



Robert Schumann: Piano Quartet & Piano Quintet

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 2010.11.01)

There are quite a few excellent recordings to choose from that pair these two works: the Cleveland Quartet (Sony), the Schubert Ensemble (ASV), the Michelangelo Quartet (Chandos), the Leipzig Gewandhaus Quartet (Berlin Classics), and of course the Beaux Arts Trio (Philips). This new release from the Mandelring Quartet, however, is very appealing, and not just because it's the first SACD version I'm aware of that couples the quartet and quintet on the same disc.

Whether it has to do with the recording itself, the placement of the musicians on the stage, the acoustics of the Bayer Kulturhaus in Leverkusen, Germany, where the performances were recorded, the extraordinarily transparent playing of the Mandelring Quartet, or some combination of the above, I have never heard such detail emerge from these scores. It's almost like hearing these pieces for the first time.

Let me just cite some examples. At the very beginning of the quartet, in the slow introduction, each entrance of the strings seems to materialize out of the piano's decaying notes as they hang in the air, creating a magical atmosphere of expectancy. Or, take the rapid downward run that announces the development section at 4:12. In other recordings I've heard, it's just a rapid blur, kind of like the effect of a glissando on the piano. But here the individual notes are heard distinctly. Next, take the passage beginning at 5:19. So often what is heard in the piano at this point is an indistinct rumbling in the bass, but here you realize that in counterpoint to the strings the piano is actually playing a modulating sequence based on the first four notes of the Allegro. These may seem like little things, and individually they are; but when you put them all together, they add up to a performance of exceptional sharpness and character, not to mention raising one's appreciation of Schumann's ingenuity.

At :09--:12 in the Scherzo, as the strings buzz away at their busywork, I don't think I ever noticed before that the piano has this really neat little rhythmic counter figure—da-rum-bum-bum-bum. This is playing that points out every accent along the way and manages to highlight every hand-off of material from one voice to another even amid one of the fleetest movements in the chamber music repertoire. The Andante cantabile pulsates with lump-in-the-throat throbbing, and the Finale displays such exactitude and cleanness of execution that it actually sounds much faster than it is. At 7:33, it's only four seconds faster than the Beaux Arts.

Everything I've said about the Mandelring's performance of the quartet applies equally to the quintet. It's an exceptionally revealing reading in which every detail is laid bare. What I marvel at is how carefully prepared, rehearsed, and controlled these performances are—as if nothing has been left to chance—yet how spontaneous and

animated they still manage to sound.

Timing, as they say, is everything. Unfortunately, another recording of Schumann's piano quartet with the Eaken Trio came to me in the same batch of review assignments as this one, a performance that could not help but suffer in comparison. I've heard a number of the Manderling's CDs, and even reviewed two or three of them in prior issues, and while the ensemble has always impressed me favorably, quite honestly I was not prepared for anything of this caliber. Other contributors—namely Brenesal, Anderson, McColley, and Laurson—have all spoken of the Manderling's alertness, exceptional coordination, and scrupulousness in attention to detail. But this Schumann disc passes beyond all that into the rarefied realm of the sublime.

I haven't yet made my final selections for this year's Want List, but if this release isn't on it, I'll be as surprised as anyone. Need I say, recommended with the greatest urgency?