



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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Revelatory Beethoven

Michael Tanner is stunned by the Cremona Quartet's playing

This is the most exciting new disc of string quartet playing that I have come across for a long time. It opens with one of Beethoven's least performed or mentioned works, his Quintet Op. 29, for which Lawrence Dutton of the Emerson Quartet joins the Cremona Quartet. It is not a masterwork, but it goes naturally with the Op. 18 Quartets in its bold and charming way.

What really matters, though, is the stupendous performance of the Quarter No. 15 in A minor, the one late quartet that I have found hardest to fully respond to until now. The Cremonans have an individual style of playing. It comes as no surprise that they were coached by Piero Farulli of the Quartetto Italiano: they seem to have taken his lessons to extremes. Their playing is characterised by strenuous lyricism, the individual players seeming almost to go their own way, as if they were a quartet of singers with strong personalities. They give this strange music a choral quality, which in the great Song of Thanksgiving, that immense slow movement, reaches almost unbearable levels of intensity. The alternating andante sections, which I have often felt, like Stravinsky, were like the layers of a five-decker Dagwood sandwich, here are necessary to relieve the tension. The almost mad, desperate finale is annihilating. Altogether a revelation.