



D. Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. I

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2007.01.13)

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Recorded February-July, 2005, these finely etched inscriptions trace the development of Dimitri Shostakovich as a composer of string quartets, 1938-1949. The 1938 C Major Quartet has about it a spring-like naiveté, a coquettish classicism, with an occasional reference to Mozart in the first movement, an allusion to Mendelssohn in the second. The composer's deliberate avoidance of "formalism" finds ironic outlet in the busy Allegro molto scherzo, with its predilection for rhythms and textures from Mahler. Subversive bits of counterpoint still manage to sneak in. The final, brief Allegro is a quick romp, albeit somewhat aggressive, with sparkling dialogue among the four principals.

The 1944 A Major Quartet is a product of wartime sensibility, a suite composed at what Shostakovich called "lightning speed." Utilizing folk motifs, Shostakovich called his first, densely layered movement an Overture. The virtuosic writing for first violin in the second movement Recitativo und Romanze had Dmitri Tsiganov of the Beethoven Quartet in mind. Here, Sebastian Schmidt does the honors in the sad cantilena. The dark hues of the first movement wend their way from Bernhard Schmidt's pungent cello. In surround sound, the upper strings' pizzicati and the ensuing fugal entries poke one from outer space. The weird Valse may hint of febrile Prokofiev, at first a totentanz, then feverish pandemonium. The last movement is a Theme and Variations, the tune rife with Russian Orthodox liturgy. The cello starts a fugal subject of some power midway through the movement; though the texture lightens a bit, the humor remains grim. The final pages evince paroxysms of despair, though some might claim the upward scales a sort of apotheosis.

The 1949 Fourth Quartet in D was suppressed by the composer until after Stalin's death in 1953. Three Allegrettos frame a second movement Andantino. Bucolic, even rustic in temperament, the first movement muses ever more chromatically toward C Major. The Andantino harkens back to Tchaikovsky's tender ethos, but a morbid heartthrob keeps us in thrall. The Scherzo, if it be, has a shadowy counterpoint, the players unisono and then effecting a drum-like gallop. Viola Roland Glassl takes us into the last movement, an ethnic march whose alternately Jewish and grotesque impulses may well have motivated Shostakovich delaying the premier by the Beethoven Quartet. The Mandelrings perform a lovely morendo (dying away) at the music's conclusion, true to the composer's intentions. Heady, understated but passionate music, exquisitely played and recorded, a fine tribute to the composer's centennial.