

AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE

September - October 2015

Amphion Quartet

WOLF: *Italian Serenade*; GRIEG: *Quartet 1*;
JANACEK: *Quartet 2*

Nimbus 6289—67 minutes

A remarkable debut from a fierce young quartet.

Neither Grieg nor Wolf are composers I normally go out of my way to hear, so both of their works presented here are relatively new to me. The Grieg appears about a dozen times in our index, including recordings by the Guarneri (Jan/Feb 1992), Budapest (Sept/Oct 1995), and Emerson (Sept/Oct 2006). Wolf's *Italian Serenade*, one of his few instrumental works, appears just twice, by the Artis (May/June 1988) and the Fine Arts Quartet (Sept/Oct 2001).

The Amphion's reading of Wolf is enchanting. This work is sometimes used as an encore, but here it works as a fine opening. It begins with a very soft stumbling 6/8 gallop interrupted by a dissonance in the viola and some off-the-cuff violin plucks before launching into a lively tarantella. The short, single-movement work has several changes in mood, tempo, and character; but this rendition holds together beautifully. The Amphion tells an amusing little tale.

Grieg's quartet is described in the notes as "a work characterized by fascinating dualities and, for the attentive listener, remarkable cohesion among its richly varied musical ideas". Amphion plays with such formal clarity that even a somewhat attentive listener would sense the work's coherence. All the fast parts are played with vigor, and all the lyrical parts are played with tenderness; but everything is paced perfectly, with just the right amount of breathing room. Even the most abrupt changes flow splendidly.

Janacek's Quartet 2 is even more challeng-

ing in this respect, and here, too, Amphion nails it. I have reviewed this work a few times already: the Stamitz (Nov/Dec 2013), the Arcadia (Mar/Apr 2014), and the Jerusalem (May/June 2014); and I've heard a few other recordings. This one tops them all. This is a work that spans the whole emotional spectrum from madness to despair to sublime beauty, appropriately described in the notes as "neurotic" and "volatile". Amphion tackles it as if their lives depend on it. Every moment is executed not only with perfect technical precision—a remarkable feat—but with exactly the right emotional tone. Moments of perfect serenity get shattered by ferocious noise. Sul ponticello tremolos are played so vigorously that pitch often becomes indiscernible, as though pitch would only get in the way of raw, emotional power. I've always enjoyed this work, but this is the first time I've felt that Janacek's intentions were articulated clearly.

In an age when fine string quartet recordings are abundant, this one is outstanding. I hope to hear much more from this group. With any luck, we'll hear them play Janacek's other great quartet.

PAGEL