



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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This disc came as a disappointment after my extremely positive feelings about the earlier volumes in the Cremona Quartet's Beethoven series. I still find what they do is interesting and suggestive, but in the case of the B flat Quartet Op. 130 – the one which Beethoven himself found most moving, and which I normally do even though it isn't necessarily the greatest – I was puzzled.

First, however, they are well up to their usual standard in the exhilarating performance of the A major Quartet Op. 18 No. 5, with its wonderfully peremptory opening and its general air of a youthful genius in confident possession of his unique powers. The notes suggest a strong influence from Mozart's A major Quartet, but it is Haydn who springs immediately to mind with his perpetual surprises, many of them mischievous. The slow movement is especially enjoyable, with a routine theme followed by ever more inventive variations.

Unfortunately the Cremonas decided to play Op. 130 without the Grosse Fuge, the original finale much later described by Stravinsky as 'perpetually contemporary'. Its first audience found it incomprehensible and Beethoven wrote the substitute finale, which we hear here – the original finale is on Volume 3. To me the first five movements seem to demand it. What we do have is some unpleasantly bulging playing in the brief second movement and exaggerated lurchings in the fourth. Most disappointing and surprising of all is the prosaically played Cavatina, Beethoven's most intimate music, played considerably too fast and it would seem deliberately unexpressive. The edginess of the recording does not help. I have listened several times and I'm bewildered.