



Ravel & La Tombelle: String Quartets

aud 97.709

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The Mandelring Quartet are most familiar to me for their superb complete cycle of the Shostakovich quartets, and their late Schubert quartets, both on fine SACDs on the Audite label, which generally has a fine chamber music catalogue, among other genres. Here the Mandelring offer French music, I think for the first time on disc. The much-recorded Ravel quartet is here coupled with a rarity, the sole string quartet of Antoine Louis Joseph Gueyrand Fernand Fouant de La Tombelle, a name, (or perhaps I should say names), new to me. I note though that Bru-Zane have given him a three-CD survey in their fine series exhuming forgotten but worthwhile works of French Romanticism, and the CD catalogue also has some songs and chamber pieces.

La Tombelle had a major career as a pianist and organist, touring all over France in the latter role, and composed over 500 works. That sheer fluency can be heard here, in his quartet written at age 41 in 1895, and winner of a prize for outstanding chamber music from the Académie des Beaux-Arts. It is dedicated to Vincent d'Indy, one of La Tombelle's co-founders of the Schola Cantorum, also in 1895, a private music academy with a focus on one of La Tombelle's enthusiasms, early music. It is a fairly big work playing for half an hour, and just interesting enough to regret that like Ravel, Debussy, Franck, Fauré, Chausson and Dutilleux, La Tombelle left only one example of the genre.

La Tombelle's quartet is broadly designed on the template of a Viennese classical work, with four movements, the first the most substantial, a brief scherzo, expressive slow movement, and lively Allegro con brio finale. There are cyclic elements also, for César Franck was one of La Tombelle's models. There is a long slowish introduction (Largo ma non troppo), and the rich harmony and complex string texture are obviously skilful, even if the feeling is (for my taste) sometimes saccharine. The first subject of the Allegro proper has a dotted rhythm hinted at in the introduction, but soon elaborated and extended, and the second theme (marked dolce) arrives at 5:38 and is given to violin and then cello. The Mandelrings keep it flowing, with no 'signposting' of musical landmarks by slowing down, which is proper in a work classical enough to have a real development – and even to accommodate a return of music from the introduction (at 9:20). The scherzo has two contrasting themes, a hint in the second of the hurdy-gurdy suggests the booklet note – La Tombelle's enthusiasms included folklore. At times there is a pizzicato-enlivened texture, a link to the Ravel. The Adagio con molto espressione sounds like yet another passionate example of 1890's French Wagnerism in its chromatic moments, and the finale has



those Franckian recalls of material from the first two movements. This is an expert performance of a very satisfying work, if not one that is quite individual enough to disturb the long-established league table of the best string quartets from France.

At or near the head of that not very long table stands Ravel's quartet. The Mandelring Quartet provide an impressive account distinguished by their characteristic technical precision and satisfying blend, with some interesting details that not every group has noticed. An early example in the first movement is the imitative cello counterpoint as the first subject begins to expand (0:32), but there several others that will catch the ear of those who know the piece well. It's an interpretation that will I think be enjoyed by most listeners even if it does displace the various favourites collectors will have.

In recent years I have most often turned to the Quatuor Ébène (Virgin Classics 2008, coupled with the Fauré and the Debussy quartets). They find more light and shade, in part because they give themselves more time to do so. Thus while the Mandelring take 7:35 over the first movement, the Quatuor Ébène's 8:50 enables them to reflect the *Très doux* marking rather more, just as their slow movement's 9:47 (*Très lent*) allows them to give us more of that quintessential Ravelian tendresse in a very rapt account of exquisite poise and feeling. Conversely the Ébène's 4:40 is more *Vif et agité* than the Mandelring's 5:12.

So the Mandelring Quartet offer here a viable alternative view of the Ravel, coupled to an intriguing rarity, both very well played and well recorded (though I hope Audite has not entirely abandoned the hi-res SACD format.) There is short but informative booklet note, which is very interesting on the background of Fernand La Tombelle, whose quartet will for most collectors be the principal attraction of this disc.

Maurice RAVEL (1875-1937)

String Quartet in F major (27:07)

Fernand La TOMBELLE (1854-1928)

String Quartet in E major, Op. 36 (30:02)

Mandelring Quartet

Rec. 11-14 October 2018, Deutschlandfunk,

Kammermusiksaal, Cologne, Germany

AUDITE 97.709 [57:13]

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Roy Westbrook

Previous review: [Michael Cookson](#)