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## Schumann: String Quartets Nos 1-3

**COMPOSER(S):** Schumann**WORKS:** Schumann: String Quartets Nos 1-3**PERFORMER:** Doric String Quartet**LABEL:** Chandos**CATALOGUE NUMBER:** CHAN 10692**PERFORMANCE:** ★★★★★ **SOUND:** ★★★★★

Here's a disc that merits an especially big welcome. Up till now there has been a fine version of Op. 41 Nos 1 & 3 (the Zehetmair Quartet on ECM) but, frustratingly, not of the whole set. At last comes a strong challenger which brings together all three of these wonderful but so often misunderstood quartets. The playing has all the fragile pathos, volatility, exuberance, and quirky humour one hopes to find in this music, along with an exceptionally strong feeling for Schumann's sometimes literally off-beat rhythmic thinking. The Doric Quartet also have a compelling sense of how Schumann's moods can turn on a musical sixpence: childlike joy one moment, heartbreak the next. It reminds me of a particularly 'Schumannesque' line from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'Excess of joy weeps; excess of sorrow laughs'.

Apart from the emotional insights, the Doric Quartet also challenge all those old weary preconceptions about Schumann's competence when it came to large-scale forms. Schumann's originality of thinking leaps out at almost every stage: in the unsettling bi-polar structure of No. 1 (a quartet effectively in two keys at once), in the deliciously unpredictable second movement variations of No. 2 (and the still more fantastical *Scherzo and Trio*), or even in something as tiny as the harmonic crunch in the second bar of No. 3 – so eloquent just after the tender falling 'Clara' motif. Hearing the three works together, the subtle cross-references emerge with telling clarity. Yet nothing is forced, and each is entirely satisfying on its own terms.

What also comes over strongly – and again challengingly – is that both the inspired demonic humorist and the delicate lyric poet of *Kreisleriana* and *Dauidsbündler tänze* are still very much alive in these chamber works. And far from having to curb his muse to follow Classical formal conventions, Schumann is still finding strikingly original intellectual means to contain – or just about – his overflowing invention. If I add that it was no effort at all to listen to these three Quartets in one sitting, that should give an idea how special these performances are; even for Schumann devotees it can be a trial of patience. In fact, since first receiving this recording for review I've gone back to it four times, despite a building in-tray. What more can one say? Well, one more thing: the recordings are vintage Chandos in their fine but not glossy tone, with a lovely close perspective on the ensemble: intimate without being intimidating. *Stephen Johnson*

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