



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. IV

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[Fanfare](#) (Art Lange - 2009.10.04)

In [Fanfare](#) 30:4, Barry Brenesal reviewed the first volume of the Mandelring Quartet's Shostakovich cycle, the First, Second, and Fourth quartets, characterizing the performances as "beautiful of their kind"—their kind, alas, lacking "emotional weight." I don't know what happened to Volumes 2 and 3 (there's no sign of them in the online Archive), but here we have the fourth installment, and my response is much the same. The expressive content in these three later works ranges from passages of bleak introspection to brief outbursts of anguish and, occasionally, aggression. The Mandelring Quartet faithfully reveals the letter but not always the spirit of the score. Their playing is tonally blended and blemish free; they are scrupulous in their attention to internal details like shifting tempo indications, such as those in the 12th Quartet's two extended movements; and they present a coherent, unified point of view throughout all three works. But they miss so many opportunities for dramatic emphasis that it is apparently neither neglect nor oversight but a consistent interpretative decision, which to my taste is less convincing than that adopted by more extroverted ensembles like the Sorrel (Chandos) and Borodin (EMI) Quartets.

Examples. In the 10th Quartet, the first violin can be a snarling protagonist in the opening Andante, but not here. The Mandelrings do dig in and grind out a committed, if not especially harsh, Allegretto furioso, and to their credit don't shrink from the dissonances along the way, but the concluding, insistent Allegretto offers no palpable degree of dread, or anguish, or brutality. They sustain a lyrical flow through the dark, chromatic contours of the 12th's opening Moderato, but without the irony or despair that the slower, more heavily inflected accounts by the Sorrel and Borodin ensembles provide; and the long Allegretto, which at times seems to border on the brink of chaos, benefits more from the Sorrel's exaggerated contrasts than the Mandelring's brisk steadfastness. (The pizzicato at 51 often gives me the chills, but not here—a small point, perhaps, but a telling one.) Likewise, though they plumb the melodic breadth of the 14th Quartet's Adagio, highlighting the long passages of counterpoint between the first violin and cello with a soothing clarity, elsewhere they lack the Sorrel's surreal extravagances and the Juilliard's (Sony) almost reckless intensity.

There are moments in this music that can set your hair on end or take your breath away. To fully experience those moments, my recommendation remains with the Sorrel, Borodin I (Chandos), and Borodin II recordings.