

Saint-Saens: Piano Quintet - Piano Quartet - Barcarolle (2013)

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Piano Quartet in B flat major, Op 41 1. *I. Allegretto* 2. *II. Andante maestoso* 3. *III. Poco allegro più tosto moderato* 4. *IV. Allegro* 5. *Barcarolle in F major, Op 108*

Piano Quintet in A minor, Op 14

6. *I. Allegro moderato e maestoso* 7. *II. Andante sostenuto* 8. *III. Presto* 9. *IV. Allegro assai, ma tranquillo*

Cristina Ortiz – piano Fine Arts Quartet: Efim Boico, Ralph Evans – violin Nicolò Eugelmi – viola Robert Cohen – cello

The Fine Arts Quartet and Cristina Ortiz find much that is gentle amid the hot-bloodedness of Saint-Saëns's chamber music. The opening of the B flat major Piano Quartet is seductive, and the string theme that follows soon afterwards has a delightful lilt.

The second movement *Andante maestoso* is terrific, with energetic staccato strings that if anything are slightly drier than Ortiz, who is placed slightly to the fore of her colleagues in a resonant acoustic. In the midst of a clean, snappy performance of the *Poco allegro* that follows, leader Ralph Evans launches into his cadenza with Romantic relish, complete with swooping portamentos. The last movement is long, and can sag, but the players hold the line convincingly. The *Barcarolle*, here in its piano quartet version, has a sensuous swing, punctuated with high-spirited string outbursts.

In the A minor Piano Quintet, the 20-year-old composer gave the pianist (himself) the lion's share of the interesting material, and Ortiz rises splendidly to its challenges. The quartet plays with a beguiling lightness of touch when Saint-Saëns relaxes from his urgent grandeur, with some beautiful lyrical playing in the slow movement, particularly from violist Nicolò Eugelmi and cellist Robert Cohen. The players treat the opening fugue of the finale with tender loving care.

---Tim Homfray, thestrad.com

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