



D. Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. V

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Composers always express themselves most intimately in their string quartets. Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) was no exception, despite the controversy about the supposed political subtext of his works. The three quartets recorded here (Nos. 11, 13, and 15) must be among the most devastating music ever written: dismal, obsessive, and lamentationous, these monumental works fluctuate between helpless fury and hopeless desperation. The shadow of death hovers over them. In the last one, ravaged by deteriorating health, Shostakovich seems to be writing his own requiem.

The Mandelring Quartet's repertoire is wide and inclusive, but that such vivacious, robust young musicians should want to immerse themselves in this mournful, despondent music is amazing. Equally remarkable is the skill with which they negotiate its violent mood swings, from grotesque "gallows humor" to bleak despair. The solos and duets are spare and desolate, the slashing chords forceful, the sound effects eerie, the long glissandi – very slow, almost measured – ominous. The Mandelrings underline contrasts of mood and character with color and articulation. Despite using sparing vibrato in the usually unvibrated opening movement of String Quartet No. 15, they make it sound bereft of color and life.

Their playing is expressive, but avoids excess and emotional abandon.

The Mandelring Quartet – Sebastian and Nanette Schmidt, violins; Roland Glassl, viola; and Bernhard Schmidt, cello – is a family affair: the two violinists and the cellist are siblings, but that alone cannot account for their perfect balance and intonation, their musical unanimity and instrumental equality. Their tone is so homogeneous that one often cannot tell who is playing; the violinists are completely undistinguishable.

This final volume of their Shostakovich cycle brings a major undertaking to an impressive conclusion. Recorded in hybrid multi-channel SACD.