



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets - Vol. 4

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MUSIC Here's some tremendously accomplished playing in two works from opposite ends of Beethoven's career as a composer of string quartets. The scurrying triplets in the finale of the first of the Op. 18 quartets, for instance, are articulated with remarkable clarity, and the tricky violin writing in the trio of the same work's scherzo is dispatched with admirable fluency. At the other end of the scale, in the long variation movement that forms the expressive heart of the late C sharp minor Quartet Op. 131, the individual phrases of the initial theme are handed over from one violin to the other with admirable tenderness, and the players find just the right caressing tone for the third variation, which Beethoven wanted performed *lusinghiero* ('flatteringly').

There are moments when the players' approach to the music can seem a little larger than life: the *sforzato* accents in the central section of the slow movement of Op. 18 No. 1 – one of the great tragic utterances among Beethoven's earlier works – sound like pistol shots; and the same marking in the subject of the slow opening fugue of Op. 131 is again exaggerated, disrupting the music's tranquil mood to an unnecessary degree. If these are faults, however, they are faults in the right direction. Curiously enough, given the players' propensity for dramatisation, Op. 131's second movement sounds rather easygoing for its '*Allegro molto vivace*' marking. But these are compelling accounts, and this fourth volume in the Quartetto di Cremona's Beethoven cycle can confidently be recommended.