



Eduard Franck: String Quintets

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amazon One of the best releases so far in Audite's Eduard Franck edition

Over the course of the year or so since this disc in Audite's ongoing survey of Franck's music was first released it has easily become one of my favourites in the series (alongside the same artists' recording of his two string sextets*). Both quintets recorded here re-affirm Franck's sterling command of large scale musical structures – the opening movements, while not innovative in their approach to sonata form, wear their length well and there is not a wasted note in either one; more importantly, he seems to have an instinctive gift for animating those traditional structures with music that flows naturally and organically so that one feels that form and content are perfectly matched. Although separated by more than two decades (according to the liner notes) there is not a great deal of stylistic disparity between the two quintets: Franck seems to have remained true to the Early Romantic idiom that he found congenial early in his career and, when it worked so well for him, why not?

The first quintet is a rare and welcome foray into the minor for Franck (based on the chamber music recorded thus far). The opening statement, with its melodic rise and fall, is – as the booklet essay quite rightly notes – a melancholy one and notwithstanding a more animated passage before the consolatory second subject is presented, that is the prevailing atmosphere of the double exposition; the well-wrought development section introduces a surprising element of drama, however, which is to return after the recapitulation with music of deep feeling in the magnificent coda. Although the vivacious animation of the scherzo stands in marked contrast to the preceding movement, in mood it is not far removed, and remains in the home key – indeed, it is striking in this work how Franck maintains the overall tone even in livelier movements such as the scherzo and the finale, which latter emphatically avoids a major key resolution at the end; even the noble 'Andante con espressione', which opens in the warm key of G major darkens during its course, the beautifully effected contrapuntal writing (one of Franck's undoubtable strengths) contributing much to the increasing air of tension.

The second quintet opens with music of flowing animation, a fine example of Franck's not inconsiderable gift for melody; although in C major, this is not resolutely sunny music (even while it doesn't have the marked melancholy of the earlier work) and presents a more chiaroscuro, bittersweet tone that you will recognise, if you are familiar with Franck's chamber oeuvre, as echt-Franck. The counterpoint that opens

the development section, while mostly eschewing the more dramatic gestures of the respective part of the first quintet, introduces a tense, shadowy atmosphere only briefly interrupted by a more forthright central episode. It is followed by an 'Andante' that opens with a striking suggestion that in the tension between major and minor modes, the minor has won out – and indeed, this emotionally profound movement only moves towards the home key of C major at the very end, the solace of the more cantabile secondary material having been challenged on several occasions by the opening statement. Disquiet marks the minuet that follows – a curious decision to choose this "obsolete" form over the scherzo if the dating of the quintet to 1870 is correct but it works nonetheless in the context of the piece as a whole and has a tone that is suitably archaic. This brief, trio-less movement is followed by a finale in theme-and-variations form, a musical device at which Franck is a dab hand and this is one of the best examples of it in his chamber output, I would say: like the preceding movements, there is a mixture of light and shade here and some of the slower variations display the same expressive weight as the "Andante", though the finale eventually concludes with a decisive turn to the major.

As with the previous releases of Franck's music from Audite, the performances are second to none; these are, so far at least, the only recordings of these works but its hard to imagine them being bettered, such is the evident sympathy Edinger and her fellow artists evince for the music not to mention the technical excellence of their playing. The sound quality matches the fine values of the performances and cannot be faulted.

The revival of Eduard Franck's music (and that of his son, Richard, an equally rewarding composer) has until recently been the almost sole preserve of the German label Audite; now, however, Naxos has recorded some of his music** which I am sure – given that label's international profile and broad distribution – will bring Franck's name and music to a wider public. Many who have been following Audite's journey through Franck's extant works will probably already own this disc, but if you have come across the new Naxos release and are wondering where to go next in exploring Franck's chamber music you could do no worse than to try this disc or the same artists' recording of the string sextets, both of which contains some of his most rewarding and enjoyable music. Moreover, for anyone interested in German chamber music during the Romantic period, I would say this is required listening.

Highly recommended.