

Score Review

Sam Girling, ed., *Pierre Rode: Selected String Quartets*, Recent Researches in the Music of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century, vol. 87. Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2023, xxi, 162 pp. \$250.00.

Typically the discourse concerning the history of the string quartet repertoire tends to gravitate towards the well-trodden path of the Classical Austro-German tradition, tracing its evolution from Haydn, through Mozart, and culminating in Beethoven. It is relatively uncommon for the academic community and performers to explore lesser-known repertoire and the nuances of a substantial number of compositions often considered by-products of the acknowledged canon. Sam Girling's endeavour to delve into the less-explored realms of repertoire thus sheds light on several compositions often overshadowed by the canon.

Girling refers to 'French violin performance' (xv) while acknowledging the prominence of the Italian Giovanni Battista Viotti as the forefather of a tradition that certainly developed into a teaching system between the walls of the Parisian Conservatoire but had its roots in Gaetano Pugnani's legacy. The 'broad and energetic style' that characterized the students of the Conservatoire (according to Pougin, see xv) was a well-acknowledged feature of Viotti's playing and that of his teacher Pugnani. Rode's debt to Viotti is also recognized by Nancy November in the Preface to the Series (this volume is part of the 'String Quartet in Beethoven's Europe' series, viii). Here, in the Introduction (ix) and the last section dedicated to performance practice issues (xv), I sense the intention of confronting just two ideal styles or schools, France versus Germany and Austria, and this is particularly evident in the comparison between Viennese and German school versus Parisian production, which tends to exclude other influences (vii). It would be highly beneficial to include further elements that could help to describe a broader and more complex environment: the vast Italian string quartet production is discarded (Viotti is presented as a French composer), and although London is mentioned as one of the European centres in string quartet history (vii–viii), a study of the lively English musical market that provided the European market with so much repertoire and that was vital for the creation of the classical canon and the elevation of Haydn and Beethoven as deities of the musical Parnassus could present relevant features that deserve to be included in the picture. I perceive this dualism as a missed opportunity to provide an updated and broader perspective on the early nineteenth-century continental scene while reinforcing an outdated narrative based on a teleological perspective.

Girling's thoughtful selection of four string quartets by the French violinist Pierre Rode (1774–1830) marks a significant departure from the conventional narrative surrounding the genre. The editor has handpicked four string quartets from Rode's extensive work, comprising 23 extant compositions. The selected quartets provide a chronological journey through Rode's creative output: each one offers a unique perspective on the genre's function and evolution during a pivotal period for the establishment of the string quartet repertoire – spanning from the late eighteenth century to the first two decades of the nineteenth.

Commencing with Op. 11, No. 3, composed in 1798 and published in 1805, Girling invites the reader to witness the genre at the brink of a transformative era. The quartet encapsulates the essence of a musical landscape on the cusp of change, capturing the domestic spirit of the late eighteenth century. This work consists of two movements, just like the Italian string quartets by Pietro Nardini (published in 1782) and the numerous 'Opera Piccola' compositions by Luigi Boccherini. Both movements feature a lyrical first violin part: it could be easy to consider this work one of the *Quatuor Brillant* tradition; but the melodic features and the lack of astonishing violin tricks point us toward Viotti's output. The two movements are Moderato and Andante con Variazioni, in which the accentuation seems to evoke a performance defined by restraint and countenance. It is interesting to analyse the fingering indications suggested by the composer, which imply an abundant use of portamenti with the same fingers (Moderato, bars 5 and 6).

Moving forward, Op. 18, published by Breitkopf und Härtel in 1811 as Quartet No. 4, serves as a beacon for the evolving nature of the string quartet during the early nineteenth century. Girling navigates the nuances of this composition adeptly, shedding light on its distinct features that mirror the shifting tastes of the musical market and the evolution of the performing context from private to public. Even though this quartet was published several years after the establishment of the canonical four-movement structure, it nonetheless still consists of three movements, fast–slow–fast, as in the concerto tradition. Nevertheless, the short Adagio (in G minor) that introduces the first Allegro moderato (in G Major) provides a possible hint of Rode's intention to evoke the atmosphere of an operatic overture. The editor has noted this nuance. The four instruments are finally involved in a dialogue where the first violin acts as a leader but is also willing to listen to the other ensemble members: this is a perfect example of the *Quatuor Concertant* style. Girling stresses the presence of 'solo' indications where the second violin, viola and cello have a prominent part and suggests an ideal connection to the concerto grosso tradition from the early eighteenth century, where 'solo' and 'tutti' determined a variation in texture and the number of performers. These terms still appear in Pugnani's two sets of three string quartets (published in London in the 1760s) and in Boccherini's Op. 2 to suggest an optional multiplication of the number of performers and to mark the measures where only a member of the core group is entitled to play (see the lavish cello part in Boccherini's Op. 2, No. 1, second movement). In Rode's case, the term 'solo' appears where the first violin is not playing or independent thematic material is occurring (as in the first movement, bar 50, second violin part).

Furthermore, there is no contrasting 'tutti'. As Girling states in the final paragraph of the introduction (xvii), in Rode's composition the 'Solo/Soli' indication is to be considered as a warning sign to the performer to be aware that the initiative is finally in her or his hand, and not to wait for the usual lead of the first violin passively. It is indeed a helpful remark if we analyse the differences in the textures of Op. 11, No. 3 (where the three lower instruments are mere accompanists) and Op. 18 (in *concertante* style). By substituting a lyrical Adagio with a slow dance rhythm in the second movement, Rode deviates from the norm: a little *coup de théâtre*. The *Siciliano* is characterized by a playful opening section where the four instruments play 'pizzicato'. In the third and last movement (Allegretto), the dominance of the first violin is re-established, and the lower strings return to their original accompanist roles: it would not be inappropriate to state that only the first movement of this quartet is in true *concertante* style. In bar 58, Rode sets up the space for an improvised cadence for the first violin over a 'tenuto' chord: Girling

suggests an editorial extension of the 'ten'. indication to the first violin, but that would hinder an extemporary intervention of the performer.

The last pieces in the collection are two *Quatuor Brillant* compositions: String Quartet Op. 24, No. 2 and String Quartet in C Major, opus posthumous. The works were dedicated respectively to Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Luigi Cherubini, signalling the author's intent to publicly state his connections within the musical elite of the time. The first violin is the dominant part; both quartets consist of three movements.

In a paragraph related to the issue of performance practice, Girling provides an insightful commentary on the French string quartet production and the violin school that gave birth to this share of the repertoire (xv). Concerning performance practice, I find particularly useful the considerations about dynamics and the use of hairpins (xvii): the careful application of the reading suggested by Girling could undoubtedly be beneficial to the performance of these quartets; and it could be extended by considering hairpins, too, as suggestions for *rubato* in melodic passages, thus operating not only on the dynamic level but also the rhythmic. I suggest reconsidering or clarifying the practice of shifting the bow from the fingerboard to the bridge with the intent to produce a broader sound, which is illustrated by a reference to the definition of 'sul ponticello'. This technique is used mainly by twentieth-century composers to produce a glassy sound, incompatible with a majestic and lyrical rendering required by this repertoire (see xv, n. 42).

Girling's edition provides valuable remarks about using expressive fingering indications (xv). The editor underlines the presence of a significant number of fingering indications in the last two quartets: it is true that these *Quatuor Brillant* are more technically demanding and, therefore, require more specific instructions in comparison with the melodic flowing of the first quartet of the collection, which contains fewer fingering indications. This does not necessarily mean that the composer left more freedom to the amateur performer, but it simply means that the part is more straightforward and, therefore, requires fewer indications.

The decision to preserve the difference between staccato stroke and dot markings is the right one (xvi). We must keep in mind the semiotic filter of the engraver and the publisher's house style when analysing printed sources, but the idea of staccato strokes and dots as 'non-legato' is undebatable: it is the performer's responsibility to decide according to the musical context. It is not uncommon to find a mixture of dots and strokes in parallel passages in string quartet parts; but, in terms of performance practice, it would not be beneficial for the editor to slavishly differentiate the length or the strength of the bowing in such instances, especially when discrepancies occur among the accompanying parts. The same applies to dynamics and the contemporary presence of *forte* and *sforzato* indications, often used interchangeably. This frequently occurs in printed sources; but, as a rule of thumb, the first violin part is the most carefully engraved and can provide the best reading for ambiguous passages. Nevertheless, in the Op. 24, No. 2, bars 102–103, for example, the *fz* in the first violin part (used for a longer and slurred note) is not exactly comparable to the *f* on the staccato short notes in the accompaniment. In this passage, the *fz* could be interpreted as *rinforzato* or *tenuto* towards the end of the slur to the next note, while the accompanying notes must certainly be performed detached. Avoiding heavy editorial intervention regarding articulation markings allows the performer a certain degree of flexibility (xvi).

In sum, Girling's careful selection and insightful commentary provide a fresh perspective on Pierre Rode's quartets and contribute significantly to broadening our understanding of the genre's evolution. This collection captures a musical

journey – tracing the dynamic and mutable nature of musical taste during this transformative period from private and amateur spheres to the burgeoning professional and public landscape.

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