



String Quartets by Brahms (Op. 51, No. 2) & Dessooff (Op. 7)

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 2008.05.01)

Though the Brahms quartet leads off the program here, it's the quartet by Felix Otto Dessooff (1835–1892) that's the more noteworthy item. As you can see from his dates, he was an almost exact contemporary of Brahms, and the two men had close ties. Dessooff, however, was not, in the manner of so many others of the same time and milieu, a Brahms wannabe. In fact, his career took him in a different direction, away from composing and into conducting. It was in this latter capacity that he was best known, eventually working his way up to director of the Frankfurt Opera. As conductor, Dessooff premiered a number of Brahms's orchestral works, including, in 1876, the composer's First Symphony. Dessooff composed very little of his own—the current 1878 F-Major String Quartet being his most widely known (perhaps his only known) work—but either he was full of himself or he and Brahms had a very fun-loving, jousting relationship; for in dedicating his quartet to Brahms, Dessooff wrote, "You will be relieved to see your name on the title page of the quartet preserved for posterity. When people have forgotten your German Requiem, people will then say, 'Brahms'? Oh yes, he's the one to whom Dessooff's op. 7 is dedicated!"

Audite and the Mandelring Quartet (Sebastian Schmidt and Nanette Schmidt, violins; Michael Scheitzbach, viola; and Bernhard Schmidt, cello) have released two companion discs to this one, pairing each of Brahms's other two string quartets with a quartet by a near contemporary. Brahms's C-Minor Quartet is paired with a quartet by Friedrich Gernsheim, and the B♭-Major Quartet is paired with a quartet by Heinrich von Herzogenberg.

My previous encounter with the Mandelring came with four cpo CDs of chamber music by Georges Onslow, in which repertoire I thought they were quite good. The field for Brahms's quartets, however, is far more crowded; and the present release does not have timing on its side, having arrived not long after the Brahms set with the Emerson Quartet. While the A-Minor Quartet is not as tightly wound and aggressive as its sibling C-Minor Quartet, there is still a nervous unease to it that the Mandelring's more laid-back reading seems to miss. The playing is beautiful, but it's a bit too relaxed for my taste and lacking the edginess that the Emerson brings to the score.

For the Dessooff, choice is extremely limited, the current recording being the only one listed. Experience has taught me, however, to make a more thorough check before declaring a recording to be the first or only one in existence. And sure enough, a quick perusal of my own collection turned up a 1983 Antes CD (319023) of the piece played by the Bartók Quartet. It has the advantage of being coupled with a 1986 performance of Dessooff's even more rarely heard 1880 G-Major String Quintet. In a case of reverse influence, it may be that Brahms's own two string quintets may have been inspired by Dessooff's earlier written work, though Brahms chose to follow

Mozart's model with two violas, while Dessoff chose Schubert's model with two cellos. Whether the Antes disc is still available or not, I can't say.

Dessoff's F-Major Quartet could not be mistaken for Brahms, no how, no way. The harmonic language is similar, but the melodic profile doesn't match, the texture is lighter, and the overall mood is gay—more reminiscent of Johann Strauss's Vienna than Brahms's. Listen, for example, to the Poco andantino that serves as the quartet's Scherzo movement. Most delightful is the last movement, Allegro con brio, a joyous, jocular affair that dashes breathlessly here and there like a busy aunt arranging the table decorations and everything else for a wedding reception. It's a lightweight, playful piece that makes a fine foil to Brahms's much darker and heavy-hearted work.

Playing and recording are excellent. Recommended.

