

The first CD by the Engegårdskvartetten reveals an ensemble at the absolute top of its game. It opens with one of the most refreshing Haydn performances I have heard in years: a model of good taste but also fizzing with energy and life – and that unbearably moving Largo is delivered with heart-breaking poise (it's not often I sit at my desk with tears rolling down my cheeks). Leif Solberg (f. 1914) came to wider public notice only in 1996 when a CD of his organ music revealed that Norway had been ignoring one of its finest composers. In the 12 years since then, his Symphony (1951–52) got its first professional performance in 1998 and one of his choral pieces was recorded in a transcription for strings – and that's all. Shame on Norway's musicians, and bravo to the Engegårds for allowing us (and the composer) to hear this first recording of his only string quartet, composed in 1945. It is a sparkling gem of a work: cast in a Classical mould and steeped in the heritage of Grieg and Norwegian folk-music more generally, it would be a concert favourite if only audiences got a chance to hear it.

The disc closes with an account of the Grieg Quartet which has a raw power that made me sit up in astonishment. That brief, broad opening opens a wild ride of thrilling impetuosity where every accentuation, every dynamic contrast, every texture is made to tell. It's also a reading which takes the work closer to its Norwegian roots than any performance I know: just listen to the evocations of *hardingfele* in the trio of the Intermezzo. The Grieg Quartet is often denigrated for not being especially quartettmässig; the Engegårds play with a passion which destined all such criticism for the dustbin. Quite simply, this is one of great recorded performances: Furtwängler's Tristan, Klemperer's Missa solemnis, the Busch Quartet's Op. 131 – it really is that good. Morten Lindberg's label 2L presents the entire thing in recorded sound of stunning immediacy. This is one CD you should not miss.

*Martin Anderson, "Klassisk" – sep 2008*