

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

Bartók: String Quartets (The Heath Quartet)

Heath's Bartók is truly Béla: New cycle of the string quartets gets to the heart of darkness.

by [Warwick Arnold](#) on 15 September, 2017

Performances of Bartók's six quartets have tended to fall into two camps; the hard-edged modernist, exemplified by the Emerson Quartet's 1989 recording, or the soft-grained folkloric from Eastern Europe, for which the Takács is famed. As the cycle has remained my favourite since my angry youth I have tended to favour the former but inevitably, my radical sensibilities are relaxing as the years go by.

This latest recording falls not in the middle but somewhere on a tangent and could well be the ideal library reference. The Heath Quartet nailed their explorative colours to the mast with their Gramophone Award-winning set of the five Tippett quartets and a bracing northern breeze fills their sails for this latest voyage.

Their cool, limpid sound and crystalline clarity elucidates Bartók's contrapuntal argument while their modern vibrato-lite style, impeccable intonation and precise chord voicing makes sense of his unconventional harmonic language. Rhythms are taut as a drum but not overdriven, they seem to find the ideal tempi; always well propelled, though time is allowed for bold gestures to register.

The *Allegro* of No 4, so often hectoring or gabbled, is superbly paced with those strange *glissandi* given breathing space and the foot-to-the-pedal surges really boosting the adrenaline. The Heath Quartet players' willingness to explore subtle tonal colours at the lower end of the dynamic range draws the listener in close so when they let rip in full voice the effect is thrilling.

Wonderful details abound; the perfectly imitated wheeze of a harmonium in the *Adagio molto* of No 5 or the specific weighting of those veiled chords at the conclusion of its *Andante* – indeed this performance of the Fifth Quartet is splendid, not as full-on as the Zehetmair on ECM but easier to live with.

As for the Sixth, they get to the very heart of a forlorn masterpiece; the extraordinary colour they give to the opening of the final *Mesto* of No 6 – a grey landscape under a wan sky. The performances are enhanced by the wonderfully transparent recording captured by the engineers in the Wigmore Hall's ideal acoustic.

This is a set to treasure for years to come. For newcomers, it's an ideal way in to a set of works that are admittedly hard to get your head around; for the converted, a refreshing alternative that will have you marvelling anew at the bold, uncompromising invention of a haunted genius.