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Johannes Brahms: Complete String Quintets

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Last year I reviewed the Mandelring Quartett's 4-CD traversal through Mendelssohn's complete chamber music for strings. It was my first encounter with this ensemble, formed in 1988 and based in Neustadt an der Weinstraße, Germany. It's very much a family affair, comprising three siblings. Sebastian Schmidt leads, sister Nanette plays second fiddle, with brother Bernhard on the cello. In 2015, the viola player Roland Glassl 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. He rejoins them for this recording. To maintain their sense of family identity, the name Mandelring originates from the street where the Schmidt family lived. Their repertoire is far-reaching, embracing Haydn and Beethoven to Koechlin and Shostakovich. They've recorded the 15 Shostakovich quartets for Audite - their largest project to date (review). They now turn their hand to the two String Quintets by Brahms, both late works composed in 1882 (Op. 88) and 1890 (Op. 111).

The Quintets are richly scored and rank amongst the composer's finest chamber works. In both, Brahms chose to double the viola, following Mozart's example, rather than adopting the Schubertian model of two cellos. I've never understood why the Op. 88 is one of his least popular chamber works. The composer, himself, thought very highly of it, describing it to Clara Schumann as 'one of my finest works', and to his publisher Simrock, 'You have never before had such a beautiful work from me.' The Mandelrings convey the affable pastoral character of the opening movement to perfection, without losing sight of its more wistful moments. There's tremendous warmth and commitment in their playing, and this is captured by the first class recording quality. The second movement is unusual in that Brahms combines a slow movement with a scherzo. I love the way the players make the contrast between the heavier, solemn, slow section and the more light-hearted episode, which is kept nimble and light on its feet. The fugal passages in the finale are the composer's nod to the Baroque. There's plenty of cumulative energy in the performance, with an underlying restless feel. All the contrapuntal strands are neatly articulated and clearly projected.

Brahms intended his Second String Quintet to be his final composition. Fortunately this was not to be and, over the next seven years before his death in 1897, he went on to compose the Clarinet Trio and Quintet, the two Clarinet sonatas and the Opp. 116-119 piano pieces. Cast on a larger scale than its predecessor, the work displays virtuosic string writing, outshining any of his other chamber works. Perhaps his confidence was buoyed up by the successful instrumental writing of the Double

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Concerto, written three years earlier. Although low in spirit, fearing his creative powers were ebbing, the overall mood of the work doesn't reflect this. The first movement opens exuberantly, and the Mandelring's invigorating account and sense of abandon is compelling. Bernhard Schmidt's surging cello figures at the beginning are confident and assured and add to the dramatic impact. There's a subdued, introspective quality in the two inner movements, the Adagio especially is expressively contoured. The high energy returns in the finale, delivered with infectious vivacity and enthusiasm.

These performances benefit from clear, rich sounding sonics. For those seeking a recording of the two Quintets played with conviction and authority, this release from Audite neatly fits the bill. I look forward eagerly to their recording of the two Sextets, which I gather is in the pipeline.

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