



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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Reviewers live with the frustration of how to convey music verbally, a frustration underscored by the Quartetto di Cremona. This is Vol. 7 of its complete Beethoven cycle, which has been greeted widely as intriguing and highly original. What sets these players apart comes down to an unusual quality: intellectuality. Every phrase in these two Beethoven quartets has been thrust under a mental microscope. Let me quote from a 2014 interview that violist Simone Gramaglia gave, where the question of vibrato comes up. The interviewer comments that in their account of the "Razumovsky" Quartet No. 2, the use of vibrato seems to be minimized.

It was far from a simple topic to Gramaglia: "[Vibrato] is a matter of the performers' taste but also of structure....In op. 59 no. 2 there are many sections in E minor that are very dark but not as dark as, for example, in the tonality of C minor. There are many extremes of violence, and it's very important to bring brightness into the darkness." Brightness is interpreted as calling for no vibrato in this case. Gramaglia goes on to talk about how expressivity doesn't necessarily mean the use of vibrato; there is a wide range of bowing techniques as well as the contact point of the bow on the string that must be considered.

The interviewer is intrigued by the PR blurb for the same recording, which says, "Beethoven's musical language is no longer balanced and 'well seasoned' like that of his contemporaries but is extreme in every respect—ruthless and with feeling, dramatically operatic, and full of contrapuntal finesse." It's very promising that so much analytical attention is being applied to middle-period Beethoven (I've barely skimmed the surface of the interview), and the resulting performance on this new recording of the "Razumovsky" Quartet No. 3 is original to the point of being peculiar. As much ingenuity is applied to the details of sonority as if we were hearing one of Bartók's later quartets. In fact, I've never encountered Beethoven played in such a piercing, at times existential, hollow, despairing, and alienated manner. Delivering a moment of charm is almost a betrayal of the ethos the Quartetto di Cremona wants to convey.

Typically, a group that plays the drawn-out chords of the Introduzione without vibrato would be making a period performance gesture. Here, however, the effect is stark, a slash-and-burn that is unabashed. But then what to do when the main Allegro vivace, with its boisterous major-key exuberance, contradicts the opening? The same dilemma arises in the second movement, where a certain poised lightness is implied by the marking Andante con moto quasi allegretto. The Cremona rocks back and forth with a questioning pulse that's neurotically moody. Once again it's very effective, but the gentle strain that comes up in the violins isn't remotely this eerie as Beethoven scores it.

One can point to many imaginative details—they crop up in practically every measure—and after a certain point the listener must either give in or rebel. I find myself strongly on the side of giving in and appreciating with fascination how a familiar work is suddenly made to sound new. The Cremonas have made the point in print that Beethoven's mature quartets are highly intellectual and deserve this kind of intense scrutiny. The scherzo creeps in on cat's paws and really does remind me of the lopsided Hungarian dance rhythms of Bartók. The most divisive movement is the finale, where the marking of Allegro molto is injected here with amphetamines, turning into a manic Presto that to me sounds breathless. In all fairness, however, the 5:46 timing isn't radically faster than the Alban Berg Quartet's 6:01 from that ensemble's first Beethoven cycle (EMI/Warner).

The second quartet from the op. 18 set fulfills Monty Python's "and now for something completely different." The Hamlet-like mood of the Cremonas' "Razumovsky" performance is discarded in favor of comic relief. Using a bright tone made brighter without vibrato, they take the first movement and extend its Haydnesque animation into Beethoven's unbuttoned brio. The four members of the Quartetto di Cremona—Cristiano Gualco and Paolo Andreoli, violins, Simone Gramaglia, viola, and Giovanni Scaglione, cello—are carefree and confident no matter how fast the passagework is. Every movement of their op. 18/2 wears a smile, and the performance exults in its own playfulness. The ensemble's tone changes in weight and color quite impressively to match the moment, although the general tendency is toward a contemporary lightness and even edginess.

In all, this is a disc that makes me want to hear all of the Cremonas' Beethoven to date. In the Fanfare Archive I found only one review so far, Jerry Dubins's of Vol. 2 from 2014, which pairs the Second "Razumovsky" with op. 127. He seconds my opinion that this is a group to get excited about. Bright, lifelike sound from Audite adds to the immediacy of the performances.