
Catalan Quartets
METIER
Kreutzer Quartet

The music world is obsessed with canons, be they in the choice of repertoire, or the choice of the places from which that repertoire is expected to come. Experience teaches that there is a tendency for artists to drift towards larger urban centres, which, in their turn, have been nodal points of empire or financial power. From this has arisen the perception that the highest standards are to be found in those places. On the larger scale, this might be true; the richest city might be able to buy itself the players and facilities to make the best orchestras, the best opera company, theatres and so on. But as you scale down the means involved in any form of artistic expression, this model becomes harder to sustain or justify. Composers do not need large amounts of money in order to compose; penury, in fact has often been seen as the engine of great composition! So it is clearly fallacious to simply look to the large centres for uniqueness or quality.

In recent years, the rediscovery of extraordinary and unique compositional schools ranging from the Baltic republics to Korea, to name just two, has provided a vivid exemplar of this, and has also flagged up an important topic of debate. The question is, whether or not the performance styles and schools that have evolved in order to execute the pre-diversified canon are ready to dialogue with the products of more independent schools. This might almost be seen as a performance practice question; at the very least, it is one where the experience of the authenticity debate can only be instructive. In that field, radical voices such as Reinhard Goebl have long argued that specialisation is the only way of understanding the delicate relationship between particular composers and the ideal performance methods for their interpretation.

In recent years, the problem with individual schools of composition and appropriate performance has been heightened by the ever-increasing rationalisation of what were once highly distinctive regional schools of performance. The very globalisation that has opened performers' eyes to the extraordinary richesse of repertoire that this offers them, has also fuelled a decline in experimentation and individuality in performance and pedagogy, as players come under ever more pressure to conform to an international mean. This means that for the exploratory contemporary performer, it is not uncommon to find whole schools of composition where it is very difficult to establish a relationship with a performance aesthetic. Often the smaller compositional schools are relying on scattered international performers to maintain the live experience of their works.

This makes the process of engaging with a very particular and individual genre a great challenge for the performer. With an aesthetic as particular as the late twentieth century Catalan one, it is a very interesting task, which is helped by the strong sense of a shared musical and rhetorical language. This can be seen as a post Gerhard-ian one, but is probably more to do with the long shadow cast by the extraordinary music of Joaqin Homs.

Despite the pioneering work of groups such as the Parenin Quartet, these works are also outside the perceived canon, so performers are often at a 'ground-zero' level of initial engagement with this stylistically very assertive genre.

This question is further fuelled by the Catalan determination to engage with the established canon. The extraordinary Soler 'commentary' on the 'Heiliger Dankgesang...' is a prime example of this. Simply labelling it 'post-modern', or seeing it in the context of 'collage-critiques' of the late Beethoven, such as the Schnittke Quartets, does not provide a satisfactory performance or listening aesthetic for this troubling work. Tippett's Quartet No.4 and Rochberg's No.3 can also be seen as readings of these works. However, both of these masterpieces side step the contextual problem, by providing compositional frames for their central dialogues with Beethoven. Tippett does it by placing his Beethoven movement at the climax-release moment of his quartet. Rochberg sees Beethoven through a number of carefully placed filters and frames, ranging from Mahler and Bartok to birdsong, introducing his enormous 'Beethoven-movement' by stealth.

Soler does none of these things, presenting the Beethoven without prelude, and immediately violating it. I use this word advisedly; the music is in no way in itself violatory, but the initial effect on the listener is disturbing. This 'turbulence' is as nothing compared to the disorientation of the player. Soler knows this very well, and toys with the performers' longing to fall into the known patterns and harmonies. One could see this as a Kurtag-esque technique, of implying and denying the unheard, playing on the expectation of all the integers involved in live performance, even exploring the resentments and wish-fulfillment that is built into the process.

This enormous slow movement is an interesting user's guide to one aspect that seems to be held in common between all three composers presented on this disc. There is a very particular tension at work here between rhythmic and spatial time common to all of these composers. The gestural way that they all seem to experience the passage of time results in a curious paradox; that the faster the musical material is being explored or articulated, the slower the architectural time seems to pass.

Naturally, their individual means of dealing with this varies considerably, from Sarda's subtle exploration of an Eisenstein-esque sense of 'overtone', drawing parallels between pitch and rhythm, to Roger's post-minimalist articulatory architecture.

Technically, all of these factors flag up some paradoxes for performance. Whilst the choices of sound production in constructionally similar works, such as the second Ligeti Quartet, seem relatively clear, aided, sans doute, by the composer's precision of demands, there is no such clarity here. All the composers have chosen to blur the borders between

melodic and painterly use of line (listen to the opening of the Soler to hear this writ large). To a degree, their sound worlds might be said to exist in the gap between effect and melody. This is a very long way from composers who also use both concepts of line, such as Henze. The slow movement of Henze's fourth quartet, which has much in common with the Soler works recorded here, puts a clear dividing line between the two aethestics. In fact the definition of Henze's 'Klangfarben-Aesthetik', might be said to be this polarisation. The Catalan blurring of this divide, accessing a non-intervallic use of melody, in favour of a spatial one, might be said to be another expression of the space-time, rhythmic-time paradox mentioned above.

In a recent round table discussion held at the Royal Academy of Music, members of the Arditti, Kreutzer and Alberni quartets discussed issues concerning contemporary attitudes in string quartet performance. It quickly became apparent that there has been a sea-change in the notion of what a quartet was and is, from the performers' points of view. Peter Pople, the distinguished second violinist of the Alberni quartet, spoke eloquently of the notion that a quartet had a sound that was accessed when his quartet played the works from the traditional canon on which they have built their considerable reputation. The players were searching for this sound, through the use of the repertoire that they chose to play, and the act of interpretation could be said to be the interraction between this absolute and the score. This was placed in sharp relief by the approach of the Arditti and Kreutzer players, who spoke of a different aesthetic; recreating the ensemble to enable the performance of each work. The composers represented on the panel also expressed a similar breadth of approach, from John Casken's specific notion of writing a quartet to express what a great quartet such as the the Lindsays 'do', to Michael Finnissy, who simply spoke of the excitement of not considering the quartet as an absolute, but as four instrumentalists, four voices, who happen to be playing in the same space.

The Catalan composers recorded on this disc seem to be exploring an exciting border zone between these two approaches; requiring the performers to play simultaneously within the traditional notion of the quartet sound, and then confronting them with material which demands that they remake themselves outside the chamber-music aesthetic, introducing traditional tonal or chromatic elements and then sabotaging them. This is music of denied expectation, of rhythmic and colouristic paradox, of broken frames. It would be disingenuous to speak of there being a post-modern aesthetic at work here, because the means used seem far less defined than such nomenclature would imply. But it is surely not inappropriate that such a language would be bubbling out of the intellectual and artistic cauldron that is the contemporary Catalunya.

Peter Sheppard Skaerved, May 2000

The four quartets recorded here occupy an important but unrecognized place in the history of the string quartet in the twentieth century. They offer a picture of a tradition of quartet writing that stands slightly apart from the main European strands - a consequence in part of geography and politics, but more importantly of aesthetic outlook. Sardà and Roger were both students of Soler (whose first quartet was written in 1955) and it is immediately obvious that it is not only compositional technique that was inherited, but also something of the actual expressive quality of the music. There are striking similarities between the two pieces from the 1970s here in both the intervallic foci of the series and the distribution of the parts - the opening of Sardà's quartet could almost come from Soler's 1974 piece. However, perhaps the most important influence on this music is to be found in the work of the older Catalan composer Roberto Gerhard - an influence that is not overtly acknowledged by any of the younger composers. It is through Gerhard and Schoenberg that we can best understand the tradition here.

Gerhard left Spain in 1939 after the end of the Civil War, eventually spending the majority of his working life in Britain. Until that time he had been closely associated with the Republicans and with early Catalan music. During the 1920s he had studied with Schoenberg for a period of five years and this was to prove the most important phase in his formation as a composer. Like Gerhard, Soler and Sardà were also drawn to study for periods outside Spain: Sardà attended the Darmstadt course in 1972 and Soler studied with Leibowitz in Paris for a period in 1960. Although we could possibly identify some 'nationalistic' features in the quartets, the biographic material on Soler forwarded to me by his pupils refers to the mature music as being characterized by a 'tendency towards expressionistic free atonality and by systematic use of the Tristan chord'. When coupled to the explicitly Austro-German heritage of the last of Soler's quartets, which begins with a quotation from Beethoven's op. 132, it is clear that this music seeks to find a resonance outside Catalonia and draws at a fundamental level on non-regional sources. An indirect Schoenberg connection binds the quartets recorded here together as much as any teacher-pupil relationship and offers the key to their real significance. Whereas the influential quartet composers in most of Europe were looking away from Schoenberg for models, it seems to me that the composers here continued to find their own ways of developing Schoenbergian writing. These quartets might be said to be successors to Schoenberg's in something of the same way that Debussy's music can be seen as a successor to Wagner's.

Despite their assured place in the musical canon Schoenberg's last two quartets (nos. 3 - 1927 - and 4 - 1936) did not engender obvious successors or imitators. This was not true of the music of some of his contemporaries. Berg's Lyric Suite (1927) and Bartok's later

quartets enjoyed immediate success and spawned several generations of responses - including both of Ligeti's astonishing quartets. There are, of course, some obvious reasons why Schoenberg's music might have proved more difficult, but perhaps the most important underlying cause has been largely ignored. The impression that the Schoenberg quartets give of a less palpable expressivity is not necessarily a function of the material itself, but of the way in which it is 'performed'. Whereas Berg and Bartok have explicitly written virtuoso music that stands at the head of what is now a long tradition of virtuoso writing for the quartet in the twentieth century, Schoenberg's music is of a completely different stamp.

Schoenberg's virtuosity is internal rather than external. On paper the music looks as if it would be easier to perform than Berg's or Bartok's quartets. However, in practice Schoenberg's music is much more difficult because of the sheer complexity of the relationships between voices - something that has sadly been seriously threatened by the late twentieth-century performance obsession with 'vertical' alignment of individual beats. Much of this 'rhythmic' aspect of Schoenberg's music (as well as serial compositional technique) is in evidence in the music recorded here. There are some striking differences too, and we are very much aware of Roberto Gerhard's significance in establishing a link between a distinctive Catalan music and Schoenberg. Gerhard's preoccupation with exploring the possibilities of colouristic dimensions of serial structures has become the rule in this music, and we also find an almost minimalist focus on mobile-like formations (a feature of Gerhard's Second Quartet) - especially in Miquel Roger's quartet. However, these relatively obvious comparisons represent only the superficial aspect of the Schoenberg-Gerhard connection. Like Schoenberg and Gerhard, the composers here are interested in the internal dynamic of the music almost more then its outward appearance, and to a large extent the impression of seriousness of purpose that characterizes all of this music - even its extreme gestures - is a function of this prioritization.

Soler's 1995 quartet might appear out of place here because of the stylistic contrast with the other pieces, but it represents the most acute version of this prioritization. The obvious abandonment of serial techniques for an apparently simple diatonically-rooted counterpoint hides this similarity of purpose. Soler is making extreme demands on both players and audience for an 'inner' listening, eschewing large-scale contrast and overt virtuosity in favour of a progressive exploration of the possibilities of the material. Nothing could be further from minimalism, for this is an extension of the Schoenbergian ideal: an exploration of the 'idea' itself. Like all of the other pieces here it is in one movement, but while the others subsume different types of activity within their uninterrupted unfoldings, this quartet focusses exclusively on the material of the opening. As a whole it could be seen as a series of variations, in keeping with the movement from Beethoven's op.132. The sort of

linear development found in Beethoven's movement, however, is avoided, and, perhaps more importantly, there is nothing of Beethoven's contrasting episodes. The motivic and character transformations typical of the other music on the disc are still here but in the service of revealing more about the underlying material rather than creating a sense of progression. This is the living representation of tradition.

Josep Soler (b. 1935)
Albert Sardà (b. 1943)
Miquel Roger (b. 1954)

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Catalan works for string quartet

Kreutzer Quartet

Peter Sheppard Skærved, Gordon MacKay
Bridget Carey, Neil Heyde

1	**Josep Soler** Quartet No.1 (1974)	**23:09**
2	**Miquel Roger** Quartet No.2 (1994)	**13:28**
3	**Albert Sarda** Quartet (1978)	**16:30**
4	**Josep Soler** Quartet No.5 (1995)	**26:10**

Total 79:15

Publishers: Southern Music Publishing Co. Inc. (tracks 1 & 3), Miquel Roger (track 2) and Josep Soler (track 4)

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This recording was made in the church of St John's, Loughton on 26, 27 & 28 August 1998.
Balance Engineer / Producer / Digital Editing / Booklet Design and Layout: David Lefeber
Cover image: Eso-Fabrika, Sarajevo

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MSV CD92026