



## D. Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. I

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If future releases in the Mandelring Quartet's projected Shostakovich cycle match this first volume's revelatory excellence (not to mention Audite's realistically detailed surround sound), the first-rate Emerson, Borodin, Rubio, Danel, and Fitzwilliam sets will have no choice but to move over and make shelf room. What strikes me first and foremost about the Mandelrings' interpretations of the First, Second, and Fourth Quartets is how they change their playing style to suit each composition's individual personality. For example, many ensembles opt for uniformly warm and blended sonorities in the First quartet's opening movement. The music's disarming tunefulness certainly suits such an approach. The Mandelrings will have none of that. Instead, the violins and viola dole out vibrato to the bare minimum and lay into each beat in strict observance of the composer's tenuto marking, while the cellist plays his part with a warmer, more sustained tone, because Shostakovich writes "espressivo". The second movement stands out for violist Roland Glassi's gorgeous tone in the extended opening solo, while the muted, motoric third movement is a model of lightness and control. The finale's similar figurations manage to retain similar tonal characteristics despite the fact that the mutes are removed.

The Mandelrings respond to the Second quartet's more massive textures and orchestral dimensions with elemental ferocity and pull out all the stops without becoming over abrasive. I like how they push ahead for the first movement's second theme in order to distinguish its character from the declamatory opening statement. It's also worth drawing attention to the second movement's introduction, where the first violin rhapsodizes over a bed of sustained chords. To play these chords louder than Shostakovich's pianissimo arguably ensures a more solid base from which the first violinist can soar in the manner of a cadenza. This is what we usually hear, and the Emersons do so fabulously. It works, and it's valid. However, the Mandelrings take more time with the fermata over the first chord and let their drop to pianissimo truly register before first violinist Sebastian Schmidt enters. Then they sustain that pianissimo chord to eerie effect, while Schmidt treats his solo less as a virtuoso vehicle than a narrative-oriented aria.

Likewise in the Fourth quartet's first movement the violinists resist the easy temptation to over-inflect their duet over the viola and cello's droning D-natural, thereby allowing the fortissimo double stops up ahead their full impact. The inner movements also are balanced to perfection, phrased with haunting delicacy and expressive restraint. And instead of establishing the final Allegretto's basic tempo at the outset, the Mandelrings ease their way into it. This gives listeners a chance to let the distinct characters of the two-note arco phrases and the soft pizzicato "oom-pahs" sink in before the story gets under way. In sum, the Mandelring Quartet serves Shostakovich with intelligent, soulful, deep-digging, and loving virtuosity that's not to be missed.