

Chamber

Because it is the shortest (6'52") and the most simply conceived work on this disc, *For Sonny* is the most approachable, but that's not to say that it is the easiest, in terms of its emotional content. It was composed in 2011, in memory of a friend's grandson who died shortly after birth. It is haunted by a pizzicato idea played by first violinist Tristan Gurney, rising up a five-note scale, hesitating on its top note, and then falling down again. The other instruments at times support it, join it, thwart it and shatter it. Without knowing the work's subtext, most listeners probably would describe it as depressing; having read what inspired it, I found it pistol-to-the-temple grim. Even so, one admires MacMillan's willingness to face strong emotions head on, and his ability to write so communicatively.

The String Quartet No. 3 (2007) is in three movements, with the last of these marked 'Patiently and painfully slow', so one has advance warning not to expect a lot of smiles here either. During a discussion at the time of the work's premiere (given by the Takács Quartet), MacMillan spoke about the work's *cantabile* quality, and certainly there's a lot of juicy melody, which, to my ears, resembles Jewish folk music. Nevertheless, there's a lot of violence too, particularly (but not exclusively) in the second movement, which is, frankly, terrifying, and there is no stinting by the performers. (A brief, galumphing passage for the cello halfway through, repeated by the quartet near the movement's end, is the blackest of humour.) I can't imagine anyone superseding this performance. In general, MacMillan's writing for string quartet catalogues the non-traditional ways in which sounds, musical and otherwise, can be extracted from a string quartet. Listeners who were disappointed that Penderecki discontinued his explorations into sonorism might find much to intrigue them in MacMillan, although the two of them are very different composers.

Etwas zurückhaltend is a student work from 1982 that MacMillan resurrected in 2009. The work reflects his interest in Wagner – the title is a tempo indication from the final pages of *Götterdämmerung* – and, in his words, 'allusions to motifs from *The Ring* are never far away'. This music is not Wagnerian, however, but strongly on the road that leads to MacMillan's mature style.

Listening to these works took a lot out of me, but I am not complaining. I can only imagine what a drain they are on the performers. I was impressed with 'Postcard from Nalchik', the Edinburgh Quartet's previous release (reviewed in the September issue); here I am astonished by these players, by their complete immersion in MacMillan's sound-world, their nerve and by their communicative power, no matter how tough the music becomes. This is not for casual listening. The sound, I should add, is fabulously real and present. **Raymond S. Tuttle**

Röntgen

Complete String Trios, Volume 2.

String Trios – No. 5 in B minor; No. 6 in F sharp minor, Op. 50; No. 7 in G; No. 8 in A.

Lendvai Trio (Nadia Wijzenbeek, violin; Ylvali Zilliacus, viola; Marie Macleod, cello).

Champs Hill Records CHRC087 (full price, 1 hour 9 minutes). Website www.champshillrecords.co.uk. Producer Matthew Bennett. Engineer Dave Rowell. Dates October 9th-11th, 2013.



Lendvai Trio

Champs Hill Records

For every long-forgotten masterpiece tucked away in an attic, archive or library, there must be 50 not-quite masterworks sitting alongside them, unloved and unperformed. Work of this second rank fills this second disc from the Lendvai String Trio of pieces by Dutchman Julius Röntgen (1855-1932), each of which has never been published and which was performed here from copies of the handwritten manuscripts. None is a major revelation – how exhausting it would be if every unpublished manuscript were – but, benefiting from brilliant performances and excellent sound, each emerges as an attractive and valuable addition to the slender repertoire of the string trio.

Röntgen was approaching old age when he penned these trios. He set down 16 in total; those included here were written between 1920 and 1923. The string quartet might have been a more obvious genre for which to write had Röntgen been interested in continued performance, but the string trio offers a unique challenge of its own, one to which the composer rises with consistently applied skill and imagination. Never is the absence of a second violin felt; if anything,

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the present combination makes for a clearer, more refined tonal palette. That relative sparsity seems a good fit for the wistful quality of Röntgen's music, revealed early in the Fifth Trio, whose flirtations with the major and minor hint at a nervous instability common to many of the faster movements.

A particularly Mendelssohnian character emerges in the Sixth Trio, underscoring the fact that much of this music could have been written a century before its stated date.

It isn't only the language that recalls the young German master; Röntgen's grasp of transparent but harmonically rich ensemble writing is worthy of comparison with the illustrious forebears with which his music seeks kinship. In its serious, searching nature, this Sixth Trio seems to be recalling the hollow existential tension of Schubert's greatest chamber music, even if the drama is significantly more compact than most of Franz Peter's titanic statements of doubt. The shifting, uncertain thrust is underlined by a swaying and sighing finale, made all the more affecting by the Lendvai players' consummate feeling for pace and expressive restraint.

While the masterpieces of Romantic chamber music may be the touchstone, Röntgen's characteristic brevity is a departure from this example. Often, a movement will begin with a long and gorgeously sustained melody, only to be wrapped up in a matter of a few minutes. It's a measure of the composer's structural skill, however, that this always seems a natural conclusion of the music's intentions; there's no better example of this than

the slow movement of the Seventh Trio, which suddenly turns a corner and dies away, as though it has discovered something in this new vista that simply must take it elsewhere. Similarly, the Eighth Trio opens with the breadth of a late Beethoven quartet, only to follow its nose along a different but no less intriguing path.

Effortless compositional skill and affinity with the instruments at hand rings from every note of this finely crafted music, but what is absent is the sense of a distinctive musical voice. Röntgen's work tells of an artist surely born into the wrong age, for almost nothing of the half-century preceding the writing of these trios is revealed within. But while the ways and means are all of a past time, Röntgen's music is never simply a pastiche: he may lack a distinctive harmonic fingerprint, but the character – poised between bittersweet regret and flowing lyrical contentment – is beguiling and rewarding. Röntgen has fighting his corner three outstanding champions in the musicians of the Lendvai Trio, whose performances exude clear care and affection for these previously unknown pieces. **Andrew Morris**