

SCHUMANN • Piano Quintet

BRAHMS • Piano Quartet No. 2

CLIFFORD CURZON



1951-52 Recordings

Budapest String Quartet

Joseph Roisman • Jac Gorodetzky, Violins

Boris Kroyt, Viola

Mischa Schneider, Cello



Robert Schumann (1810-1856): Piano Quintet, Op.44

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897): Piano Quartet No.2, Op.26

Robert Schumann never wrote anything better than his *Piano Quintet*, one of the most perfect creations in Western music. In fact he virtually invented the form as we know it: the quintets of Boccherini were arrangements and those by Hummel and Schubert incorporated a double bass. Schumann had such success in combining a piano and a string quartet that many other composers followed suit, among them Brahms, Dvořák, Franck, Fauré, Reger, Martucci, Elgar, Bloch, Reizenstein, Toch, Martinů and Shostakovich.

The quintet was the prize production of Schumann's 'chamber music year', 1842, in which, after an intensive study of classical works, he also wrote three string quartets, a piano quartet and some pieces for piano trio. The quintet, intended for his wife Clara and dedicated to her, was finished in October and incorporated musical signatures with deep significance for the Schumanns. The most obvious is the double drop of a fifth which can be heard in the first trio of the scherzo and elsewhere: it harks back to the *Impromptu on a Theme by Clara Wieck, Op. 5*, based by Schumann on a *Romance* which Clara had written for him. Then there is the near-quotation of the aria 'Es ist vollbracht' from Bach's *St John Passion*, heard just after the first movement's exposition and again in the slow movement. Hans Kohlhase has convincingly argued that the quintet commemorates the painful four and a half years during which Robert and Clara were forbidden by her father to marry. It is clearly influenced by his admiration for Schubert's *E flat Trio*; but Schumann makes everything his own. The first movement has a marvellously bold first theme and a meltingly romantic second subject. The slow movement is a funeral march, as in Schubert's trio. The scherzo is based on a simple chromatic scale – of such touches are geniuses made – and the finale is a magnificent construction, ending with a masterstroke in which its

main theme is combined with the opening theme of the whole work. The quintet is a portrait of Clara on two levels; the virtuosic piano part reflects her status as one of the great nineteenth-century pianists, and the lovely phrases given to the viola surely represent her more private self, the Clara that Robert knew.

We do not know what contributions Clara, a superb critic, made to the work, but we do know that Schumann's friend Mendelssohn made a crucial intervention. The very end of the work, with its contrapuntal tour de force, was probably inspired by Mendelssohn's quartet in the same key. Then, by a lucky mischance, Clara was unwell when the first private performance was given on 6th December 1842, and Mendelssohn played the fiendish piano part, which hardly ever lets up, at sight. He made astute suggestions for improving the slow movement and the scherzo: adding a second trio was his idea. Clara played in the first public performance on 8th January 1843, by which time the quintet had been revised, and pronounced it 'splendid, full of vigour and freshness'. It was published on her birthday, 13th September 1843.

Clara Schumann also played a major rôle in the life and career of Johannes Brahms, as his muse, his unrequited love and his most constructive critic. She was closely associated with his three Piano Quartets. The *C minor, Op. 60*, first to be started and last to be finished, was connected with the tragic time when Robert Schumann died and Brahms realised he was in love with Clara; the *G minor, Op. 25*, was given its première by Clara; and her favourite, the *A major, Op. 26*, was a lyrical, feminine answer to the dramatic, masculine G minor. Brahms worked on these two quartets from 1857, completing the G minor by November 1861 and the A major the following year. He chose the G minor for his début as pianist and composer in Vienna, and two weeks later, on 29th November

1863, he gave the first performance of the *Piano Quartet in A major* with the same string players, members of the Hellmesberger Quartet. Both quartets were published in 1863.

The A major may be the gentlest of the three piano quartets but it is also the most expansive, and its first movement has a quiet grandeur which is only partially offset by the second subject. The lovely slow movement, in ternary form, requires the strings to be muted at first. The large-scale scherzo, with its canonic trio, displays Brahms's deep knowledge of Bach's music, especially the *Overture of the Fourth Partita* for harpsichord, and the finale, in sonata form like the first and third movements, is one of Brahms's Hungarian-influenced creations, although the Magyar touches are more subtle than those in the rondo of the G minor piano quartet. To hear this great quartet in the same programme as Schumann's quintet is to gain a rare insight into that most tragic of musical triangles: Robert and Clara Schumann and their friend Johannes Brahms.

The performers here are worthy of the assignments. The Budapest Quartet had a stormy history but maintained a high standard for half a century, from 1917 to 1967. Beginning as a group of three Hungarians and a Dutchman, it metamorphosed during its second decade (1927-36) into a Russian ensemble, and that line-up became established in the United States. Arising out of the Budapest Opera Orchestra, the quartet was founded on democratic lines, each man having a vote. It made its debut in Kolozvar (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), in December 1917 and in 1920, after a change of second violin, moved to Berlin. It could soon offer some 65 works, including all the Beethoven quartets. On 12th January 1925 it made its London debut at the Aeolian Hall. Another second violinist left in 1927, to be replaced by the first Russian, Joseph Roisman (1900-74). In the spring of 1931, the Russian cellist Mischa Schneider came in. The group made its New York debut

on 4th January 1931 but the following year the leader Emil Hauser left, to be succeeded by Roisman, while Scheider's younger brother Alexander (1908-93) became second violin. The Hungarian violist Istvan Ipolyi continued with the quartet until 1936, when he was replaced by Boris Kroyt (1897-1969). The all-Russian formation entered a purple patch, during which it emigrated to the United States and became resident at the Library of Congress, but the stability lasted only eight years before Sasha Schneider decamped. Replacements Edgar Ortenberg and Jac Gorodetzky were no match for him and in 1955, following the latter's death, he returned for the last phase of the ensemble's career.

The Budapest Quartet worked with many fine pianists, among them George Szell, Artur Balsam, Mieczyslaw Horszowski and Rudolf Serkin. A favourite was the Englishman Clifford Curzon (1907-82), who studied with Charles Reddie at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and later with the Leschetizky pupils Katharine Goodson and Artur Schnabel. After two years in Berlin with Schnabel, Curzon went to Paris, where Wanda Landowska and Nadia Boulanger influenced him. He made his United States debut in 1939 and after the war was recognised as one of the great pianists. He was made CBE in 1958 and knighted in 1977.

The Budapest Quartet made four recordings with Curzon in 1950-53, the present two and the quintets of Brahms and Dvořák. In addition live recordings of the quintets by Schumann (1951) and Franck (1956) and the E flat Quartet by Mozart are known. The Columbia recordings had to be taped in the boxy acoustic of the Library of Congress concert hall, as a condition of using the Library's Stradivari instruments. The string players' essential warmth and Curzon's aristocratic pianism, however, still make their effect.

Tully Potter

Producer's Note

This disc is the first of two volumes devoted to the complete studio recordings of Clifford Curzon with the Budapest Quartet. The second volume (8.110307) will contain Brahms's *Piano Quintet in F minor, Op.34*, and Dvořák's *Piano Quintet in major, Op.81*. The transfers have been taken from American LP pressings.

Mark Obert-Thorn

GREAT CHAMBER MUSIC RECORDINGS

SCHUMANN: Quintet in E flat major for Piano and Strings, Op. 44 **30:51**

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|------|
| 1 | Allegro brillante | 9:10 |
| 2 | In modo d'una Marcia | 9:26 |
| 3 | Scherzo: Molto vivace | 4:54 |
| 4 | Allegro ma non troppo | 7:22 |

Recorded 28th-29th April, 1951 in the Coolidge Auditorium,
Library of Congress, Washington, DC
Matrices: XCO-46097 through 46104
First issued as Columbia ML-4426

BRAHMS: Quartet No. 2 in A major for Piano and Strings, Op. 26 **46:12**

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|-------|
| 5 | Allegro non troppo | 12:23 |
| 6 | Poco adagio | 12:09 |
| 7 | Scherzo: Poco allegro | 11:13 |
| 8 | Finale: Allegro | 10:27 |

Recorded 27th-28th April, 1952 in the Coolidge Auditorium,
Library of Congress, Washington, DC
Matrices: XLP-9712 and 9713
First issued as Columbia ML-4630

Clifford Curzon, Piano
Budapest String Quartet:
Joseph Roisman, Violin I
Jac Gorodetzky, Violin II (tracks 1-4)
Boris Kroyt, Viola
Mischa Schneider, Cello

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

Playing
Time
77:03

SCHUMANN
(1810–1856)
BRAHMS
(1833–1897)

8.110306

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Clifford Curzon, Piano
Budapest String Quartet:
Joseph Roisman, Violin I
Jac Gorodetzky, Violin II*
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Mischa Schneider, Cello

This is the first of two Naxos volumes devoted to the complete recordings of the British pianist, Clifford Curzon, performing with the Budapest Quartet. Recognised as one of the great, 'aristocratic' interpreters of the classical and romantic repertoire, Curzon was one of many fine artists who worked with the Budapest Quartet. Despite a stormy history, with several changes of personnel, the Quartet maintained a high standard for half a century, as can be heard in these classic performances of Robert Schumann's *Piano Quintet*, one of the loveliest of all creations in Western music, and Brahms' *Piano Quartet No. 2*.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
Cover image: Clifford Curzon (Tully Potter Collection)

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