

and sustained their playing is at 2'12", an extraordinary passage whose harmonic shifts seem to presage Schubert at his most lyrically eloquent and visionary. Then, in the warmth of the *Adagio cantabile*, listen to how Weithaas makes the most of the weird, wild birdcalls (at 4'40").

Indeed, it's the duo's ability to characterise so imaginatively that makes these interpretations especially satisfying. I've never heard the trills in the first movement of the G major Sonata, Op 30 No 2, sound as insidious as they do here, for instance – try at the beginning of the development section (from 3'55"). And they're unusually free with the tempo of the second-movement *Tempo di minuetto*, injecting an element of fantasy into this otherwise *galant* music. Similarly, although they play the opening *Allegro con spirito* of Op 12 No 3 with unflinching elegance (and a steady tempo), there's something distinctly rhapsodic in the way they handle the music's various virtuosic roudades.

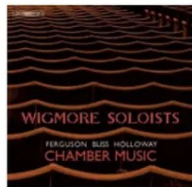
Rest assured that no attempt is made to prettify these works – those giant *fortissimo* chords in the first movement of the C minor Sonata have an appropriate crunch, for example – although what stands out most for me on this disc is the unstudied refinement of their playing as well as their appreciation of the music's subtleties. How joyful and light on its feet their reading of the finale of the G major Sonata is, say, even in the coda, where the harmonic and motivic high jinks are handled with taste as well as wit. If the subsequent volumes are as polished and freshly insightful as this, Weithaas and Várjon's cycle will be one to reckon with. **Andrew Farach-Colton**

Bliss • Ferguson • Holloway

Bliss Clarinet Quintet Ferguson Octet, Op 4
Holloway Serenade in C, Op 41

Wigmore Soloists

BIS (BIS2547) • 74'



The larger chamber combinations of wind and strings – one thinks of Beethoven's Septet, Schubert's Octet and the nonets of Onslow, Spohr and Stanford – are a relative rarity. This CD is therefore especially welcome in its exploration of two seldom-performed octets by Howard Ferguson and Robin Holloway.

Less than 20 minutes in length, Ferguson's Octet, Op 4, one of his first works to attract critical attention, dates from 1933 and was dedicated to his counterpoint teacher, RO Morris.

Very much a post-Romantic work in character and gesture, this impressive piece is full of agile filigree and rich, imaginative scoring (sometimes almost orchestral in timbre), its deep-seated, haunting nostalgia rooted in an attractive harmonic idiom, brimful of lyrical melody. Though there is something of the English pastoral tradition in its pages, not least engendered by the recurrence of the yearning motto-theme – one thinks especially of the first movement and the deeply felt *Andantino* third movement – there are hints of a more acerbic neoclassicism in the Scherzo and the dash of the finale, though the underlying Romantic spirit returns in the poignant cyclic memories of the latter's evocative coda.

As a pupil of Robin Holloway at Cambridge in 1979 and 1980, I can distantly remember how he was preoccupied by the composition of the Serenade in C, Op 41, and the bigger Second Concerto for Orchestra, Op 40, though I was unaware of the 'emergency' deadline to finish the Serenade for a Nash Ensemble commission. First recorded by them 25 years ago (Hyperion, 9/98), this appealing, quirky group of five movements (which deserves to be much better known) defers to the 18th-century 'divertissement' tradition, though Holloway also admitted to the influential model of Schubert's Octet; I also detect shades of Brahms's two early Serenades, especially the five-movement Op 16 for wind and lower strings, though this only forms a fraction of the helter-skelter assortment of styles, lovingly executed parodies and quotations (ranging from Poulenc to, to quote Holloway himself, 'light-music clichés', 'Biedermeier Vienna' and 'Southend Pier') that makes up the work's idiosyncratic stylistic amalgam. This is manifested in the eccentric 'Marcia' (with its array of fleeting references to other music – I particularly enjoyed the allusion to the famous horn solo from Brahms's First Symphony), the sprightly tarantellas of the first minuet and finale (with its crisp spiccato bowing) and the central set of tonally modulating variations based, bizarrely, on a Methodist hymn tune. The nimbleness of Holloway's score is perceptibly interpreted with a mixture of virtuoso litheness and humorous dynamism by the Wigmore Soloists with a clarity much enhanced by the generous, forward sound of the recording.

Bliss's Clarinet Quintet, written a year before Ferguson's Octet, is probably the best-known work on this recording, and is surely one of the finest 20th-century successors to those supreme paradigms of Mozart and Brahms. The euphonious

nature of the first movement, no doubt inspired by the pioneering bravura of Frederick Thurston, shows off Michael Collins's supreme singing tone, as does the rhapsodic *Adagietto*, in which the composer's unabashed Romantic credentials come to the fore. But Bliss, as we know from the brilliant instrumentation of his orchestral music, is just as much at home in a faster dramatic mood, and this is certainly true of the élan of the splendid Scherzo (a movement which rivals that of his masterpiece, *A Colour Symphony*) and the technical panache of the last movement. For anyone interested in British 20th-century chamber music, this recording will bring abundant rewards.

Jeremy Dibble

Boccherini

String Quintets – in F minor, Op 42 No 1 G348;
in B minor, Op 42 No 3, G350; in G minor,
Op 42 No 4 G351; in C major, Op 46 No 3 G361

Karski Quartet with Raphaël Feye VC

Evil Penguin (EPRCO057 • 64')



The Karski Quartet, founded in Belgium in 2018, take their name from Jan Karski,

a Second World War resistance fighter, whom they cite as a role model that every era needs, to quote from their mission statement. Relevant or not, it cannot be doubted that in making their recording debut with these four string quintets by Boccherini, they have made a bold start by promoting a composer who for far too long has been in the shadows of Haydn and Beethoven, who flanked his career, while another, Mozart, as whom he was almost as prolific, lived contemporaneously. On this showing, the Karski dispel that epithet of a contemporary who dubbed him 'la mère Haydn', a tag perpetuated by *that* Minuet being heard behind net curtains in the drawing room of the respectable Mrs Wilberforce in *The Ladykillers*.

Of the four quintets recorded here, only the G minor, G351, has received much attention. G361 in C is a premiere recording and the others are scarcely well known. The Quintet in F minor, G348, which opens this album, offers a bird's-eye view of the composer as well as the style of the Karski, in which the players take it in turns to share different parts. Natalia Kotarba leads the F minor, her Classical bow guiding and enlightening her and their every turn of phrase, digging below the Mediterranean melancholy, and acknowledging in their graceful playing

of the little courtly dance in the opening movement (at 1'15") the many years that Boccherini spent as a court musician in Spain. Her lovely playing adorns the *Adagio cantabile*, close in temperament to a sarabande, the *con moto* marking duly observed, while the Karski bring a light touch to the graceful Trio within the Minuet, with its characteristic major-minor modulations. In the finale the players relish the rough and tumble of the rustic dance episodes as the music moves from indoor decorum to outdoor playfulness.

Diede Verpoest leads the two-movement Quintettino in B minor, G350, the playing once more tapping underneath the surface melancholy. The dancelike Trio, with its imitation of hunting horns and pizzicato accompaniment, is deftly handled.

In the challenging outer movements of G351 the Karski come up trumps in the rhythmically and polyphonically complex first movement and go on to offer a no-holds-barred performance of the last movement, a compact sonata-form structure, not far removed in mood from Haydn's *Sturm und Drang* works. With a tangible bloom to the recorded sound, this quartet and their indefatigable cello partner Raphaël Feye are musicians to watch. It was another cellist, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia – to whom Boccherini was chamber composer – who marked his score of this quintet 'bene', an attribute one might apply to the whole recording. **Adrian Edwards**

Handel

'Handel at Home, Vol 2 – Total Eclipse'

Sonata a 5, HWV288 and chamber arrangements of instrumental and vocal music from *The Choice of Hercules*, *Giulio Cesare* in *Egitto*, *Radamisto*, *Rinaldo* and *Samson*
London Handel Players
 Somm (SOMMCD0676 • 76')



It's one thing to say that you're recording a programme of music fit for an 18th-century

evening's domestic music-making. It's another for the finished result to actually sound like one. Yet this beautifully polished second volume of 'Handel at Home' from the London Handel Players has achieved exactly that, thanks to a tranquilly close-knit chamber dynamic that has them sounding like eight peas in a pod, and to the acoustic of St John the Baptist Church in Loughton having been captured as a subtle, natural warmth rather than as a churchily sonorous presence. Essentially,

it's not hard to picture eight musically accomplished Hanoverian-era friends gathering in some high-ceilinged townhouse to recreate the Handel music they've most enjoyed at the theatre.

Such musicians had plenty of chamber arrangements to choose from, too. Savvy London publisher John Walsh was lightning-quick at bringing out his own amateur-friendly chamber versions of whatever London's opera audiences were newly humming on the streets. Harpsichordists meanwhile had William Babel's 1717 set of Handel aria arrangements, *Suits of the Most Celebrated Lessons*. Handel himself also produced a number of more skilfully crafted options.

Back to the London Handel Players, and their programme is a mix of 18th-century and self-penned settings. One successful amalgamation is harpsichordist Silas Wollston's version of the much-loved 'Lascia ch'io pianga', which begins as a direct transcription of Handel's original before gradually incorporating Babel's harmonic liberties and ornamental flash. For *Samson*, they've turned initially to John Walsh's unlikely but surprisingly satisfying arrangement for solo flute and continuo, its Overture still sounding suitably theatrical thanks to flautist Rachel Brown's punchy *sforzandos*. Then for the two arias, the original strings have been reinstated, allowing 'Total eclipse' to retain its original unison-strings bleakness, and 'Thus when the sun' to follow on with show-stopping sudden bright radiance.

Other joys? The utter closeness of the duetting between Brown and violinist Adrian Butterfield in *Giulio Cesare's* 'Se pietà'; the brightly fluid, rich-toned rhythmic buoyancy in the outer movements of the Corelli-breathed Sonata a 5, the closest Handel got to a violin concerto; and the emotively vocal quality that Wollston's slight whisper of rubato has reinjected into the circling lines of Handel's own harpsichord arrangement of 'Ombra cara'. All in all, an end-to-end pleasure.

Charlotte Gardner

Haydn

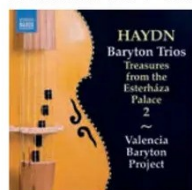
'Treasures from the Esterháza Palace, Vol 2'

Baryton Trios, HobXI - No 6; No 35;

No 67; No 71; No 93; No 113

Valencia Baryton Project

Naxos (8 574504 • 63')



Haydn's output for the baryton is one of those facets of his artistry that is more

known about than it is known and appreciated. It's not a stranger to recordings: a complete cycle appeared in Brilliant Classics' 160-disc 'Haydn Edition' – but how many purchasers can honestly say their hands didn't linger over the 20 discs of baryton music before reaching for the more reliably indelible outpourings of his genius among, say, the sonatas, quartets or Masses?

Genius is not too strong a word. For a decade from the mid-1760s Haydn wrote at least 126 trios for baryton, viola and cello for the edification of his employer, Prince Nicolaus Esterházy, alongside his duties as opera impresario and the composition of works such as the Op 9, 17 and 20 string quartets and any number of symphonies. The degree of variety Haydn achieves in music that must have been composed at breakneck speed is little short of breathtaking.

The baryton is similar to a bass viol with six or seven bowed strings but with the addition of 10 or so metal sympathetic strings under the fingerboard, which not only resonate freely but can be plucked by the left thumb. The artwork for the first volume of this series (8 574188) shows a close-up of the instrument's head, with six tuning pegs on one side and 10 on the other; this volume's cover homes in on the body, showing the standard viol bridge and the points at which the metal strings are attached to the woodwork. The sound is plaintive and viol-like; it can be gruff and a tiny bit raspy in faster passages but a movement such as Trio No 35's opening Pastorella demonstrates its plangent, singing tone in sustained melodies.

Haydn's writing for the baryton reveals the Prince to have been competent but no virtuoso. The dark sonority of three instruments pitched in the alto, tenor and bass ranges nevertheless makes for a curiously engrossing sequence of music. There are bursts of counterpoint, and the Valencia Baryton Project, recorded closely in the airy acoustic of a Spanish castle, provide variety through ornamentation and a range of sonic alterations in repeats (more generously provided than by the Esterházy Ensemble for Brilliant), the *col legno* in the Trio of No 35 being an example. If the prospect of 20 discs' worth of baryton music seems a daunting prospect, then either of these volumes should provide an absorbing hour or so's musical pleasure. And two volumes in, the Valencians have only 114 trios left to explore. Perhaps they'll spell 'Esterháza' correctly on the cover of future instalments.

David Threasher