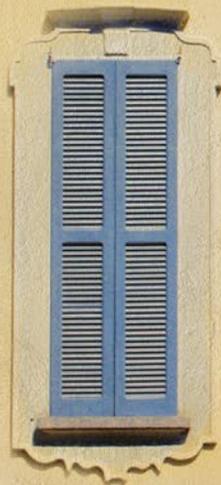


R. STRAUSS • VERDI

String Quartets

Enso Quartet



Richard STRAUSS (1864-1949) · Giuseppe VERDI (1813-1901): String Quartets
Giacomo PUCCINI (1858-1924): Crisantemi · Three Minuets in A major

The German composer and conductor Richard Strauss represents a remarkable extension of the work of Liszt and Wagner in the symphonic poems of his earlier career, followed by operas that remain part of standard operatic repertoire. Born in Munich, the son of a distinguished horn-player and his second wife, a member of a rich brewing family, he had a sound general education there, while studying music under teachers of obvious distinction. Before he left school in 1882 he had already enjoyed some success as a composer, continued during his brief period at Munich University with the composition of concertos for violin and for French horn and a sonata for cello and piano. By the age of 21 he had been appointed assistant conductor to the well-known orchestra at Meiningen under Hans von Bülow, whom he succeeded in the following year.

In 1886 Strauss resigned from Meiningen and began the series of tone-poems that seemed to extend to the utmost limit the extra-musical content of the form. Meanwhile he was establishing his reputation as a conductor, directing the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra for a season and taking appointments in Munich and then in 1898 at the opera in Berlin, where he later became Court Composer. The new century brought a renewed attention to opera, after earlier relative failure. *Salome* in Dresden in 1905 was followed by a series of works, ending only with *Capriccio*, mounted at the Staatsoper in Munich in 1942. His final years were clouded by largely unfounded accusations of collaboration with the musical policies of the Third Reich and after 1945 he withdrew for a time to Switzerland, returning to his own house at Garmisch only four months before his death in 1949.

While still at school, Strauss was a proficient pianist. At the same time he showed obvious gifts as a composer. He had had his first piano lessons at the age of four with his father's colleague in the Munich Court orchestra, August Tombo. His first known composition, *Schneider-Polka* for piano was written two years later, in 1870, the year in which he entered the Munich cathedral school. He began violin lessons in 1872 with his father's cousin, Benno Walter, leader of the Court Orchestra, who, in 1881, was to lead a performance of Strauss's *String Quartet in A major, Op. 2*, a work that was dedicated to the quartet led by Benno Walter, with Michael Steiger, the violist Anton Thomas and the cellist Hanus Wihan, to whom Dvořák later dedicated his *Cello Concerto*. The *Quartet* is classical in form and met with family approval, so that it could be published

by Eduard Spitzweg of the firm Joseph Aibl, after rejection by Breitkopf. The first movement, in the expected tripartite structure, allows the second violin to introduce the second subject, and after a conventional development the material returns again in a recapitulation. The second movement is a scherzo, with an A minor trio, and the B minor slow movement entrusts the first statement of the principal theme to the cello, followed by the first violin. The quartet ends with a movement that clearly owes much to Haydn.

Giacomo Puccini, born in 1858, was a native of Lucca, and inherited something of his family's longstanding association with music there as a probable successor to his father and earlier relations as organist at S Martino. Earlier generations of the Puccini family had been largely concerned with church music in Lucca, but Puccini's ambitions were to turn into another direction, when he moved to Milan to pursue his operatic ambitions, inspired by a visit to Pisa in 1876 to attend a performance of Verdi's opera *Aida*. In 1884 his opera *Le Villi* won some success, but it was with *Manon Lescaut* in 1893 that his reputation seemed finally established. This was followed by a succession of operas that retain their central part of Italian repertoire. His last opera, *Turandot*, in which he sought a new challenge, was unfinished at the time of his death in 1924, but enough had been written for the work to be completed by Franco Alfano and staged in 1926.

Crisantemi (Chrysanthemums) was written in 1890 for string quartet, an elegy for Amedeo of Savoy, the Duke of Aosta. A brief work charged with emotional intensity, it presents two melodies, the first repeated to frame the second, the piece imbued with melancholy. It served Puccini four years later to mark the paths of Manon's imprisonment and transportation in the opera *Manon Lescaut*. The *Three Minuets* date from 1884, a year of great importance in Puccini's life. It brought the pain of the loss of his beloved mother but also the first performance of his opera *Le Villi*, and a relationship with the publisher Guido Ricordi that would continue until the latter's death, and a monthly stipend. The *Minuets*, which have a charm of their own, each bore a dedication to a member of Luccan society, the first to the Principessa di Capua, Vittoria Augusta di Borbone, the second to the leading violinist and director of Lucca's orchestral society, Augusto Michelangeli, and the third to Puccini's former fellow-student, the composer and conductor Carlo Carignani.

Giuseppe Verdi held an increasingly dominant position

in Italian opera from his earliest success in Milan in 1842 with the opera *Nabucco* to his final opera *Falstaff* in 1893, a work based on Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, staged six years after his second Shakespearean opera, *Otello*. Verdi's fame in Italy was allied in part to his association with the national aspirations of his compatriots, as Italy was unified under a new monarchy, with political ideals often reflected in his work. In addition to his operas, a number of which still form the core of Italian operatic repertoire, he wrote vocal and choral music, notably a *Requiem*, a commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Alessandro Manzoni. His operas, the main body of his work, are strongly dramatic, often grandiose in conception, expanding the possibilities of the traditional forms that he continued to use. His career, which took him to St Petersburg, to Paris and to London, was essentially that of an opera-composer, intimately concerned with the details of performance, from his first association with La Scala in Milan to his last operas in the same theatre.

Verdi wrote very little purely instrumental music and the only work of this kind of any significance was his *String Quartet in E minor*. This was given a private performance in April 1873 at the Hotel delle Crocelle in Naples, offered to Verdi's guests virtually without excuse or explanation. Verdi had been in Naples during the preceding winter, arranging for revivals of his operas *Don Carlos* and *Aida*. The quartet was played in Paris in June 1876, again before an invited audience, and was published in the same year. The remarkable thing about the quartet is that, for Verdi, it was an unusual excursion into unfamiliar territory at a time when, at the age of sixty, he was at

the height of his powers as a composer of opera. With this new excursion into less familiar ground, Verdi was happy, it seems, with the suggestion in London that there should be twenty players to each part, and such an expansion would show the work in a new light.

The first subject of the opening movement is entrusted to the second violin and played on the G string. The melody is taken up by the first violin, while the cello introduces another short accompanying motif that will assume some importance, preparing the way for some imitative contrapuntal entries, the introduction of a new melody and finally the second subject proper, marked *dolce*. The first violin returns with the opening subject, starting the second part of the movement, leading eventually to an E major version of the second subject and a varied treatment of the thematic material. The C major second movement, marked *Andantino* and *con eleganza*, starts with a theme that serves, by its final repetition, as a framework for a more varied central section. The *Prestissimo* that follows is contrasted with a trio section dominated by a cello melody. The final *Scherzo Fuga* allows the second violin to introduce the harmonically ambiguous subject, answered by the first violin, the cello and finally the viola. The movement continues demonstrating, if it needed to do so, Verdi's command of every contrapuntal device, a technique that was to reach its climax in *Falstaff*. The subject is to return in inversion and both versions are to be combined, as the movement proceeds to its positive E major conclusion.

Keith Anderson

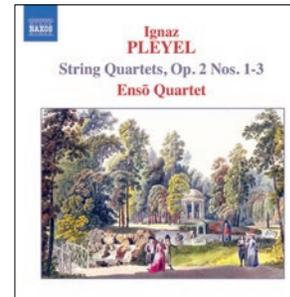
Photo: Jurgen Frank



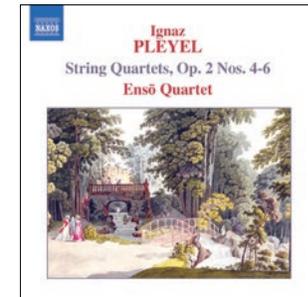
Ensō Quartet

Founded at Yale University in 1999 and based in New York City since 2007, the Ensō String Quartet has, in a decade and a half, risen to the front rank of string ensembles. Praised by the *Washington Post* for its "glorious sonorities" and "smoldering power – half honey, half molten lava... full-throated dramatic intensity," the Ensō has won numerous awards, including top prizes at the Concert Artists Guild competition and the Banff International String Quartet Competition. Apart from a busy touring and teaching schedule, the quartet has made a number of critically acclaimed recordings for the Naxos label. The Ensō's members were all drawn to the string quartet repertoire because of its richness and diversity, and the ensemble regularly performs the string quartet classics, but also champions lesser-known works that deserve to be heard, along with much contemporary music, including works that it has commissioned. The ensemble also performs its own arrangements of 16th-century Renaissance music. World premières include commissioned works by the New Zealand composer Dame Gillian Whitehead, and by the American composer Kurt Stallmann. The Ensō also gave the world premiere of Joan Tower's *Piano Quintet*, with the composer at the keyboard. Recent seasons have seen them perform in major concert halls across the USA such as Carnegie Hall, the Library of Congress and the Kennedy Center, as well as on tours of Canada, Central and South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. The Ensō was awarded the Guarneri String Quartet Award for Artistic Excellence by Chamber Music America. The ensemble's name is derived from the Japanese Zen painting of the circle, which represents many things: perfection and imperfection, the moment of chaos that is creation, the emptiness of the void, the endless circle of life, and the fullness of the spirit.

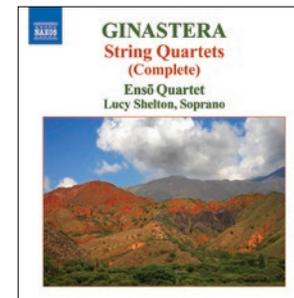
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Three of the greatest opera composers from the 19th and early 20th centuries are heard on this recording in their only works for string quartet. Richard Strauss's *String Quartet in A major* is a youthful work which shows the classical influence of Haydn, while Puccini's *Crisantemi* is a brief elegy charged with great emotional intensity. Verdi's *String Quartet in E minor* is his only significant chamber work, written at the age of sixty when he was at the height of his fame. The Ensō Quartet's GRAMMY®-nominated recording of Ginastera's complete quartets (8.570780) was acclaimed by *MusicWeb International* for "string quartet playing of jaw-dropping prowess".

		Playing Time
	Richard Strauss (1864-1949):	
	String Quartet in A major, Op. 2, TrV95	29:02
1	I. Allegro	8:23
2	II. Scherzo: Allegro molto	4:25
3	III. Andante cantabile, molto espressivo	8:28
4	IV. Allegro moderato	7:46
	Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924):	
5	Crisantemi	5:52
	Three Minuets in A major	9:14
6	Minuetto No. 1	3:48
7	Minuetto No. 2	2:40
8	Minuetto No. 3	2:46
	Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901):	
	String Quartet in E minor	22:21
9	I. Allegro	7:33
10	II. Andantino	6:49
11	III. Prestissimo	3:22
12	IV. Scherzo Fuga: Allegro assai mosso	4:37

Ensō Quartet

Maureen Nelson, Violin I • John Marcus, Violin II
Melissa Reardon, Viola • Richard Belcher, Cello

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