String Quartets by Brahms (Op. 51, No. 1) & Gernsheim (Op. 31)

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Formed in Neustadt, Germany, by Sebastian, Nanette, and Bernhard Schmidt, the Mandelring Quartet takes its name from the almond-tree-rich district where the siblings were born. Multiple prize winners and founders of the HambacherMusikFest, they have established themselves on stage and disc as one of Europe's most distinguished and adventurous young groups. In addition to playing the standard literature, they specialize in discovering, performing, and recording the works of contemporary and unjustly neglected composers such as Berthold Goldschmidt (1903-1996) and George Onslow (1784-1853).

Their new three-volume project combines Johannes Brahms with Heinrich von Herzogenberg, (Felix) Otto Dessoff, and, on this record, Friedrich Gernsheim (1839-1916), an unknown but excellent and prolific German composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher. Though pairing a towering genius' masterpieces with works of his lesser contemporaries seems hazardous, Gernsheim's quartet holds its own: grandly conceived, clearly structured, texturally full-blooded but not dense, rhythmically pungent and original, it is ardently romantic. This is music that is lush, dramatic, intense, and abounding with beautiful, lyrical melodies and rich harmonies. The playing throughout is first-rate, fully equal to all technical demands, tonally warm, homogeneous and clear, deeply felt and expressive. Gernsheim could not have wished for more persuasive advocates. The Brahms is brilliant, expansive, sustaining drama, exhibiting drive and tension without haste.

The record is an admirable, welcome addition to the Romantic discography.

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