

Chamber

CHAMBER CHOICE



A rich score drawn from wanderings in America

Kate Wakeling is captivated by the Partch Ensemble's compelling realisation of a truly original body of works



Go your own way: Partch Ensemble breathe life into *The Wayward*

Partch

The Wayward

Partch Ensemble
Bridge BRIDGE9611 55:10 mins

Harry Partch was that rare thing of a true original. Born in California in 1901, Partch went on to create his own musical scale, construct his own (highly idiosyncratic) musical instruments and compose some of the strangest and most delightful music of the 20th century. This glorious disc from the Partch Ensemble brings to life one of Partch's most intriguing and affecting series of works, *The Wayward*, in a world premiere recording.

Partch describes *The Wayward* as 'a collection of musical compositions based on the spoken and written words of hobos and other characters – the result of my wanderings in the Western part of the United States from 1935 to 1941'. This recording brings together, for the first time, all five pieces that comprise the 'collection'. These range from the eight-movement work *Barstow*, which features

lively spoken text (based on hitchhiker inscriptions from a highway railing in Barstow) heard above a spritely band of Partch's custom instruments, to the more melancholy piece *San Francisco*, which evokes the chill of the city's mist.

It is a treat to hear so many of Partch's original instruments on the album, including the Cloud

Chamber Bowls (suspended perspex bowls struck with a beater), the Chromelodeon (a pump organ, retuned to fit Partch's scale system) and the Castor and Pollux (a

zither-like instrument with 44 strings). Instrumental performances throughout the record are precise and richly musical, while the vocal lines, which often teeter between the spoken and the sung, are delivered with terrific charm. It is a pleasure indeed to encounter music so alive with imagination and performed with such poise. ★★★★★

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Bacewicz

String Quartet No. 4, Piano Quintet No. 1

Karski Quartet; Jâms Coleman (piano)

Evil Penguin Classic EPRC0078

52:38 mins



This fine recording illuminates the still largely underappreciated chamber music

of Grażyna Bacewicz, Poland's national treasure, both a virtuoso violinist and highly-regarded composer during the 20th century. The Karski Quartet and pianist Jâms Coleman deliver gripping interpretations of her Piano Quintet No. 1 (1952) and String Quartet No. 4 (1951), works that exemplify Bacewicz's synthesis of contrasting movements and moods, extended melodic lines and her oscillation between tonal and modal harmonies, all punctuated by moments of abstraction.

The piano quintet is an emotional rollercoaster, opening with atmospheric textures before building to a magnificently intense third movement. The string colours of the Karskis are often silvery and transparent, beautifully matched by Coleman's layered, colouristic playing (balance works well throughout this demanding work). Despite much bleakness, the work contains both humour and pathos, culminating in a thrilling *Con Passione* finale that showcases imaginative, cheeky textures – here handled with virtuosity. The music evokes mid-century devastation and industrially-tinged despair.

The String Quartet No. 4 opens with sinister quiet, and unfolds with formal spaciousness through a variety of moods. Particularly moving is her use of the cello's rich voice, while the second movement dreams and mutters before a witty, dancelike finale. The inclusion of a traditional folk song arrangement – actually sung! – provides a perfect, unexpectedly touching conclusion to this illuminating and emotionally powerful recording.

The recording's grainy, intimate sound beautifully captures Bacewicz's rich textures, though I occasionally wanted more vehemence – even roughness – to intensify the dramatic impact. But

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this recording should win admirers for both this fine composer and these thoughtful musicians.

Natasha Loges ★★★★★

Martinů

String Quartets 2-3-5-7

Pavel Haas Quartet

Supraphon SU4368-278:54 mins



Placing the Fifth Quartet at the beginning of this record is a wake-up call. Starting with motoric

rhythmic energy, before turning to a more lyrical second theme, it shows two faces of Martinů's composing personality. Both are beautifully and intensely conveyed here, with bright, honest sound which brings clarity to the layers of the second movement, its long sustained melody coloured by tremolo and pizzicato. Energy is unrelenting in the *Allegro vivo*, then a long slow introduction leads to an *Allegro* finale, which begins genially, but ends in darker minor hues.

The Third Quartet is more dissonant and more concentrated, coming in at 13 minutes. Hints of warmth in the *Andante* are offset by often acerbic harmonies, and the outer movements have passages of barely contained violence. What a contrast to the Seventh Quartet, whose clean lines and contrapuntal textures look back to the Baroque, although there are harmonic features and a sometimes-impish sense of humour which place it firmly in the 20th century, as well as traces of Dvořákian melody: the players manage the rapid changes of mood and colour with élan.

Echoes of Martinů's teacher Josef Suk permeate the introduction to the first movement of the Second Quartet, before it moves to a more neoclassical language, reflecting a later teacher: Roussel. There's toughness as well as sentiment in the *Andante*, and the vigorous finale contains a cadenza which, for me, interrupts the flow of the music. But a fascinating collection, well worth investigating.

Martin Cotton ★★★★★

Mendelssohn

String Quartets (X-Files)

Uxia Martínez Botana (double bass), Sergey Ostrovsky (violin), Alexander Kagan (violin), Noémie Bialobroda (viola)

Fuga Libera FUG847 47:38 mins



This is very much Uxia Martínez Botana's project, replacing cello in the quartet with double bass.

What's the point? You may well ask, and the opening track – the *Adagio non troppo* from the E flat Quartet – doesn't give much of a clue. The bass plays the cello part mostly at the original pitch, and the only differences are in tone colour, which is sometimes gruffer, and phrasing, where legato can be less smooth. There's also a sense of safety in the performance, with Mendelssohn's many dynamic indications not fully explored and a rather strait-laced approach to rubato.

The high, scurrying semiquavers in the *allegro fugato* section of the *Capriccio* from the Op. 81 Pieces are often put down an octave, but not always clear in pitch, muddling the harmonic stability. And in the *Fuga*, changing octaves in the middle of phrases sometimes disturbs their shape and continuity.

Mendelssohn's response to the death of his sister, the F minor Quartet, sets off with the right feeling of despair and anger, but loses energy when it slows for the few bars of *tarantella*, and the bass tremolandi tend to come over as a rumble. Anger continues in the second movement, and this is more successful in terms of balance and coherence of texture, as is the

Adagio, where the sustained nature of the music allows the bass sonority to match the other players better. But caution in tempo and dynamic projection rob the final *Allegro molto* of its impact. On the whole, an unsuccessful experiment.

Martin Cotton ★★

Birds of Paradise

Works by Henriette Renié, Reena Esmail and Angélica Negrón

Ember

Azica Records ACD-71383 47:18 mins



This brisk, contemporary take on the trio by the harpist, composer, pedagogue and prodigy Henriette Renié brings an enjoyable sense of definition to the piece, making it a welcome addition to the catalogue. Renié's remarkable self-determination was both musical and ideological; she extended the role of the harp both technically and in terms of repertoire and was an activist long before the term was invented, advancing the cause of women in music and upending the convention that the harp should be a domestic pastime for women, but a profession for men. Written in 1901, her Trio's four movements draw on the style of late 19th century French Romanticism with elements of the modernist ideas that were also

developing, conveyed here in an interpretation that is evocative but never mannered. Renié herself was inspired by beauty above all else, but without the preclusion of subtle intensity (as in the melancholy *Andante*) or sheer energy (as in the animated closing *Allegro*). There's a nice element of legacy here, too, in that harpist Emily Levin studied under Susann McDonald who had been a pupil of Renié.

The two shorter pieces present an expertly programmed transition into later styles. The composers have a certain amount in common: both have diverse cultural roots and both are outward-looking and polygeneric in their approaches, with Negrón's discreet use of field recordings being particularly effective. Roger Thomas ★★★★★

Farasha

Works by de Bréville, Hindemith, Mendelssohn, Khaled Al Kammar et al

Sindy Mohamed (viola), Julien Quentin (piano), Serdar Saydan (Riq), Wassim Mukdad (Oud)

Berlin Classics 0303729BC 55:82 mins



'Farasha' is the Arabic word for 'butterfly', and Sindy Mohamed has chosen the word to reflect

her complicated musical progress from dowdy larva to airborne gorgeousness. She's one of those lucky musicians with bi-cultural roots, born and brought up in France but was introduced to Arabic music by the singing of her mother. 'Everything I heard at home was Arabic,' she says. Egypt was the Hollywood of the Middle East, and Sindy absorbed all its songs.

At seven, she expressed a desire to go to a music school, and as the piano class was full, the teacher suggested that she try the viola, that being, as the teacher put it, 'an instrument that has a golden age awaiting it.' Sindy took it up seriously later, at a classical conservatoire.

The grandest work on this CD – Saint-Saëns's Sonata for Bassoon and Piano – originally reflected that composer's desire, at the end of his hugely productive life, to do justice to under-appreciated instruments. 'I am spending my last energies,' as he put it, 'on widening the repertoire.' And in this new arrangement by Léa Hennino, the viola replaces