Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets - Vol. 4

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Gramophone (Peter Quantrill - 2015.05.25)

GRAMOPHONE

Audite's recording is close if not claustrophobic, close enough to differentiate the character of the four Italian instruments as well as their players—the 20th-century viola and cello are more reticent if more timbrally even than the Amati and Testore instruments used by the violinists. The microphones catch both the leader's sniff and the rather wide and slow vibrato he uses in general; I prefer the pure tone employed by him and his colleagues to chilling effect in the Adagio of Op 18 No 1, which is invested with an unusual depth of expression. The dramatic silences are given full measure around Eroica-like intensifications of the main theme's second half at the movement's climax, and the players don't let the tension slacken with a sentimental rallentando but bend the coda with discreet portamento.

Right from the subtle play with Beethoven's opening gambit—first tentative, then more assured, like a guest at the door putting their party face on—this is a performance that moves with purpose and takes care over the small things. Both the Scherzo and its Trio push on relentlessly—it's a small room for a busy party and the guests are inclined to talk to your face—with plenty of buzz from the cellist as he lays into a point. The confrontational tonal profile of the quartet is more obviously suited to the abrupt contrasts of Op 131. The stabbing accents of the opening Adagio would cut deeper at a lower dynamic level, and throughout there is a lack of really quiet, inward playing, even in the central Andante. Accordingly the finale is a first cousin to the Grosse Fuge, raw and impressively provisional.

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