



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets - Vol. 1

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Though some might argue that the market is overloaded with recordings of Beethoven's quartets, consequently making releases such as these redundant, enough freshness of interpretation is evident here to suggest that both should command interest, especially as the approach of each ensemble differs from the other.

The Hagen ensemble has, of course, been in existence for three decades, during which it has gained broad admiration. My first exposure to the group was with a DG CD from 1995 in which it offered impressive accounts of Beethoven's Quartets, Opp. 127 and 132. In the succeeding years, the group has remained intact but its style has become a bit more flexible, with the use of legato and rhythmic inflection that I do not recall from its earlier playing. This is especially true for the first movement of Op. 18 No. 3. Its second movement seems just a bit too slow for the con moto qualification that Beethoven gave this Andante, but the music can stand this approach. With the Presto finale aptly projected as a delightful romp, the performance comes to a joyous close.

Quartet No. 5 is not quite as successful. Its opening movement is afflicted with breathpauses and a seeming preciousness, neither suitable for the music's buoyant spirit. Conversely, its Menuetto seems a bit too fast at its beginning and a bit too slow in the movement's trio, but the ensuing Andante cantabile unfolds with a perfectly chosen tempo in which the music flows without the breadth sometimes imposed upon it. The finale is a delightful romp, its fast tempo in no way comprising the wonderfully clear articulation of every note.

It is quite a leap to Op. 135, Beethoven's last quartet. Indeed, some may well wonder why it is included on the same disc with two of his earliest ones. Perhaps the musicians were making a statement - to wit, that this work, while superficially similar to those of Op. 18, is in many ways strikingly different from them. Nothing in the earlier works, for example, suggests the relaxed eeriness of the first movement of this later one. Here the Hagen conveys all of the music's graceful yet sometimes other-worldly ethos with a tempo that (unlike some performances that are too fast) honours Beethoven's Allegretto specification. Similarly, the second movement (Vivace) is not rushed, consequently permitting its sudden rhythmic lurches to be especially striking, its syncopations sharply drawn. The third movement (Assai lento, cantante e tranquillo) is everything that Beethoven's indications call for: very slow, content and tranquil. The finale is equally distinguished, its slow introduction aptly spooky and forceful, its Allegro buoyant but not rushed, the humour of its false climax fully conveyed. In short, a fine performance that, despite a few shortcomings, remains commanding.

The Quartetto di Cremona, in existence for only ten years, will probably be unfamiliar to many. Here it is a virtuoso ensemble, favouring a tone that seems somewhat edgy, a minor drawback that may well be the product of the engineering. Whatever, it is a formidable ensemble, musical even in exceptionally fast tempos. In Op. 18 No. 6 Beethoven's Allegro con brio is fleet to the point of sounding fierce and almost breathless. Aside from a ritardando just before the recapitulation, the tempo is retained throughout the first movement, resulting in great cumulative impact. The second movement (Adagio ma non troppo) moves faster than I have ever heard in one basic tempo that is at once graceful and arresting. Beethoven said the scherzo that follows should be played 'as fast as possible'. Doubtless, he would have been delighted with what is offered here. The finale opens with a slow introduction that Beethoven titled 'La Malincolia', an adagio that leads into a quasi allegro that is ideally paced in not being too fast. All in all, this is a superb performance.

The Cremona's account of Op. 95 may prove controversial. Its opening movement is fleeter than in any of the great number of recordings or live performances of the work I have heard. But, because the Cremona's playing is so technically accomplished, nothing sounds blurred or smeared. Particularly impressive here is the first violinist, Cristiano Gualco. Although some may find the first movement uncomfortably breathless, even frantic, others may be swept away in admiration. So, too, with the fierce, almost angry third movement, which Beethoven could not call 'scherzo', which means 'joke', in a work that is clearly serious. Thus the rather grim finale ends in a joyous f major coda tossed off at a high speed that avoids any blurring.

Listening to this performance of Op. 135 in the context of having just heard the one recorded by the Hagen Quartett is fascinating, particularly in the way in which one account differs from the other in matters of tempo. The biggest difference is in the first movement, 6'28" with the Cremona ensemble, 7'30" with the Hagen. What is most interesting about this extreme difference is that they both work well. Doubtless, they project different images, but in the same fashion that two actors may have radically different approaches to a leading role, each in its own way is valid. This, of course, is why record collectors often acquire more than one performance of a favourite work.

In short, both ensembles do justice to the music. Indeed, I would recommend both as acquisitions that offer a prime example of how great art is complex and will always be open to more than one 'correct' interpretation.