



Robert Schumann: Piano Quartet & Piano Quintet

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International Record Review (John Warrack - 2010.07.01)

RECORD REVIEW
Schumann's Piano Quintet has had literally dozens of performances on record, but in only about half a dozen cases is it coupled with the Quartet. One of these, by the Michelangelo Piano Quartet on Chandos, with Elena Matteucci as pianist, was the first to make use of period instruments. This was not strictly authentic: the piano used was an 1830 Simon fortepiano, and by 1842 the very particular Clara Schumann, for whom the work was written, would have preferred a more recent Härtel or Graf, examples of which she and Robert possessed. No piano identification is given on the present disc but the instrument sounds like a modern one, strong in tone and strongly played here by Claire-Marie Le Guay. The excellent recording sees to it that there are virtually no difficulties over balance, with clarity even in the closing bars of the Quartet's Andante cantabile when the cello is asked to tune his bottom string down from C to a soft supportive B flat.

Clarity is also crucial in the many passages in these two works when Schumann indulges what he called his Fugenpassion, his love of the Bach fugues over which the newly marrieds pored. The bold opening theme of the Quintet almost certainly derives from a Bach prelude in the Well-Tempered Clavier, and the lucidity with which Le Guay articulates this is admirable. She is strong and sure of finger, in the Quintet filled with nervous energy in the episodes of the curious little March, and she is Molto vivace indeed in the Scherzo so marked. There are echoes here of Mendelssohn, whom they admired and who suggested some revisions (and who was one of many who admired Clara, to Robert's brief irritation). The final Allegro ma non troppo needs a clear head as well as clear fingers to hold it all together, but all is well here with a strongly conclusive finish to the work. The Quartet is in some ways a more original piece than the more finished Quintet, and well deserves to be placed beside it. The movements include a Scherzo in racing octaves reflecting Schumann's love of Weber's piano writing (he must have known the First Piano Concerto), a beautiful singing Andante that sets off here with some lovely cello playing, and, relished by the players, lots of fugal fun in the finale.