



Franz Schubert: String Quartets Vol. I

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Fanfare (Steven E. Ritter - 2009.07.24)

After several pleasant encounters with the Mandelring's Shostakovich series (also on Audite), I had high expectations for this new Schubert quartet series (labeled as "Volume 1"). Alas, it is a bit of a mixed bag. The bad news first: this is as contrived and chillingly stolid a reading of "Death and the Maiden" as I have ever heard. Rhythmically it maintains a goose-stepping parody that enslaves itself to tempo regardless of the emotive needs of the moment, and because of this shackled condition, never really lets go. Of all Schubert's string works, this one requires a certain intensity that needs to be the overall driving force behind any performance, and while beauty of tone, finesse of execution, and contour of phasing are all important (and present here to a good degree), this one reminds me of a beautiful maiden impeccably dressed walking across a sloven, muddy field.

Lynn René Bayley (Fanfare 32:1) was tripping all over herself for superlatives when reviewing the recent issue of this piece by the Jerusalem Quartet (Harmonia Mundi) and proves exactly right. I came to the same conclusions for another non- Fanfare review, and think it simply the finest on the market, a fiery and tempestuous rendition of superlative beauty and wonderfully couched athleticism. It's hard to go back to the old favorites, which would include the Tokyo and Alban Berg readings, after hearing this one. Before I start tripping also—and the Jerusalem recording seems to incite one to this—let me simply offer it up as the reading to have if you are only having one.

But let's get back to the Mandelring, certainly no slouch as a quartet, just outgunned by one of the more remarkable recordings of the year on HM. This current issue, though lead-worn by the maiden's death, proves its mettle when we hear the early E♭ Quartet (1813), pristinely free of any burnt rubber tracks coming off the smoking "Death." We are back to the world of Haydn and Mozart, sunning ourselves in the radiance of Schubert's First Symphony. Though Schubert being Schubert still displays some strangely and tantalizing melodic quirks (especially in the bratty Scherzo and the first Adagio in the composer's quartets), the rich smell of a cup of Viennese coffee perfumes each movement of this all's-right-with-the-world composition. The Mandelrings have this one down pat, and the aforementioned purity of tone rings in heavenly places throughout their performance.

I have to assume that "Death and the Maiden" was simply a flawed concept, for this group should have sent it burning skyward. As is, the example of the 1813 work proves a flawed but still curiously optimistic opening to a complete quartet salvo. Audite being an audiophile label certainly makes up for some of the distresses on this disc (you are there in the hall), and I plan to keep it, but Jerusalem's foil was a case of bad timing for all concerned here.