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Johannes Brahms: Complete String Quintets

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EAN: 4022143977243

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 01.03.2017)
Quelle: http://www.fanfarearchive.com/articles/a...

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Since its founding in 1997, Germany's Mandelring Quartet has built a commendable discography mainly around the mainstream German Romantic string quartet repertoire, namely, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms. Significant detours from that established path, however, led the ensemble to a few off-road trips, as well as to a traversal of the complete Shostakovich quartets. Most, if not all, of the Mandelring's releases have been reviewed in these pages, most of them favorably, and a number by me, including the group's recordings of two of Brahms's string quartets, plus a two-disc set of the composer's chamber works featuring clarinet. Here the Mandelring turns its attention to Brahms's two string quintets, featuring an additional viola.

Considering the composer we're dealing with here, Brahms's two string quintets are warm, genial, affable works, relatively free from the feelings of melancholy, loneliness, loss, and lashing out that characterize so much of his music. The scores are not free, however, from the contrapuntal, harmonic, and especially the rhythmic complexities that seem to have been hardwired into Brahms's brain. Brahms was still a relatively young 49 when he composed the F-Major First Quintet in 1882 during a stay at one of his favorite vacationing spots, the spa town of Bad Ischl in upper Austria. The work opens with an expansive, relaxed theme that reflects the stress-free spring atmosphere of fresh air, sparkling water, and sunny skies that surrounded Brahms as he put pen to paper. He even wrote to his publisher, Simrock, "You have never before had such a beautiful work from me." The Mandelring Quartet, joined by violist Roland Glassl, strikes just the right balance between the score's seemingly uninhibited friendliness—almost as if Brahms has imbibed a bit too much and has become overly familiar with strangers in the pub—and its moments of contented repose. The players make the music glow, as it should.

When Brahms set to work on his G-Major Quintet eight years later in 1890, he intended it to be his valediction. At 57, he was financially secure, a world-famous composer, and a beloved friend and mentor to many. He was ready to retire and rest on his laurels. It wouldn't have been a bad note to go out on, for the music is stunningly beautiful, but Fate had other plans for the composer and, fortuitously, for us. Brahms's hope for a peaceful retirement was just that, a pipedream. Inspired by the playing of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld, Brahms was soon back at his desk, composing his four clarinet masterpieces—the Clarinet Trio and Quintet, opp. 114 and 115, and the two Clarinet Sonatas, op. 120. But even those works weren't his last words. His final musical utterances were the Four Serious Songs, op. 121, and the 11 Chorale Preludes for Organ, op. 122, both composed in 1896 in the year

before his death.

Where the earlier string quintet projects feelings of well-being, good cheer, and general contentment, the later G-Major Quintet seems to take wing on soaring updrafts of rapture. From the very opening halo effect, produced by the two violas mirroring the two violins interlocked in a contrary motion, measured tremolo, we're transported to a place of radiant light and otherworldly exultation. The feeling of elation and ecstasy, which seems barely containable and likely at any moment to escape the constraints of the printed page, is made viscerally manifest by the Mandelring's players and Glassl. This may truly be the most transporting performance of Brahms's G-Major Quintet I've ever heard.

Previous favorites in the two quintets, as coupled here, have been those by the Takács Quartet with Lawrence Power, the Alexander Quartet with Toby Appel, and the Nash Ensemble with Philip Dukes, this new version by the Mandelring and Glassl now supersedes all of them. This is not just fantastic playing, it's revelatory music-making on the highest level.

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