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Dmitri Shostakovich: The Complete String Quartets

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Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Mandelring Quartet (Audite)

These are wonderful performances. The Mandelring Quartet don't overplay the savagery and shocks - their approach is lyrical, sane and effortlessly musical. They can deploy the big guns when necessary – the second movement of the 10th quartet is a good example – but they always care about the line, the musical argument. You're not lectured or shouted at, but drawn in. Shostakovich's quartets plot an interesting trajectory, from the superficially lightweight First of 1938 to the death-haunted 15th completed in 1974. The last works have their profoundly depressing moments, but these players accentuate the glimpses of light – the powerful, defiant major coda to the 12th or the radiant harmonic language of the 14th.

There's a body and lack of shrillness to the string sound – helped by nicely nourished viola and cello tone, so that the more aggressive climaxes don't sound like offcuts from Bernard Hermann's Psycho soundtrack. It's hard to single out the highlights, but both the Fifth and Sixth quartets with their blend of desperation, wistfulness and hard-earned joy nearly reduced me to tears. I was gripped as these players moved from the Third quartet's jaunty Fawlty Towers-style opening to far darker, more probing territory. There's no self-pity, no indulgence. Recorded between 2005 and 2009 and now reissued in a bargain box, these are near-definitive readings of intense, beautifully crafted works – every bit as good as accounts by the vintage Borodin or Fitzwilliam Quartets.

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