



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Complete Chamber Music for Strings

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The Mandelring Quartet is, I must confess, an ensemble that has completely passed me by. On the evidence of these recordings, I'm more than grateful to have made its acquaintance. The quartet is very much a family affair, comprising three siblings. Sebastian Schmidt leads, sister Nanette plays second fiddle, with brother Bernhard on the cello. Roland Glassl is the viola player in these recordings but, at the beginning of 2015, he was replaced by Andreas Willwohl, becoming the third violist the group has had since the quartet's formation in 1988. Glassl took over from Nora Niggeling in 1999. To maintain their sense of family identity, the name Mandelring originates from the street where the Schmidt family lived.

Their repertoire couldn't be more diverse and adventurous, ranging from George Onslow to Berthold Goldschmidt, with Koechlin, Caplet, Milhaud, Janáček and much of the more staple fare along the way. Many of their albums have met with great critical acclaim, and they have pocketed several awards into the bargain. Having made recordings for several labels, they are now exclusive Audite artists, for whom they have set down a complete Shostakovich cycle. Future projects include the Brahms Quintets and Sextets. The Mendelssohn Complete Chamber Music for Strings was originally issued as four separate volumes, so their collection into one boxed set, at budget price, makes for a more financially viable proposition.

The String Quartets are well-served on disc, and these recordings enter a more than crowded playing field. My favoured choices include the Emersons (DG), the Cherubinis (EMI) and the Melos Quartet (DG). The Mandelrings afford a worthy alternative and have the added advantage of offering the other chamber music for strings. They deliver polished performances of flawless ensemble and pristine intonation. Their tempi are well judged and phrasing and dynamics all seem just right. My personal favourite is the Op. 44 No. 2 in E minor. It was written in 1837 when the composer was on honeymoon, yet it is far from a rapturous response to a joyous event. The uneasy and brooding melancholic opening is effectively captured, reinforced by the syncopated chords accompanying the first subject. The second subject is, in contrast, tender and warm-hearted with a hint of nostalgia. The Scherzo is sprightly and capricious, and we are treated to a rhythmically buoyant sonata-rondo finale.

The F minor Quartet Op. 80, Mendelssohn's last work in this medium, was composed in 1847 following the death of his sister Fanny. His own death was to follow in November of that year at the young age of thirty-eight. The quartet embodies all the sadness of his great personal loss. Like the Op. 44 there is an undercurrent of unease running through the first movement. The Adagio is lyrical, and the Mandelring's performance overflows with tenderness and yearning; Mendelssohn was pouring out all his grief in this lament for his sister. The fourth movement is

played with passionate intensity.

It's amazing to think that Mendelssohn was only sixteen when he composed the Octet in 1825, and the work showcases both his genius and superb craftsmanship. Frequently performed and recorded, there is no sense of routine here. The Mandelrings, joined by the Quartetto di Cremona, have dusted the work down and produced a high-spirited and affectionate account, giving it a new lease of life. The exhilarating first movement has energy, drive and flamboyance, surging forward boldly. The scurrying Scherzo is carefree, and is swept along with delicacy and lightness. The finale is notable for its power and punch.

It's a pity that the two Quintets are not heard all that often, as they display some skilful and imaginative writing. The Mandelrings, augmented by Gunter Teuffel on second viola, respond instinctively to Mendelssohn's exuberant scores, emphasizing the sunny disposition of the music. The Op.18 is an early work, written when the composer was seventeen in 1826. It's young Mendelssohn at his best, combining warmth and geniality with the more serious disposition of the second movement, a contrast these players achieve in their performance. The Op. 87, composed when he was thirty-six, is constructed on a larger scale with more orchestral textures. I was particularly stuck by the light diaphanous character the players bring to the scherzos of both works. The same persuasive qualities can be found in the Four pieces for String Quartet Op. 81. Composed between 1827 and 1843, they have likewise taken a bit of a back-seat, and it's a delight to have them here.

The Klingenmünster offers a warm spacious acoustic. Liner-notes are in German and English. These are compelling and life-affirming readings, which convey the Mandelring's utter commitment to the music.