

TRACK

21

PROKOFIEV

String Quartets Nos 1 & 2

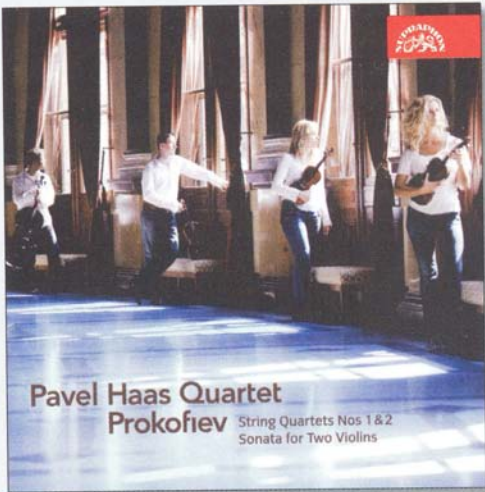
Pavel Haas Quartet

Supraphon

I'm not quite sure how they do it. Despite twice losing a team member, the Pavel Haas Quartet manage to come back as exciting as ever. And this at such an early stage in their careers. As was related last issue, the quartet's first release won a *Gramophone* Award. Their second was short-listed and came within a whisker of making the double. I wouldn't be surprised if this third is in the running come October.

This time they've turned to Prokofiev. It's a corner of the composer's repertoire not over-represented on disc, so even without playing of the very highest order the players would have a head-start. But this is playing of the very highest order. The sound is rich but not so sumptuous as to blunt expressivity (something I sometimes feel

'What comes through above all is a laser-like intensity... and youthful brio'



with at least one other much-lauded young quartet) and they know when to pull back slightly in the emotional stakes for more penetrating effect.

But what comes through above all is a laser-like intensity. The Pavel Haas throw their all into these works and if, as David Gutman suggests in his review, some of the music isn't quite from Prokofiev's top drawer, their youthful brio carries all before it.

What is thrilling now is to imagine where this quartet can go, as long as they don't run out of steam. Or lose too many more players!

► **REVIEWED ON PAGE 72**

CD of the month

Pavel Haas Quartet:
thrilling in Prokofiev



Pitch-perfect Prokofiev from the Pavel Haas Quartet

**EDITOR'S
CHOICE**
GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

Prokofiev

String Quartets^a – No 1, Op 50; No 2, Op 92.

Sonata for Two Violins, Op 56^b

^aPavel Haas Quartet (Veronika Jarůšková,

^bEva Karová vs Pavel Nikl vs Peter Jarůšek vs)

Supraphon © SU3957-2 (61' • DDD)

Selected comparison – coupled as above: *

Emerson Quartet (10/91) (DG) Ⓢ 431 772-2GH

Stg Qt No 2 – selected comparison:

Hollywood Qt (3/95) (TEST) SBT1052

Sonata for Two Violins – selected comparison:

Pertman, Zukerman (7/80[†]) (EMI) 208118-2

Prokofiev's chamber music is at last making an impact in the recital room yet remains curiously under-represented on disc given the ubiquity of a certain Soviet Russian contemporary. (The older composer would have been vexed indeed!) Fortunately this is just the kind of collection to challenge preconceptions. The logical and useful coupling has been tried before but the Emerson Quartet's unyielding, high-powered projection was not much liked in these pages. There's almost too much light and shade with the Pavel Haas Quartet, whose emotional engagement, youthful ardour and occasional penchant for extreme *pianissimo* will be familiar from a brace of award-winning Czech programmes.

Based, like Myaskovsky's 23rd Symphony, on ideologically vetted Kabardinian folk materials, Prokofiev's Second Quartet is one of the most immediately attractive quartets in the repertoire. It dates from 1941 when the two men were evacuated to the relative stability of the Caucasus and points east. That Prokofiev's young companion Mira Mendelson was in tow might explain the jollity of the outer movements

although their music can be tough as well as witty. In the wondrous *Adagio* the cello line rises high, ghostly melodic statements in octaves can expose the smallest tuning difficulties and *pizzicati* needs must sparkle like ice. The young players pass every test before dispatching the inventive finale with equal aplomb, differentiating a wide variety of moods and timbres within a swiftish frame.

The strenuously wrought First Quartet comes off just as well. It's a pre-Soviet score and hence formally heretical as well as rather more advanced harmonically. After the sometimes Bartókian vehemence of the *Vivace* element at its core, the work winds down to end slowly on a note of sustained expressive intensity. The concluding *Andante*, much admired by Myaskovsky and subsequently transcribed for string orchestra, is rarely tackled with the passion you find here. While not as measured as the American Quartet (Olympia, 2/90 – nla), the players give the invention just enough space and are certainly better tuned.

The Sonata for Two Violins, written to Parisian order in 1932, takes in a variety of manners, rhapsodic and intimate as well as brusque, without always persuading us that it is more than the compositional exercise adumbrated in the booklet-notes. Not the fault of its eloquent exponents I'd say. The third movement would seem to be played without the optional mutes.

Of the small clutch of "classic" performances of the component pieces, none is more usefully programmed than the present disc, nor so naturally recorded. Why hesitate? **David Gutman**