



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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Gramophone (Harriet Smith - 01.08.2014)

GRAMOPHONE

I got my first taste of the Quartetto di Cremona in a survey of Beethoven chamber music last summer. Now they've reached Vol 3 of the quartets and the qualities that were apparent then are just as abundant here, I particularly like the way they combine early, middle and late Beethoven: it sets up fascinating tensions and counterpoints. Their opening of the Grosse Fuge is a reminder that this is one of the greatest of all gauntlet-throwing-down gestures in music. It's immensely ballsy playing, sweaty, almost anarchic in the sense of it almost coming apart at the seams in the Allegro proper. This is emphasised by Audite's immediate recording (the Lindsays sound deliberate by comparison). Many others are more polished - not least the Takács, while the Talich have a wonderful clarity - but this is a thrilling ride, even if timbre suffers at times. The extraordinary opening of Op 59 No 1 needs, to my mind, to begin almost midstream: the Takács are spot-on, and their mix of elegance, energy and precision is very alluring. The Quartetto di Cremona are that bit more impatient: it's no surprise that this spacious movement is highly emotive, tremulous even. The Artemis tread a convincing middle ground, while the Takács, who seem almost frozen with grief at the outset, create one of the most intense readings of all. The Cremona's finale, though, is wonderfully energetic, the players ripping into the accents with real glee. If you're a fan of the recent Belcea account of Op 18 No 4, chances are you won't much like this. The pent-up emotion that characterises that account has no place here, particularly in the sliding, slewing Minuet, which is energetic and humorous; the very focused finale of the Belcea strikes me as a little po-faced; the Hagen, with a not dissimilar approach, find more light and shade; but the Cremona's appeal lies in their reactivity and playfulness. Performances of great personality, then; not benchmarks but an exciting addition to the shelves nonetheless.