



Quartetto Italiano - The complete RIAS Recordings

aud 21.456

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This is the first time that the Quartetto Italiano's complete RIAS broadcast recordings have been made available, direct from the master tapes made between 1951 and 1963. The broadcasts are interspersed throughout the three discs but extracting the details shows that there are four broadcasts in total. The earliest in February 1951 (apparently taped over two consecutive days) saw the Austro-German programme of Haydn, Schubert and Schumann. In October 1958 they essayed Cherubini and Schumann's Third Quartet, and the following year the more radical pairing of Donizetti and Ravel. Finally, in October 1963 they played the cutting-edge Shostakovich 7 (only very recently published) and Malipiero's Fourth of 1934. Not the least of the many virtues of this release is that the ensemble's Cherubini, Donizetti and Shostakovich Quartets are making their first appearances on CD.

It's evident that by the late 1950s their stature was sufficiently high for them to exhume older Italian quartets and to add them, however briefly, to their repertoire to supplement their more standard fare. The Donizetti Quartet No.7 is, in any case, rather closer to Schubert stylistically than to Beethoven and its clarity and refinement are alike fully projected by this most fastidious and beautifully textured of quartets. There's no want of elegance and charm. Their crispness of articulation and unanimity of weight garland Cherubini's F major quartet to great advantage. In this first disc the two-movement Malipiero comes as welcome grit, its tempestuous agilities and beauties opening into broad polyphony; bright, alive and flexible. The Quartetto Italiano must surely have welcomed the Ravelian hues of its second movement, which they play with great warmth.

It's a real surprise, and of enormous benefit, to hear their very particular insight into the Shostakovich. It's neither as vibrato-heavy as the Borodin nor as biting and acidic as the Taneyev; that, of course, was not the Italians' tonal, timbral or expressive heritage. Instead they chart a rhythmically resilient, focused course playing the funereal Lento – the composer's tribute to his late wife, Nina – with exemplary refinement. They recorded the Ravel commercially in Milan in 1959, the same year that they left behind this Berlin broadcast performance. Here it's just as beautifully balanced and atmospheric, the control of narrative just as gripping. It offers a welcome respite from the Juilliard Quartet's frost-bitten recording of it, which was made at almost the same time. Perhaps this broadcast performance of Schubert's B flat major quartet is a touch slower than the studio inscription but there's not much in it expressively, and the characterisation of the Menuetto is a real highlight; the terpsichorean wit, control of dynamics and pizzicati unforgettably alluring.



The final disc is given over to Schumann's Second and Third Quartets, and Haydn's Op.77/1. German critics of the time may not have always welcomed Schumann if the booklet notes are reflective of their views, but the Italians play both works with affection and a sure sense of direction. The F major is buoyant, deft in the slow movement, and sporting an insouciantly dispatched Scherzo. The A major is the more popular quartet but whilst the slow movement is sensitively voiced it is never mawkish. The Quartetto Italiano remains scrupulously elegant throughout. The Haydn is both rarefied and gallant; the briefest moments of insecurity in the Menuetto apart, everything goes beautifully.

The original tapes have been presented in the very best aural light, whether taped in the RIAS Funkhaus or in Siemensvilla, and the booklet notes and production standards exemplary. It's difficult to think of a time during its distinguished existence when this quartet wasn't at its peak and any chance to explore the hitherto unpublished elements of its repertoire should be relished. Time spent here is stimulating, rewarding and enriching.

Quartetto Italiano - The Complete RIAS Recordings

rec. 1951-63, Berlin

AUDITE 21.456 [3 CDs: 212:57]

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