



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. I

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[Fanfare](#) (Barry Brenesal - 2007.03.01)

This is the first release in a new series featuring the Mandelring Quartet, a relatively young ensemble that has already recorded extensively. I can't say that I've sampled their Schubert series or Brahms, but their Onslow (cpo 777 151) displays great energy and precision. It brings out the contrapuntal character that is so important an element in the composer's music, and I relish the give and take of these four performers who clearly enjoy the refined art of the chamber ensemble.

But I really don't think they have the measure of Shostakovich, here. This isn't 19th-century chamber music, music-making for music's sake. The Shostakovich quartets, with very few exceptions, perform the role of private diary to the composer's emotions. It's no secret that they reveal the pain of friends and lovers dying, the unremitting hatred of a stupid, dictatorial regime, or the anguish over personal treatment and universal suffering. While the First Quartet is something of an exercise in form and the lightest of the group, the Second is already a work that gets into the grit of torment; not surprisingly, considering the level of misery that Shostakovich saw everywhere after the German invasion. The String Quartet No. 4 was one of several works the composer left "in the drawer" after his second major run-in with the authorities led to loss of employment, prestige, and funds. It wasn't performed publicly until nine months after Stalin's death, and showed an uncompromisingly angry, bleak vision of life.

You won't get anger, bleakness, ridicule, or anguish out of these performances, however. They are beautiful of their kind, being well played, varied in tone, and exceptionally effective in bringing out inner voices. But that's the limit of their efforts. These performances might as well be of any Classical period composer as of Shostakovich, for all the emotional weight they bear.

Consider the songful Andantino of the Quartet No. 4, referred to in the Manderling's liner notes as a "broken-winged waltz à la Tchaikovsky." Not by half, it isn't. The piece is one of those despairing, lost soul movements that Shostakovich placed in several of his symphonies; and this is the most songful and heartrending of them all. The Shostakovich Quartet (on Regis 5001) gives its bleak lyricism full value, moving from full chords treated richly à la Borodin Quartet, to a wan, vibrato-drained sound. The Mandelrings here are considerably faster than the tempo marking, and restrained to the point of removing much of the piece's emotional arch. Timings can't tell all, but they tell us something: the Shostakovich Quartet takes 7:16, the Mandelring Quartet requires only 5:33.

The contrast is greater still in the Scherzo movement that follows. The Mandelrings chug along at a moderately slow clip, with little attempt to reproduce the hushed eeriness of the work. The oppressive march section is—well, the only word I can find

to describe their efforts would be polite. It sounds tuneful, even jolly. The Shostakovich musicians take matters at an energetic allegretto as marked, and make much more of both the expressive violin passages and the subsequent march. The latter sounds properly grotesque, with the trumpet-like motif smartly rapped out. Dynamics are more hushed throughout, and although the ambience is overly dry, the overall results are more effective in creating the kind of impression Shostakovich desired.

There is certainly room for interpretative difference in these quartets, as the recordings of the Fitzwilliam (Decca 455776), Borodin (Chandos 10064), Rubio (Brilliant Classics 6898), and Brodsky (Warner 60867) Quartets reveal. But throughout the Fourth String Quartet and to a lesser extent in the Second, the Mandelring Quartet gives us the notes, all the notes, and nothing but the notes. No, that's not quite right: they give us the notes in an 18th-century context when for the most part, Haydn-influenced chamber music was about courteous musical interplay, and not the details of personal emotional upheaval. This, then, is Shostakovich as Haydn.

The sound is as beautiful a thing as I could wish on a string quartet, suave and balanced in stereo, with a reasonable degree of added hall spaciousness in surround sound. Too bad it isn't put to better use, for the Mandelrings are out of their element, here.