant, a feature for which he is particularly indebted to Brahms, is conveyed faithfully in this recording. As with their recording of the later op. 7 Quartet, here the Aron Quartet convey clearly the overall structure of the work. Where this music differs is that it does not have the rhythmic-metric complexity of op. 7, with its phrase structure being of a four-square nature. Motivic and harmonic sophistication are its outstanding features, delivered with a suitable grace in this recording. To my ears the sound-world here is somewhat more romantic than that in the later quartets in this set.

Preiser Records get full marks for their attention to detail in the production of this set. The attractive packaging has as its cover a reproduction of Kandinsky's *Impression III (Concert)*, a work that was itself inspired by Schoenberg's Quartets opp. 7 and 10. The sleeve notes (written by various authors for the Arnold Schoenberg Centre) are quite extensive and informative. And the presence of Schoenberg's own voice on the set gives it the polish it requires. The performances themselves have much to offer, but I wonder whether the spoken commentaries by Schoenberg might not have been left with the Kolisch Quartet where they truly belong, and where they are presented with a transcription in the sleeve notes and Schoenberg's album notes. As a set, however, the Kolisch Quartet recordings remain superior, with the exception of the grating surface noise, to my mind not an impassable flaw. If you are averse to this historical sound, I highly recommend the Aron Quartet's Schoenberg set. For all those who treasure their Kolisch Quartet recordings, the Aron Quartet provide a worthy complement, but not an alternative.

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**Schumann**

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Symphony No. 2 in C major op. 61
Symphony No. 4 in D minor op. 120

Orchestre des Champs Elysées
Philippe Herreweghe *cond*

Harmonia mundi (Musique d'abord) HMA1951848 (66 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

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Schumann experienced, of course, the same anxieties about composing symphonies that afflicted all the Romantic composers. At the time of his so-called 'orchestral year' in 1841 the available models might have seemed both few and daunting ones. Beethoven naturally exerted a force that could be as paralysing as it was inspiring. Schubert was known only from the 'Great' C major Symphony, in the resuscitation of which Schumann had played a crucial

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