Franz Schubert: String Quartets Vol. III

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Fanfare (Peter J. Rabinowitz - 2007.03.01)

The Mandelring Quartet, three siblings and a friend, are renowned for their exceptional coordination—a virtue evident on this, the third volume of their Schubert cycle for Audite. They're not a hyperkinetic group in the manner of the early Juilliard—nor do they offer the intellectual focus of the Pacifica, much less the conversational heat of the Vermeer. But they compensate with an enviable balance—both in terms of their vertical sensitivity and in terms of their emotional stability. I found the first installment of their Shostakovich series too temperate and underinflected for the repertoire; but their poise is better suited to Schubert.

Granted, their occasional tendency to focus on details at the expense of line and their intermittent lack of spring (try the finale of the G Major) gives their performances an expansive atmosphere, making the tempos seem slower than they are. Especially given their inclusion of first-movement exposition repeats, this is not the group to disguise Schubert's sometimes-garrulous nature. Nor is it the group to disguise the sense of rhythmic redundancy that can infect his music. But listeners with the requisite patience will find a great deal to appreciate here: in the magical shading of the tremolos toward the beginning of the G Major, in the aplomb of the Andantino of the G Minor, in the clarity and sense of control throughout. And while the emotional temperature tends to be low, there's a fair amount of Schubertian grit where required (try, for instance, the more dynamic passages in the first movement of the G Major).

In sum, hardly the last word in these scores, especially the familiar G Major. But those attracted to the interpretive vision should find this a welcome release, especially given the solid engineering.

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