



The audio quality is more than satisfactory, particularly considering that this was a live recording, with body microphones for the singers. Noise from the stage or audience is minimal, and never loud enough to disturb. The most obvious reminder that the CD originated in performances is the extended applause at the work's conclusion, which seems unnecessarily self-gratifying. Otherwise, the only lapse I noticed was a slight flagging of energy in the *tonnerre* at the end of Act 5. For my taste there is a little too much reverberation in the mix, and this tends to muddy the clarity of the singers' diction; meanwhile, the viola da gamba used as the sustained continuo instrument is under-represented.

Readers may be interested in the company's website, <[www.pinchgutopera.com.au](http://www.pinchgutopera.com.au)>, which offers some audio and video excerpts from the production, including the ingenious stage design featuring a geodesic dome alluding to the opera's celestial theme.

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JOHANN NEPOMUK HUMMEL (1778–1837), FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

PIANO QUINTETS

The Music Collection / Susan Alexander-Max

Chandos CHAN 0800, 2014; one disc, 65 minutes

The recent revival of interest in the music of Johann Nepomuk Hummel, evident in the range of recordings of his piano concertos, piano sonatas, chamber music and operas produced since the early 1990s, has been counterpointed by an equally vigorous scholarly fascination with the composer, especially given the correspondences between his compositional style and that of Franz Schubert. To this end, musicologists have begun to examine the ways in which Schubert was influenced by the older composer, sometimes drawing upon Hummel's works as models for his own – a welcome development, one which confronts the time-worn practice of employing Beethoven's instrumental music as a benchmark against which to judge Schubert's contributions.

While this disc's pairing of Hummel's E flat minor Quintet, Op. 87, and Schubert's A major Quintet, the 'Trout', D667, is not novel – the pieces have been recorded side-by-side by three individual ensembles – it none the less contributes to this emerging picture of artistic affinity. No direct relationship exists between the quintets: as Susan Alexander-Max's liner notes rightly clarify, it was Hummel's Op. 74 quintet (published in 1816), and not Op. 87, which acted as a model for Schubert's 'Trout'; Schubert's acquaintance Albert Stadler recalled that

[Schubert] wrote [D667] at the special request of my friend, Sylvester Paumgartner, who was absolutely delighted with the delicious little song. At his wish the Quintet had to preserve the structure and instrumentation of the Hummel Quintet, *recte Septour*, which at that time was still new. (Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: Memoirs by His Friends*, trans. Rosamund Ley and John Nowell (London: Black, 1958), 148)

Indeed, given that Op. 87 was published in 1822, three years after the most likely date of composition of D667, it would be difficult for Hummel's quintet to have held any direct influence over Schubert's. None the less, these two works reveal a stylistic kinship, and their shared instrumentation (for fortepiano, violin, viola, cello and double bass) is an obvious point of contact, making this an apt and delightful coupling. Alexander-Max is overly generous to Hummel when she suggests that it was he 'who first employed the innovative instrumentation' and made 'use of the double-bass in a way that had not been heard before' (liner



notes, 12): Hummel's Opp. 74 and 87 were preceded by Jan Ladislav Dussek's Quintet in F minor, Op. 41, of 1799 (published 1803), and were broadly contemporaneous with Ferdinand Ries's Quintet in B minor, Op. 74 (published 1817), both of which are similarly scored. Indeed, the two quintets on this disc form part of a lineage of works for similar instrumentation which continues to be unjustly neglected: later examples are Johann Baptist Cramer's Op. 69 in E major (published 1825) and Op. 79 of 1832, as well as Franz Limmer's Quintet in D minor, Op. 13 (published 1835).

A distinction of this Chandos recording is the use of an 1814 Viennese fortepiano by Johann Fritz from Finchcocks Musical Museum in Kent, where the recording was made. While performances of Schubert's music on early pianos are not rare (recall Malcom Bilson, Seth Carlin, Joshua Rifkin, Jorg Demus and Paul Badura-Skoda), the same is not true of Hummel, a notable exception being Alexander-Max's recording of a selection of piano sonatas (Op. 13 No. 3, Op. 20 and Op. 107 No. 3) for Chandos (CHAN 0765, 2009; reviewed by Jeremy Eskenazi in *Eighteenth-Century Music* 8/1 (2011), 143–144). Indeed, there are just two earlier recordings of Hummel's Op. 87 featuring fortepiano, the first from Alexander-Max with a different configuration of The Music Collection (ASV CDGAU210, 2000), and the second from the Nepomuk Fortepiano Quintet (Brilliant Classics 93203, 2007); I shall return to these presently for comparative purposes.

Hummel's Op. 87 is a magnificent work, full of lyricism and passion, and quite deserving of its place alongside the perennial favourite that is Schubert's 'Trout'. Indeed, upon its publication in October 1822 Hummel's work was favourably reviewed – with analytical illustrations – in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, and in 1857 Karl Friedrich Zelter hailed it as 'a masterpiece. It should not be forgotten!' (Zelter, 'Joh. Nepomuk Hummel', in *Die Componisten der neueren Zeit*, ed. W. Neumann (Cassel: Ernst Balde, 1857), 95). The relative obscurity into which it fell thereafter is more likely a symptom of historical circumstance (namely, the emergence of Chopin and Liszt) than a reflection of the work's innate worth, which is everywhere in evidence in The Music Collection's stellar performance.

The vibrant first movement, skilfully (if rather slowly) realized by the ensemble, is full of rhythmic vitality. It opens with a four-note motive that permeates much of what follows, in a diversity of instrumental and harmonic contexts; one is immediately reminded of the opening motive of Schubert's early String Quartet in B flat major D36/1 (1813). The movement's adventurous tonal language and three-key exposition suggest even more Schubertian parallels. Beginning in E flat minor, the first thematic group arrives on a prolonged chord of C sharp (bars 46–58), setting up F sharp as the key of the next group, which instead enters with a lyrical second theme in A major (bar 62; 1'28'') and establishes F sharp major (the tonic's relative major, enharmonically spelled) only later, in a turbulent passage (bar 96, 2'12'') that closes the exposition. The ensemble's perceptive sense of phrasing and cadence triumph here, and the clear tone of the fortepiano delights, even if it sounds slightly tinny in the upper register (2'29''–2'34''). The exposition's second theme, and particularly the reincarnation of the passage from bar 78 in the recapitulation (8'38''–9'07''), offers moments of exquisite lyricism worthy of any Schubertian *Gesangsthema*, and Alexander-Max's graceful playing invites us to linger (a little too much in the recapitulation, where the dotted rhythm in bars 270 and 271 is regularized to a more cantabile version). At these moments, the intensity and warmth of the strings' tone is contrasted effectively, and expressively, with the fortepiano's brightness (Elizabeth Bradley's double-bass pizzicato doubling of the fortepiano's left hand at 8'48'' is particularly enjoyable).

The second-movement Scherzo (entitled 'Menuetto') is played with obvious enthusiasm and verve, and the alteration of the dynamics to *piano* for the repeat of the opening section (4'29''–4'55'') introduces a welcome variation. The Trio is not so assured, and tends to drag as a result, but the ensemble's more relaxed tempo in the Largo third movement is, conversely, perfectly intuitive. It is here, in what is effectively a structural upbeat to the finale (eleven of its twenty-nine bars are dominant preparation, and the final cadence is elided with the opening of the Rondo), that the fortepiano shines, and the elegance and subtle poignancy of Alexander-Max's playing are most in evidence. Unlike the Nepomuk Quintet's Riko Fukuda, Alexander-Max refrains from decorating the melody with flourishes and arpeggiated



chords, but allows the simple beauty of the line to emanate from her instrument; it is in this creation of a rich tone colour that the choice of the fortepiano, heard against sustained strings, really pays dividends.

The theme of the fourth-movement Rondo is lively and playful, and the ensemble takes obvious delight in its dramatic passages (0'59''–1'50''). The balance of the parts, occasionally dubious earlier on, is much improved here, especially in the middle *cantabile e dolce* section with the duet between viola and violin (2'47''–3'51''). Although the ensemble recoils in places (4'24''–4'47''), the flames of the *con fuoco* eventually blaze, and the listener revels in a powerful finish to this polished performance.

The Music Collection's playing of Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet is authoritative and expressive in equal measure. In this work Schubert transforms the fortepiano into a melodic instrument via the use of octaves – particularly in the ensemble sections, where it frequently plays at a high register. This creates a wonderful balance across the instruments, and allows the melody to sing. The main theme of the first movement in the violin (0'46''–1'05''), and subsequently in the fortepiano, is a good example, although one cannot help desiring more volume from the keyboard instrument in certain passages (bars 51–64, 1'28''–1'47''). Again, the tempo chosen for the opening movement is perhaps overly cautious; its duration of 13'45'' exceeds both the Nepomuk's 13'18'' (Brilliant Classics 93771, 2008), and the Vanguard Classics recording with Alexander Schneider, Peter Serkin and others, at 13'02'' (ATMCD1197, 2004). This sluggishness makes itself felt in the beginning of the development section (8'28''–9'21''), but the dynamic extremes that mark the end of the exposition (bars 115–146, 3'15''–4'14'') are better executed here than in comparable passages of the Hummel, and inject energy into the performance.

Schubert's second movement is in the style of a nocturne, with an impressive array of harmonic twists in the opening dialogue between fortepiano and violin, which is beautifully accomplished by Alexander-Max and Simon Standage. The serenity of this opening group gives way to a dramatic modulating passage (taken rather guardedly by the ensemble) and turns to a lyrical second theme, a duet between viola and cello, which is evocatively rendered by Peter Collyer and Poppy Walshaw (4'49''–5'30''). The buoyancy of Schubert's third-movement Scherzo is palpable in the strings' opening bars: here The Music Collection does not hold back, and the Trio offers a fine example of the fortepiano acting as a melodic instrument, while the strings present the harmonic grounding.

The fourth movement, the set of variations on Schubert's 1817 lied 'Die Forelle', is the heart of the work, and here the ensemble truly comes to life. This movement elicits many fine moments from the players: the stately announcement of the theme by Standage's violin, the vivacious octaves of the fortepiano in the first variation, the robust ensemble playing of the third variation, the sheer intensity of the fourth, in the first section of which the ensemble courageously lets go to brilliant effect, and the balanced and rich tone colour heard in the second part of Variation 5. On occasion, such as in Variation 2, accompanimental figurations overpower the melody in the middle strings, making it difficult to decipher. The Allegretto final section is playful, with no loss of energy; again, its tempo is slightly slower than one might expect, but this allows for momentum to be maintained to the end (this is the only movement on this disc in which the ensemble elects not to play the exposition repeat – a judicious decision, given that the recapitulation begins directly after the exposition, on the subdominant).

The strength with which this movement is brought to closure, and the ensemble's dramatic juxtaposition of *fortissimo* and *piano* passages, makes one wonder if the failure to do so in the Hummel was a consequence of maintaining a respectful distance from a less familiar work. Indeed, the slow tempos taken in Hummel's Op. 87 render it rather lacklustre in comparison to The Music Collection's earlier recording of the work, which displayed a livelier first movement, lasting 9'49'' in contrast to this recording's 11'06''. Consequently, although the playing is studied and attentive on this Chandos release, it is the earlier recording that is the more enjoyable for this reviewer.

Ultimately, notwithstanding the occasionally brittle sound quality, these are distinguished and affectionate renderings of two masterpieces of the early nineteenth century – compellingly performed, with a myriad of inspired moments. One hopes that The Music Collection will turn its energy towards reintroducing other



unduly neglected works for this distinctive instrumentation into the performance canon, treating us to more of the ensemble's remarkable playing, and with renewed verve, ere long.

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