SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1406

GREAT STRING QUARTETS play BEETHOVEN

The BUDAPEST QUARTET
The LÉNER QUARTET
The BUSCH QUARTET

For some the highest form of music is the string quartet and at the summit in that form are the works of Beethoven. When Carl Flesch was about thirty he considered forming a string quartet, but decided against it on the grounds that to perform such works as perfectly as humanly possible he would have to devote his career to it exclusively, which he did not feel able to do.

In the period from 1925 to 1940 the gramophone achieved a maturity in which records of the greatest music encouraged the public into the concert halls and experience in the concert halls encouraged the public to buy records of the greatest music. In those years Wanda Landowska's "Goldberg" Variations, Arthur Schnabel's complete Beethoven sonatas, Elena Gerhardt's album of Wolf Lieder and the Beethoven quartets played by the Budapest, Busch and Léner groups, the three truly great Central European quartets of the interwar period, entered the record catalogues. This maturity was made possible by the introduction of electrical recording in 1925. Even so, further progress in recording and in reproducing sound enables us to hear these recordings today with far more realism than when they were made. This is especially significant for the intimate nature of chamber music, which, it can be argued, is in any case better heard in domestic surroundings than in the concert hall.

In 1917 four members of the orchestra of the Budapest Opera, Emil Hauser and Alfred Indig, violinists, Istvan Ipolyi, violist, and Harry Son, cellist, founded the Budapesti Vónosnégyes. Matters both musical and non-musical were decided democratically; income was divided equally. Although of East European origins, the quartet was firmly imbued with the German classics. Thus the war over, it migrated naturally to the cultural milieu of the Weimar Republic and became the BUDAPEST QUARTET. Over the years the personnel changed, so that by the time of this recording, of the original members only the violist remained. Roisman was from Odessa and the brothers Schneider from Vilna. Hauser, of the old school, used plenty of portamento, was sparing of vibrato and played with great warmth. Roisman, who replaced him, was of the new school, with a faster vibrato applied most of the time, pointing the rhythm more deliberately and introducing a brilliant sonority and uniformity of playing. References to the Roisman Quartet were disliked by Roisman, who wished to maintain the quartet's democracy. Rehearsals could be very stormy, but the storms always subsided and were never personal. In 1939 the quartet, its members now all Russian, moved to the United States. In

1940 it became the Resident Quartet of the Library of Congress, Washington. With further changes of personnel the quartet survived until the 1967, but the élan, musicianship and ensemble of this recording, particularly in the rapport between first violin and cello, show the quartet at its zenith and explain why in its best years it was beloved of its public and praised by the critics.

As the Great War ended four orchestral players, remarkably also of the Budapest Opera, determined to escape from the conditions of the time, left for a country village with a box of quartet scores. They studied and practiced intensely to develop into a quartet with its own style and sound, ensemble and insight, personality and excellence. Thus the LÉNER STRING QUARTET made its début in Budapest in 1919. In 1920 it played in Vienna. There it was heard by Ravel, who invited it to appear in Paris, where it was a huge success. In 1922 the quartet toured Italy and appeared in England. It at once became the favourite of London audiences, particularly at the Wigmore Hall. Its position was challenged only by the Busch Quartet in 1930, but it nevertheless continued there with great success. In 1925 it played the complete Beethoven cycle over six evenings in Manchester, repeating it in the Queen's Hall in 1927 for the Beethoven centenary. The Busch and Budapest groups were recorded by The Gramophone Company, but the Léner Quartet was with Columbia, who in 1935 presented its leader with a golden disc to mark the sale of its millionth record. (An achievement somewhat easier than it sounds when one recalls that each quartet occupied three to six 78rpm records.) In 1929 the quartet toured North America, but it was not appreciated there and did not go again. In 1939 the quartet broke up. Léner went to the United States. He started a new quartet, but it did not thrive and lasted only until 1946. In any case by then his style was perceived to be outmoded. Léner was a pupil of Hubay, who taught a wide vibrato. This is apparent in the quartet's playing, but it is also the secret of its warm sound, Grove [*Dictionary of Music and Musicians*] describing its "rich and mellow tone quality combined with an unusually homogeneous blend of the four instruments." The quartet's use of portamento varies with the composer being played, being relatively modest with Mozart and Beethoven.

In 1912 Adolf Busch became leader of the orchestra of the Wiener Konzertverein which led to the foundation of the Wiener Konzertvereins-Quartett in 1913, which included Paul Grümmer and Karl Doktor. In 1919 Busch, now working largely in Berlin, decided to form the BUSCH QUARTET. Paul Grümmer was included, with Karl Doktor as soon as he was demobilised, while Gösta Andreasson joined them next year. There was intense, detailed rehearsal, but use of portamento seems frequently to have been left to inspiration of individual players in performance. Vibrato varied from almost nothing, but was generally faster and less pronounced, more modern, than in, say, the Léner Quartet. Germany had already nine or so quartets; the newcomer was soon recognised as the best. It was realised that fees from quartet playing would be insufficient, so, unlike the other two quartets in this album and contrary to the attitude of Carl Flesch, members were free to accept other engagements. Perhaps because of this the

quartet sometimes even practiced in railway waiting rooms between concerts. The repertoire was wide, though conservative, being based essentially on the German classics, to which were added works by Debussy, Ravel and Verdi. By virtue of personality, intellect and strength of playing, Busch was the leader; not an absolute leader in the sense of Joachim or Rosé, but the quartet was certainly no group of equals.

Although the Busch brothers were "racially pure" they would have nothing to do with the New Order and made their views very obvious. From 1933 the quartet did not play in Germany; later also in neither Italy nor Austria. The quartet hoped to establish itself in England, but, this not being possible, moved to the United States, where it was active until the death of Busch in 1952, though with various changes of personnel. The Busch Quartet specialised in performances of the Beethoven cycle and perhaps more than any other quartet it was able to communicate the late works to audiences.

[The first recordings of the Busch Quartet, works by Hofstetter, Mozart, Schubert and Verdi, can be heard on Symposium CD 1109.]

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