



CASTALIAN STRING QUARTET

This press book contains (in order):

- Artist bio
- Press excerpts
- Full reviews (beginning with the most recent)

NOTES: When searching for suitable pull-quotes, be sure to check through the "Full reviews" section. The "Press excerpts" are not comprehensive, and do not necessarily display the best selections.



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CASTALIAN QUARTET

Sini Simonen violin

Daniel Roberts violin

Charlotte Bonneton viola

Christopher Graves cello

“A powerful individuality of sound matched by an instinctive singularity of musical intention”
– *The Scotsman*

In the nine years since its formation, the London-based Castalian Quartet has distinguished itself as one of the most dynamic, sophisticated young string quartets performing today. Recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society’s 2019 Young Artists Award, the Quartet also received the prestigious inaugural Merito String Quartet Award and Valentin Erben Prize in 2018, has won a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship Award, and is beginning to gain international acclaim as they take their talents abroad.

The Castalian Quartet will have their debut performances in Toronto, New York, Santa Fe, San Diego, and many other cities across North America in the 2020-21 season. In February 2019, the Quartet was joined at Wigmore Hall by guest artists Stephen Hough, Cédric Tiberghien, Michael Collins, Nils Mönkemeyer, Isabel Charisius and Ursula Smith to perform the chamber music of Brahms and Schumann. *The Guardian* (UK) raved, “To hear this music, so full of poetry, joy and sorrow, realised to such perfection, felt like a miracle.”

Other recent highlights include debuts at the Paris Philharmonie and Vienna Konzerthaus; performances of the complete Haydn Op.76 Quartets at Wigmore Hall; concerts in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Heidelberger Frühling, East Neuk, Zwischentöne Festival in Engelberg, Neuchatel Chamber Music in Switzerland and Banff International Festivals. Further afield they undertook tours of China and Colombia.

Formed in 2011, the Castalian Quartet studied with Oliver Wille (Kuss Quartet) at the Hannover University of Music, Drama and Media, graduating with a Master’s degree. In addition to the above, awards include Third Prize at the 2016 Banff Quartet Competition and First Prize at the 2015 Lyon Chamber Music Competition. The Quartet was selected by Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in 2016. They have received coaching from Simon Rowland-Jones, David Waterman and Isabel Charisius.

Their name is derived from the Castalian Spring in the ancient city of Delphi. According to Greek mythology, the nymph Castalia transformed herself into a fountain to evade Apollo’s pursuit, thus creating a source of poetic inspiration for all who drink from her waters. Herman Hesse chose Castalia as the name of his futuristic European utopia in *The Glass Bead Game*. The novel’s protagonist, a Castalian by the name of Knecht, is mentored in this land of intellectual thought and education by the venerable Music Master.

2020-21 season

CASTALIAN QUARTET PRESS ACCLAIM

"In Brahms's Piano Quintet, Hough joined the Castalian String Quartet, a young ensemble of whom I've heard a lot but hadn't actually encountered until now. They're terrific: violinists who seem capable of anything, layering a gleaming finish (often the key to a really luminous quartet sound) on a viola player with a tone like crushed velvet and a cellist who sounds like old gold."

–*The Spectator (UK) / January 2020*

"The Clarinet Quintet, a desert island choice for many of us, given a desert island-worthy performance here, ended the concert. To hear this music, so full of poetry, joy and sorrow, realised to such perfection, felt like a miracle."

–*The Guardian (UK) / January 2020*

"...It was in Brahms' Clarinet Quintet [with Michael Collins] where they hit sublime heights. The strings had a burnished glow – perfect for that sense of mature ripeness – but it was the variety of colours the employed that impressed. (...) Gloomy old Brahms? No, this was Brahms revelling in October sunshine, drinking in the colours – and doubtless the fruits of the wine harvest – around him. Sheer bliss."

–*Bachtrack (5 stars) / January 2020*

"A feisty group, with a real personality and strong interpretative ideas"

– *The Guardian / January 2020*

"A powerful individuality of sound matched by an instinctive singularity of musical intention"

– *The Scotsman*

"...the Castalians, led by the seraphic Sini Simonen who seems to pull her inspiration straight down from the skies, lived every moment. Depth came in the moving introduction of Schumann's First, A minor Quartet and more surprises in his slow movement, even if the final impression is one of manic exuberance."

The Arts Desk

"Schumann's Op 41 No 1 quartet was nothing short of sensational, and in performance the Castalian proved why they are in such demand, not just at the East Neuk Festival, but world-wide....an absolutely mesmerising evening of chamber music."

Dundee Courier

"The Castalian Quartet makes the simplest things we hear into the most important things we could ever want to hear."

"Their level of ensemble inter-connectedness in the Adès and at times in the subsequent movements of Brahms and Schumann was truly remarkable in evincing a physics most rare and special, overlaid with an emotional world of similarly surpassing sublimity. There were times that I simply could not believe my ears."

Calgary Herald

Warmth, energy and gripping momentum: Stephen Hough's Wigmore Hall residency reviewed

Hough was joined by the terrific young Castalian String Quartet

Richard Bratby

In the summer of 1878 Johannes Brahms finally succeeded in growing a beard. It was his third attempt. 'Prepare your wife for the grisly spectacle, for something so long suppressed cannot be beautiful,' he wrote to a friend, and by all accounts he wasn't wrong. Clara Schumann pleaded with him to shave it off. She'd have remembered Brahms as the golden-haired 20-year-old who had arrived on her doorstep in September 1853, glowing with genius; in the words of her husband Robert, 'a young blood at whose cradle graces and heroes stood guard'. For modern listeners, though, the beard has long since conquered — as if, like one of Philip Pullman's daemons, it somehow embodies Brahms in his gruff and hairy definitive form.

Stephen Hough opened the new year at the Wigmore Hall with a residency built around Brahms's chamber music, and a less bearded pianist you'll struggle to find. It's not that he can't or doesn't play Brahms. Hough's technique is invincible, and his performances of Brahms's two piano concertos are simultaneously among the freshest and most thoughtful on record. But when one thinks of Hough, it tends to be as a bringer of delight: the virtuoso as epicure, finding moments of clear-eyed loveliness in music that other pianists might dismiss as lollipops or oddities — or, more likely, simply can't play.

He writes about it too. Hough doesn't just play the music of the 'English Rachmaninov' York Bowen. He somehow puts the sensation into words, describing (in his recent book *Rough Ideas*), 'piano writing so elegant and refined that it seemed to slip around the hand like an old lambskin glove, the curling counterpoint almost nestling between the fingers rather than lying under the hand'. To the committed

Catholic Hough, you sense, there's a divine spark in all music, whether a prelude by Mompou or the Carousel Waltz. But where does such generosity and joy belong in the world of the agnostic Brahms, a composer in pewter and oak, and the gnarliest of self-critics? 'Such a great man, such a great soul!' declared his friend and disciple Antonin Dvorak. 'And he believes in nothing.'

In Brahms's Piano Quintet, Hough joined the Castalian String Quartet, a young ensemble of whom I've heard a lot but hadn't actually encountered until now. They're terrific: violinists who seem capable of anything, layering a gleaming finish (often the key to a really luminous quartet sound) on a viola player with a tone like crushed velvet and a cellist who sounds like old gold. As for Hough, well, he's never been the kind of pianist who trashes a piano quintet by treating it as a mini-concerto. Assertive without ever being overbearing, he provided rhythmic clarity and a forward-leaning energy that gave the whole performance a gripping momentum. Brahms's strenuously worked counterpoint took on the flexibility and strength of highly polished steel.

Until, that is, it melted. So much of Brahms's large-scale music — even the youthful stuff (and Brahms's youth left him with no shortage of pain to transmute into art) — sounds like an artist battling to contain his emotion within unbreakable forms. The struggle becomes the music, bracing if you're in the mood, exhausting if you're not. And yet almost always there will be some brief glimpse of consolation, when the music suddenly flushes with warmth and tenderness like sunlight breaking through the clouds after a storm-battered day.

At such moments of grace, there's no pianist you'd rather have than Stephen Hough. That's certainly how it felt towards the end of the first movement of the Quintet, and on the previous night, with clarinetist Michael Collins, at the beginning of Brahms's Second Clarinet Sonata. Brahms had officially retired when he wrote his clarinet music. He's stepped back from the struggle and Collins barely glanced at the sheet music as his figuration rippled over Hough's alert, sensitive piano. Although certainly beautiful, the performance did feel rather on the extrovert side. Perhaps even the Wigmore Hall is too public a space for such intimate music, though I was reminded of Hough's observation in *Rough Ideas* that instruments evolve, generally in a more forceful direction, and that Chopin would have been unable to play more than a few bars on a modern Steinway.

But the forgotten Austro-Hungarian composer Carl Frühling would surely have been thrilled to have heard his ultra-romantic Piano Quintet of 1892 performed at all, whatever the instruments. Frühling is another one of Hough's beloved musical misfits, played here as if his place next to Brahms were entirely deserved, with swooning string melodies, diamanté keyboard cascades, and just the lightest leavening of eastern spice (Frühling came from Lemberg, in Galicia). The audience received it even more enthusiastically than the Brahms, though rare pictures reveal that Frühling also had a beard. But only a small one, impeccably waxed.

The Guardian

Jan 11, 2020

The week in classical: NYO/Martín; Stephen Hough review – a flying start to 2020

The Clarinet Quintet, a desert island choice for many of us, given a desert island-worthy performance here, ended the concert. To hear this music, so full of poetry, joy and sorrow, realised to such perfection, felt like a miracle.

From word of mouth it's clear that Wigmore Hall, starting the season as it means to go on, has already notched up some top concerts – among them a recital by the young Russian pianist Pavel Kolesnikov and a Britten programme with the tenor Allan Clayton. My first, on Monday, was a mainly Brahms chamber concert devised by the pianist Stephen Hough as part of his Wigmore residency. Typically of Hough, he generously gave the lion's share to his fellow musicians, the clarinetist Michael Collins and, rising stars in their field, the Castalian String Quartet. They played Hough's skilful quintet arrangement of Beethoven's Violin Sonata in F, Op 24, "Spring": sunny, witty, idiomatic, and a highly original start to Beethoven 250 – the name being used worldwide to mark the anniversary of the composer's birth.

Hough and Collins, old friends, joined forces in Brahms's two clarinet sonatas (often played as viola sonatas too) with an ideal union of wistfulness and passion. Pivotal in the history of the clarinet but, for the rest of us, glories of the chamber repertoire, these contrasting works were the last chamber music Brahms wrote. How Collins managed to sustain his energy, as well as his seemingly limitless, invisibly achieved breath control, is anyone's guess. The Clarinet Quintet, a desert island choice for many of us, given a desert island-worthy performance here, ended the concert. To hear this music, so full of poetry, joy and sorrow, realised to such perfection, felt like a miracle.

THE TIMES

June 10, 2019

“...The Castalian Quartet were livelier still in Saturday’s concert in Aldeburgh church, wonderfully expressive in looks and sound in Britten, Haydn and a festival commission from Edmund Finnis, *Aloysius*, formally categorised as his String Quartet No. 1. Given its affecting rocking patterns, expressive musings on gravely beautiful polyphony by Byrd, and the natural ease of its writing for strings, I now look forward to Quartets 2, 3, and 4.”

Geoff Brown

Castalian String Quartet at Wigmore Hall – Haydn – the last three Quartets of Opus 76

Wednesday, July 25, 2018 Wigmore Hall, London

Reviewed by Antony Hodgson



This was the final concert in Wigmore Hall's Haydn String Quartet Series in which a considerable number of these compositions have been given by various performers, and many reviewed here on Classical Source (search "Haydn String Quartets Wigmore Hall Classical Source"). Differences of approach by distinguished ensembles have helped to illuminate the essence of these masterpieces. The Castalian String Quartet previously performed the first three of Opus 76 – memorable for a superb interpretation of the 'Emperor' Quartet – and its completion of the set was of a similar high standard and full of insight.

A characteristic of the players' sound is one of elegance, retained even when the music becomes fast and furious, and there is many a passage like that in Opus 76. No.1 opens in utmost calm however and there was rare beauty as Sini Simonen climbed from quietness and began to illuminate the day, the subtitle 'Sunrise' entirely justified and the bright forte outburst was all the more effective for being kept at the same measured tempo. In the Adagio, gentleness of tone expressed the serious nature of the music ideally and the modesty with which vibrato is used made the serenity all the more effective. The Minuet is marked Allegro but it was not hurried (I have a feeling that nowadays performers are moving away from

hasty approaches to such movements) and this made the onward drive of the Finale all the more effective.

In No.5 Haydn uses a fast ending to an opening movement (an effect anticipated in the reading of the previous work). This Allegretto, taken swiftly, has a much decorated main theme leading to an Allegro which surges excitingly forward. The following Largo cantabile was performed with grace and the Allegro Minuet was perfectly judged, allowing the delightful cello-led Trio to sound suitably grandfatherly in response. When Haydn writes Presto he means it and the Castalian members whipped the Finale along at great pace yet with absolute accuracy.

No.6 also begins with an Allegretto in variation form but this time the surprise at its close is a fugal Allegro. After performing the slow movement ('Fantasia') I appreciated the players not lowering their instruments for a long period; we needed time to reflect after such a gracious rendering. Presto is the requirement for the Minuet but this was controlled so that the very different middle section was kept in proportion, this is not a Trio but an Alternativo – a term used in Baroque times. As for the final Allegro spiritoso, I have never heard it taken so spectacularly fast yet it was absolutely precise and the golden tone was not compromised.

The high spirited atmosphere was retained in the encore – the Finale of Opus 76/1. As in their complete performance in April (link below), the players indulged a whim, slowing greatly for the quaint pizzicato passage that comes just before the end – delightful, and ideal to finish in great good humour.



The art of good conversation: an engaging evening of Haydn with the Castalian Quartet

By Mark Pullinger, 18 April 2018

We've all played the "dream dinner party guest list" game. I'd invite a witty raconteur like Victoria Coren-Mitchell or Stephen Fry to keep things lively; a dashing sporting hero, a glamorous soprano – no names! – and maybe a critic well into his anecdote age to spill scurrilous opera gossip. Everyone would make entertaining contributions, but nobody would hog the floor. Now apply that art of good conversation to string quartet writing and nobody – not even Mozart – does it better than Joseph Haydn.

Too often Haydn plays second fiddle to Mozart, although – ironically – when they played quartets together with Dittersdorf and Vanhal, it was Haydn who played first violin and Mozart who played the viola! Wolfgang's symphonies get programmed far more often in concert halls, as do the quartets, although Haydn was the father of both genres. Perhaps his prolific output – 68 string quartets – presents too much choice? What a joy, then, that Wigmore Hall is celebrating "Papa" Haydn's quartets with a series of recitals spanning his career. They are sometimes programmed with other composers, at others – as here with the Castalian String Quartet – taking the solo spotlight.

The six Op.76 string quartets are from Haydn's final creative period. They were published in 1799 with a dedication to Count Joseph Erdödy and were well received, Charles Burney proclaiming they were "full of invention, fire, good taste and new effects". The Castalian played the first three of the set (they tackle the other half in July) and Burney's admission that he "had never received more pleasure from instrumental music" could hardly have rung truer, so splendid were the performances.

The Castalian played with little vibrato, resulting in lithe, crisp accounts that never felt too weighty nor too rushed. Once the triple-chord opening of the G major quartet was dispatched, gentle conversation broke out straight away, the four players taking turns, like the entries of a fugue, to make their introductions. Charlotte Bonneton's velvet viola tone was the lynchpin, keeping the dialogue flowing, driving the debate. There was gravity aplenty for the serious, almost Beethovenian Adagio, while the Ländler-like violin figure for the third movement's Trio section found Sini Simonen soaring, despite the odd moment of insecure intonation. The muscular G minor finale put a rare scowl on Haydn's face before the false ending gave way to a delicate, tripping melody to see the quartet end in twinkling humour.

Two falling fifths at the start give the D major provide the quartet with its "Fifths" nickname, its austere first movement given a business-like rendition, alert but never driven too hard. After a delicate Andante, the spiky Minuet – sometimes called the "Witches' Minuet" – rasped vigorously. The Hungarian gypsy-style finale – characterised by its stamps and pauses – chattered merrily, Christopher Graves' sleek cello tone adding to the banter.

The finest of the first three Op.76 quartets – arguably of the entire set – is the C major no. 3. Its nickname of "The Emperor" is drawn from the second movement, where Haydn employed his own hymn tune "Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser" (God save the Emperor Franz), the former Austrian national anthem. It starts with the two violinists in cantabile duet, Simonen and Daniel Roberts dovetailed perfectly. The Castalian performed the opening movement with plenty of spirit, especially the central sections where Haydn slips some rural gossip into the conversation, throwing in a heavy peasant dance complete with wheezy drone, amusingly executed. After further rustic capers in the Minuet, the Presto finale was a little brusque, perhaps our host indicating that it was time for us to call our carriages and head home. Good dinner guests never outstay their welcome but the Castalian fully deserve their July return invitation.

Music review: Castalian String Quartet, Perth Concert Hall, four stars

By Keith Bruce @keithjbruce
Arts Editor
27th March 2018



WHEN those who make it their business to encourage young musicians are unanimous in their endorsement of a young chamber group, there is usually a good reason for it.

Led by Finnish violinist Sini Simonen, with a French viola player, Charlotte Bonneton, and two British blokes, violinist Daniel Roberts and cellist Christopher Graves, the Castalian Quartet have been championed by the Young Classical Artists Trust and won a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Fellowship among a string of other established and highly-regarded stepping stones. They have played a string of dates for the music clubs and societies

funded by Enterprise Music Scotland and will be appearing this summer at the East Neuk Festival in Fife, with one concert in partnership with pianist Christian Zacharias. Next month they are at London's Wigmore Hall to play three of Haydn's Opus 76 quartets.

They opened their lunchtime recital in Perth – which attracted the sort of attendance that suggests that the good word had already reached the Fair City – with the third of those, which has the Emperor's Hymn (the tune used for the German national anthem), and variations upon it, as its slow second movement. The lightness of touch the lower strings brought to the first and third movements was particularly striking, set against a folkie edge to Simonen's playing of the opening Allegro. Come the finale, however, it was the bold ensemble sound of the big opening chords that repeat at the end that stuck in the mind.

Schumann's Opus 41 Quartets were a 23rd birthday present to his beloved Clara and come from the time of his first symphonic writing, which is particularly obvious in the hugely expressive arc of the second movement of the last of them, which the Castalians played here (Kilrenny Church will hear the first at East Neuk at the end of June). A much darker tone is required throughout, and Bonneton revelled in the brooding melody line she has in the Adagio, before some of Haydn's influence reasserted itself in the comparatively brighter – but still far from unambiguous – finale.

14 MARCH 2018

Castalian String Quartet wins inaugural Merito String Quartet Award worth €45,000

Professional development award headed by Alban Berg Quartet cellist Valentin Erben, is based on secret observation of eligible quartets

The Castalian String Quartet, based in London, has been announced as the winner of the first Merito String Quartet Award/Valentin Erben Prize which carries €20,000 professional development prize, along with a further €25,000 towards sound recordings and a commission.

The award will be officially presented at the Wiener Konzerthaus on 23 April 2018, where the quartet will perform works by Haydn and Schumann.

There was no application process or competition for the award, but instead a secret jury assembled a shortlist of five quartets which were then observed in at least two concerts during the course of a year, always without the musicians' knowledge.

According to the award announcement, 'The aspects that were evaluated included their professional approach, repertoire, programming, the artistic quality of the concerts, their musical profile, and also the imagination and innovation displayed by the musicians. Their artistic career to date and recordings, where applicable, were also evaluated.'

The award is an initiative of Wolfgang Habermayer, owner of Merito Financial Solutions, and Valentin Erben, founding cellist of the Alban Berg Quartet.



*The Castalian Quartet, left to right, Charlotte Bonneton, Christopher Graves, Sini Simonen and Daniel Roberts
©Kaupo-Kikkas*

'The critical factor for us is how the young musicians behave in "everyday life" on the concert stage,' said Erben. 'We will now accompany and support the winning quartet professionally for four years to secure success on the international stage,' Habermayer added.

Of the Castalian Quartet, Erben commented: 'The human warmth and aura radiated by these four young people played a key role. They are never just putting on a show – the music is always close to their heart. You can feel their intense passion for playing in a quartet.'

As an optional addition to the award, Erben has offered the loan of four instruments by German luthier Stefan-Peter Greiner, the choice of Christian Tetzlaff among others.

The Castalian Quartet was also recently awarded a £20,000 fellowship from the Borletti-Buitoni Trust.

BISQC Day 2: Castalian Quartet shines, Quartet Berlin-Tokyo superb in their Bartók entries

STEPHAN BONFIELD

Updated: August 31, 2016

Excerpt:

“Castalian Quartet’s playing of [Bartók’s] String Quartet No. 6 was a case in point. From Charlotte Bonneton’s haunting viola solo that begins the work, Castalian showed the strongest composure in handling the many abstract and heartfelt uses of that opening idea. They delivered the highest quality narrative of the Bartók 6 I have heard at BISQC in a very long time.

The opening of the second movement was ethereal in every way, and the best so far we’ve heard at the competition — gorgeous tuning but also a sense of how to carry you from one theme to another with gentle transitions. The quartet owes a lot to first violinist Sini Simonen — what an outstanding and rare musician she is.

And that third movement! Just gloppingly heartfelt with exquisite and again, perfect, emotionally sensitive, exquisite tuning, this time from second violinist Daniel Roberts, especially on those “Bulgarese” chords — impossibly good. It was another remarkable

interpretation that ought to have stolen the heart of any honest Bartók fan.

But the fourth movement simply took the prize yesterday. What a lovely opening — suspenseful throughout, using a spectacular array of different interpretive thoughts and angles, all contrasting in style and phrase shape, and all interesting simply from our perspective of how to make a close reading of the score. This group came out and established themselves as the quartet to beat, with everything going right for them in their sound — such conspicuous middle voices in viola and second violin contributing to a darker hue I couldn’t get enough of. I can’t wait to hear them again Wednesday when they play their Ravel.”