

REVIEWS

Franck - Piano Quintet in F minor Fauré - Piano Quintet No. 1 in D minor Nimbus Alliance - NI6397

Franck's piece, beginning *dramatico*, lives through what Debussy rather unkindly called its 'perpetual paroxysms', and one of the performers' tasks is to grade these excitements so that we get some feeling of shape in a whole movement. Here this task is fulfilled admirably, helped by discreet rubato here and there, notably in allowing just a touch of extra space leading into the climaxes themselves. The strings range widely between gentle melancholy and furious declamation, while the pianist manages to create impressive volume without banging. The ensemble is alive, too, to the frequent 'subito' markings which at times give an almost surreal air to the discourse.

Fauré's Quintet is less about drama than efflorescence, and in this Mami Shikimori's attention to the bass is vital. When pianists played his music to Fauré he would regularly preface their attempts with 'A nous, les basses!' ('Let's hear those bass lines!'): often it's the tension between treble and bass that leads the music onwards, with the middle of the texture helping to rationalise things. Another important factor is the echoing of material between the instruments, and here this ensemble is faultless, making intelligible what in less observant performances can be merely a meaningless jumble.

Finally, they excel in the curious *Finale*, almost all in four-bar phrases and with a nod to folk music. Their elegant phrasing turns the threatened boredom into sheer delight.

Roger Nichols, BBC Music Magazine (5* performance & recording)

This beautifully recorded juxtaposition of two three-movement, minor-key, harmonically progressive French masterpieces makes for a deeply satisfying disc. Both achieve a balance of the string and keyboard forces, avoiding the clatter of an overdominant piano, and sporting exquisite tintinnabulations such as in the Franck's central *Lento* or the Fauré's opening stretch.

Paul Driver, The Sunday Times

Franck's Quintet must be one of the most muscularly romantic pieces of chamber music in the repertoire and the excellent Czech Wihan Quartet are just the players for it. This is a forceful performance, mature in every sense.....the opening of the *Lento* second movement is delicious. Shikimori matches them at every turn.....the ensemble is immaculate.....each always listening but with a different contribution to the conversation. This is a disc to savour.

Simon Mundy, Classical Music Magazine

The Wihan Quartet and Mlle Shikimori are *sharply* attuned to the notes. First

violin's acuity has a mighty edge, consistently razor-sharp while fretful chromatic ruminations, stemming from second violin (ref: "Allegro non troppo ma con fuoco"), are fashionably controlled. The episodic "Finale", underscored by Mami Shikimori's keyboard, shows her rarified firmness that draws into lines of permeability within all strings. The undulating ebbs and crests add dramatic heft and angst with a final answer: The Wihan Quartet ensures the listener doesn't wander off at any time. Mami Shikimori is the glue that holds the Quintets together in a very tight and thoughtful manner. This allows the Wihan Quartet to capitalize on their own brand of embellished punctuations. An irresistible winner at its best.

Christie Grimstad, ConcertoNet.com

Pairing César Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor and Gabriel Fauré's Piano Quintet no.1 in D minor is such a good idea – full of stimulating contrasts of mood and music – one wonders why it hasn't been done before. Franck's Quintet was premiered in 1880, at the start of his most fruitful decade, and its Wagnerian harmonies and sensuality are wafted on a cloud of Catholic incense. The Wihan Quartet tear into the con fuoco finale like men possessed, while pianist Mami Shikimori shimmers and sighs in the slow movement's half-lights, fully emphasizing Franck's *sentimento* direction. From Franck to Faure's Quintet (1906) is to step from the steamy emotional hothouse into a cool and gentle breeze. The F-major finale started life as the theme for the Pie Jesu of his famous Requiem and Shikimori and the Czech quartet eloquently express its warm and clear-eyed joy. The recording quality is excellent too.

Norman Stinchcombe, Midlands Classical Music Making

QR has no hesitation in recommending this fine CD – which, in the surprisingly lighter opening of the final movement of the Fauré, will bring a smile to your face.

Stuart Millson, Classical Music Editor of *Qu*

Review