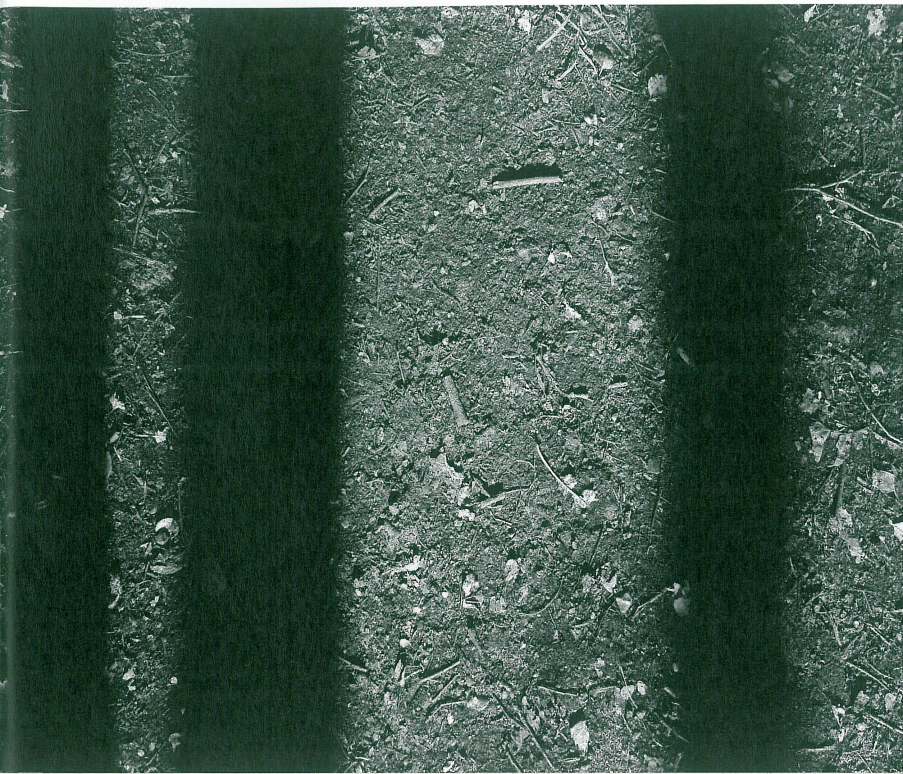


Boris Yoffe **Song of Songs**

Rosamunde Quartett The Hilliard Ensemble

ECM NEW SERIES



**Boris Yoffe   Song of Songs**

**Rosamunde Quartett**

**Andreas Reiner**   violin

**Diane Pascal**   violin

**Helmut Nicolai**   viola

**Anja Lechner**   violoncello

**The Hilliard Ensemble**

**David James**   countertenor

**Rogers Covey-Crump**   tenor

**Steven Harrold**   tenor

**Gordon Jones**   baritone

**Boris Yoffe** (\*1968)

**Song of Songs**

- |   |                                                                 |       |
|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I sought him but I found him not                                | 12:30 |
| 2 | My own vineyard I did not keep                                  | 4:21  |
| 3 | I sleep, but my heart waketh                                    | 13:57 |
| 4 | My head is filled with dew,<br>my locks with drops of the night | 11:05 |
| 5 | My soul went forth when he spoke                                | 10:00 |







Boris Yoffe

## ZU DEN QUARTETT-GEDICHTEN

Es sind nun ungefähr drei Jahre vergangen seit meiner ersten Probe mit dem Rosamunde Quartett, aber ich kann mein Glück auch heute noch nicht fassen. Als ich die Quartettbuch-Stücke geschrieben habe, so wie sie sind – ohne jegliche Interpretationsanweisung –, war ich der festen Überzeugung, dass einem echten Musiker die Auseinandersetzung mit dem bloßen Notenbild für die Interpretation ausreichen wird, einem schlechten dagegen auch Anweisungen nicht helfen werden.

Ich war bereit, mich damit abzufinden, dass meine übertriebene Hoffnung, ein höchst virtuos und sensibles Quartett zu treffen, das sich gerne die Mühe geben würde, sich mit allen Feinheiten und Widersprüchen meiner Stücke auf das Ernsteste auseinanderzusetzen, eine Auswahl aus der riesigen Sammlung selbst zu treffen, das Tempo, die Dynamik, die Agogik und die Artikulation selbst zu bestimmen und noch dazu in einer freien Rubato-Bewegung die Stücke im Konzert quasi jedes Mal neu zu kreieren –, dass eine solche Hoffnung kaum in Erfüllung gehen könne. Mit dem großartigen Rosamunde Quartett, für welches eben diese Arbeit sich als interessant und attraktiv erwiesen hat, ist aber genau das geschehen!

Den wunderbaren Aufführungen in der Münchener Konzertreihe »Aus dem Quartettbuch« folgte diese Aufnahme, die mit dem Beitrag des Hilliard Ensembles, dessen Machaut-, Palestrina- oder Lasso-Einspielungen für mich seit Jahren zu einem Superlativ der Gesangskunst geworden sind, alles übersteigt, was ich je



erhofft habe. ... Bleibt nur noch eine Hoffnung: dass sich die Qualitäten meiner bescheidenen Musik, die Zuwendung von solch großen Interpreten erfahren hat, auch dem Zuhörer nicht verbergen mögen.

Das auf der Aufnahme dargestellte Ganze empfinde ich als eine handgeschriebene Poesie-Sammlung, in der die Quartett-Gedichte von den zartfarbigen Miniaturen der gesungenen Stücke begleitet werden.

Boris Yoffe

## JEDEN TAG EIN BLATT

Boris Yoffe hat einige Zeit meine Kompositionsklasse in Karlsruhe besucht. Ich konnte ihm eigentlich nie etwas sagen. Er hat das Beste daraus gemacht. Warum habe ich ihn aufgenommen? Weil er ein Unbelehrbarer geblieben ist? Vielleicht. Auch darin bin ich intuitiv, hoffentlich.

1999 lag ich im Krankenhaus. Wache auf. Da steht der neue Student vor meinem Bett, im Mantel, mit Aktenmappe. Er schaute mich besorgt an. Wieder konnte ich ihm nichts sagen.

Er schrieb jeden Tag ein Streichquartett. Schreibt. Meist nur eine Seite. Tausende inzwischen. Zur Abschlußprüfung erschien er mit einer Kiste, darin die Quartett-Seiten. Ich entschied, die Kiste geschlossen zu lassen. Wir – die Kommission, der Kandidat, der Lehrer – blickten lange auf die geschlossene Kiste. Wir bestanden die Prüfung.

Immer wieder ruft Boris an und immer wieder kann ich ihm nichts sagen.

Wir lernen viel. Meist habe ich ein schlechtes Gewissen. Und er?

Seine Musik ist von großer Schönheit. Kann man sie mißverstehen? O ja.

Aber sie jammert nie. Bleibt schön und gebend. Unmißverständlich.

Mit der Zeit auch gehärtet, zugespitzt.

Die Teilstücke ergeben das eine große Lebensstück, das wir so gerne schreiben: un begonnen, unbeendet, unendlich. Wem etwas fehlt, der soll es sich denken.

Es ist alles da.

Wieder konnte ich ihm nichts sagen.

Wolfgang Rihm



Über die Tannen die nicht weiss sind  
Mit der Zeit noch gelblich werden  
Die Tannenkegelchen das eine Jahr  
unvergessen, nachdem sie schon im Jahr  
davor alle da  
Wieder immer noch im Winter liegen

Die Tannen die nicht weiss sind  
Mit der Zeit noch gelblich werden  
Die Tannenkegelchen das eine Jahr  
unvergessen, nachdem sie schon im Jahr  
davor alle da  
Wieder immer noch im Winter liegen



## ONE PAGE EVERY DAY

Boris Yoffe spent some time in my composition class at Karlsruhe. I could never really tell him anything. He made the best of it. Why did I take him? Because he had remained immune to teaching? Probably. Also, I have an intuition in these things, I hope.

In 1999 I was in hospital. Woke up. There at my bedside stood the new student, in his overcoat, with his briefcase. He looked concerned. Again there was nothing I could tell him.

He wrote a string quartet every day. Writes. Mostly just one page. Thousands by now. He came to the final examination with a boxful. I decided to leave the box closed. We – the panel, the candidate, the teacher – looked at the unopened box for a long time. We passed the examination.

Now and again Boris phones me, and every time there's nothing I can tell him. We learn a lot. Mostly I have a bad conscience. And he?

His music has great beauty. Can it be misunderstood? Oh yes. But it doesn't complain. Stays beautiful and giving. Unmisunderstandable. With time also hardened, pointed.

The separate pieces amount to one big work of a lifetime, such as we so much want to write: unbegun, unended, unending. Whatever is missing has to be imagined. It's all there.

Again there was nothing I could tell him.

Wolfgang Rihm

Translation: Paul Griffiths





The crowd is vast. Yet only a scattering of people can be seen, picked out here and there. Some are singing. What they all share, in their common humanity, only emphasizes how they differ, in looks and expression. Among them, no doubt, will be a face you think you recognize.

Boris Yoffe began writing short pieces for string quartet – each a page long, playing for around half a minute – in 1995, when he was in his mid-twenties. He has gone on. By now his “Book of Quartets” is a compendium of several thousand pages, and one constantly growing. The pieces on this recording were selected, by the players and by the composer, from the eight hundred or so he has produced during the last three or four years.

Among them are other single-page compositions from a related, interpenetrating project in which the quartet’s four parts become eight with the addition of four singers, their voices matching the instruments in range as they sing phrases from the “Song of Songs”. Here again the store is potentially boundless, since Yoffe generally sets only part of a verse, so that the musicalization of the entire book would require several hundred pieces – and who is to say he could not set the same words twice?

This recording thus offers a sampling of eternity. Pieces that might seem as modest in their ambitions as in their dimensions – a strand of melody that is imitated or answered against touches of harmonic support, all created by instruments that keep generally to narrow, quasi-vocal ranges, to a steady tempo and to a moderate dynamic level – become intimations of the ungraspable. Any attempt at a complete performance would have to take days, and even then its completeness

would be uncertain: perhaps a piece was mislaid or forgotten, perhaps one or more slipped under the listener’s tested perception. However much could be performed, however much could be attended to, there would always be more – with more to come, of course, for as long as the composer goes on writing. One listens here into infinity.

It is, nevertheless, a bounded infinity. Yoffe acknowledges in his quartets “the clear influences of German music, Russian poetry, and far eastern aesthetics”, and one might expand on all these allegiances. The medium itself, of course, places this music in a sphere that is, in the largest sense, German – an affiliation endorsed by aspects of harmony and motivic working. At almost any moment one might feel oneself to be listening to a quartet from the central tradition as it stood about a century ago, something by a hitherto unknown contemporary of Schoenberg and Reger – except that the moment, always, is passing, and does not seem a fragment but a whole. A great river is reflected in these droplets, one to which they cannot, being separated, belong.

There is melancholy in that separation, and there is melancholy often – offset by bursts of dance or assertion – in the shape of the melody and the inevitability with which contours persist from one voice or instrument to another, and even from one piece to another. The falling minor second, like a tear, is one leitmotif. And it is perhaps this world of expressive melody Yoffe has in mind in voicing his suspicion that his German-Russian-oriental quartets nevertheless “belong firmly to the Jewish cultural tradition”. Perhaps there is melancholy also in our knowledge that we can gain no more than a glimpse of something so much larger, a melancholy, in the face of vastness, that is close to wonderment.

Lament, though, is only one of the categories to which Yoffe tells us his listeners have assigned these pieces, along with psalm, prayer, scientific investigation and others, to which one might add embrace, especially when words from the Song of Songs are being sung or recalled. The music's expressive quality remains ambiguous, floating, at least partly because it has dispensed with the solid form that grounded expression in the tradition here being remembered. A trace of grief, or of adoration, is not the same as grief or adoration themselves, and here we are in the presence of traces – traces of a music too enormous to hear (or to bear) and traces also of a music that is gone, the unheard standing for the lost.

What is also absent, and contributing to the ambiguity, the unsettling vacancy, is a sense of expressive persona such as would have been abundantly present in the music of an earlier age. These tears are not Yoffe's, nor are they those of an imaginary narrative voice. They fall from no eyes; they exist of themselves. The weepers, too, have been lost, along with the bewept.

Unvoiced, the moments succeed one another like days, like entries a diary is writing itself. And yet their succession is by no means haphazard. One may note, for example, how the vocal pieces are gathered largely into the second and fourth movements, how the voices have expended themselves by the time we arrive at the fifth, how the first movement ends by returning to the piece with which it began, how there are other repetitions (including some immediate ones in the third movement), how the voices in the first two movements preface their beginnings with fragments, as if these pieces come stuttering into existence, and altogether how the five movements have running through them a continuous trajectory, one

based not only on matters of similarity and occasional contrast but also on an intensification that is also a removal.

All around us is limitlessness and loss. But this is something. And how should it end but with a question?

Paul Griffiths

Recorded November 2009  
Propstei St. Gerold  
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## ON THE QUARTET POEMS

About three years have passed since my first rehearsal with the Rosamunde Quartett, but even now I can't believe my good fortune. When I wrote the Quartet Book pieces, just as they are – without any directions for interpretation – I was firmly convinced that to a genuine musician an examination of the bare score would be sufficient for its interpretation, while on the other hand to a poor one even performance directions would be of no help.

I was prepared to resign myself to the fact that my excessive hopes could hardly be realised – of finding a highly virtuosic and sensitive quartet that would willingly take the trouble to examine all the subtleties and contradictions of my pieces with the utmost seriousness, and make its own selection from the enormous collection, determining tempo, dynamics, agogics and articulation, and on top of that would recreate the pieces in concerts almost every time with a free use of rubato. But that's exactly what happened with the superb Rosamunde Quartett, to whom this work proved to be interesting and attractive!

The present recording followed on from Rosamunde's wonderful performances in the Munich series "From the Quartet Book", and the contribution of the Hilliard Ensemble, whose versions of Machaut, Palestrina or Lassus have for years been my yardstick for the art of singing, surpassed everything I could have hoped for. ... I can only hope that the qualities of my humble music, which has found favour with such great interpreters, may also be evident to the listener.

For me this recording is a handwritten collection of verse, in which the quartet poems are accompanied by the tenderly coloured miniatures of the sung pieces.

Boris Yoffe

Translation: Misha Donat