



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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[American Record Guide](#) (Greg Pagel - 2015.11.01)

I get to review Beethoven quartets almost every issue. As much as I lament the fact that great ensembles too seldom record unfamiliar or contemporary repertoire, I almost always find these releases a treat. Each new reading, even if it's mediocre, reveals new possibilities.

The Cremona Quartet has never disappointed me. I reviewed their release of Quartets 6, 11, and 16 (Sept/Oct 2013). I thought it was very good, and this one is even better. Their approach to Beethoven seems to be expressive, but straightforward and never overplayed. Most of my recordings of Op. 18 are either too delicate or too romantic, but Cremona comes pretty close to the bull's eye. Their interpretation is crisp, yet robust. 1:1 is a little quicker here than on any of my other recordings, but the tempo gives it a lilt that I don't think I've heard elsewhere.

I also enjoy their reading of Quartet 14. Here, too, they play in a way that is very direct, but not dry. The tempos are again quick, and listeners might miss the weariness often heard in late Beethoven. For that, go with the Italiano, whose slow movements in particular are praised in our overview of the Beethoven Quartets (Nov/Dec 2006). If you're looking for clarity, though, the Cremona would be hard to beat. They allow the work to unfold slowly and naturally, without any interpretive excess.

The Elias Quartet's approach to Beethoven is the opposite of the Cremona's. They are too romantic. In Quartet 4 many details are exaggerated, and the music feels quite bogged down. Accents are overdone, and there are many unnecessary pauses. Also, there is a lot of sliding and scooping. There is even more of this in Quartet 13. In general, they simply seem to be pushing too hard. This way of playing might work for Brahms. I'd like to hear this group play something else, because they are creative and technically skilled and have a rich sound. But I cannot recommend this.