



## Ravel & La Tombelle: String Quartets

aud 97.709

EAN: 4022143977090



www.musicweb-international.com (15.04.2021)

Quelle: <http://www.musicweb-international.com/cl...>



For its latest album, the Mandelring Quartett turns its attention to French chamber music, in the first of a two-part issue. Maurice Ravel's enduring renown as a composer could not be more different from that of his older contemporary Fernand de La Tombelle, whose music did not come close to achieving the same status and was virtually forgotten after his death. This coupling is very much to my taste, as it contrasts one of the most admired string quartets in the entire repertoire with the much less-well-known quartet by La Tombelle.

The Mandelring Quartett was founded in 1983 in Neustadt; unsurprisingly, its discography strongly favours Austro/German repertoire - although not exclusively. This album follows its previous foray into French music a few years ago with works by George Onslow, the French born composer of English descent. The Mandelring has announced on its website that the forthcoming second album will feature Debussy's string quartet and a pair of string quartets by Jean Rivier, another name new to me.

La Tombelle and Ravel were near-contemporaries, the former being the elder by twenty years. Both were Parisians, but La Tombelle was born in the capital whereas the Basque-born Ravel moved there as a young child. Both were students at the Paris Conservatoire, where their reputations and successes could not have been more different. La Tombelle studied composition with Theodore Dubois and organ with Alexandre Guilmant, while Ravel's teachers included, most notably, Gabriel Fauré who was firmly supportive of his student. La Tombelle was well regarded and won prizes whereas Ravel's works were strongly criticised by director Théodore Dubois and others in the Conservatoire hierarchy and he was actually expelled, readmitted, then expelled a second time. As pianists, Tombelle progressed to become a concert pianist and organist, whereas Ravel, who had given piano recitals from age fourteen and sometimes played his own works in concert, was to achieve greater success in writing for the piano rather than playing it.

La Tombelle's name is unfamiliar to many, I am sure. Currently his music is beginning to gain wider attention and a mini-revival seems to be underway. Just over a year ago, my first encounter with La Tombelle, his music proved to be a rewarding experience when I reviewed a 3 CD-book release of La his 'Chamber, Choral and Symphonic Music and Mélodies', part of the Bru Zane 'portraits' series.

Written in 1895, La Tombelle's String Quartet in E major was dedicated to his friend Vincent d'Indy and the following year the work won the esteemed Chartier Prize for



exceptional chamber music. Whilst I am not making any claims for its greatness, it is so amiably Romantic and melodic, without an unpleasant tone in the score, that it is captivating. This is an insightful performance, full of expressive detail; the Mandelring produce tasteful phrasing and a sweet, warm, beautifully blended string tone. I am often reminded of the sound-world of Camille Saint-Saëns, who gave La Tombelle guidance. One soon becomes conscious of the constant, fruitful rapport between the quartet members. There is an invigorating freshness to their playing in the Allegros and Scherzo which generates plenty of spirit and buoyancy. The protean character the Allegro con brio – Finale is especially notable; it is full of an energy which turns to sadness and loneliness, then becoming resolutely optimistic. In the Adagio, the heart of the score, the Mandelring impart a melting tenderness to the sense of longing and the players combine to glorious effect. The intense level of yearning infused in his writing surely indicates that La Tombelle is portraying a love affair.

There is an alternative “world premiere recording” of La Tombelle’s String Quartet from the Quatuor Satie on the Ligia Digital label, recorded in 2011 in the Auditorium Cziffra, La Chaise-Dieu. I have heard only sound clips, but the album was reviewed here in 2013. I am not sure of its availability as a new CD, but used copies may be available, and it can be downloaded.

Ravel’s distinctive style of composition is often acknowledged as inhabiting the middle ground between the Romantic and the neo-classical eras. A product of his Paris Conservatoire years, Ravel’s only String Quartet could be said to combine the traditional forms so characteristic of his master Fauré (to whom it is dedicated) with a broad range of tone colours and moods which owes a debt of gratitude to Claude Debussy’s string quartet. Achieving acclaim when introduced in 1904 at the Paris Société Nationale de Musique, it is now widely considered a masterwork of the genre.

This captivating and melodic early work is renowned for its freshness and can make quite an impact at first hearing. Throughout the four-movement score, the Mandelring creates a magical and lavish display of warm, vibrant colour. Ravel employs a cyclical use of themes in the manner of Debussy’s String Quartet. Designed in a sonata form with a pair of main themes, the first movement Allegro moderato – très doux (very sweet) is played both adroitly and passionately by the Mandelring. The glorious introduction is played as beautifully as I have heard. The second movement, serving as a Scherzo, marked Assez vif – très rythmé (Rather lively – very rhythmic), contains pizzicato effects and the Mandelring demonstrates excellent concentration and timing. In the rapturous slow movement marked Très lent (very slow) they create by turns a gracious feeling of introspection and poetic rapture. Worth singling out is the simply glorious sound of the resonant cello. Bursting onto the scene is the Finale – Vif et agité (Lively and agitated), which swings between a squally, rather unsettling character to a much-needed composed temperament. The Mandelring’s playing here is immediate and resolute, serving to heighten the finale’s effect.

On balance, my first choice remains the exceptional recording from 2008 on Virgin Classics from the Quatuor Ébène (review), one of the world’s foremost chamber music ensembles. Their performance is impressively vital and colourful, enhanced by a gratifying sense of purpose and their second movement makes a greater impact than the Mandelring’s.

As seasoned performers, the Mandelring Quartett is entirely responsive to the challenges presented by both the La Tombelle and the Ravel scores. The level of empathy required to encompass the range of moods and tone colour possibilities is always in evidence. Impressive, too, are the well managed dynamics. The radio

broadcast sound quality is first class. The booklet essay by Eva Blaskewitz is interesting and helpful.

This is a most attractive album of these two French quartets and the second release cannot come too soon.



**Maurice RAVEL (1875-1937)**

String Quartet in F major (1902-03) [27:07]

**Fernand de LA TOMBELLE (1854-1928)**

String Quartet in E major, Op 36 (1895) [30:02]

Mandelring Quartett

rec. October 2018, Deutschlandfunk

Kammermusiksaal, Cologne.

**AUDITE 97709** [57:13]

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**Michael Cookson**

**Mandelring Quartett:** Sebastian Schmidt (violin); Nanette Schmidt (violin); Andreas Willwohl (viola); Bernhard Schmidt (cello)