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Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets - Vol. 2

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RECORD REVIEW

One of the great pleasures of being a classical music critic is coming upon a comparatively youthful group with only nine years of experience performing familiar repertory with a command and taste that in this release suggests complete maturity. Such is the case with this release, Volume 2 in what is a projected cycle of Beethoven's 16 masterpieces (I reviewed the first instalment in June 2013). Moreover, it is refreshing in its pairing of two contrasted works, the earlier Op. 59 No. 2 exemplifying Beethoven's 'middle' period, the later Op. 127 the beginnings of the more radical style that stamps the third and final one.

The Cremona ensemble suggests 'period' style in its astringent tonality but avoids the 'period' practice favouring lowered eighteenth-century pitch. (Those with very sensitive ears may feel that the group has tuned slightly low, but not enough to cross the border into an A=430 sonority.) In every way this relatively youthful group proves virtuosic, technically secure and free of any mannerisms. The opening movement of Op. 59 No. 2 boasts excellent balance and a bracing tempo lacking fussy ritardandos. Its second movement is beautifully sustained without any hint of affectation, permitting this 12-minute hymn-like section to speak for itself. The third movement Allegretto at 6'38" is almost a full minute faster than the tempo adopted by the Emerson Quartet, a difference that is audibly quite apparent. It may strike some as breathless, but considering how tastes can vary, others may find it thrilling. The Presto finale is just slow enough to permit the concluding acceleration that Beethoven demands for the coda to be clearly articulated.

The first of Beethoven's 'Late' Quartets (Op. 127) is also distinguished. Its first movement (Maestoso-Allegro) is a short six-and-a-half minute romp, at once terse, intense, yet filled with surprises and beautiful moments. The second movement, shaped by Beethoven's three marked changes in tempo, is conveyed with a welcome contrast sharply drawn. The third movement, tagged Scherzando, emerges as a witty scherzo, and the Allegro comodo finale emerges with a buoyant liveliness that suits the movement perfectly. Throughout, the sound is almost ideal: close and clear with ample presence. In some listening rooms, however, it may require a slight trimming of the upper frequencies. In no way, though, does this compromise what is clearly a most welcome release, one that does justice to the music and makes one want to hear more of what is clearly a distinguished ensemble.

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