



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quartets in E flat major (Op. 12), in A minor (Op. 13) & in E flat major (1823)

aud 92.656

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Gramophone (Caroline Gill - 04.09.2012)

GRAMOPHONE

Start of a Mendelssohn cycle from the Mandelring

As this is the first in the Mandelring Quartet's complete cycle of Mendelssohn's string quartets, plain chronological order may well have been the simplest approach and better than saving the insubstantial E flat Quartet for later. However, it's hard not to feel that a recording of this quality wouldn't have benefited from a more contextual approach: to place together Opp 12 and 13 is to look at Mendelssohn's study of Beethoven's late quartets and therefore be party to one of the most essential parts of Mendelssohn's relationship with his sister Fanny. So much of that shared interest is evident in his best and final quartet, the 'Requiem für Fanny', that the only frustration with this wonderful disc is the knowledge that there will be a considerable wait until they get round to releasing Op 80.

The Mandelrings make an appealingly muscular sound but without the sense of jostling egos one often hears in recordings of quartets by groups this mature. This is particularly noticeable in their even-handed approach to the intricate fugues of the two later quartets and there is, in fact, a strong feeling throughout that this music—Mendelssohn and Beethoven—is in the blood of the players. The accuracy of articulation and tuning add a further dimension of enjoyment to this sense and they always stay on the right side of sentimental, knowing what they mean and meaning what they say with enough confidence to be minimalist in how much they interfere with what Mendelssohn carefully placed on the page. This isn't to say it's glib or throwaway—in fact, there is a lot in the authenticity of this performance to suggest that the way they play these pieces is the only way to play them. There is a conviction to the performance that totally banishes any sense that these quartets were the on-paper achievement of a privileged prodigy whose experience lacked the kind of deprivation necessary to create great art. For those who struggle with that notion, this disc will be a welcome emancipation.