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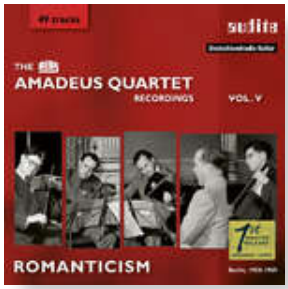

The RIAS Amadeus Quartet Recordings - Romanticism

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Gramophone (Rob Cowan - 2017.10.01)

GRAMOPHONE

Chamber of delights

The Amadeus Quartet on vintage form in Romantic repertoire and a much-recorded Danish pianist

REPLAY

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of historic reissues and archive recordings

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With a time frame that stretches from 1950 to 1969, Audite's fifth volume of RIAS Amadeus Quartet Recordings catches this great ensemble at the height of its powers. The theme on this occasion is Romanticism, and the set includes key repertoire that the quartet never took into the recording studio. Of principal interest is Grieg's G minor Quartet (recorded 1953), a performance that for sheer energy and expressive power rivals the pre-war recording from the Budapest Quartet – the first movement especially. You get the sense that both the quartet's leader Norbert Brainin – who is on especially good form here – and his colleagues are relishing every moment of a delectable score.

Mendelssohn is represented by a fiery account (1952) of the Capriccio from Op 81 (a work the group did record complete), especially striking at its fugal centre; and the Quartet in E flat major, Op 12 (1969), which features a warmly phrased account of the opening Adagio.

Schumann is another curious absentee from the Amadeus's official discography, the Piano Quintet in E flat (1950) most engaging where in the first-movement exposition (played with repeat) the second theme is handed between the viola and the cello, whereas the Scherzo illustrates how well pianist Conrad Hansen establishes a strong presence without overwhelming his colleagues. How lovely, too, Brainin's playing in the Trio. Hansen also cues a gently rocking lullaby for the opening of Dvorak's Piano Quintet (1950), and all five players alternate poetry and high spirits for the Dumka second movement: note the wild accelerando from 7'24", before Hansen calls a halt and Brainin weeps his line with a mournful (though never overwide) vibrato and marked portamentos. This is vintage Amadeus artistry.

It's interesting that for the opening bars of the third movement of Brahms's First Quartet (1950) they take the written hairpin dynamic as a cue to enter on an aching rallentando, an option they also take on their two commercial recordings of the score, though here it's more marked. This darkly introspective reading is in marked contrast to the more songful, even genial, account from seven years later of Op 67, the finale's variations bringing the work to a colourful conclusion. The finale of the Op III String Quintet (1953, with Cecil Aronowitz), however, really fuels the flames, especially at its centre, though for sheer ebullience the opening can't compare with a roughly contemporaneous Sony recording from the Casals Festival at Prades with Isaac Stern, Alexander Schneider and friends (coupled with the Schumann Piano

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Quintet with Myra Hess), a classic that's surely due for a local reissue.

The other featured Brahms Quintets involve clarinettist Heinrich Geuser (1951), whose mellow playing fits the music's mood to perfection and Hansen (1950) whose contribution to the Piano Quintet, and the finale in particular, is powerfully communicative. Which leaves Bruckner's F major Quintet (195 7), lovingly played form start to finish (movingly emotional in the Adagio) and Verdi's E minor Quartet (1962), not quite in the same class musically as the Bruckner but very well played.

So, in closing, I'd say that of the six volumes of this invaluable edition, perhaps Volume 5, 'Romanticism', is the most treasurable of all, given the number of Amadeus repertoire rarities it includes. The transfers, all from excellent mono radio tapes, are consistently excellent. […]

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Staying with Austro-German Romanticism Danacord has treated us to a fresh and engaging 1955 account of Schubert's Piano Trio No 1, presented as part of a double-pack devoted to 'the most recorded Danish pianist in the first half of the 20th century' as annotator Claus Byrith describes Victor Schiøler. I was frequently reminded of the classic Cortot-Thibaud-Casals recording, principally because of the lift that Schiøler and his excellent colleagues violinist Henry Holst and cellist Erling Blöndal Bengtsson bring to the outer movements. By contrast Bengtsson's solo at the start of the *Andante* second movement is more along the lines of Emanuel Feuermann, who years earlier had recorded the work with Heifetz and Rubinstein. Note also that Schiøler and Bengtsson playing the two Brahms sonatas is already available on Danacord (DACOCD738). Before Schubert makes his joyous entry Schiøler rounds off a memorable account of Beethoven's *Kreutzer* Sonata with Nielsen's son-in-law the Hungarian violinist Emil Telmányi (recorded 1942), whose memorable playing hails from another era, especially in the second movement where his fast trills and downward portamenti are strongly reminiscent of Bronisław Huberman.

Also included on this rewarding and generally well-transferred collection is a grand, sonorously stated Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto (1950) commandingly accompanied by the Danish State Radio Symphony Orchestra under Erik Tuxen, and an account of Schumann's *Carnaval* that is by turns wistful and affecting. As for the three Intermezzi, Op 117, by Brahms, I can't recall ever hearing a more desolate reading of the third, an awe-inspiring eternity at seven minutes (broader than Radu Lupu by almost a minute). Mozart's C minor Fantasia K396 is also characterfully played.

THE RECORDINGS

RIAS Amadeus Quartet Recordings, Vol 5: Romanticism
Audité Ⓢ ⑥
AUDITE21 425

The Great Danish Pianist Victor Schiøler, Vol 2
Danacord Ⓜ ②
DACOCD781/2

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