

Freedom, balance, musicality

For its 15th anniversary, the French **Quatuor Modigliani** is releasing a new album, “Portraits”, on the Mirare label. On it, the Parisian virtuosos invite listeners to join them on a spectacular gallery tour through different eras and styles as represented by 13 musical miniatures – and, in the process, impressively bolster their reputation as one of the top string quartets in the world.



Felix Mendelssohn:

[1] CAPRICCIO

Sergej Rachmaninow:

[2] SCHERZO

Giacomo Puccini:

[3] CRISANTEMI

Erich Wolfgang

Korngold:

[4] INTERMEZZO

Fritz Kreisler:

[5] SCHERZO

Samuel Barber:

[6] ADAGIO

Franz Schubert:

[7] MENUETT UND TRIOS D 89 NR. 3

Alexander Borodin:

[8] SERENATA ALLA SPAGNOLA

Dmitri Schostakowitsch:

[9] POLKA

Anton Webern:

[10] LANGSAMER SATZ

Roman Hoffstetter:

[11] SÉRÉNADE

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:

[12] PRESTO

Leroy Anderson:

[13] PLINK, PLANK, PLUNK!

Quatuor Modigliani

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The Quatuor Modigliani has reached the very summit of the international music scene. Here are some irrefutable proofs: in 2017, the four French musicians were booked as the first string quartet to perform in the Great Hall of the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. The same year, they started their own series of masterclasses at the legendary Conservatoire national supérieur de musique in Paris. In the coming months, the quartet will again be giving concerts worldwide in North and South America, Japan and Europe, among other places. And now, with “Portraits”, Amaury Coeytaux (violin), Loïc Rio (violin), Laurent Marfaing (viola) and François Kieffer (cello) are presenting what is already their ninth studio album on the label Mirare. Fifteen years have passed since the ensemble was founded, years in which it has studied with the Quatuor Ysaÿe, taken part very successfully in competitions and received various prizes for its CD releases (including the “Grand Prix du Disque”) on its path to becoming a string quartet of international standing. As early as 2014, the prominent German critic Harald Eggebrecht wrote enthusiastically about the Quatuor Modigliani’s playing: “Balance between the four parts, sensitivity of sound, harmonic and dynamic alertness and incisive rhythm always remain their goal. It all sounds effortless, masterly and immensely elastic.”

Now, in 2019, some more characteristics have become audible: above all, maturity and serenity, allowing the musicians even greater artistic freedom. But all this always remains in the spirit of their namesake, the painter Amedeo Modigliani, whose motto was: “It is your duty in life to save your dream.” This Italian artist, who died in Paris in 1920, was an outstanding portrait painter. And on its current album for its 15th anniversary, “Portraits”, the Quatuor Modigliani makes a deliberate musical statement on how it sees itself by presenting a kind of portrait gallery of very different composers. Each individual piece can be understood as “a photograph of the interpreters at a given moment”, says Loïc Rio. “But it is more a stroll through different images, atmospheres and epochs.”

The 13 works selected for “Portraits” are also ideal ways to portray the ensemble itself: its enormous stylistic range, its astoundingly effortless virtuosity combined with the highest degree of musical expertise, interpretative sophistication and controlled emotionality. There is not too much or too little of anything, and nothing is smoothed over; rather, things that were hidden are brought to the surface. To explain this, François Kieffer takes the supposedly comical genre of the scherzo – two scherzos, one by Sergei **Rachmaninoff** and one by Fritz **Kreisler** are included on the recording – as an example: “Their humour is often disconcerting, their pauses make a roguish or ambiguous effect, while their sometimes wittily inflected harmonies are like plays on words.” **Mendelssohn's** “Capriccio”, with its captivating and enchanting romanticism, is an attractive opener for the album. **Puccini's** “Crisantemi” take listeners into profound emotional abysses in what starts as a grief-filled elegy yet ends in spiritual exaltation. The celebrated film-music composer Erich Wolfgang **Korngold**, who is also known for his full-blown emotionality, shows his cheerful side here in the Intermezzo of his String Quartet No. 2, composed in 1933. Loic Rio says of this work: “It is a nice example of humour in music. His highly complex compositional technique takes us into the carefree period between the wars, when all the brilliant Viennese minds seem to gather together in a cheerful assembly.” And the epoch of (Viennese) classicism also receives its due on “Portraits” with **Mozart** (KV 136) and a serenade by the Benedictine monk Roman **Hoffstetter** (a work that was long ascribed to Joseph Haydn).

What makes a good portrait is, above all, the distinctive depiction of an individual character, the conscious (stylistic) differentiation from what has been previously seen or heard. So it seems only logical that for “Portraits”, which also includes, among other things, a **Schubert** minuet (D. 89 No. 3), Samuel **Barber's** “Adagio” (which became world-famous in a later version for orchestra), a polka by **Shostakovich** and **Borodin's** “Spanish Serenade”, musical uniqueness was the main criterion for selection, something that guarantees the maximum of variety for listeners. And they also learn something about the history of the Quatuor Modigliani as an ensemble, for example, with Anton **von Webern's** “Langsamer Satz” (“Slow Movement”): “This piece grew on us; we already played it during our first performances. It represents an important aesthetic turning point, a sort of climax of romanticism. Here, he gives himself over completely to a tender, generous melodism that contrasts sharply with his later, extremely concentrated mode of expression.” For the last piece on their 15th-anniversary album, the four French musicians intentionally turn to the world of light music: Leroy **Anderson's** “Plink, Plank, Plunk!” was successful not only as show music on US television in the 1950s, but has also proved its worth in countless concerts by the Quatuor Modigliani as the “encore of encores”, after which “the hall goes wild every time” – something nice to imagine when listening to this CD soon at home.

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