



SPANISH CLASSICS



Andrés
ISASI

String Quartets Nos. 3 and 4

Isasi Quartet



Andrés Isasi (1890–1940) String Quartets • 2

Among the more obscure composers from the early twentieth century, Andrés Isasi (y Linares) was born in Bilbao on 18th October 1890. He developed a love of music from his grandfather, with whom he went to live after the premature death of his parents, while studying piano and composition with Unceta. When he was only eighteen, two recitals of his Grieg-influenced music received praise from critics and public. Feeling the need to travel, he moved to Berlin in 1909 where he attended classes with Karl Kämpf and Engelbert Humperdinck (the latter a composer then held in the highest esteem) – in the process receiving extensive instruction in the writing of larger symphonic forms. Isasi was already a prolific composer of songs, but now he followed the trail blazed by such older contemporaries as José María Usandizaga and Jesús Guridi in turning to the genre of the symphonic poem as the means to introduce himself to Bilbao audiences on his return there in 1914.

Public response to such overtly Germanic music, however, was lukewarm and Isasi, taciturn and unworldly by nature, retreated to the family home in Algorta, where he was able to compose in relative seclusion. While his music received hearings in Madrid and other Spanish cities over the next decade, he was to enjoy greater success abroad – notably in Budapest, where his choral work *Angelus* was performed in 1930 and the *Second Symphony* [recorded on Naxos 8.557584] a year later. Never in need of money, and in turn a generous supporter of artists from the Basque region who worked in a variety of media, he continued in his music to reflect a love of Germanic culture as well as his lifelong religious conviction. His passionate interest in nature is embodied in the *'Ornitofonia'* that he assembled over many years: a study of the songs of birds and their many variants, such as could also be used as a creative resource for his music. Along with two symphonies and two orchestral suites [the second is also on Naxos 8.557584], his output includes several symphonic poems, a piano concerto, music for piano and for choir, a large body of songs, a guitar suite, a sonata for violin and piano, and eight string quartets (this recording being the second in a series of three). He died, largely forgotten and at a time of traumatic upheaval throughout Spain, in Algorta on 6th April 1940.

Only two of Isasi's string quartets seem to have been given a public performance in his lifetime. Yet this was a medium that clearly held considerable appeal for the composer, as is evident from the works detailed below:

Op. 83, No. 0 in E minor (1908)

Op. 11, No. 1 in G major (1911)

Op. 27, No. 2 in A minor (1920)

Op. 30, No. 3 in E minor (1921) (probably unfinished; only the first three movements survive)

Op. 31, No. 4 in D major (1921)

Op. 32, No. 5 in C minor (1921)

No Op., No. 6 (probably unfinished; only a fragment of the scherzo survives)

No Op., No. 7 (probably unfinished; only fragments of the first and second movements, and the third movement, survive)

Composed in 1921, the *Fourth String Quartet* received its first performance in Getxo (Bilbao) on 13th November 2010 by the Isasi Quartet. Among the most formally expansive and expressively wide-ranging of the cycle, the piece features some of Isasi's most questing tonal ventures as well as a frequently imaginative approach to both texture and sonority.

The first movement begins with an eloquent theme that draws all four instruments into an intricate dialogue. Initiated by pizzicato chords, the second theme is more capricious in character without undermining the mood previously established. Parallel evolution of both themes gets underway almost immediately, but at length the first theme re-emerges as at the outset and a literal reprise ensues; the music passing into a livelier and Dvořák-like coda that brings a decisive close. The *Romanze* second movement, introduced by a ruminative cello solo, centres on a searching theme. A central section is more restive in manner, with much polyphonic interweaving between the players, though this segues into a transformed return of the opening music that continues to its peaceful ending. The *Scherzo* commences with a scurrying idea whose rhythm is to underpin much of the good-humoured repartee that follows, though the trio section brings greater restraint with its thoughtful and

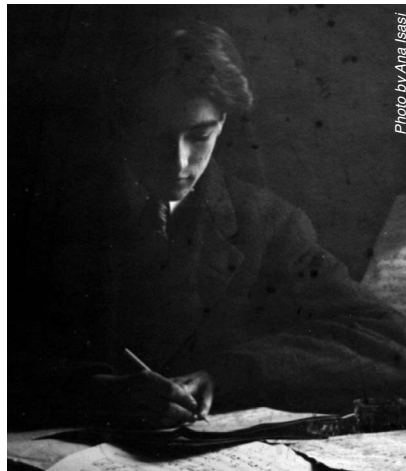


Photo by Ana Isasi

possibly folk-inflected theme, before the previous animation resumes and a lively conclusion is reached. The *Rondo* finale opens with a robust theme that finds subtle contrast in a more wistful successor where the writing for strings is at its most imaginative. Elements of both these themes combine in an agile dialogue that ushers in a degree of contrast much as before, then the music belatedly regains its initial energy on the way to a resolute conclusion.

Isasi seems to have worked on his *Third String Quartet* during 1921, simultaneously with the *String Quartet in A minor* that was subsequently numbered as his second. The present work probably remained unfinished, and it fell to the present artists to give the première at Château d'Arcangues (France) on 3rd December 2011 (along with the remaining works on this recording).

The first movement commences with expansive gestures that coalesce into a forceful theme which quite overshadows its lilting successor. The development of both themes is

varied and even discursive in nature, leading to a determined fugal interplay on the first theme that amasses a fair momentum before a suitably varied reprise and an allusion to the gestures from the opening prior to the surprisingly peremptory close. The main theme of the *Scherzo* has a tensile rhythmic profile that holds good on subsequent reappearances, and between which comes a trio of Schubert-like melodic appeal (though its melodic content is audibly derived from the previous idea), before the main theme resumes its nonchalant course on the way to an almost dismissive ending. The *Adagio* sustains its rapt mood right from the outset – for all that this mood is intensified appreciably when other thematic elements are introduced. At length, however, the music comes to rest on a taciturn violin phrase which seals the essential inwardness of the movement overall as it heads towards a serene ending.

Little is known about the *Aria in D major*, though this might well be the slow movement of the otherwise fragmentary *Seventh String Quartet*. Over a rather Bach-like 'walking bass', the musicians engage in a dialogue of notable poise and suppleness. A degree of contrast is provided by the central section with undulating phrases and freer rhythmic interplay, before the initial music wends its way to a thoughtful and (whatever the lack of immediate context) conclusive close.

The *Scherzetto in F minor* was probably composed during the 1930s, though it is not known whether it was conceived as part of a larger work. The stuttering main motif is seldom far from the musical foreground, not least when this undergoes a notable range of transformations when the soulful central section is reached. The scherzo resumes as before, though the peremptory conclusion seems the more unexpected even allowing for the relative brevity of this movement as a whole.

The *Prelude in A major 'Jinete de Abril'* (April Horseman) was composed in 1934 and duly designated *Op. 51 No. 1*. Whether or not the title is intended to conjure up a specific image or evocation, this piece must rank among Isasi's most appealing statements – its rustling passagework reaching a brief climax before subsiding into the prevailing wistfulness, then on to an eloquent conclusion which seems the more affecting for the rhythmic agility that persists right to the end.

Richard Whitehouse

Isasi Quartet

The Isasi Quartet blends the complexity and depth of German musical culture with the lyricism and sensuality of Southern Europe – a pairing also found in the string quartets of Andrés Isasi. The four musicians seek to imbue their interpretations with an intensely emotional, spiritual quality, in music ranging from German and Austrian composers of the Romantic and Post-Romantic eras, to French and Russian composers of the 19th century and contemporary music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Isasi Quartet makes regular appearances in festivals and recital series in Germany, Austria, France and Spain, and they work closely together with living composers. The ensemble has already made several recordings for broadcast in Germany (BR), Austria (ORF) and Spain (RNE, Solidaria TV, CRTVG, Localia).



From left to right: Karsten Dobers, Yvan Chiffolleau, Anna Bohigas, Annick Roussin

Photo: Marc Bensoussan

The second of three volumes devoted to Andrés Isasi's complete string quartets is again performed by the composer's foremost champions, the Isasi Quartet, who premiered all the works on this recording. *String Quartet No. 4 in D major* reveals his vibrant and imaginative use of textures and his affiliations with the music of Dvořák. Though unfinished, the 1921 *String Quartet No. 3 in E minor* fuses melodic richness and serenity. Each of the three smaller pieces shows contrast and warmth, not least the beautifully eloquent *Prelude in A major*



**Andrés
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(1890–1940)



String Quartets • 2

String Quartet No. 4 in D major, Op. 31 (1921)

- | | | |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | Allegro grazioso | 9:18 |
| 2 | Romanze | 7:24 |
| 3 | Scherzo | 6:08 |
| 4 | Rondo | 6:40 |



**ALL WORLD PREMIÈRE
RECORDINGS**

String Quartet No. 3 in E minor, Op. 30 (1921) (unfinished)

- | | | |
|-----------|--|--------------|
| 5 | I. | 10:22 |
| 6 | II. Scherzo | 5:36 |
| 7 | III. Adagio molto espressivo | 5:53 |
| 8 | Aria in D major: Andante | 5:14 |
| 9 | Scherzetto in F minor | 2:31 |
| 10 | Preludio in A major
'Jinete de Abril', Op. 51,
No. 1 (1934) | 3:44 |

Isasi Quartet

**Annick Roussin and Anna Bohigas, Violins
Karsten Dobers, Viola • Yvan Chiffoleau, Cello**

Recorded at Château d'Arcangues, France, 18–22 December 2011
 Producer: Johannes Müller • Co-producer: Marquis Michel d'Arcangues
 Engineer & Editor: Johannes Müller • Booklet notes: Richard Whitehouse
 Original manuscripts revised and completed by Karsten Dobers • Cover image: *Los remeros* (c.1912) by
 Manuel Losada y Pérez de Nenin (1865–1949) (Fine Arts Museum of Bilbao)