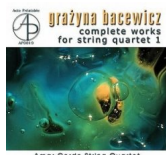


Grazyna Bacewicz – Complete Works for String Quartet Vol. 1 (1999)



String Quartet No. 4

01. Andante, Allegro moderato 8.46

02. Andante 5.34

03. Allegro giocoso 6.08

Piano Quintet No. 1

04. Moderato molto espressivo. Allegro 7.32

05. Presto 4.09

06. Grave 6.52

07. Con passione 5.33

String Quartet No. 7

08. Allegro 5.33

09. Grave 5.50

10. Con vivezza 4.26

Performers:

The Amar Corde String Quartet are:

Barbara Stuhr – 1st violin

Boguslaw Ziegelheim – 2nd violin

Beata Ploska – viola

Agata Zajac – cello

Waldermar Malicki – piano (for the piano quintets)

Although these three discs are available separately, it seems sensible to discuss them together, in order to be able to consider something of the composer's developing use of the quartet form.

Bacewicz's five mature quartets – nos. 3-7 – are amongst the most interesting of quartet sequences from the second half of the twentieth century. Ranging in date from shortly after the Second World War to the mid 1960s they reflect both a striking personal development as a composer and a highly intelligent response to a complex politico-social environment.

The two early quartets are pleasant and redolent with promise. That to which she gave the number 1 was one of two quartets written during the composer's studies at the Warsaw Conservatory, from which she graduated in 1932, and was presented as part of her final composition examination. It was premiered in Paris on 26 April 1939 by The Figueroa Quartet, as part of a programme sponsored by the Paris Society of Young Polish Musicians. Essentially neo-classical in manner, its three movements have energy but relatively little that is very individual. The spiky first movement has some teasing rhythmic effects to recommend it; the final *vivo* begins jauntily but the seemingly simple mood is questioned as the movement develops. These two outer movements frame a well-crafted set of variations on a Lithuanian folksong, 'Zakwitnij białe jabłuszko' – Bacewicz was the daughter of a Lithuanian father and a Polish mother. The variations on 'Zakwitnij białe jabłuszko' are delicate, but not without an edge of menace at moments, the unmannered, confident use of silence being striking in this movement.

During the 1930s Bacewicz travelled, studied and played (as a violinist) extensively. She studied briefly in Paris – composition with Nadia Boulanger, violin with André Tóuaret; she taught at the State Conservatory in Łódź; she returned to Paris for further violin studies with Carl Flesch. After her marriage in 1936, she was Principal Violin with the Polish Radio Orchestra. Life in Warsaw during the War was, unsurprisingly, very difficult, but Bacewicz continued to compose. Amongst the works produced was Quartet no.2, which had its premiere in the artists' café run by the composer Bolesław Woytowicz. Though it has some rewarding passages – not least the writing for cello in the main theme of the first movement – it isn't Bacewicz at her most inspired.

After the war, Stalinist ideological control over artistic life was intense, but concert performances still took Bacewicz abroad from time to time. She was able to return to Paris, which she always found stimulating. It was during one such visit that her third quartet was written. The Parisian 'tradition' of modern neo-classicism is still evident in the work, but there is a new depth and weight to the music. The opening *allegro* is in lucidly worked sonata form, graced by many subtleties. Tonality is to a degree implicit, certainly not dogmatically insisted upon. There are enough (gentle) affirmations of F major for the abrupt switch to B major at the end of the

movement to come as an enjoyable surprise. The effect is a not unpleasant avoidance of absolute resolution. The following andante is a graceful creation, full of ideas, with some elegant melodic phrases and some striking harmonies. In the closing vivo the key relationships are less ambiguous or implicit. There is some fine solo writing for both viola and violin and touches, especially in the third theme, of folk traditions. Everywhere in the movement there is wit and invention. It is not to deny the individuality of the work if one says that it clearly owes much to her time as a student of Nadia Boulanger.

It was with the fourth quartet that Bacewicz attracted a greater degree of international attention. It was composed at a busy and creative time for the composer – at much the same time she wrote her first Cello Concerto, her Second Symphony, her Fifth Sonata for Violin and Piano and her fourth Piano Concerto (Bacewicz was an accomplished pianist as well as violinist). The Fourth Quartet was awarded first prize at the International Composers Competition in Liège in Belgium, won a National Prize in Poland and in 1953 became a required piece for competitors in the Geneva International String Quartet Competition. It isn't hard to see why it should have been so popular, nor why it has been recorded a number of times by a variety of quartets. The relatively untroubled nature of the third quartet (in which war time suffering is only intermittently audible) is replaced by a much stronger sense of conflict, especially in the first two of its three movements. Without taking things too literally, it is hard not to hear in this music something of the contemporary Polish situation, something of the conflict between private and public worlds. The opening of the first movement is expressively disturbed; the slow movement takes a folk-like melody as its main theme and explores it harmonically rich fashion. The dance-like allegro giocoso – modelled on the oberek - which closes the work is a sonata-rondo which simultaneously affirms affinities with Bartók and Parisian neo-classicism. The Amar Corde Quartet match most of their competition here – not necessarily by being 'better', but in giving a coherent, individual reading.

Bacewicz's Fifth Quartet, written some four years later, has attracted less general attention, but is a fine, adventurous work. Its four movements are densely written, the dominant idiom much more radical than that of its forerunners. In the opening moderato there is a fascinating contrast between the energy of the first subject and the almost static second subject – played particularly well in this account. The second movement is a spirited and wittily worked-out double fugue; the third movement ('Corale') is exceptionally beautiful, a solemn chorale framing a more animated central section. The finale is a theme and (six) variations, the variations relatively free. The first makes striking use of glissandi and syncopations, the fourth is notable for the dissonant proclamations for viola and the sixth a lovely andante. The Amar Corde Quartet is heard at something like their best in this utterly convincing performance of this excellent Fifth Quartet.

In her Sixth Quartet Bacewicz makes selective use of twelve-tone principles (especially in the first movement) and a wide range of string effects. The quartet is full of intriguing colours and

techniques; muted harmonics, tremolandi, passages played sul ponticello and others marked saltando comme percussione. In these respects the work clearly has affinities with contemporary developments in Polish music –with the so-called ‘sonorism’ of Penderecki, Lutosławski and Bogusław Schaeffer, for example. Adam Walaciński’s booklet notes tell us when the Quartet was premiered, by the Parrenin Quartet, it gave rise to some controversy: “the older generation attacked (Bacewicz) for the alleged betraying of the established ideals, the young criticized the unsatisfactory radicalism”. There is, as such reactions might suggest, a certain quality of eclectic compromise about this quartet; some of its parts are perhaps more satisfying than the sum of its parts. But Bacewicz is too interesting a musical thinker for the work to anything less than stimulating, even if it isn’t wholly satisfying.

The last of Bacewicz’s quartets sees her reverting to a three-movement form, allegro – grave – con vivezza. Again there are many expressive effects – some striking swoops and glissandi, some resonant drones – but they serve a musical logic which clearly belongs to the great tradition of the string quartet, within the sonata form of the first movement, the ternary song of the second and the rondo of the third. The closing rondo, indeed, has a playfulness which is almost Haydnesque at a deep level, for all the surface differences. There is a starker quality to the earlier movements, especially the compelling, if uncomfortable, central movement. This is a fascinating quartet, in no sense a farewell, since it speaks of future possibilities more than of retrospection. Bacewicz was only sixty at the time of her death – she died suddenly, of a heart attack. These seven quartets speak of a constantly growing and developing musical imagination, which yet has an inner core of great consistency, and I, for one, wish that there were more such works from her pen. It is good to have one quartet’s reading of the whole sequence and the Amar Corde Quartet clarify the lines of continuity and change very effectively, in a series of well judged performances, their sound marked by sure-footed internal balance.

This set of discs also offers – as a kind of bonus – the opportunity to hear Bacewicz’s two works for Piano Quintet, in the performance of which the Amar Corde Quartet is joined by Waldemar Malicki. The first Piano Quintet is a powerful work, its opening movement beginning with a brooding introduction which starts a series of contrasts and juxtapositions sustained throughout the work in a constant switchback ride of moods and tempos. The yearning third movement is particularly fine. I have heard no other performance of this piece, and I mean no disrespect to the present artists if I say that I would like to – it is simply that the work is so rich and rewarding that it would certainly lend itself profitably to a range of different interpretations. But the present recording will do very well to be going on with. The second Piano Quintet is another interesting work, less traditional in idiom; its central larghetto full of delicate and subtle effects, the strings often rather eerily in dialogue with some relatively orthodox writing for the piano. The closing allegro giocoso is a sparkling movement, full of zest and inventiveness – listen to these CDs in volume order and it makes a resounding conclusion.

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The more I hear Bacewicz's music the more impressed I am. The string quartets constitute an important series of compositions, and the two piano quintets are engaging works. This is a valuable set of CDs, which will surely be of great interest both to followers of modern Polish music and to all who listen with any regularity to the chamber music of the last half century.
---Glyn Pursglove, musicweb-international.com

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