



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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The Belcea Quartet and Quartetto di Cremona are both comparatively youthful ensembles who have made fine reputations in a short time.

Let me get one complaint out of the way first: unlike the eclassical.com La Dolce Volta album, neither of the downloads of the Cremona Quartet from audite.de nor the one from eclassical.com comes with a booklet; only for Volume 1 of this series can a booklet be obtained from Naxos Music Library. The same holds true for the Zig-Zag download from 7digital.com – and, indeed, all downloads from this source. Download purchasers deserve to have all the apparatus that comes with the CD or SACD. Having said that, however, I must point out that the multi-lingual booklet which came with my press download of the Belcea Quartet is not very informative, with more photos of the quartet than analysis of the music.

The Quartetto di Cremona, formed in 2000, plunged in at the deep end in 2013 with quartets from Beethoven's early, middle and late periods. So far they have recorded the three volumes listed above.

The Belcea Quartet have won awards in several quarters for their Beethoven and Stephen Greenbank thought this cycle an impressive achievement to which he planned to return often – review. Their recordings are also available on two 4-CD sets but the 8-CD set represents a considerable saving, unless you download from classicsonline.com, who haven't realised that this is a bargain set and are asking £63.92 (mp3) or £71.92 (flac) for a set which you should be able to find on CD for about a third of that price – at least COL throw in the booklet.

Comparisons may be odious – or odorous as Dogberry would have it in Much Ado about Nothing – but I'm going to compare the two groups in one each of the early, middle and late quartets and both with Op.130 and Op.133 from the Talich Quartet.

Aline Nasif thought that the Belcea Quartet, live at the Wigmore Hall in 2004, gave a very fine performance of Op.18/3, though he wondered if they put quite enough feeling into the slow movement – review. That might have been a good place for a comparison, but the Audite series has not yet included Quartetto di Cremona in that work for comparison, so I've chosen Op.18/6 instead. Both ensembles choose tempi in all four movements very similar to each other and to those on my benchmark Takács Quartet recording (Decca). Both do all they can to stress the maturity of this early work and if the Belcea Quartet slightly lack the vigour of the Quartetto di Cremona in the opening work, that may be due to the lower quality of the outthere.com press download – concerning which, see below.

So far Audite have recorded two of the middle-period Razumovsky Quartets.

Stephen Greenbank praised the Belcea recording of Op.59/1, so that's the one that I shall compare. Here again tempi are very similar, with the Belcea very slightly slower overall, especially in the second movement, where their time of 9:13 compares with the Cremona players' 8:45 and the Takács' 8:18. As so often, timings can be deceptive: heard on its own terms, the Belcea performance is light and airy and it's only by comparison that the Cremona performance seems to have greater energy, an impression again, perhaps, strengthened by the higher quality transfer. I liked both in their different ways but I suppose that the Belceas come closer to the *allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando* marking by a small margin.

The late quartets, usually defined as from Op.127 onwards, are among the most challenging chamber works for any group to perform. I first got to know most of them from the Budapest Quartet's powerful stereo versions for CBS but the general consensus has been in favour of the Quartetto Italiano (Decca, two 2-for-1 sets, 4547112 and 4547122) and the Takács Quartet (Decca 4708492, 3 CDs). The latter remains my benchmark, as it was when I listened to the BIS recording of orchestral versions of the late quartets for DL News 2014/1.

The Talich Quartet's recording has come up fresh-sounding in this transfer and their performances of Op.130 and Op.133 come very close to rivalling my Takács Quartet benchmark in conveying the beauty and power which are combined in these works in such a wayward manner as to puzzle their original hearers and most who have come freshly to them since.

The Belcea Quartet give the Andante and Cavatina movements of Op.130 a little more time to breathe and make them sound more heartfelt than the Talich or Takács players. Which approach you prefer will depend on personal taste. Their account of the Grosse Fuge comes a little incongruously after two of the early Op.18 quartets but otherwise there's little to choose between their version and that of the Talich Quartet. Had I heard their performance of Op.130 and Op.133 live, I'm sure that I would have been as impressed as Peter Grahame Woolf was, hearing them live early in their performing career, in 2000 – review.

The press download of the Belcea Quartet to which I listened was at a barely adequate 192 kb/s – if Outhere really want reviewers to hear their recordings at their best, they should up their game to the full 320 kb/s or even to lossless quality – but it sounded good enough for me to think that the 320 kb/s version from 7digital.com should be fine and the lossless from classicsonline.com even better if they can get their pricing sorted out.

I listened to the Cremona Quartet's Grosse Fuge in Audite's 24/44.1 download – their set hasn't yet reached Op.130. Of the versions under consideration it and the Dolce Volta Talich album are the only ones available as lossless downloads apart from the unreasonably-priced COL version of the Belcea set. With a more recent, digital, recording and the availability of 24-bit sound it has an audible advantage over the Dolce Volta, as good as that is. Though I've said that the late quartets are hard to bring off – and the Grosse Fuge perhaps the hardest of all; it's a crazy, almost demented, fugue such as Bach could never have written or, probably, wanted to – there's remarkable similarity of approach and tempo from all three quartets under consideration in this work.

I've already said that Talich would make a good introduction to late Beethoven, but if I were forced to make a Desert Island choice, the greater immediacy of the Audite recording would just win the day. Overall I could live happily with both the Cremona and Belcea quartets in Beethoven, especially given a better-quality transfer of the latter. If you would like to make your own comparison on a more level playing field

and have access to Naxos Music Library, you can stream Volume 1 of the Zig-Zag set and all three of the volumes of the Audite to date there.

