



REVIEW: RECORDING

## Trois Quatuors Op. 42

Adalbert Gyrowetz (1763–1850)

Quartetto Oceano

OMF Records KDC-2093G, 2021; one disc, 64 minutes

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*Trois Quatuors Op. 42* is Quartetto Oceano's debut album, as well as the premiere recording of the penultimate set of string quartets by Adalbert Gyrowetz (1763–1850). Gyrowetz is perhaps best known today for being forgotten, joining the ranks of numerous Czech-born composers of this era – including Jan Ladislav Dussek, Anton Reicha, Leopold Kozeluch, Johann Baptist Wanhal, Josef Mysliveček and Franz Krommer, among others – who fell into relative obscurity after their deaths despite enjoying successful musical careers and, in many cases, considerable notoriety during their lifetimes. Gyrowetz himself prophesied his own obsolescence when he reportedly told Ludwig August Frankl, 'I live poor and forgotten. And that is natural . . . only genius lives beyond the grave. It is, nevertheless, a strange feeling to be alive and know that one is dead in spirit' ('Ich lebe arm und vergessen. Und das ist natürlich . . . nur das Genie lebt über das Grab hinaus. Es ist doch ein eigenthümliches Gefühl, zu leben und zu wissen, daß man geistig gestorben ist'; 'Adalbert Gyrowetz', *Ost-Deutsche Post* (12 April 1850), unpaginated; my translation). Many of these composers have, fortunately, been rediscovered over the past few decades, making their comebacks in both musicological literature and performance repertory. The efforts of the early-music movement and its interest in reviving not only historical performance practices but also neglected repertories have especially helped to shed new light on this music.

Gyrowetz was born in Česke Budějovice (Budweis), Bohemia, where his father was choirmaster at St Nicholas Church. He studied law for a period in Prague before gaining employment in Brno (Brünn) as secretary to Count Franz von Fünfkirchen, members of whose staff also made up a private orchestra, and to whom Gyrowetz would dedicate his first symphonies. Gyrowetz's prolific compositional career spanned roughly six decades, from the early 1780s to the early 1840s, during which he travelled widely and tried his hand at nearly every major contemporary genre. The Op. 42 quartets were published c1802, by which time he had settled in Vienna and composed dozens of symphonies and chamber works (including thirty-six string quartets), and at least one opera. Soon after, in 1804, he was appointed Kapellmeister at Vienna's two court theatres, the Kärntnertheater and Burgtheater, obliging him to turn his attention to the composition primarily of operas and ballets for the next and longest phase of his career. Gyrowetz held that post until 1831 and continued to compose, though less prolifically, until the age of eighty-one.

Gyrowetz's Op. 42 quartets – in D major, F major and C minor – show the influences of his travels and early experience as a composer of symphonies, while also demonstrating the aptitude for theatrical idioms that would characterize his later career. The three quartets blend elements of the popular Parisian and more 'serious' Viennese string-quartet styles of the period. Gyrowetz juxtaposes lyrical themes and declamatory gestures evocative of operatic aria and recitative with more typically instrumental figurations and the exploration of colour in differing combinations of voices. His adeptness at appropriating the most popular stylistic trends of his day is, however,

occasionally undercut by what comes across as a lack of regard for their synthesis. He overuses unison and homorhythmic gestures for formal delineation and dramatic effect, with the unfortunate consequence that his quartets are missing the nuanced textural transitions that would generate a more conversational quality and greater sense of continuity. Furthermore, while he writes compelling solo passages for the viola and especially the cello, his treatment of accompanying parts tends to be unimaginative. Greater textural and rhythmic variety in accompanying voices could have been used to highlight formal development, create smoother transitions and enhance conversational effects.

The Viennese Bureau d'Arts et d'Industrie edition (c1802) – which Dean Sutcliffe used as the basis for what is, at the time of writing, the only available modern edition (Ann Arbor: Steglein, 2017) – is entitled *Trois quatuors*. This edition begins with the D major quartet, the only one conforming to the by-then standard Viennese four-movement structure, followed by the F major and C minor quartets. Jean André adopted the same title and ordering when he later published the same set (Offenbach am Main, c1804), albeit erroneously labelled as Op. 56. Another historical edition, published by Johann Carl Gombart in Augsburg (c1802), is called *Trois quatuors concertans*, and instead sandwiches the D major quartet between the two in three movements, a structure more typical of the French *quatuors concertans*. Judging from the album's liner notes, Quartetto Oceano seem to have consulted all available sources. They have, however, chosen an order that differs from every edition, but which perhaps better fulfils our contemporary expectations for an expressive arc that spans the album: beginning with the mysterious *sotto voce* opening of the C minor quartet (which ends with an extended C major coda to the finale), placing the F major quartet second and finishing with the D major quartet as the most substantial and 'Viennese' of the three works.

Quartetto Oceano (violinists Shiho Hiromi and Yuki Oshika, violist Go Tomono and cellist Takashi Kaketa) have been playing together for several years, and one gets the impression from their first album that the quartet has developed a strong sense of their ensemble sound and character. Their playing is generally dynamic and expressive, and contrasts are prepared by manipulation of timing and/or anticipatory (de)crecendos, meaning that they never come as a complete surprise. Of particular interest from a performance-practice standpoint, portamento is heard sporadically in the first violin, and though it is musically appropriate, its execution comes across as self-conscious and overly careful. Portamento is still somewhat rare in period-instrument recordings of chamber repertory from this early in the nineteenth century (listen, for example, to Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets, which were published in 1801 and have been recorded by several quartets specializing in historical performance), and a more blatant execution would help to convince listeners that its application is both intentional and expressively effective. The manipulation of time, which can be heard both in independent lines and coordinated between different instruments, is more compelling, yet even more extreme rubato would not be out of place. Among individual moments, Kaketa's cello solos in the first movement of the D major quartet and the slow movements of the C minor and F major quartets stand out for his ease of execution and range of expression from tenderness to exuberance in the instrument's high register. The viola also has a prominent solo in the F major quartet's central Adagio, which Tomono plays eloquently, but with a more deliberate sound in comparison with the cello solo immediately preceding it.

Quartetto Oceano displays impeccable cohesion throughout the album. Their unity is in many ways highlighted by Gyrowetz's ubiquitous punctuating unisons, which are not just synchronized, but also superbly blended and balanced, as are moments of parallel passagework and ornamentation or synchronized pizzicatos between any combination of the four instruments. Such overall polish, which should also be credited to producer and engineer Hironori Kosaka, is of course to be expected from any professional recording produced today. One question to be raised in this respect, however, is whether recordings might also attempt to replicate to some extent the sensation of listening to repertories in their historical performance contexts, and whether and how a different mode of listening might then affect evaluations of the music being performed. The generally dark and

reverberant sound of this recording conjures the solemn image of listening from some distance in a nearly empty performance hall. In contrast, some more recent orchestral recordings sound as if one is listening from somewhere (or everywhere) right in the orchestra, using, as they do, close microphone placements to emphasize the definition of individual parts. When distinct instruments are foregrounded in the mix, so are the audible breaths of the performers and sometimes even the clicking of woodwind keys or other extramusical instrumental sounds. While hearing every instrument 'up close' can produce an uncanny sensation when listening to large-scale symphonic works, it would be interesting to hear what an ensemble could achieve with Gyrowetz's string quartets, marked as they are by theatrical gestures and expressive contrast, using recording techniques that produce a more intimate listening experience and thus allow an ensemble to highlight even more the music's dynamic extremes, dramatic interjections and striking harmonic turns. This thought experiment notwithstanding, the album presents a compelling introduction to both Quartetto Oceano and Gyrowetz's previously unrecorded Op. 42 quartets.

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