



D. Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. I

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Well, at least for now, this is my favorite SA-CD, for a number of reasons. Of the three quartets presented here, only #2 was previously available on SA-CD, with the Rosalyra Quartet on Artegra (coupled with #8). Best I can tell, the Artegra recording was the only previous recording of any of the quartets actually played by a quartet, with chamber orchestra renditions of #8 on Delos and #10 on Linn rounding things out. Thus, while all of Shostakovich's 15 symphonies have had at least one SA-CD recording, only three of his 15 quartets had made it to SA-CD in some form before this present disc. Now we're up to five.

I can't get enough of these quartets. I recently began another listen through the cycle with my favorite RBCD version, with the Emersons on DG. This set won 2 Grammy awards in 2001, for Best Classical Album and Best Chamber Music Performance. The Emersons combine highly intelligent interpretations with virtuosity that is staggering. The sound is very closely miked, with little sense of an actual space; you can almost feel the bows scraping away at you, but the players are so good that they (and the listener) can take the exposure. Often, the strong, muscular sound produced by the Emersons is an advantage in these works. I also enjoy the Borodin sets (the first incomplete one on Chandos, a later one on Melodiya), and have listened through the Fitzwilliam, Manhattan, Brodsky, and Eder sets too.

The Mandelring Quartett, on the basis of this recording, holds up very well against the recorded competition. As opposed to the DG/Emerson character of four outstanding individual musicians sometimes trying to outplay each other (which may well be due to the engineering), the Mandelrings have a blended sound, like a single unit. This is not to say that they are not individually talented; they are clearly musicians of high caliber, but they don't call unnecessary attention to that fact. Following the quartets in the score, I was struck by the group's attention to unified dynamic shading and details. The passages which, at first listen, did not sound blended are played that way because that's the way they're written! For instance, in the first quartet, first movement, rehearsal 4, the viola and cello play pianissimo, the first violin forte and sticking out obviously on this recording, because the players are true to the score and the composer's clear intentions. Intonation in some difficult passages stretching instrument range, such as the first movement of the 4th Qtet, is superb.

The multichannel sound is wonderful. It is not an original DSD recording; the clearly printed recording information in the booklet indicates a PCM 88kHz-24 bit original converted to DSD. If you can tell, you've got better ears than mine. When I close my eyes, I imagine I'm sitting in a fairly small but pleasingly resonant rehearsal hall, and the players are in an arc maybe ten feet away from me. I'm close enough that the 1st violinist is clearly to my left, the cellist clearly to my right, but not so close that I lose

the sense of being in a real space. The instruments sound true to life.

It would be wrong to say that these are "light" quartets -- they aren't -- but if you're not familiar with the cycle, they are perhaps three of the easiest to "get", and a good way to start exploring. I find the Shostakovich 1st quartet is to the rest as Prokofiev's Classical Symphony is to the rest; there are 4 brief, almost neoclassical movements but with unexpected twists and turns in the melodies and time signatures, odd glissandi, etc. The 2nd has 4 titled movements, including the second "Recitative and Romance" with extended 1st violin solo passages, and an extended "Theme with Variations" finale. Three of the the four movements in the 4th quartet are marked Allegretto; the 4th movement has melodies with a distinctive Jewish/klezmer sound, and a climactic triple forte unison passage with interrupting triple- and quadruple-stops that is unforgettable.

Perhaps the best news of all -- this is volume 1 of a projected complete cycle! My only unknown is whether the playing and sound will work as well in some of the later Shostakovich quartets. Will the Mandelrings give us raw, suicidal emotion in the 8th? The slashing energy in the finale of the 9th? The darkness and despair of the 13th and 15th? These questions are not answerable yet. Based on this recording, though, if the Mandelrings bring their high level musicianship, and Audite brings this sound for the rest... ..I may still go back to the Emersons sometimes for that adrenaline rush, but they'd no longer be my first choice. Amazing!