Manuel Canales - String Quartets Op.3 No.1-3 (2000)

String Quartet in D major, Op. 3/1 *1. Allegro Maestoso 2. Minuet. Trio 3. Largo assai 4. Presto* String Quartet in E flat major, Op. 3/2 *5. Allegro Maestoso 6. Allegro Minuet. Minore 7. Adagio 8. Presto*
String Quartet in C minor, Op. 3/3
9. Allegro Maestoso 10. Minuet. Trio 11. Largo 12. Allegro non molto
Cambini Quartett München: Miguel Simarro - violin Eva-Maria Röll - violin Lothar Haas - viola Michael Rupprecht - violoncello

Born in Toledo, Manuel Canales (1747-1786) moved to Madrid around 1770 and entered into the service of the Duke of Alba. A frequent visitor to the court of King Carlos III, he likely associated with his more famous contemporary, Luigi Boccherini, who was also in this flourishing cultural center at the same time. Canales' string quartets show a familiarity with his work, as well as with the early compositions of Haydn.

Originally published in London, these 3 quartets form the first half of Op.3. The only known chamber works of Canales, these compositions follow the usual four movement format, although they place the Minuet as the 2nd movement, instead of the more customary 3rd position.

Written in D Major, the 1st Quartet presents the initial theme of the 'Allegro Maestoso' in the violin, a regal upward spiraling motif. After a vigorous response in the cello, repeated excursions into a minor key set the stage for an intricate fugal passage before the upper voice returns. A rustic 'Minuet' offers the viola ample opportunity to shine, while numerous harmonic shifts lead in and out of minor.

Somber and grave, the 3rd movement 'Largo assai' follows, showcasing the sweet sound of the 1st violin. After a series of triplets in the bass line, repeated staccato notes in unison offer a crisp contrast to the more leisurely pace of the rest of the movement. Sprightly and playful ,the 1st violin bursts forth the final 'Presto'. Energetic fiddling alternates with more restrained passages with all four voices before the joyous conclusion.

Quartet No.2 is composed in E Flat, with the initial 'Allegro Maetoso' featuring more first rate work from the first violinist, Miguel Simarro. Brief dips into a minor key color this 1st movement, while the unexpected syncopated rhythms characterize the triple metered 'Allegro Minuet' that follows. Gently pulsing accompaniment in the lower strings support the soaring lead voice in the 3rd movement 'Adagio'. A poignant dialogue develops between the viola and cello, before the first violin leads the foursome to a reverential conclusion. Extensive use of extended silences and extremely fluid phrasing allow the Cambini Quartet to draw the maximum pathos from the music.

This 3rd movement and the rousing 'Presto' that closes the work may be the high points of the recording. Introduced by the lead violin, the infectious rondo theme frequently slides into minor, briefly darkening the work before exploding back into major, each time with more zip than the last. Full of surprising rhythmic dislocations and unexpected harmonic shafts, this delightful section concludes the 2nd quartet.

In C Minor, the opening 'Allegro Maetoso' of the final quartet offers a spirited interplay between the lower strings with the upper voice often relegated to a mournful counter melody, using a perpetual motion figure initially presented on the violin's lower register before skittering high on the E string. Employing a start and stop rhythm, the swaying triple metered 'Minuet' supplies lots of virtuosic ornamentation from the 1st violin, punctuated by frequent pauses and elastic tempos.

Pizzicato support in the bass line establishes a sparse underpinning for the 3rd movement 'Largo', sounding almost like a harp with the vibrating isolation of the single notes. The 2nd violin and viola exchange sweetly melancholic lines before the section draws to the tranquil ending. A triple metered 'Allegro non molto' follows, a gypsy flavored dance with wild swirling passages that alternate with dramatic unison phrases, which suddenly drop into pianissimo. Abrupt dynamic shifts mark this final movement, a marvelous conclusion to the quartet and to the disc.

The recording by 'La Ma De Guido' is excellent, although the microphones are set very close to the instruments, close enough that fingers sliding along the fingerboards are readily apparent, especially from the 1st violin and the cello. The work from the Cambini Quartet of Munich is terrific, offering an accomplished interpretation of a little known composer of the Classical era. Manuel Canales has never been a household name. Based on the high quality of these 3 string quartets, perhaps he should be. ---bejart7092, amazon.com

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