



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. V

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First Impressions and Shostakovich

First impressions can be terrible things. The emotional footprint they have is so formative that it colors our perception of everything that comes after. That's why a first date to which you showed up with a booger blissfully stuck to the tip of your nose so rarely leads to a second. Or why every Beethoven Symphony since Toscanini has been a disappointment. (Part of the 'Golden Age' attitude found with frightful frequency among critics of a certain age.)

When your first meaningful encounter with the Shostakovich string quartets was the Borodin Quartet, you are screwed, too. The intensity, the roughness, and the overwhelming sense of authenticity (ultimately a purely psychological phenomenon), there simply isn't anything that can match that. My impression by the Borodin has been so considerable that I even, perversely, consider scratchy sound and slight distortion part of the desirable 'authenticity'. Perhaps it helps getting into the dark, dystopian Soviet mood that facilitates our appreciation of these quartets? It's nonsense, of course—but try arguing with perception and feelings, even—or especially—if they are your own.

In any case, there are other quartets that have shown me that the Borodin-only diet is limiting. Most remarkably the Jerusalem Quartet, which live and on record delivers some of the most awe-some, most gripping Shostakovich around. Another revelation, more subtle though it has been, are the audiophile recordings of the Mandelring Quartet on Audite SACDs. The sheer beauty of all of Shostakovich's brilliantly harrowing ugliness that these discs—I'm now listening to their cycle's concluding, fifth volume, delivered in unrivaled dynamics—is something to behold.

It might be special even in lesser performances than those the German sibling-based Mandelring Quartet (named after the street they grew up on) claw and pull from the scores of the 11th, 13th and 15th quartets. Key to that enjoyment—and really to the enjoyment of any DSCH or Bartók quartet listened to on inevitably limiting recording media—is that you listen loud. Very loud. If your neighbors aren't 'enjoying' your Shostakovich session, neither will you.

The quartets of Shostakovich won't need praise or introduction in these pages—either you admire or love them or you have not heard them live yet. But it helps to appreciate different interpretations to know specifically what distinguishes the three quartets on this volume. For one, they represent an internalization of emotion that takes place in all, but especially the late, of Shostakovich's quartets.

Anger and anguish are there, but suppressed; suffering and sighs are accentuated. Unlike in some of the symphonies (nos. 10, 11), resignation and resentment are approached with apprehension rather than gusto. Nor is scathing irony (Symphony no.15) present. That's what we get in these three quartets: quiet suffering and moments of queer humor to the point where I imagine that performers in the USSR must have been scared upon first playing and discovering them.

One exception to the seething-calm of these three quartets is the harrowingly sudden, jagged opening of the Recitative of the 11th quartet is ripped into with such joyous ferocity by the Borodin Quartet that it seems difficult to top. The Sorrel Quartet, whose fine Chandos recordings were on hand for convenient comparison, certainly, literally seems only to scratch the surface instead. The Mandelring, parts of whose interpretation on volume three I found a bit "nice sounding", won't be outdone this time. Their slash is yet even more explosive; even as their tone remains, as always, more refined. (The Jerusalem, incidentally, sound much like the Borodin here; except in Harmonia Mundi's fine, less direct than Audite's, sound.) The Scherzo from the same quartet, experiences the swiftest clip at the hand of the Jerusalems (2:42), who needle through it like a sewing machine. Compared to them, the Sorrel (taking 3:17) drag their feet. The Borodins, perhaps uniquely in the Shostakovich cycle, offer a movement I don't consider superior but rather a little wimpy.

In Fanfare Magazine, Art Lange writes about the fourth volume that the "Mandelring Quartet faithfully reveals the letter, but not always the spirit of the score. Their playing is... blemish free; they are scrupulously in their attention to details like [tempo changes]... and they present a coherent, unified point of view throughout..." The problem with this polite damnation is that, really, all quartets make that impression, when compared to the Borodin. The Mandelring's carefully considered, always unpredictable ways are a treasure—here and in the other installments. Their performances are polished and meticulous, even immaculate, but that unpredictability keeps them from being relegating to the 'mild-mannered' cycles. The dynamic range and fidelity of the Audite recordings, hence the suggestion to turn up the volume, does its part to lift it above much of the competition.

Specifically, I prefer this cycle over the Sorrel, St.Petersburg, Danel, and Brodsky Quartets. The Fitzwilliam cycle, to which I am not emotionally wedded, hasn't anything the Borodin doesn't offer me—minus presumed Russianness. The Emerson's rigid live recordings I've never much liked, and I've heard nothing or too little of the various Manhattan, Rubio, and Éder cycles to judge. Direct comparison, in any case, is rather tedious when dealing with great music in interpretations that are all above average (because one just wants to keep listening), puts the Mandelring Quartet's cycle, and certainly volume five, up with the best of the 'non-Russian' Shostakovich interpretations. If I were to shed all but two cycles (and of course I can't), I would keep the complete Borodin cycle on Melodiya and the Mandelring Quartet to cover my bases.