



F. Schubert: String Quartets Vol. I

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The Strad (David Denton - 2004.03.01)

The German-based Mandelring Quartet makes an auspicious start to a new cycle of the Schubert quartets, its choice of 'Death and the Maiden' taking it into direct comparison with just about every famous ensemble of our time. Composed of two brothers and a sister from the Mandelring family, together with violist Roland Glassl, the group has created a well-balanced team that enjoys a unanimity of musical vision.

Dynamics are observed to the point of total compliance, blowing away the many performing conventions that have become encrusted on the score. This is particularly evident in the second movement, where the marked contrasts invoke the feel of dark drama I miss in most other recordings.

Though exceptionally precise in this respect, the group does have a tendency to wrap up phrases with an unmarked easing of tempo before moving on. The pulse throughout is generally brisk, the whole reading more sharply etched than the relaxed account the Mandelrings recorded on Naxos early in their career. Certainly a strong contender among recent recordings.

Schubert composed the E flat major Quartet when he was 16 and the Mandelrings are unable to remove the feel of a student struggling for inspiration in the opening movement. They stroll gently through the Scherzo and their handling of the delicate nuances of the slow movement leads to a genial view of the finale invested with more charm than many performances I have encountered.

The sound quality is good, with admirable balance between the instruments, and I look forward to the rest of the series.