



DISC OF THE MONTH

Royal treatment for Szymanowski

JOHN ALLISON *has been following the rise of Poland's young Royal String Quartet, and heralds their coming of age with this superlative Szymanowski album*

SZYMANOWSKI

String Quartets Nos 1 & 2

RÓZYCKI

String Quartet in D minor

Royal String Quartet

Hyperion CDA 67684 70:20 mins

BBC Music Direct

£12.72

Poland's young Royal String Quartet, well known to British audiences through its membership of the BBC New Generation Artists scheme, have already been making Karol Szymanowski's music very much their own in memorable live performances. Now comes this welcome new disc, allowing us to deepen our experience of their interpretations – and in the hands of any players, Szymanowski's quartets are subtle works that yield up their secrets slowly.

consciousness by Janáček's two almost contemporaneous essays in the medium – works that are, admittedly, more immediate in their impact.

Szymanowski's two quartets were composed a decade apart (in 1917 and 1927) on either side of *King Roger*, and the First Quartet inhabits a world of enriched diatonic harmony. The Royals have a special feeling for texture and colour, which is vital in this music, but an equally strong sense of structure. They never drop the lyrical thread of the rapturous middle movement. Their opening of the Second Quartet has a floating, weightless quality, contrasting with the weighty textures they bring to the central *Vivace scherzando*, where the folksiness of

The opening of the Second Quartet has a floating, weightless quality, contrasting with the central scherzo of a gritty intensity which recalls Bartók

Given how well some of Szymanowski's music is served on disc – the violin concertos, for instance, or the opera *King Roger* – it can be sobering to realise that many parts of his output remain relatively obscure. Though the two string quartets have been recorded several times, most notably until now by the excellent Silesian Quartet, they are works that the biggest labels and big-name ensembles have tended to shy away from. Perhaps they have been overshadowed in the non-Polish

Tatra mountain dances is felt. There is a gritty intensity here that calls to mind the quartet writing of Bartók, but every note in these pieces remains distinctive and original – confirming Szymanowski as a still underrated master of the medium.

Making what must now count as the best recording of these works even more satisfying, the Szymanowski quartets are wrapped around the String Quartet (1916) of Ludomir Rózycki, who along with Szymanowski was a member



COMFORTABLY STYLISH:
the Royal Quartet 'have a special feeling for texture and colour'

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ROYAL STRING QUARTET



MONIUSZKO • SZYMANOWSKI • BACEWICZ

Moniuszko: String Quartet No. 1; Szymanowski: String Quartet No. 2; Bacewicz: String Quartet No. 4
BeArTon CDB 035
Available from www.bearton.pl
The Royal Quartet's first recording of Szymanowski No. 2, appropriately coupled with works by two fellow composers of the Young Poland Group.



ZAREBSKI

Piano Quintet; Roses and Thorns
With Wojciech Switata (piano)
BeArTon CDB 036
Available from www.bearton.pl
Music by a Polish pupil of Liszt's, much-praised by Borodin but who died aged 31.

of the short-lived Young Poland group of composers in the first decade of the century. His idiom is less advanced and his treatment of form more conventional, but never obviously so: there are Janáček-like ostinatos, albeit more soft-edged, throughout this glowing work. Rózycki (who studied in Berlin with Engelbert Humperdinck) composed in a variety of genres, but his music is infrequently heard today. This Quartet is a hidden gem, but we shouldn't be too surprised: Polish chamber music is full of such treasures (perhaps the Royals will now team up with a pianist for Juliusz Zarebski's somewhat earlier but magnificent Piano Quartet in G minor). At almost 17 minutes' duration, the first movement is nearly as long as each of Szymanowski's quartets, but Rózycki's high inspiration and the Royals' impeccable playing sustain it.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★

Q&A ELWIRA PRZYBYŁOWSKA

DANIEL JAFFÉ *talks with the Royal Quartet's second violinist*

You first recorded Szymanowski's Second Quartet just two years ago. What made you decide to record both quartets so soon?

Of course we have listened many times to our earlier recording of the Second Quartet, and we heard some things that we didn't like in that recording in terms of tempo or general flow or going from one section to another – many small details. I guess, though, that it was always our dream to record both Szymanowski string quartets: we have been playing them for some time now. So it was our first choice of repertoire for our first 'international' recording.

How did you come to choose Rózycki's Quartet to couple with Szymanowski's?

We thought that Szymanowski's two string quartets were too short to make a full-length CD – together they last less than 40 minutes. So we felt that we had to find something to add to the disc. It wasn't easy! And suddenly we thought of Rózycki's

Quartet; we knew that it existed, but it had never been released on CD. We found just one old recording in the archives of Polish Radio – I think it was from the '60s – and we listened to it once or twice: no more than that because the way the quartet played was very old-fashioned with lots of vibrato. But it fitted perfectly with the Szymanowski as it was from the same period.

So, leaving aside the old recording, how did you 'find your way into' the Rózycki?

We'd never performed it before so when we first started to study this quartet it was very fresh, and everything we did was with the knowledge that it was going to be recorded; so we worked on it very carefully. I think Rózycki was very interested in opera. And in a way you can hear it in the melodies and how he uses these melodies. It's very beautiful. When you close your eyes and just listen to it you can almost hear that these are singers, not instruments, performing this.