Dmitri Shostakovich: The Complete String Quartets

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The Mandelring Quartet Throw Their Hats in the Ring

There are two sets of string quartets written in the twentieth century that can be counted among the greatest ever written: the six Bartók and the fifteen Shostakovich quartets. The Bartóks have been considered masterpieces for many years; it took longer for the Shostakovich set to be acknowledged as such outside Russia. But such they are and will surely remain. Still, they figure less often on concert programs than one might expect. That is at least partly because, with the exception of the popular Eighth and the more accessible and brief (15') First, they are rather more difficult to 'get' on one hearing. But they certainly repay repeated hearings and it is no surprise that the complete set has been recorded numerous times since the first complete set recorded by the Beethoven Quartet in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the quartets had been dedicated to and premiered by them and some feel their recordings are definitive. Shostakovich: The 15 String Quartets Following that was the first of two complete sets by the Borodin String Quartet. I still remember the delight of discovery when a student of mine lent me the first Borodin set (of Qts 1-13) and I heard the quartets for the first time. I still have a strong emotional preference for those recordings, long since available on CD. Shostakovich: String Quartets 1-13 The Borodins recorded the complete set again (after Nos. 14 & 15 had been written) in the 1980s and there are many who prefer that set for its improved sound. That set also includes an incandescent performance of the Piano Quintet with Sviatoslav Richter. Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets The Emerson Quartet recorded a complete set in live performances at Harris Hall at the Aspen Music Festival and I was privileged to attend several of those recording sessions, among the greatest concert experiences of my life. Shostakovich: The String Quartets Among other complete sets are those by the Fitzwilliam Quartet Shostakovich: The String Quartets, the Brodsky Quartet Shostakovich: The String Quartets and the eponymous Shostakovich Quartet Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets. The latter three have their merits but are perhaps a notch below those mentioned above.

So, what about this new set from the Mandelring Quartet? The Mandelrings are four youngish German players, three of whom are siblings: Sebastian and Nanette Schmidt, violins, and Bernhard Schmidt, cello. The only non-related player is the violist, Roland Glassl who 'plays as if he was family'. I have reviewed other recordings of theirs very positively: Janácek Complete String Quartets, Schumann Schumann: Piano Quartet & Piano & Quintet (Hybr) and, with the Ma'alott Woodwind

Quintet, of the Onslow Nonet Onslow: Nonet Op 77 in a Minor/Quintet 19 Op 44 C Minor. They are notable for their utter clarity, unanimity of style, slight reticence of expression and deft use of subtle dynamic and tempo adjustments. There are those who might prefer a more angry or even ugly style of playing since these quartets are often Shostakovich's expression in sound of his disgust, anger, pain and anguish over the situation in Stalin's Soviet Union and the years that followed. But there is justification for playing the quartets as music qua music, not as 'testimony' and frankly I like this approach quite a bit. These quartets are more beautiful than a starker approach can convey. Even in the late somewhat cryptic quartets this approach works. So, I am willing to place this set up near the top of the leader board. If you love these quartets the set certainly belongs in your collection.

And keep on the lookout for future issues from this marvelous Quartet. They are the real deal.

★★★★★ **The Mandelring Quartet Throw Their Hats in the Ring**

Von J Scott Morrison am 15. Mai 2011

Format: Audio CD

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5 CDs; TT = ca. 292 mins Superb sound

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