



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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Each volume of this evolving Beethoven quartet cycle from the Quartetto di Cremona usefully encompasses works from all three creative phases of the composer's life. Nowhere else in his oeuvre, save perhaps in the piano sonatas, can the listener experience at first hand Beethoven's novel technical and expressive advances being brought into such sharp relief across a range of works in a Single genre.

With this new SACD release, Volume in Audite's series, that creative evolution and attendant polarization of form and ideas seems even more startling than before. The reason for this is no t hard to determine; the programme combines the tersely belligerent C minor Quartet from the Op. 18 group with the Grosse Fuge and the first of the middle period 'Razumovsky' Quartets, Op. 59. It would be hard to cherry-pick a more challenging or more representative group from among Beethoven's quartets, making this compilation particularly appealing, one imagines, to anybody for whom these works might still be terra incognita.

However, so far, this series has had mixed fortunes. Variable performances from the Cremona Quartet haven't always lived up to the expectations their heritage seems to have conferred upon them, as perceived successors to the illustrious Quartetto Italiano. Consequently in an already oversubscribed field, these accounts probably won't be the ones most of us would choose to live with, despite much that's entirely praiseworthy: the highlight here is an ardent account of Op. 59 No. 1 that seems to me to be the finest individual performance I've heard so far in the Cremona Quartet's cycle.

The C minor Quartet, Op. 18 No. 4, owes much to the minor-key works of Haydn, in particular to the second in the Op. 76 set, the D minor Quartet popularly known as the 'Fifths'. Speeds are invigorating; and with bristling attack and mercurial Mediterranean passions simmering away, this was always going to be an exciting account! Yet there are moments which don't quite come off, particularly in the Andante, and the tiered dynamics and syncopated abruptness of the Menuetto find these players in less than full accord, though the finale goes very well indeed.

In the Grosse Fuge climaxes are reached too soon, motorically and expressively, and amid this torrential onrush, the team begins to flag well before the music has run its course. This proved a considerable disappointment, particularly when compared to the superlative account from the Belcea Quartet, whose visionary playing of all these works has raised the bar in the interpretation of the Beethoven string quartets by several notches in the recent past.

Finally things begin to go well, however, and the Quartetto di Cremona ends Volume 3 of its Beethoven cycle in fine style, with a thoroughly assured performance of the

first 'Razumovsky' Quartet. If the playing cannot match the overall tonal cohesion of the Belceas, this is a solidly reliable reading nonetheless, which ticks most, though not quite all, of the right boxes. The biggest problem you'll detect at the outset is the somewhat anonymous character of the playing. Certainly the opening movement goes well for the most part, though the cello's introduction of the 'Eroica'-like first subject seems to lack something in presence and character, whereas the Belceas sound altogether more intrepid and purposeful. The Cremonas need time really to find their feet here, but when they do, there's crisply alert ensemble playing and a genuinely convincing sense of teamwork which hasn't always been so much in evidence previously.

The pointed Scherzo hasn't quite the metrical rigour of the Belceas' version, and dynamics are not so strongly attenuated, but this impression may well derive from the recording, made in a fairly reverberant auditorium, than to any particular shortcomings in the playing itself. The slow movement brings moments of heart-rending expressivity, however, and these players are at their impressive best when they allow the music to unfold at its own natural pace; the transition into the Russian-inspired finale, one of the most dangerous and unpredictable passages in Op. 59 No. 1, is nicely managed too.

Audite's production is never sonically the equal of Zig-Zag's exceptional Belcea Quartet recordings, but the sound is bright and well balanced. With Michael Struck-Schloen's informative booklet notes to hand, this is much the best disc in this series to date.