



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. V

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Fanfare (Jens F. Laurson - 2010.05.01)

First impressions can be terrible things. The emotional footprint they have is so formative that it colors our perception of everything that comes after it. That's why a date to which you showed up with a booger blissfully stuck to the tip of your nose so rarely leads to a second one. Or why every Beethoven symphony performance since Toscanini has been a disappointment. (Incidentally, not my view but part of the "Golden Age" attitude found with frightful frequency among critics of a certain generation.)

When your first meaningful encounter with the Shostakovich string quartets was the Borodin Quartet, you are screwed too. The intensity, the roughness, and the overwhelming sense of authenticity (ultimately just a psychological phenomenon): There simply isn't anything that can match that. My impression by the Borodin has been so considerable that I even, perversely, consider scratchy sound and slight distortion part of the desirable "authenticity." Perhaps it helps getting into the dark, dystopian Soviet mood that facilitates our appreciation of these quartets? It's nonsense, of course, but try arguing with perception and feelings, even – or especially – if they are your own.

In any case, there are other quartets that have shown me that the Borodin-only diet is limiting. Most remarkably the Jerusalem Quartet, which live and on record delivers some of the most awesome, most gripping Shostakovich around. Another revelation, more subtle though it has been, are the audiophile recordings of the Mandelring Quartet on Audite SACDs. The sheer beauty of all of Shostakovich's brilliantly harrowing ugliness that these discs – I'm now listening to their cycle's concluding fifth volume, delivered in unrivaled dynamics – is something to behold. It's so good, it might be special even in lesser performances than those the German sibling-based Mandelring Quartet (named after the street they grew up on) claw and pull from the scores of the 11th, 13th, and 15th quartets. Key to that enjoyment – and really to the enjoyment of any DSCH or Bartók quartet listened to on inevitably limiting recording media – is that you listen loud. Very loud. If your neighbors aren't "enjoying" your Shostakovich session, neither will you. The quartets of Shostakovich won't need praise or introduction in these pages – either you admire or love them or you have not heard them live yet. But it helps to appreciate different interpretations to know specifically what distinguishes the three quartets on this volume. For one, they represent an internalization of emotion that takes place in all, but especially the late, Shostakovich quartets. Anger and anguish are there, but suppressed; suffering and sighs are accentuated. Unlike in some of the symphonies (Nos. 10, 11), resignation and resentment are approached with apprehension rather than gusto. Nor is scathing irony (Symphony No. 15) superficially present. That's what we get in these three quartets: quiet agony and moments of queer humor to the point where I imagine that performers in the USSR must have been chilled upon first playing and discovering

them.

One exception to the seething-calm of these three quartets is the harrowingly sudden, jagged opening of the Recitative-Adagio of the 11th quartet, which is ripped into with such joyous ferocity by the Borodin Quartet that it seems difficult to top. The Sorrel Quartet, whose fine Chandos recordings were on hand for convenient comparison, only scratches the surface; literally, from the sound of it. The Jerusalem Quartet incidentally sounds much like the Borodin here, except in Harmonia Mundi's fine sound less direct than Audite's, cleaner than Melodiya's, and closer up front than Chandos's. The Mandelring, parts of whose interpretation on Volume 3 I found too "nice" sounding, won't be outdone this time. The group's slash is yet even more explosive, even as its tone remains, as always, utterly refined. The Scherzo from the same quartet experiences the swiftest clip at the hands of the Jerusalems (2:42), who needle through it like on a sewing machine. Compared to them, the Sorrel (taking 3:17) drags its feet. The Borodins, perhaps uniquely in the Shostakovich cycle, offer a movement I don't consider superior but instead a little wimpy, while the German quartet gets the mix just right, after three bars of establishing the repetitive, perpetuum mobile-like rhythm.

In Fan fare 33:1, Art Lange writes about its fourth volume that the "Mandelring Quartet faithfully reveals the letter but not always the spirit of the score. Their playing is ... blemish free; they are scrupulous in their attention to details like [tempo changes] ... and they present a coherent, unified point of view throughout." The problem with this polite damnation is that, really, all quartets make that impression, compared to the Borodin. But to my ears at least, the Mandelring's carefully considered, always unpredictable ways are a treasure – here and in the other installments. Yes, its performances are polished and meticulous, even immaculate. But its unpredictability – terribly refined one second, ruthlessly vigorous the next – keeps it from being relegated to the lot of "mild mannered" cycles. The dynamic range and fidelity of the Audite recordings, hence the suggestion to turn up the volume, does its part to lift it above much of the competition, even just in plain two-channel CD sound.

Specifically, I prefer this cycle over the Sorrel, St. Petersburg Quartet, and Brodsky Quartet. The Fitzwilliam cycle, to which I am not emotionally wedded, hasn't anything the Borodin doesn't offer me – minus that presumed Russianness. The Emerson's rigid live recordings I've never much liked, and I've heard nothing or too little of the various Manhattan, Danel, Rubio, and Eder cycles to judge. Direct comparison, in any case, is rather tedious when dealing with great music in interpretations that are all above average (because one just wants to keep listening). The direct comparison I've done puts the Mandelring Quartet's cycle, and certainly Volume 5 (my recommended introduction to their cycle), up with the best of the non-Russian Shostakovich interpretations. If I were to shed all but two cycles (and of course I could never), I would keep the Borodin cycle on Melodiya and the Mandelring Quartet to cover my bases. The only thing that could change my mind anytime soon would be a hypothetical prospective Jerusalem Quartet traversal.