

The four string quartets of Ernest Bloch form a group comparable in stature only with those of Bartók and of Beethoven. They have followed one another at an ever-increasing speed, as if impelled by an ever-increasing urge: the First Quartet came in 1916; the Second in 1945; the Third in 1953; and now already the Fourth. And during the long gap between the First and Second Bloch by no means entirely neglected the string quartet; it was allowed, in its customary uneasy partnership with the piano, to contribute to the monumental Piano Quintet of 1924.

In 1916 Bloch left Switzerland to go to the United States as conductor for a tour of the dancer Maud Allan. He stayed in America to make it his home: and the score of the First String Quartet, of 1916, is annotated Geneva—New York. That such a work can be written at all is one of the marvels of humanity; that it could be written during what must have been a period of complete personal upheaval is next to unbelievable. It is in writing of Bloch's Second Quartet of 1945 that the late Beethoven quartets are most often drawn on for comparison; but they come to mind no less in considering the earlier work. It is on the largest of scales (Decca have here put more music, in duration, to a side than elsewhere perhaps they would like us to believe possible!); four long movements in the highest degree of concentration, with never a moment's emotional relief. Here and there the Jewish idiom is faintly echoed, but the savagery that it sometimes brings in its train is the only interruption to the sorrow, and occasionally the tranquillity, that finds most moving expression in the rest of the heartfelt work.

Both the Third and the Fourth Quartets are on a smaller scale, in point of actual size. They are of a considerable intensity, but an intensity more frequently alleviated in tranquillity than previously. And there is, too, anything but a diminution of vigour: the outbursts of hard, biting determination are more frequent than in the earlier works, and contrasting sections frequently alternate — as they do often in late Beethoven — rapidly and effectively.

Listeners familiar with the Griller Quartet's fine 78 set of the Second Quartet, or with their earlier LP of the Third, will know the standards of performance to be expected in these new issues. Everywhere there is almost impeccable ensemble, and also the deepest sensitivity; Bloch's sustained elegiac moods are presented wholly without flagging of any sort. Some of the long-held diminuendos at the ends of phrases or of sections are played with seemingly superhuman control.

The recording, too, is in the first class. Occasionally in balance, in the First Quartet, the viola is allowed to be slightly backward; only once seriously so, and that for precisely two notes — to mention them at all is to risk a faulty emphasis. The quartet's tone as a whole is unified in sound: in the First Quartet, again, a dark grey that might be thought to be due to faintly undernourished recording until in contrast it suddenly shines forth in one of Bloch's few outbursts. The dark grey quality (but not the unification of tone) disappears with the greater brilliance of the later quartets: in the case of the Third there was more roundness, less brilliance of tone on the older LP, and perhaps a smoother performance. But the two new records are both contributions to the repertory of incalculable value offering entirely worthy performances of three unquestionable masterpieces: the fullest recommendation, with no reservations at all. A new recording of the Second Quartet by the Grillers is promised for release in the near future.

M.M., *The Gramophone*, October 1955, review of LP issues of Quartets 1, 3 & 4



bloch string quartets 1-4

PRISTINE
AUDIO

PACM 120

disc one
(72:21)

BLOCH String Quartet No. 1

1. 1st mvt. - Andante moderato (15:39)
2. 2nd mvt. - Andante moderato (11:58)
3. 3rd mvt. - Andante molto moderato (Pastorale) (14:10)
4. 4th mvt. - Andante molto moderato (Pastorale) (16:44)

BLOCH String Quartet No. 2

5. 1st mvt. - Moderato (6:04)
6. 2nd mvt. - Presto (7:45)

disc two
(74:23)

1. 3rd mvt. - Andante (7:47)
2. 4th mvt. - Allegro molto (13:00)

BLOCH String Quartet No. 3

3. 1st mvt. - Allegro deciso (3:36)
4. 2nd mvt. - Adagio non troppo (5:54)
5. 3rd mvt. - Allegro molto (5:59)
6. 4th mvt. - Allegro (8:22)

BLOCH String Quartet No. 4

7. B1st mvt. - Tranquillo - Allegro energico - Tranquillo (8:21)
8. B2nd mvt. - Andante (7:22)
9. B3rd mvt. - Presto - Moderato - Presto (4:59)
10. B4th mvt. - Calmo - Allgro deciso - Calmo (9:04)

Griller String Quartet

Sidney Griller, violin
Jack O'Brien, violin
Philip Burton, viola
Colin Hampton, cello

XR Remastered by Andrew Rose

Front cover artwork based on a
photograph of Ernest Bloch with
the Griller Quartet, 1948

Recorded 28 - 30 June,
2, 5, 6, 9, 19 & 20 July 1954
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London

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