



The RIAS Amadeus Quartet Beethoven Recordings

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Between 1950 and 1967 the Amadeus Quartet were taped by RIAS, Berlin in an almost complete Beethoven quartet cycle. Missing is the Quartet No. 10 in E flat major, Op. 74 'The Harp', though as substantial compensation we have a performance of the String Quintet in C major, Op.29 with a favourite string colleague, violist Cecil Aronowitz. One performance is anomalous. The Op.127 Quartet was not recorded in the RIAS studio but in the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin - though no reason is advanced as to its exclusion from the normal radio broadcast schedule. It's the most recent taping, as well, coming from 1967, five years after many of the other preserved quartets. Maybe it was a coincidence that both omitted works are in E flat major.

Only a couple years after its official formation, the Amadeus was touring widely in Germany. The first tapes were made at the Siemensvilla in Lankwitz in the city, to which venue the quartet returned whenever it performed in Berlin. In a see-sawing operation studio sessions for DG were accompanied by visits to Lankwitz for RIAS sessions. Altogether the quartet recorded a mouth-watering 23 sessions for RIAS between 8 June 1950 – when it set down Tippett's Quartet No.2 – and June 1969 when works by Haydn and Mendelssohn were played. This is a formidable portfolio of radio broadcast material and given the excellence of RIAS in this area, presided over by Elsa Schiller, who was soon to work for DG – taking a stable of eminent performers with her – the results technically speaking can be guaranteed.

So, fortunately, in this case, can the high interpretative level of the performances. There is no dip in the intensity and tonal breadth generated by the foursome and if the results differ little from the studio legacy, there are certainly a few moments when the music takes off in a more memorable way.

Perhaps the clearest difference between the RIAS and the DG inscriptions comes in the case of the slow movement of Op.132 where the Amadeus prefer, for RIAS, a slightly slower tempo and a slightly more veiled tonal quality. Otherwise whilst interpretative differences are few, the inevitable tensions of live performance ensure that the music remains visceral and full of profitable tension. The 1962 sessions show the familiar breath and warmth of tone, a rich wash that some adore and others find too indulgent. For the first time, as well, it's now possible to trace two complementary readings of the Beethoven quartets from the Amadeus, albeit with the exclusion of 'The Harp', as noted.

I suppose the important question for someone yet to acquire the Amadeus's Beethoven is this: apart from the matter of Op.74, are there any interpretative or recording concerns with this Audite box, sufficient to make the DG box an obvious favourite? I would have to answer 'no' in both respects. RIAS recorded their

ensembles, singers and instrumentalists superbly from the get-go and these recordings are no different. If you can live without Op.74 I don't see why you shouldn't take the plunge with this 'live' set of the quartets. It is in every respect a superb achievement.

