



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. I

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Composers have always entrusted their most intimate personal feelings to the string quartet, but Shostakovich went further: he used them to encode what he could not express openly. Increasingly bleak and despondent, his 15 quartets represent a diary of his ever more desperate, tormented existence. The three recorded here already show this development. All have eerie, shadowy Scherzo-movements, though the first quartet, written in 1938 still free of political pressure, is "spring-like" and optimistic. The second quartet, written in 1944, is more obsessive, with wilder contrasts and mood-swings; the fourth goes from pastoral calm to agonized shrieks, from lyrical melancholy to violent outbursts; its four movements all die away in hopeless desolation. Though written in 1949, Shostakovich withheld its premiere (like that of the first violin concerto, from which it quotes a theme) until after Stalin's death in 1953. The performances are most excellent. The Mandelring Quartet - the siblings Sebastian, Nanette and Bernhard Schmidt and violist Roland Glasl - plays with truly fraternal unanimity and a warm, beautiful tone of extraordinary homogeneity. The texture is rich but absolutely clear, the balance is good, though in the first quartet the melodic line is unduly favored. And the players' response to the music is strong and personal. They make the lyrical sections leisurely and deeply expressive, but are not afraid to sound rough in the abrasive ones. Contrasts of speed and dynamics are stark but not excessive, with remarkably poised, natural tempo changes; rhythms are firm and decisive, the spooky Scherzos are dances of death. This record is a valuable contribution to the Shostakovich celebrations.