

**London String Quartet**

**Beethoven** String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132<sup>a</sup>. **Schubert** String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, D810, *Death and the Maiden*<sup>b</sup>.

**London String Quartet** (a)John Pennington, vn; (b)James Levey, vn; (ab)Thomas W. Petre, vn; (a)William Primrose, va; (b)H. Waldo Warner, va; (ab)C. Warwick Evans, vlc).

St Laurent Studio © ⊕ YSL78-022 (71mins; ADD). Item marked <sup>a</sup> from Columbia LX332/6 (rec. New York, 2-3/4/34); <sup>b</sup>Columbia L1751/4 (London, 20/11/25 & 24/12/25).

**Franck** String Quartet in D.

**London String Quartet** (John Pennington, vn; Thomas W. Petre, vn; H. Waldo Warner, va; C Warwick Evans, vlc).

St Laurent Studio © ⊕ YSL78-033 (44mins; ADD). From Columbia L2304/9 (rec. London, 26 & 27/10/28).

**Bridge** Londonderry Air<sup>a</sup>. **Debussy** String Quartet in G minor, Op. 10 – Andantino<sup>a</sup>.

**Schubert** Piano Quintet in A, D667, *Trout*<sup>b</sup>.

**Tchaikovsky** String Quartet in D, Op. 11 – Andante cantabile<sup>c</sup>.

(b)**Ethel Hobday**, pf; **London String Quartet**

(a)C James Levey, vn; (b)John Pennington, vn; (a)C Thomas W. Petre, vn; (ab)C H. Waldo Warner, va; (ab)C C. Warwick Evans, vlc; (b)Robert Cherwin, d-bs.

St Laurent Studio © ⊕ YSL78-039 (71mins; ADD). Items marked <sup>a</sup> from US Columbia 50088D (rec. London, 3 & 4/11/25);

(b)Argentinian Columbia A1019/23 (London, 9-11/1/28); (c)Argentinian Columbia A1023 (London, 4/11/25).

Each of these discs, from Canadian engineer Yves St Laurent, contains a treasure from the LSQ commercial discography. The Schubert quartet is one of the best things done under James Levey's leadership; and the Franck is the best achievement of John Pennington's long reign. *Death and the Maiden* has a very trim, quite dramatic first movement. There are no repeats in the variations, for space reasons; the performance of one variation is slightly sticky but otherwise they are good. The Scherzo gives these players no problems and the finale is fine, although one side is noisier than the others and there is a bit of distortion, probably from the pressings. The ensemble plays with pronounced *portamento* and with the light style favoured under Levey. Not much vibrato is in evidence. Tuning and technical matters are of a high standard. The cello is reasonably well recorded. In the last resort the interpretation is bitter-sweet rather than terrifying. I made comparisons with the 1927 performance by the early Budapest Quartet (HMV ● D1422/6), which is more flexible in tempo, more "Viennese" if you like, and tonally more interesting, with the cello even better captured. The Budapesters do both parts of the theme twice in the second movement but you do not get much more music for the extra side. The Scherzo is slowish, the finale more inflected. The Busch version has more penetration and commitment than either, but in the 1920s listeners were quite well served.

The Beethoven has historical interest as William Primrose's only published commercial recording with the LSQ. As an interpretation, I fear it will not do. Under Levey, the LSQ established quite a lithe, swift-footed Beethoven style, heard *in excelsis* on the acoustic recording of Op. 131 (reissue, please!). This kind of playing needs to operate at a high level of intensity, but here the offhand opening bars set the tone for a reading which rarely dips below the surface. The Allegro is competent, once it gets going, but the players fatally fall into a jog-trot in the "Andante con moto". Rhythmic underpinning is not good in the chorales of the *Heiliger Dankgesang*, despite the unchallenging fast pace, and although the players understand that the intensity must increase with each chorale, they fall well short of inspiration. The two faster interludes are slack in pace and rhythm. The march

is adequately done but the leader's cadenza lacks intensity and the finale starts too easily, although it works up to a reasonable level of excitement. The recording is poor for 1934. In its day this set was outclassed by the Deman and Léner and the Busch version swept all three away. Listening recently to the new Tokyo Quartet set of the late quartets on Harmonia Mundi, I was amazed to find there are still players who think that all you have to do in Beethoven is play his music rather pleasantly. It did not work in 1934 and it still does not work.

Franck's Quartet was popular a century ago and the 78rpm era saw three excellent sets, starting with the Virtuoso String Quartet's 1925 acoustic one (HMV ● D1006/11). The main problem was the Scherzo. The VSQ used two sides for it and in 1933 the Quatuor Pro Arte were persuaded to speed up to 4'40", so as to get it on to one side (HMV ● DB2051/6). The LSQ solution was to have the Allegro end and the Scherzo begin on Side 4, allowing for an overall timing of 5'19". Significantly, every one of the 12 sides needed at least three takes, eight requiring four and two requiring five. The players must have been limp after two days of such labour but the result vindicates it. Although this work is not as steamy as the Piano Quintet, it requires passionate commitment. All three big movements have the necessary Romantic ebb and flow; and with the Scherzo going at an alert but comfortable tempo, there is little to carp at. The playing is of high calibre, if less colourful than that of the Pro Arte, and the "Larghetto" is involving. The LSQ's habitual *portamento* is so suited to the music, one barely notices it. Columbia's recording is pretty good for its era and Yves St Laurent's natural transfer – made without filtering, like all his dubbings – is easy to listen to, despite the surface noise. His English pressings were first sold by Casa America in Buenos Aires, a city often visited by the LSQ.

For the *Trout* Quintet, we actually have Argentinian pressings: like the English issues (● L2098/2102), they have quite heavy surfaces, but the recording is reasonably clear. There is some distortion, especially in the Scherzo. Tempi for the first two movements are good – Side 3 has the end of the first movement and the start of the second. The Scherzo is vigorous and the tempo of the trio is

well related to it. The variations are lovingly done – I have heard the final one more deliciously turned by other ensembles. The finale is very pleasant and Ethel Hobday's innate musicality leaves an abiding impression. The bassist is not especially outstanding. The three fillers are all truncated: the Tchaikovsky works reasonably well; the Debussy starts at the viola theme; and the Bridge loses most of its point if you do not get all the variations – readers should seek out the LSQ's double-sided version (● L1716). Note for discographers: the Debussy was coupled in America with the Bridge – the US pressing is excellent – and in England with the Tchaikovsky, the latter being re-used for Side 10 of the *Trout* set.

Tully Potter