



String Quartets by Brahms (Op. 67) & Herzogenberg (Op. 42, No.1)

aud 97.504

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 01.05.2008)

This is one of the other two companion discs mentioned in my review of Audite 97505 elsewhere. On three separate CDs—this one being Volume 2—the Mandelring Quartet presents one of Brahms's three string quartets paired with a work by one of his close contemporaries, friends, and members of his musical circle. On Volume 3, mentioned above, Brahms's A-Minor Quartet was conjoined with a string quartet by Felix Otto Dessoff (1835–1892). Volume 1, (97503) yet to be reviewed, pairs Brahms's C-Minor Quartet with a quartet by Friedrich Gernsheim (1839–1916).

On the present disc is a string quartet by Heinrich von Herzogenberg (1843–1900), an individual who enjoyed a special status within the Brahms circle, but for reasons other than his musical endowments. Elisabet von Stockhausen had been a piano pupil of Brahms, and she was to become possibly his most passionate love fixation, more so even than Clara Schumann. The letters they exchanged—some 250 of them—are filled with Brahms's thinly veiled amorous yearnings.

Until 1868 marriage looked like it might be in the cards, but for reasons still not clear—cold feet?—Brahms broke off the relationship, and Elisabet married—guess who?—Heinrich von Herzogenberg. On one level, Brahms must have felt relieved, for he was now free to resume a Platonic relationship with Elisabet for whom he still had strong feelings. Being human, however, Brahms must have felt pangs of anger, betrayal, jealousy, and envy; yet in order to maintain good relations with Elisabet he had to suppress such feelings and remain civil, if not gracious, to the man who stole his sweetheart. To complicate matters further, Heinrich grew ever more idolatrous of Brahms, seeking his advice and mentorship, and attempting to mimic the elder composer's style, all the while apparently oblivious to or unconcerned by Elisabet's and Brahms's relationship.

Of the many composers that circulated in Brahms's sphere, Herzogenberg may have tried the hardest, without entirely succeeding, to imitate Brahms's style. In a review of his solo piano works, (30:3) I wrote, "Unmistakably, this music was incubated in the Brahms-Schumann nursery, but just as unmistakably, it does not quite resemble either parent. Not as emotionally charged or lyrically expressive as Schumann, and not as introspective, psychologically complex, or harmonically and rhythmically advanced as Brahms, Herzogenberg seems nonetheless to have forged a derivative style based on his models, yet one that manages to avoid slavish aping." And as far back as 25:2, Raymond Tuttle wrote of Herzogenberg's E-Minor Piano Quartet, "From the opening notes, a Brahmsian wave washed over me..."

Herzogenberg's 1883 G-Minor String Quartet (the first of a set of three he wrote under the op. 42) is unabashedly Brahmsian. I would not argue with Tuttle on that point. I would not go so far as to say, however, that Herzogenberg was so

determined a copyist—or strove to be—that his work could pass for the real McCoy. Brahms may have been the most imitated of all composers, yet his music resists exact imitation. One of the keys to understanding this is the subtle and secret art of “continuation.” The rules of harmony and counterpoint can be taught and learned. The gift of melody is, well, a gift. But having stated a musical idea, what follows it, what comes next, and why it takes your breath away or doesn’t is one of music’s enduring mysteries.

When you listen to the Brahms B \flat Quartet on this disc, you will hear a minimum of musical material that coalesces and expands into ever widening arcs. One by one, these jigsaw puzzle pieces fit together to form a work that satisfies on a deeper, subconscious level as a result of its organizational principles and structure.

Now listen to the Herzogenberg. Does it sound like Brahms? On the surface, yes, pretty much it does. But try listening below the surface, and what you are likely to discover is that it lacks the coherence and cohesion of the Brahms. On the surface, it’s a beautiful thing. Underneath, its progression of ideas is felt more than heard to be weak in the continuation that gives Brahms such underlying strength.

Audite is to be applauded for contrasting works by Brahms with those of his contemporaries and friends on the same discs; for in this way we can hear for ourselves the differences, sometimes subtle, other times not, between these composers that were drawn in by and circled like lesser satellites around the most influential composer of the late 19th century.

I am more positively disposed towards the Mandelring’s reading of Brahms’s B \flat -Major Quartet on this volume than I was towards their less energized interpretation of the A-Minor Quartet on Volume 3. The B \flat -Major is an altogether less intense, less tightly wound work, and the Mandelring’s more easygoing manner suits it perfectly. Listen to their amiable way with the last movement. If your interest is strictly in the Brahms, however, I’d still put my money on the Emerson Quartet.

As for the Herzogenberg, there don’t seem to be any alternative versions to choose from at the moment, which is all the more reason to be grateful for the Mandelring’s recording, which is excellent in all respects. Recommended.