



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets - Vol. 6

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This is Volume VI of the quartets from the Cremona. I reviewed Volumes II & III (M/J 2014, N/D 2014), and others have been covered by Greg Pagel. I feel I have a good sense of this group. Their playing is generally bracing and clean, with fairly fast tempos. While they are not what anyone would call “inexpressive”, their approach tends to be straightforward, one might say youthful. Their performances of the early quartets (Op. 18) seem quite fine, and here in No. 5 (the A major) the crisp, off-the-string articulation in I is wonderfully light and Haydnesque. The finale is taken at a tempo that shows the Cremona’s technical expertise. The music doesn’t gain much from the blinding speed, so when I asked myself why they played at such a pace, I came up with this answer: because they could!

I’m less happy with Quartet 13 (B-flat, Op. 130). For me the short introduction to 1 should include an element of pain, of regret, of sadness, but here it seems too straight. The opening theme (repeated notes, then a leap up a fourth) certainly is on the positive side, but we find (mainly in the development) that the optimism is tinged with lots of questions and uncertainty. This emotional complexity, so important in late Beethoven, seems in short supply here. The middle movements go better. The presto is flown through, taking just over two minutes, but the scherzo (poco scherzoso) and German dance are lovely. The cavatina is plagued with poor balances; accompanying voices often overshadow the melody. The finale (not the Grosse Fuge) is also lightweight and nicely done.

The publicity for the Cremona likes to compare them to the Quartetto Italiano. They’re not there yet, but the earliest recordings of the Italiano were faster and more aggressive than the later ones we so much admire. Perhaps the same thing will happen with this group.