



R. Schumann: Piano Quartet & Piano Quintet

aud 92.574

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I have enjoyed the performances of the Mandelring Quartet in both Schubert and Shostakovich (especially the latter) and now we have them with piano in another “S” composer – Schumann. There is a very high level of execution in both of these chamber music staples. Starting with the piano quintet, they take the *allegro brillante* marking of the first movement quite seriously. They shave about a minute off of the time taken by the Prazak Quartet in their recent Praga SACD (roughly 10% faster overall). Both approaches work in this volatile, romantic repertoire but I slightly prefer the more measured tempo of the Prazak which brings out a bit more drama and contrast. Likewise in the second movement, the Mandelring’s are about 10% faster than the Prazak and in this case the slower Prazak reading really does enhance the somber drama of the funeral march music which plays in wonderful contrast to the *agitato* portions of the movement. Again, the Mandelring’s performance is really good and, without the Prazak to compare it to, would hold its own quite well. I just like the Prazak’s way with the second movement more. The remaining two movements have nearly identical timings – take your pick because they are both excellent.

I have no SACD competition for the piano quartet. This performance is a welcome addition to the SACD ranks. The playing of this young quartet with Claire-Marie Le Guay on piano is exceptional. They give nothing away to veterans like Emmanuel Ax with the Cleveland Quartet (RBCD).

Sound quality is very good. Audite is forthright in listing the recording specifics: recorded in the Bayer Kulturhaus Leverkusen in pcm 24/44.1 using Sennheiser, Neumann and B&K mics. The pcm-dsd converter is a Philips AFC, Sigma Delta type D (for those who care). Comparing this to the Prazak/Praga SACD, the Audite is at a much higher level and the individual instruments stand out more sometimes at the expense of the ensemble. There is also a crispness in the high end that sounds honest and real to me (i.e. not at all fatiguing as many RBCD’s can be). Plus, there is a nice low end foundation here that is lacking to some extent in the Praga recording. The Praga sound is more of a piece – more homogenous (in a good way) than the Audite. While these two SACD’s sound quite different I have a hard time deciding which I prefer since neither is perfect. I would give the slight edge to the Audite for sound but I prefer the performance of the Prazak in the piano quintet. It’s nice to have both! Highly recommended.