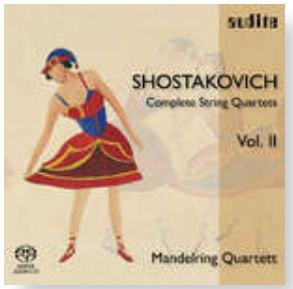Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. II

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International Record Review (Peter J. Rabinowitz - 01.06.2008)

RECORD REVIEW

In the disjointed Portrait DVD that comes as a bonus with this CD (the second instalment of a new Shostakovich cycle), members of the Mandelring Quartet make two surprising comments. Nanette Schmidt tells us that all four of us are powerful people; her brother Bernhard warns us that a quartet¹s interpretations suffer when there¹s too much agreement among the players. The comments are surprising not because they seem inappropriate to Shostakovich's idiom (on the contrary, his quartets work best when played by four strong-willed players who can contest one another), but rather because if there's anything missing from these fluent and intelligent performances, it's precisely power and diversity.

Indeed, like everything I've heard from this foursome, these readings reveal an emotional reticence backed by a remarkable uniformity of tone and vision, most obviously audible in exceptional balances (note how vividly they present the fugal writing in development of the Third Quartet's first movement), in a seamless coherence whenever material is passed from one instrument to another, and in an unfaltering accord about the way each detail contributes to the music's emotional trajectory. In terms of dynamic control and tonal nuance, this is surely one of the most refined quartets of its generation; and in those flickering moments of untroubled lyricism (more frequent in the Sixth Quartet than in the Third or Eighth) and in the haunting morendo endings that round out each of these works, their performances stand up to any.

Their finesse, however, is apt to cushion Shostakovich's violent jolts (say, the stark hammer blows in the third movement of the Third or the fourth movement of the Eighth) and to mitigate the music's vein of desolation (surely, the first violin's laments in the fourth movement of the Third need to be bleaker). For all the beauty of the performances, then, the music's emotional reach seems both distorted and constricted. The Mandelring certainly don¹t convey the sense of unrelenting grief in the Sixth's third-movement passacaglia, for instance, and they substitute consolation for despair in the finale to the Eighth. The music¹s variety of utterance is muted, too: long-range changes in mood are generally well handled (note how steadily they build to the climax of the fourth movement of the Sixth), but quicker shifts in spirit are often underplayed.

In the end, then, these are comfortable readings that offer a very partial view of the repertoire. I much prefer the more extroverted, hyperbolic style that marks the Kopelman Quartet's Third or the more rugged approach that the Borodin Quartet take to all three of these quartets. If you favour your Shostakovich on the sweeter side, however, you may well find the Mandelring appealing, especially given the first-rate engineering and the generally informative notes.

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