

# Four artists called Artis

Not content to rely on the Viennese quartet tradition, the Artis Quartet are set on developing a style of their own. Herbert Glass talks to the Austrian foursome

Sweetness, grace and light. Waltzes. *Kaffee mit Schlag*. *Strudel* and *Sachertorte*. The image of Vienna has crystallised into something rather precious. It is no longer the home of great composers, and its performing traditions are not what they once were – or perhaps they *are*, and that's where the problem of the city's musical identity lies. An excellent topic for discussion with Vienna's decidedly hot Artis Quartet.

My initial encounter with these energetic, articulate and accomplished young men – all are in their early 30s – was through recordings. The first to come my way were on the smallish Orfeo label: searing performances of Schoenberg, Berg, Zemlinsky, and Karl Weigl (a pupil of Zemlinsky's who is particularly close to the Artis's collective heart). Then on Sony, the label for which they now record exclusively – Mozart, Beethoven (the beginning of a cycle, to be taped over several years), Schubert, Webern, and most recently, Dvořák and Smetana – all delivered with a winning combination of boldness and clarity.

These people have something to say musically. Which would make them good talkers too? The answer turned out to be an emphatic 'yes' when I recently chatted with them in first violinist Peter Schuhmayer's flat, just a few steps from St Stephen's Cathedral.

Three-quarters of the quartet – Schuhmayer, second violinist Johannes Meissl and cellist Othmar Müller – was in place around the coffee table as we discussed their upcoming concert in the Brahms-Saal of the Musikverein, home of the Vienna Philharmonic. The fourth

member, violist Herbert Kefer, arrived slightly late: 'Just like in our performances,' cracked Meissl, the jester of the ensemble.

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Asked about the quartet's background and formation, Schuhmayer explained: 'We all studied in Vienna at the Music Academy, according to traditional methods, with traditional teachers, to which we had no real objections. But perhaps the major reason we formed a quartet was that we felt "tradition" wasn't enough for the interpretation of music, that we might have something of our own to say.'

What did the expression 'Viennese tradition', as applied to string playing, mean to them? Their responses boiled down to observations of Viennese string playing being 'tone-infatuated', 'superficial', a bit sloppy – not because of technical failings, but because of that famous relaxed, *schlampisch* attitude, which stressed expressivity above all.

The players agreed that there had been moves in recent years to clean up the Viennese quartet act, spearheaded by the Alban Berg Quartet. 'They brought a fresh wind when they began to emphasise going back to the score,' according to Müller. 'But there was considerable resistance in Vienna. When they broke the ice, they were criticised, naturally, for being "icy". Adjectives

connected with cold were always used when there was any question of doing away with the abuses of the past. Uncomprehending listeners, including the "traditional" critics, missed the point of what the Berg Quartet was doing.'

It was Hatto Beyerle, then the Berg's violist, who suggested in 1984 that the Artis Quartet should follow the Berg Quartet's experience and study with America's LaSalle Quartet. They obtained a scholarship to work with the LaSalle in Cincinnati.

What did the LaSalle give them? Schuhmayer replied: 'We went to the LaSalle secure about tone and technique. We went to them to learn about what lies behind the notes. From Walter Levin [the LaSalle's first violinist and guiding spirit, and still an active teacher] we learned new approaches to musical texts. He kept us away from the trap so many young musicians fall into, that of saying: "OK, the score is marked *piano* but it doesn't have to be *piano* if I like it better some other way." What such an attitude means is, forget what the composer is saying. What matters is what I say. Levin taught us that before you put yourself into the music, you'd better know precisely what the composer *wrote*.'

Meissl added, 'There are basically two European traditions in Vienna: a mainstream tradition that says beauty above all. But there was also a more intellectual, analytical tradition, stemming from Schoenberg's teachings and represented by people like Rudolf Kolisch and Eduard Steuermann. That was lost to us when the Nazis forced these people to flee. Their work continued in America. So we went



across the Atlantic for something that grew up here but was uprooted and no longer available.'

Now, as teachers themselves at the Vienna Academy, they are careful to instill in students a primary respect, not for the composer's 'intentions' (that being an abstract notion), but for the notes and markings the composer set to paper. 'We can't, and don't try to teach interpretation,' says Müller. 'That's an invitation to imitation, which is the end of any sort of meaningful education.'

How was the Artis Quartet received on their return to Vienna? Much the same way as the Berg Quartet was. The more analytical style continues to encounter two kinds of critical reaction in Austria, the players informed me: 'One critic will say that we're on the right track, that textual clarity and expressiveness needn't be mutually exclusive. Another will say that our playing is too abrupt, that it lacks soul.' I informed them that what made me

want to meet them was the feeling that they were analytical musicians who also cherished the values of tonal allure and

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expressivity. The proof was provided just a few days prior to our meeting, when I heard their Sony coupling of quartets by Smetana and Dvořák, and again when I attended their lucid, elegant *and* potently dramatic performance of Beethoven's op.130 in the Musikverein (where the Artis has had its own subscription series for the past four seasons). What you hear from these artists on CD is what you get live. They are not the products of producers' and engineers' fantasies.

The players' ability to combine an accurate reading of the text with sensual tone has helped to draw audiences to the works of the Second Viennese School, music which is often presented with a self-conscious abrasiveness. The Artis have seen for themselves how flowing, rich-toned readings of this repertoire can affect an audience. 'This is another instance where we have to make a deep bow to the LaSalle,' violist Kefer noted. 'They never attempted to change our sound. What we learned from them was structure, onto which we superimposed our sound.' Schuhmayer added, 'I think sometimes, in retrospect, that Levin regretted that his own group was never able to produce a Romantic sound for Romantic music. But he admired our ability to do so.'

At this point, it seemed necessary to indulge in some relative pre-history – *life before LaSalle* – and the hoary yet highly personal question: how do you become a string quartet? And how do you know that you *are* one, rather than four assorted beings working on a joint project?

Schuhmayer responded: 'I'd been playing quartets as a student, as far back as I can recall. And the four of us [the original second violinist, Manfred

Honeck, left to pursue a conducting career in 1982] met as players in the Austrian Youth Philharmonic in 1980. We were all interested in chamber music, but before you know whether you fit together as a musical ensemble you're drawn to each other as personalities. If you're lucky, you also speak the same language musically. We

entered some competitions and did well, affirming in our own minds that we belonged together.'

'Then came that year in America,' when, according to Müller, 'we didn't only play and study together, but lived together in the same house. If that kind of constant proximity worked, we could survive as a quartet back in Vienna, where our contact would be mainly musical.'

With their growing reputation, and their dedication to seeking out the



music of promising young Austrian composers, they have been able to receive subsidies from the Austrian government and the support of the Austrian National Bank. The latter institution is the custodian of one of Europe's great collections of rare stringed instruments, two of which are on loan to the Artis violinists: Schuhmayer's 1727 Montagnana and Meissl's c.1690 Andrea Guarneri. For the record, Kefer's viola is a J.B. Vuillaume dated 1846, and Müller's cello (c.1700) is the work of the Dutch master Hendrick Jacobs or his stepson Pieter Rombouts. These are the instruments played on their recent Sony recordings.

Their recording career began seven years ago, on a small French label (Accord), gaining them major recording prizes, including a *Grand Prix du Disque* and *Diapason d'Or*, and prestige engagements in Paris. Their reputation has grown immensely, however, since signing with Sony three years ago.

In recent years they have had major engagements not only in Vienna and Paris, but in Tokyo, Rome, Amsterdam, New York, Prague, at the Salzburg Festival, the Schubert Festival in Feldkirch, Italy's Fiesole and Verona Festivals, and in London, where their Wigmore Hall appearances attract a growing following.

I asked what they now thought of their early recordings. 'We never lis-

ten to them', was the virtually unison response. 'Everybody says that,' was my jaded rejoinder. 'But we mean it!' was the riposte. My parting shot, 'Everybody says that, too!' elicited hearty – and perhaps self-analytical –

ensemble laughter. Humbug, clearly, is alien to these bright, up-to-date sons of Vienna. □

*The Artis Quartet will perform Mozart and Schubert at London's Wigmore Hall on 12 June.*

#### The Artis Quartet's Discography

- Beethoven:** String Quartets op.18 no.1 and op.132. (Sony Classical SK 48058).
- Berg:** Lyric Suite; String Quartet op.3; **Weigl:** String Quartet in A major op.4 (Orfeo C 216901).
- Brahms:** String Quartets op.51 no.1 in C minor and no.2. in A minor (Orfeo C 211911).
- Dohnányi:** String Quartets in A op.7 and D flat op.15. (Koch Schwann 3-1635-2).
- Dvořák:** String Quartet no.14 op.105; **Smetana:** String Quartet no.1 'From My Life'. (Sony Classical SK 53282).
- Magnard:** String Quartet in E minor op.16. (Accord CD 149160).
- Mendelssohn:** Complete String Quartets. (Accord 200342).
- Mozart:** Six 'Haydn' Quartets, K387, K421, K428, K458 'Hunt', K465 'Dissonance'. (Sony Classical SK 46552, 3 discs).
- Mozart:** String Quintets no.3 K515, no.4 K516 (with Michael Schnitzler, viola). (Sony Classical SK 46483).
- Schubert:** String Quartet no.14 D810 'Death and the Maiden'; String Quartet D32. (Sony Classical SK 52582).
- Schumann:** Piano Quintet in E flat major op.44; **Brahms:** Piano Quintet in F minor op.34 (with Stefan Vladar, piano). (Sony Classical SK 58954 – to be released July 1994).
- Schoenberg:** String Quartet in D major; **Zemlinsky:** String Quartet no.2 op.15. (Orfeo C 194901).
- Webern:** String Quartet (1905); String Quartet op.28; Slow Movement for String Quartet; Rondo for String Quartet; Five Movements op.5; Bagatelles op.9. **Gielen:** Variations for String Quartet. (Sony Classical SK 48058).
- Wolf:** String Quartet in D minor; Intermezzo; Italian Serenade. (Accord 149 183).