

Chamber

Carter

String Quartets – No 1; No 5

Pacifica Quartet (Simin Ganatra, Sibbi Bernhardsson
vs Masumi Per Rostad *vs* Brandon Vamos *vs*)

Naxos American Classics © 8 559362 (61' • DDD)

Quartet No 1 – selected comparisons:

Arditti Qt (5/89) (ETCE) KTC2507

Juilliard Qt (4/92) S2K47229

The Carter cycle we've waited for?

The Pacifica are visionary and engaging



This is a significant release not only in its heralding Elliott Carter's centenary year, but also because the Pacifica Quartet enjoy a special identity with his quartets – having given integral cycles of them in North America and Europe. The first instalment affords maximum contrast by coupling the First and Fifth of the cycle – the former as expansive and visionary as the latter is concentrated and laconic.

In No 1 (1951), the Pacifica find a near-perfect balance between the driving intensity of the Arditti and portentous grandeur of the Juilliard. Without undermining the stark contrasts between its four continuous movements – divided by brief pauses into three parts to preserve overall continuity – they scrupulously observe the “tempo modulation” through which Carter achieves seamless momentum across the work's greater span. Admirable, too, is their shaping and weighting of the final “Variations”, which never feels overbearing in its exhilarating onward drive. In No 5 (1995) they, like the Arditti (Montaigne – nla), make the most of its alternation of outwardly spontaneous and rigorous sections, yet the sense of tension and release is even more capricious. The music becomes a four-way dialogue which, running the gamut from propulsive dynamism to detached stasis, is deeply human in that the emotional responses here encountered mirror those of life itself.

The sound has ideal clarity and warmth, and there are revealing notes from Bayan Northcott and the composer. If the second disc maintains such a level, this will certainly be the Carter quartet cycle to have. **Richard Whitehouse**