Eduard Franck: String Quintets

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These are world premiere recordings of two string quintets, Opuses 15 and 51, by German composer Eduard Franck (1817-93). He certainly knows how to write for this medium. Each voice is given its own space so that its function always comes through clearly, especially with the warm, superbly balanced engineering here, and with these players, whose tuning, rhythm, and ensemble is so perfect one would think they play as a unit all the time. They also give superb forward movement to both works. My only criticism of them is that they favor forte volume so often that their gorgeous sound becomes wearing much of the time, especially when the music is of lesser interest.

That’s the main problem with Opus 15. Franck has learned structure and form from his best contemporaries, particularly Mendelssohn (with whom he studied) and Schubert, but here he doesn’t have enough creative ideas to make the work distinctive. In lesser hands some of his harmonic progressions would become really tiresome. His ideas become tedious because they’re not inventive enough to endure the length. Or, to put it bluntly, at some point in each of the four movements I finally said, “Enough already”.

Opus 51 has more substance. Its inner lines pulse with life as the players bring out leading voices, even though II reminds me that Franck writes mainly for the two violins; while strong on form, he doesn’t write much counterpoint. The Scherzo is very nice, and the theme-and-variations finale has the cleverest, loveliest, most inventive writing on the album—which says a lot because the the-me-and- variations form is often the deadliest for even the best composers (just ask Schubert or Beethoven).

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