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

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The Mandelring Quartet is formed around the members of the Schmidt family, Sebastian and Nanette, violin and Bernhardt, cello. On the present recording the violist is Michael Scheitzbach, although their violist today is Roland Grassl. The Mandelring Quartet has an extremely wide-ranging repertoire and is probably best known to CD listeners for their series on CPO of the quartets of Georges Onslow. They are also known for their close association with the composer Berthold Goldschmidt, who dedicated his fourth quartet to them. The present recording is one of three produced in 1999 in a series entitled Brahms and Contemporaries and only released recently. Each CD pairs one of Brahms' quartets with one by a friend or associate of his. This disc features the second quartet of Friedrich Gernsheim, a friend of Brahms and one of the few composers whose music Brahms actually liked.

Gernsheim was six years younger than Brahms and occupied successively more important positions as a conductor and pedagogue in Cologne, Rotterdam, and Berlin, where he died in 1916. In all of these positions he was a strong promoter of the music of Brahms. As a composer he wrote a lot of orchestral music, including four symphonies that have been recorded as a set on Arte Nova conducted by Siegfried Kohler, as well as concertos, choral works and much chamber music. Although on the surface a minor Brahmsian character he possesses a personality of his own and a geniality that Brahms sometimes lacked. Gernsheim wrote five string quartets, of which the second, in A-minor, is recorded here. It was published in 1875 and shows some influence of the Brahms Op. 51 quartets written two years earlier.

In comparison to the Brahms quartets, the Gernsheim A-minor has both more rhythmic push and more serenity. The development in the first movement is well done, if not fascinating, and the composer shows great imagination in the use of tonal relationships. The recapitulation is ably done. The second movement is in D-flat major and again Gernsheim handles tonal relationships well. The second section of the movement and the overall development impressed me more than anything else in the entire work, especially at 6:30 through to the end of the movement. The scherzo struck me as too Brahmsian, although the trio was much more individual and another highlight of the whole work. The quasi-rondo final movement features a recap of the opening material from the first movement and strains at the bonds of the home key. It also strains at the boundaries of chamber music and almost seems to require an orchestral texture in its last minutes. In all, a work not deserving of the obscurity it has received in the last century.

The three Brahms string quartets are well-known and well-recorded, although they have not received the affection accorded some of the other Brahms chamber works such as the piano trios or the piano quintet. The Op. 51, #1 is a tightly constructed work with the opening material generating all that comes after it. At the same time

the piece thrives on counterpoint, frequently to the exclusion of all else. The Mandelrings begin at too brisk a tempo for my taste, but settle down before an excellent playing of the recapitulation. They are fine in the lovely and tentative slow movement, with it's intricate counterpoint, and continue so in the third movement, with fine work by the violist. They do best with the feverish fourth movement, sustaining the tempo, the atmosphere and the counterpoint steadily throughout the movement. This is their finest playing on the disc.

It may have been noticed that while I spoke of the performers' playing as a whole, I hardly mentioned any solo work. This is not accidental - the Mandelring plays as such a cohesive unit that one hardly notices individual players. All are fine when called upon individually, but it is the total sound of the group that one remembers. Perhaps this is to be expected from a quartet where three of the four instrumentalists have been playing together since infancy and where all four members are devoted to playing chamber music almost exclusively. In any event, it works very well in most of the Brahms, although there were times in both composers' quartets where I felt that the Mandelrings sacrificed tempo control for smoothness of ensemble. I would say that this is the factor the quartet most needs to address.

All three of the discs in this series were recorded as part of the Mandelring's own Hambacher Festival in the St. Bartholomäus-Kirche in Birkweiler in the southern Rhineland. The church lends itself better to the sound of the Brahms than the Gernsheim, but the presumably live performance mikes both works much too closely. There is also some smudging of the individual lines in certain passages in the Brahms. The close ensemble sound of the Quartet is not always well served by the acoustic in the church which sometimes blunts what should be a taut sound. However, any sonic imperfections are outweighed by the chance to hear a more than interesting quartet by a friend of Brahms. I look forward to the other two recordings in this series.

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