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## Concerts

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# Cherubini Quartet plays Schubert cycle

by Hartmut Cramer

To state it at the very outset: The Cherubini Quartet is already right up there among the world-class classical string quartets, and its exciting performances were without a doubt the absolute high-point of this year's May Music Festival in Wiesbaden, West Germany.

The technical mastery shown by these four young musicians—first violinist Christoph Poppen (32), second violinist Harald Schoneweg (36), violist Hariolf Schlichtig (38), and violoncellist Klaus Kämpfer (36)—was perfect and left nothing more to be desired. We were impressed not only by their absolutely perfect intonation, but also by their great instrumental balance and ensemble throughout the entire Schubert cycle—qualities which belie an extraordinary gift for chamber music, and quite a lot of hard work.

Their performance was marred only by the acoustical problems inside the Marktkirche sanctuary, whose strong echo effects considerably distorted our otherwise pure enjoyment of art, and made it difficult to render an effective judgment on the first two concerts. The listener could only surmise the finely differentiated manner in which the Cherubini Quartet was able to shape the musical material; and that surmise was more than confirmed in the final two concerts, which were held in the Casino Hall. It is completely inexplicable, how the directors of the May Festival could have entrusted the selection of a concert hall for a world-class ensemble, to someone who did not personally know the various locales, and who settled for someone else's assurances that the acoustics were "not that bad." Or, perhaps he or she was not even aware of the jewel which had been entrusted them.

### Well-composed program

The works for each program were adroitly selected. At each concert, the listeners were first put into the right frame of mind, with one of the "easier" quartets dating from 1813-16, a time during which Schubert not only did intensive counterpoint and fugal studies, but also set to music many poems by Schiller. These already quite artistically elaborated

quartets are by no means "juvenalia"; before he wrote these, Schubert (born in 1797) had already written a whole series of string quartets; his first attempts, at age 12, were intended for his own family's "house quartet," where he played the viola.

The musically impressive counterposition of these finely composed "apprenticeship pieces"—in which Schubert quite audibly works through the quartet literature of Haydn and especially Mozart (particularly clear in Schubert's G minor and E Major quartets)—alongside his "late" works from 1824-28, afforded the listeners an interesting insight into the course of development of Schubert's creative work. In this respect, the final concert was the most revealing; but more about that later.

It was remarkable how confidently Christoph Poppen, who is able to produce anything he wants on the violin, led the quartet, and how intensively his three colleagues played, heard, and felt as one. The second violinist Harald Schoneweg often literally "leaned into" his two other colleagues. The evenness in the quality of their tone and bowing was striking: The "passing along" of the themes and figures from violin to violin was inaudible, and to the viola and the 'cello it could only be heard as a darker tone-color. All this, in the midst of sometimes enormous technical difficulties, which already turn up in his "early" works (in the E major quartet!), and always without false shows of virtuosity, entirely in the service of the whole.

Concerning the violist Harald Schlichtig, we can only congratulate the quartet. He is a very secure, sensitive musician, with a big, warm tone, who always jumps in forcefully when that is required. We would have liked the 'cellist Klaus Kämper, who also distinguishes himself with a wonderfully beautiful tone, to have been somewhat more forceful at many points; in the quintet, he certainly proved that he is capable of doing so.

### Influence of the Amadeus Quartet

The quartet's musicality was completely in keeping with their technical qualities: The fast movements were fresh and well-accented, and the slow ones song-like and flowing; the minuets and scherzos were very joyful and "Viennese," with clearly delineated, restrained trios. It was evident in every respect, that these musicians had learned quite a lot from the members of the Amadeus Quartet, their great paragons and teachers. This is particularly true of Christoph Poppen, who has profited much from Norbert Brainin's art of bowing and quartet-leading.

This influence was quite evident in the performance of the Quartet in D minor ("Death and the Maiden"), the enormous artistic difficulties of which they surmounted extraordinarily well. Especially successful were the ultra-sensitive second movement, which puts extremely high demands on ensemble-playing abilities, and the last movement, whose chasing rhythm in the original tempo (*presto—prestissimo*)

is very difficult to handle from the standpoint of bow technique. But the Cherubini Quartet solved all these problems in a downright “playful” manner, so that there was even room left over for an impressive shaping of this entire quartet, one of the most difficult in the entire repertoire.

The impression that something utterly extraordinary was being offered at the Wiesbaden May Festival, was strengthened during the final evening of the Schubert cycle, which featured works which typified the process of Schubert’s musical development. First came the Quartet in E Major from 1816, the last of Schubert’s “apprenticeship pieces,” which is a hermetic composition, a “typical” string quartet.

### Quartet movement in C minor

Schubert himself was well aware of this limitation, and it took him a good four years before he attempted another string quartet, in 1820—and failed. This “failure,” however, is actually an extraordinary stroke of luck for music as a whole, since the dramatic as well as lyrical Quartet Movement in C Minor, which was performed following the Quartet in E Major, is one of the most powerful movements ever written for string quartet.

The Cherubini Quartet played this movement not only extraordinarily quickly, as Schubert specified (*Allegro assai*), but also with all its inherent tension and intensity, while strictly observing its difficult dynamic shifts. It was truly a technically perfect performance, which hardly left anything to be desired in its shaping of the living musical material.

Is the Cherubini Quartet already at the absolute pinnacle of the art of classical quartet playing? Fortunately not. For if that were true, this young quartet would hardly have any more potential for development. The musicians only began playing together ten years ago; and measured against the approximately 40 years which such famous ensembles as the Quartetto Italiano and the Amadeus Quartet (the latter a veritable musical institution) have worked together, the Cherubini Quartet’s ten years is not all that much. There is, in any case, always something new to discover in string quartets.

Let us take, for example, the correct shaping of the quartet’s internal proportions. In the Quartet Movement in C Minor, the entry of the four instruments, beginning at *pianissimo*, with the violin moving to *affz* and rising almost three octaves from C’ to A”, succeeded with breathtaking precision and tension; but the following two measures, where the first violin drops down, via a *fp*, to a low B, was not sufficiently deliberate. The immense, pent-up force of measure 9, which goes up to b”, must be carefully counterbalanced by the immediately following falling eighth-notes—otherwise there is no sense to the lyrical *pp* figure in measure 13, which for its part is merely a presentiment of the song-like theme, beginning in measure 27. Only a tiny nuance of slowing up was lacking here, but it is precisely such nuances of artistic *freedom*, which make musical pieces into entire worlds, and whose adequate, *non-arbitrary* shaping requires

up to 40 years of playing together in the same quartet.

Demonstrating the *freedoms* which the composer has elaborated in his works, additionally requires an explicit—and often crass—accentuation of the “edges and corners,” which thereby lend more *immediacy* to the process of musical creation and development. Measured by this criterion, the Cherubini Quartet’s performances seemed too “perfect,” and often too “smooth.” What is still lacking in the Cherubini Quartet’s interpretations, is the *necessary* element of *lawful freedom*, which can only be demonstrated in the course of very long and intensive artistic collaboration.

### High-point: Quintet in C major

Where will this lead? We got a good foretaste in the closing quintet, since the presentation of this grandiose work, composed by Schubert in September 1828, shortly before his death, emerged as the crowning conclusion of the entire Schubert cycle. The addition of Manuel Fischer-Dieskau (just turned 25) as the second ’cellist, was an extraordinarily good choice—not merely because his mastery of his instrument was on a par with that of his colleague, but also because he has an extraordinary poetic sensibility and strength of imagination, precisely the qualities which can create new degrees of freedom in interpretation. Exemplary was the “pizzicato dialogue” between the first violin and the second ’cello in the slow movement (the *Adagio*), whose expressiveness made it one of the most beautiful moments of the entire concert.

Contributing to this lively presentation, was the above-mentioned fact, that the Cherubini Quartet possesses an exceptional violist, an indispensable prerequisite for Schubert’s compositions. Positioned not only visually, but also musically at the center of the quartet, and sometimes brought together with the two violins, sometimes with the two ’celli, the viola frequently becomes the sole “fulcrum” of the quintet, introducing new developments or accentuating the dynamics. Hariolf Schlichtig showed a sovereign mastery of this difficult task, and did so with an ever-beautiful, full tone. The ovations from the audience, who included a large number of young people, was completely well-deserved.

We should note, that it has been not quite a year now, since violist Peter Schidlof’s sudden death, marking the tragic end of the Amadeus Quartet, on which occasion *Ibykus*, the German magazine of culture, science, and statecraft, wrote that it is consoling to know “that these four musicians had also worked toward educating their own ‘successors,’ who, hopefully, [will be] just as original, independent, and unique, and thus, of course, in many respects completely *different*, as their great paragons and teachers.”

If the Cherubini Quartet stays together and continues to work on itself, and summons the courage and the energy to develop as a *quartet*, so that it may conquer new realms of artistic freedom for itself and for its audience, then it will surely be able to step in as the true successor to the Amadeus Quartet.