

works in terrific, beautifully balanced Harmonia Mundi sound.

Guy Rickards (March 2015)

Alhorn, Tbn & Tpt Sons – selected comparison:

Various, Gould (3/93) (SONY) SM2K52671

Vc Son – selected comparison:

Warner, Buck (BRID) BRIDGE9088

Vc & Tbn Sons – selected comparison:

Ostertag, Slokar, Randalu

(12/97) (MDG) MDG304 0697-2

Tbn & Tpt Sons – selected comparison:

Lindberg, Pöntinen, Tarr, Westenholz

(3/94) (BIS) BIS-CD159

Tpt Son – selected comparisons:

Helseth, Stott (5/13) (EMI) 416471-2

Laubin, Randalu (MDG) MDG304 0696-2

Vn Son – selected comparisons:

Wallin, Pöntinen (8/96) (BIS) BIS-CD761

FP Zimmermann, Pace (9/13) (BIS) BIS-CD2024

Becker-Bender, Nagy (12/13) (HYPE) CDA68014

Langgaard

'String Quartets, Vol 3'

String Quartets - No 1, BVN68; No 5, BVN189.
Quartet Movement, 'Italian Scherzo', BVN408

Nightingale Quartet

Dacapo 6 22057 (69' • DDD/DSD)



Gramophone's conferral of Young Artists of the Year on the Nightingale

Quartet is no less than these four intrepid artists deserve. Their Langgaard cycle is bringing this maverick composer the kind of broader recognition he always deserved, and their playing on this final volume lives up to the sky-high standards they have led us to expect.

... In his booklet essay, Tim Frederiksen, who has mentored the Nightingales throughout the process, characterises the first CD as mainly dramatic and the second as predominantly poetic and idyllic, while the third embraces both aspects and thereby makes a fitting conclusion. Both quartets recorded here fit that description (the *Italian Scherzo* is a chip from the workbench, though an engaging one). The First is the more deceptive, in a way that anyone already attuned to Langgaard will relish. The leisurely first movement manages to behave itself but the *scherzo* evidently has trouble keeping the lid on, and imaginative transgression bursts through on the last page (I wondered at this point if Langgaard may have known Borodin's First Quartet). The long slow movement returns to sobriety for the most part but becomes seriously disruptive in the late stages, while the finale moves from initial entrancement to an energised *robusto* coda.

The Fifth Quartet is altogether milder. It starts with a respectful nod to Grieg and continues with a mainly reflective, leisurely first movement. Still, like the British weather, if you don't like it, all you have to do is wait a bit. The finale is especially changeable; and even though this work might not be the one to choose to induct a friend to Langgaard, it has a winning charm that doesn't pale on repetition. Beautifully judged recording quality and authoritative essays complement the performances ideally.

David Fanning (December 2014)

Smetana

String Quartets - No 1, 'From My Life'; No 2

Pavel Haas Quartet

Supraphon SU4172-2 (48' • DDD)



This is becoming a bit of a habit. The Pavel Haas Quartet record a disc. Critics swoon and reach for their superlatives box, usually hidden away on a top shelf to avoid overindulgence. Result? It ends up as Disc of the Month and a hot contender for a *Gramophone* Award. But swooning is not enough, and nor are superlatives. So let's try and explore why this is so spectacularly good.

The PHQ already have an extraordinary track record with music of their Czech homeland (Dvořák, Janáček and of course Haas), so their Smetana was always going to be highly personal. Their sound is, as ever, immediately recognisable – partly due to the sheer richness of timbre but also the sense of four personalities at play. That is palpable from the opening viola solo of the First Quartet: here, Pavel Nikl revels in the juicy lower register of his instrument and the effect is markedly different from the Jerusalem Quartet's viola player who is less lustrous-toned. In the answering phrases between the two violins what is striking is the level of detail combined with an apparent spontaneity. What this new version captures particularly compellingly is the sense of the music's extremes – at times it's hard to believe you are in the presence of only four players, so intense is the sound. No element is taken for granted, and the way they colour the dotted falling figure that dominates so much of the first movement is a masterclass in imagination yet never sounds in the least bit contrived.

Not everyone is going to agree about their approach to the polka-infused second movement. They are more galumphing

than the Jerusalem, who cut a fine, sophisticated dash and are slightly fleetier in the outer sections. On the other hand, the PHQ's viola brings off the *quasi tromba* marking very effectively (tr 2, 0'48"), while in the fairground-like Trio, the two violinists judge to a nicety the *crescendos* and *diminuendos* on their double-stopped chords in which Smetana conjures up a very lifelike squeezebox (sample from 1'46" onwards). In fact, so focused are they on the characterisation of this movement, injecting into the *più allegro* markings not just speed but an increase in intensity, that a moment of wayward tuning, just before the five-minute mark, is left uncorrected. Though initially disconcerted, I did find this became less of an issue on repeated listening.

The PHQ's inherently 'vocal' style gives the First Quartet's biographical elements a particularly poignant edge. This is especially effective in moments such as the cello soliloquy that opens the *Largo sostenuto*, which finds Peter Jarůšek voluptuously eloquent, his poignant phrases answered with equal intensity by leader Veronika Jarůšková (tr 3, 0'50"). Here, the PHQ are several degrees warmer than the more forlorn Talich, whose reading prizes plangency over lyricism and whose every climax is almost painfully hard-won. In the finale, the Jerusalem find a thrilling drive, without making light of the more inward moments. Yet the PHQ are to my mind more compelling still, launching into it with a heady exultancy which makes the catastrophic moment where Smetana's deafness is announced by a piercing high E on the first violin (tr 4, 3'34") all the more searing – more shocking in impact than either the Jerusalem or even the Talich. Nothing can be the same after this; and in the closing minutes of the quartet they manage to convey a succession of emotions – warmth, doubt, determination and ultimately a quiet sense of resignation.

There is no shortage of exceptional readings of the First Quartet but Smetana's Second is another case entirely. It has never enjoyed the same success as the First, being dismissed (rather in the manner of Schumann's late music) as being the product of a deeply disturbed mind. But, as we've belatedly learnt with Schumann, disturbed does not preclude flashes of genius, which is surely the case here. Smetana wrote the Second Quartet just months before his death from syphilis and – while not wishing to draw oversimplistic parallels between life and work – anguish combines with an extraordinary intensity. It's easy to understand why it has perplexed listeners, for here is a work that constantly