



Quincy
PORTER

String Quartets Nos. 5-8

Ives Quartet



Quincy Porter (1897-1966)

String Quartets Nos. 5-8

A native of Connecticut, (William) Quincy Porter was one among a diverse generation of American composers, Roger Sessions, Howard Hanson and Roy Harris all being among his immediate contemporaries, who played a significant role in shaping and directing American musical culture in the mid-twentieth century, only for their music to be neglected thereafter.

Born in New Haven on 7th February 1897, Porter learnt the violin from an early age. He studied at Yale University with Horatio Parker, who taught Charles Ives a quarter-century before, and David Stanley Smith – graduating in 1919, before taking lessons with Vincent d'Indy in Paris. Returning to the United States in 1921, he worked with Ernest Bloch in New York and Cleveland, joining the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1923. A fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1928 made possible a three-year stay in Paris, during which time Porter laid the basis for the compositions of his maturity. In 1932 he was made professor of music at Vassar College, leaving six years later for the faculty of New England Conservatory, where he became director in 1942. In 1946 he returned to Yale as professor of music, which title he retained until his retirement in 1965. He died in Bethany on 12th November 1966.

Stylistically Porter inclines to neo-classicism, rather than modernism or neo-romanticism, as the basis for his creative thinking – though his approach avoids the emulation of traits derived from Stravinsky or Hindemith that affected so many American composers of his generation. Although his orchestral works attracted considerable attention in his lifetime (such as the *Concerto Concertante for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1954, while the *Viola Concerto* was praised by none other than William Primrose), his posthumous reputation rests more on his extensive chamber output: specifically the series of nine string quartets which stretches across the greater part (1922-58) of his composing career.

This disc features *Nos. 5-8*, all of them written over a

period of 15 years and the initial three evincing a resourceful response to the archetypal three-movement (fast-slow-fast) format. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Porter made an extensive use of chromatic harmonies and sophisticated rhythms within an essentially melodic context, while his own skill as an executant musician (he had studied violin alongside composition, and was a viola player in the Cleveland-based De Ribaupierre Quartet during the 1920s) comes across in his writing for strings – resulting in quartets that are idiomatic and pleasurable in equal measure.

The *Fifth Quartet* was written in 1935 and is among the most formally dense and expressively wide-ranging of the cycle. The first movement begins with an elegiac introduction that gains in expressive intensity before a nagging rhythmic motif presages the *Allegro*. Its restive main theme can be heard in dialogue between the first violin and cello, while a secondary theme is audibly derived from that of the introduction, then the music continues its purposeful course on route to a terse and surprisingly oblique ending. The second movement (one of Porter's most affecting) centres on an eloquent melody whose haunting aura is only relatively offset by the more fluid motion of its middle section, after which aspects of both themes combine prior to the blissful close. The third movement commences with a propulsive rhythmic idea that takes in a more expressive theme during its hectic onward course. Towards the centre this vehemence abates and the latter theme comes into its own for a plangent restatement, but the earlier momentum is not to be denied and the driving energy resumes accordingly – though the final destination is unclear until a final surge brings the fateful closing chords.

The *Sixth Quartet* was written in 1937 and, compared to its predecessor, is lighter in tone without any relaxing of Porter's characteristically firm grip in terms of motivic evolution.

The first movement starts with lively contrapuntal interplay, out of which the spirited first theme duly

emerges and soon finds contrast with a more inward theme that gradually stills the prevailing activity. This is resumed towards the incisive central development, then the main themes are reprised in an appreciably modified guise before the initial activity gains all the while in impetus to bring about a decisive close. The second movement, by contrast, is of great eloquence and one in which the composer's nobly wrought polyphony unfolds through to a brief while determined culmination before resuming its searching course. The third movement suggests a certain folk influence in its carousing main theme as reaches an inward central episode, before going on its nonchalant way towards the sweeping final bars.

The *Seventh Quartet* was written in 1943 and is dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, whose support led to the creation of many such works during the first half of the twentieth century. The first movement opens with a plaintive theme in which first violin and cello are first among equals, and this gains greater impetus as it heads into a more animated second theme with its bracing rhythmic repetition and frequent use of pizzicato writing. At length elements of the initial theme resurface, but they are held in check as activity resumes prior to the closing flourish. The second movement starts as a ruminative discourse whose yearning harmonies gradually gain intensity as the music reaches a plangent climax before regaining its earlier poise. The third movement sets off

with a forceful idea such as finds contrast with a more elegant theme – the two alternating prior to a sudden hush near mid-point, from where both ideas return in modified guise before the onward motion secures a decisive resolution.

Both of Porter's final quartets are structured as a single movement, though this does not bring any notable change of idiom; rather an increase in the motivic dexterity which had long been a hallmark of the composer. Written in 1950, the *Eighth Quartet* begins with a *Lento* whose inward speculation yields notably subtle harmonic shades, after which the belated arrival of the *Allegro* fails to generate greater momentum as this and a more expressive theme alternate on the way to a brief series of recitative-like exchanges. Elements from the themes previously heard are brought together in a free reprise, though any tendency towards greater impetus is quickly dispelled by the ensuing rhapsodic bars. The music now heads into an *Adagio* whose essentially introspective mood picks up on that from the outset of the work, and one which remains free of disruption almost until the ending – when a momentary though aggressive chordal sequence emerges out of the prevailing inwardness with which the work concludes.

Richard Whitehouse

Ives Quartet

Bettina Mussumeli, Violin I • Susan Freier, Violin II • Jodi Levitz, Viola • Stephen Harrison, Cello



Photo: Steve Blumenthal

Inspired by the unique temperament of the composer Charles Ives, the Ives Quartet is acclaimed for revelling in the unfamiliar and championing an eclectic repertoire, mixing established masterworks with neglected compositions of early-twentieth-century America, and commissioned new pieces. The Quartet appears in notable chamber music series and festivals nationwide bringing American and European experience and sensibilities which draw on the solo, chamber music, and recording careers of its members – Bettina Mussumeli, violin; Susan Freier, violin; Jodi Levitz, viola; and Stephen Harrison, cello. Each is an acclaimed performer, earning distinction with renowned ensembles, including the Chester and Stanford Quartets, I Solisti Veneti, the Chicago String Trio, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. They have commissioned works from distinguished composers including William Bolcom and received grants to support recordings of American string quartets. Recordings on the Laurel Records, Music and Arts, and Naxos labels include music of William Bolcom, Ben Johnston, Marc Neikrug, Donald Crockett and, most recently, Quincy Porter. They produce a home season concert series in the San Francisco Bay Area where its members are committed musician-teachers at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Stanford University, as well as at music festivals around the world.

www.ivesquartet.org

**Quincy
PORTER**
(1897-1966)

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| String Quartet No. 7 (1943) | 15:40 |
| 1 I. Allegro moderato | 6:39 |
| 2 II. Adagio molto | 4:51 |
| 3 III. Allegro moderato | 4:10 |
| String Quartet No. 5 (1935) | 17:47 |
| 4 I. Adagio ma non troppo –
Allegro moderato | 6:10 |
| 5 II. Andante, calmo | 5:53 |
| 6 III. Allegro molto | 5:44 |
| String Quartet No. 6 (1937) | 18:11 |
| 7 I. Allegro molto | 8:41 |
| 8 II. Adagio | 5:28 |
| 9 III. Allegro giocoso | 4:02 |
| String Quartet No. 8 (1950) | 14:20 |
| 10 Lento – Allegro – Poco meno mosso – | 9:32 |
| 11 Adagio molto espressivo | 4:48 |

Ives Quartet

**Bettina Mussumeli, Violin I • Susan Freier, Violin II
Jodi Levitz, Viola • Stephen Harrison, Cello**

Recorded in St Stephen's Church, Belvedere, California,
on 20th, 23rd, 27th and 28th May, 2008; on 5th April, 2009;
and on 16th May, 2012

Producer and editor: Jason O'Connell • Engineer: Robert
Shumaker • Recording assistants: Tanya Tompkins,
Alexa Beattie, Donald E. Osborne

Publishers: Quincy Porter (tracks 1-3); Composer's facsimile
(tracks 4-6); Edition Peters (tracks 7-9); Valley Music Press
(tracks 10-11) • Booklet notes: Richard Whitehouse

Cover photograph by enfig (Fotolia.com)



AMERICAN CLASSICS

The generation of composers which proved so influential in mid-twentieth century America included Roger Sessions, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris and Quincy Porter. Porter's much-admired orchestral music is marked by originality in its absorption of neo-classicism, but his series of nine string quartets also represents an important contribution to the genre. *Quartets Nos. 5 to 8* are the works of a composer who had been a professional string player in the 1920s and are marked by rhythmic sophistication and melodic tension. 'A very enjoyable disc which whets one's appetite for the remaining five quartets.' – *Penguin Guide* on Volume 1 (8.559305).

www.naxos.com

Playing
Time:
66:00