



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. III

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The Mandelring Quartet are named for a street in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse on which three of its four members lived. This is not surprising, though, as the three Schmidts are siblings. Violist Roland Glassl joined them in 1999, but the Mandelring (with a different violist, of course) have been playing for longer, winning their first major award in 1991. With this release they are halfway through a Shostakovich cycle. I missed the first two volumes (the second of which was reviewed in October 2007), but I am so impressed by this third that I might now purchase its predecessors. The prose on the back of the jewel-case verges on purple. In these three quartets, we read, Shostakovich not only interpreted the achievements of his great role-model Beethoven into contemporary musical language, he also paid tribute to the three important women in his life: his late wife Nina [in No. 7], his last wife Irina [No. 9] and his secret love Galina Ustvol'skaya [No. 5]. Michael Struck-Schloen's actual booklet notes are more temperate, although they have not always been translated into idiomatic English. These three quartets span 1952 to 1964. (As a frame of reference, Symphonies Nos. 10-13 came in between.) Struck-Schloen aptly compares the Fifth Quartet in its compelling constructivism and dramatic form to the middle Beethoven quartets. It is in this quartet that Shostakovich quotes Ustvol'skaya's Clarinet Trio. The Seventh Quartet is construed as a work of grief – but with Shostakovich, that is hardly a unique distinction, and it has too much violence to be simply elegiac. Similar to what he would later say about the Fifteenth Symphony, Shostakovich at one point referred to the Ninth Quartet as a children's piece (about toys and excursions). As with the symphony, this description smells like a red herring. Interestingly, both works evoke the finale of Rossini's William Tell Overture: the symphony quotes it explicitly, and the quartet dances around it, via its obsessive anapaestic rhythms. It's impossible not to compare the Mandelring with the Hagen, another three-sibling group. The Hagen play the Seventh Quartet with a fuller tone and give the lower strings more prominence, although it is not easy to rule out the role of the engineering. The Mandelring play this music more edgily; both groups rough up the tone when it seems appropriate to do so, however. Interpretatively, the Hagen and the Mandelring are very similar – implacable, passionate and haunting – and their tempos are almost identical. DG's engineers bring the Hagen closer to the listener than Audite's do for the Mandelring. The Audite disc is an SACD, but I played it on a conventional CD player, so that needs to be taken into consideration. The Fitzwilliam Quartet were once everyone's favourite Western interpreters of the quartets, but I confess that my enthusiasm for their recordings has waned with so many fine new ones appearing in the digital era, present company included. I wish the Hagen Quartet would record a complete Shostakovich cycle, but the Mandelring Quartet seem poised to console that particular disappointment of mine.