



Eduard Franck: String Quartets

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The recordings of Eduard Franck's (1817-93) string quartets are proudly labeled premiere recordings. I have no reason to disagree with that statement. In fact the only other recordings of Franck listed in my most recent Schwann are on Audite. Who was Eduard Franck? He was a student of Felix Mendelssohn, who had nothing but praise for his early works. Born into a wealthy Breslau banking family, the four sons pursued entirely different career paths. Eduard was the youngest and pursued a musical career wholeheartedly, settling in Cologne, where he taught at the Rheinische Music School. Unfortunately, his teaching and solo performances came first, and few of his compositions were ever published, perhaps owing to his ambition for absolute perfection. Also, he tended to move from place to place every few years and thus didn't establish a lasting reputation anywhere. It is only now, more than 100 years after his death, that an exhaustive biography jointly written by his grandson and great-grandson has begun to open modern eyes to his works.

The Quartet in E-flat, Op. 54, was evidently written in Berlin in 1847; its companion, the Quartet in C minor, Op. 55, was not published until after his death, and its date of composition is uncertain. It appears first here and is an exceptionally fine quartet. The recording is ideal. Microphone placement is fairly close, yet the instruments sound in their individual places. This is important, because each instrument has a remarkable number of solos. He clearly was in full command of the quartet form, for the whole work is delectable. Themes are well and fully developed. Each of the four movements is well developed, and the quartet is unusual in that all four are marked allegro, allegro vivace, or allegretto. Both quartets are substantial, lasting 34 and 35 minutes.

The E-flat work begins with two adagio movements and concludes with two allegro movements. It is reminiscent of both the late Beethoven quartets and certain aspects of Haydn but with distinctly romantic influences as well. It is interesting for its similarities to great funeral music. Remarkable virtuoso turns are given to the first violin. III is a classically oriented minuet with a hunting trio. The finale is a series of variations.

Both quartets are well worth knowing, but Op. 55 is especially impressive. I would very much like to hear the other Franck works on at least five Audite releases, including two violin concertos and two symphonies as well as his Third Quartet and his piano quintet. Everything about this issue speaks of careful preparation and loving work.