String Quartets by Brahms (Op. 67) & Herzogenberg (Op. 42, No.1)

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Both of these albums are devoted to the chamber music of Brahms (1833-97) and his contemporaries, and some readers may be surprised to see Richard Strauss (1864-1949) listed among the latter. 31 years younger, Strauss was not part of the Brahms circle, but he was a careful student of the older man's technique as new works would come forward, including Brahms's innovations in sonata form and motif development. Strauss needed them for his growth, and so, as Strauss's biographer Norman Del Mar tells us, "He swallowed them whole". Strauss went to school on Brahms, but then moved on. As the cello sonata at hand makes clear, Strauss at 19 was already Strauss. The work is thoroughly engaging, particularly in the fine performance by Johannes Moser and pianist Paul Rivinius, and seems to draw from the same well-springs as the Horn Concerto 1, the Burleske, and the early songs.

Heinrich von Herzogenberg (1843-1900) very much belonged to the Brahms circle. But he was reluctant to move on. The two works here – as with other of his music, but perhaps not the church music he devoted himself to more and more as he grew older – are instantly recognizable as Brahmsian. So history has done its best to forget them. That is too bad, because, especially if you favor idea over style, they are really lovely works. There is real expert mastery of the cello sonata and string quartet forms; they are melodically distinguished, and adroit in their avoidance of romantic excess. I am glad to add them my library.

If the film industry ever goes back to the kind of romantic drama favored before World War II, the triangle between Brahms and Herzogenberg and the latter's wife, Elisabeth, would make a fascinating movie. Matt Damon could star as Herzogenberg, Julia Roberts as Elisabeth, and Paul Giamatti as Brahms. Elisabeth was charming and musically talented and apparently a bit of a maneuverer; she regularly did her best to interest Brahms in her husband's music. Brahms, a confirmed bachelor, doted on her and did his best to comply, but seems to have been steadily growing weary of having Herzogenberg at his feet. Heinrich might have been better off for his career taking Elisabeth and moving elsewhere. He did eventually move to Berlin with her.

Meanwhile, the older composer was rolling on musically. In Germany's Mandelring Quartet he has an exciting new champion. It consists of the violist Roland Glassi and three Schmidts – Sebastian and Nanette on violins and Bernhard on cello. One has to assume the Schmidts are related; Audite is silent on the subject. The players are very good. The performance of Brahms's third and last quartet, in B-flat, Op. 67, is one of the finest to come along in years.

The Mandelring's Brahms benefits from judicious tempos, an imaginative dynamic range, clear textures, and careful blending. The performance of the Andante (II) is

wonderfully expressive and secure in the way it captures the long lines of Brahms's writing. In the variations of IV the group displays a kaleidoscope of colors that they seem to use to help shape the phrasing. Their performance of the Herzogenberg quartet is filled with the kind of energy and belief that seems to say, "we delight in the discovery of this work".

Moser has won assorted prizes, and his resume lists performances with orchestras in the US, Britain, and Europe. Judging by this release, he plays excellently and with understanding. So does Rivinius, who gets one picture in the album as opposed to five dreamy poses accorded the cellist, who also offers a lofty interview rather pretentiously tided "The Sum of the Universe", Brahms apparently being the universe. Brahms's First Cello Sonata is a beautiful piece with an outstanding last movement that Moser and Rivinius set forth with flair, taste, and imagination. It is also nice to hear them plunge into that world-being-born inside Strauss's mind, and to note how they give equal attention to his small debts to Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms, yet give rapt attention to Strauss's own genius, which would keep him moving on until half-way through the next century.

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