



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quartet in E flat major (Op. 44 No. 3), Four Pieces for String Quartet (Op. 81) & Octet in E flat major (Op. 20)

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Gramophone (Harriet Smith - 2014.01.01)

GRAMOPHONE

The Mandelring Quartet have been garnering warm reviews for their Mendelssohn series which, enterprisingly, encompasses the complete string chamber music rather than just the quartets. They have been very well recorded, with plenty of immediacy, which captures the visceral and at times robust quality of their playing. For example, in the Op 81 Pieces there's a rawness in the Scherzo that has a kind of no-nonsense appeal. Yet I found myself longing for more clarity in the individual lines, something that the Elias Quartet convey wonderfully while still sounding hugely spontaneous.

The Mandelring capture well the bustling energy of the finale of Op 44 No 3. But turn to the Zemlinsky and you'll find a lot more yearning in the quietly grave slow movement, where the Mandelring seem less inclined to withdraw to a whisper. Also particularly effective in the hands of both the Zemlinsky and the Eroica is a tautness of intent in the Scherzo. The Mandelring by comparison sound a little less focused, their phrasing less precise.

This is an issue, too, in the Octet, for which they are joined by the Cremona Quartet, who much impressed me with their Beethoven earlier this year (6/13). Among modern-day performances, those led by James Ehnes and Daniel Hope are superlative and both achieve a far greater transparency of texture and variety of colour than here. The Scherzo in the new recording is less ethereal than some and somewhat earthbound as a result; and while the last movement has both direction and energy, it sounds generalised in tone compared to the finely textured Hope and co or the vertiginously energetic Ehnes.