

Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada



Reviews New recordings from Nashville, San Francisco...and Sweden » **The Scene** Live highlights - page VII

J Beck

String Quartets - No 1^a; No 2, 'Fathers & Sons'^b;
No 4^a; No 5^c

^cDa Kappo Quartet; ^bNevsky Quartet;

^aSan Gabriel Quartet

Innova © INNOVA867 (63' • DDD)

Recorded ^a2001, ^b2003, ^c2010



Assured string quartets from a Kentucky-based composer

Composers who venture into the realm of the string quartet do so at their peril, especially with such masters of the genre as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Bartók looking over their shoulders. But Jeremy Beck, for one, has gone past intimidation to produce five substantial quartets, four of which are performed on this release featuring three ensembles. It's clear from the moment the first entry – the Fourth Quartet – begins that the American composer knows the importance of embracing the past while also going his own way. The swirling gestures at the outset are like jolts of Bartók (but *Miraculous Mandarin*, not the quartets) that quickly give way to Beck's forceful and expressive sound world. As in all of the quartets on this disc, the writing is concise in structure and generous in tonal language, savouring both the dramatic and the poetic.

The First Quartet, in three movements, moves organically from solemn to invigorating ideas, with ample contrapuntal interplay to keep the narratives rich and layered. In the Second Quartet, the subtitle *Fathers & Sons* reflects the influence of material in the first movement on the unfolding events in the second. It is a striking and intensely felt work. Likewise, the Fifth Quartet makes a haunting impression in three movements of contrasting utterances. The excellent performances by the San Gabriel, Nevsky and Da Kappo Quartets were recorded over a decade in California, Russia and Kentucky. The Nevsky can be heard playing the Third Quartet (*Shadow and Light*) on a 2008 Innova disc of Beck's music, 'Never Final, Never Gone'. **Donald Rosenberg**

Beethoven

Three String Quartets, 'Rasumovsky', Op 59

Miró Quartet

Longhorn Music © 2 LMH2012004 (105' • DDD)

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GRAMOPHONE *talks to...*

Jeremy Beck

The composer on the unique joys and challenges of writing music for string quartet

Did you always have a desire to compose for string quartet?

My principal instrument is the cello; although I no longer perform, when I was younger I played in a variety of ensembles. One of those groups was a student string quartet and I vividly remember us playing the Ravel. I was deeply moved by that experience, of inhabiting Ravel's world from the inside. In part because of that early influence, the string quartet occupies a special place in my creative thought.

What are the particular difficulties of writing for just four players?

Part of the joy as well as the challenge of writing for a string quartet is the focused intimacy and the exposed nature of the medium. With four players, there is no place to hide. One creates a kind of concentrated abstract play, where the language of music



provides the dialogue, interaction and emotion of the four participants.

You have written five quartets, do you feel that you have more to say in the genre?

There is always more to say - I'm sure there is at least a No 6 in my future. The first five were composed over a period of about 25 years, and each has emerged between three and five years after the previous one. No 5 was composed in 2006, so the next one may come knocking any day now. And of course I am always open to requests!



Banff-winning quartet record middle-period Beethoven

Making a determined and largely successful effort to recapture the sweep and vision of Beethoven's original inspiration, the Miró Quartet, based in Austin, Texas, sweep many of the most likely cobwebs off the 'middle-period' quartets with readings that pulse with dramatic energy. Working from the 2008 Bärenreiter edition, the Miró use exhilarating speeds, spare textures and virtuoso playing, leavened in the slow movements by a gentle lyricism, to make sure that the music's impact comes through loud and clear. While this occasionally brusque approach has been more usual with many quartets in Op 59 No 3, it is often startling to

hear how it increases the surface tension in No 2. First and foremost, it smooths out the awkward transitional passages so that the momentum can continue unabated, as in the last movement's delirious whirlwind.

If things are not so revolutionary in No 1 – in fact, the *thème russe* of the last movement seems positively tame at times – it is compensated for by an *Adagio molto e mesto* slow movement which is, for once, effectively *molto* and which benefits impressively from the quartet's ability to maintain line and structure. Viola player John Largess's excellent booklet-notes signal the Miró Quartet's intention 'to present the ideal performance as Beethoven would have imagined it in his inner ear', which is of course every quartet's intention, although rarely realised with as much conviction and actual

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