



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quartets in E flat major (Op. 12), in A minor (Op. 13) & in E flat major (1823)

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The Mandelring Quartet has received generally favorable reviews in these pages from others and from me. With this disc, the ensemble launches a Mendelssohn cycle titled "Complete Chamber Music for Strings." In so doing, the players place themselves in direct competition with two of the ensembles that have dominated this field in recent years, the Emerson and Pacifica Quartets.

Still, if Audite lives up to its promise of giving us Mendelssohn's "complete chamber music for strings," the Mandelring's survey will necessitate additional players and encompass not just the quartets, but the string quintets, the octet, the dozen or so fugues for violin, viola, and cello, and a number of rarely heard and, as far as I know, unrecorded pieces, like a Duo in D Minor for Two Violins and an Andante in B♭-Major for Violin and Cello, both listed in the updated 2009 Breitkopf & Härtel Mendelssohn work catalog compiled by Ralf Wehner. I always like to take a little poke at record labels that announce the "complete" anything by anyone. We'll have to wait and see just how "complete" Audite's cycle is when it's finished.

Meanwhile, the Mandelring has included on this first installment the earliest known of Mendelssohn's string quartets, a work in E♭-Major the composer penned in 1823 at the age of 14, just after completing his 13 string symphonies. The quartet is without opus number and was not published in the composer's lifetime. Having long been familiar with Mendelssohn's adolescent precocity from works like the string symphonies, the octet, and the Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream, we no longer express incredulity at it, but what still surprises are the scale and substance of this early string quartet. But for its fairly short fugal finale, the first three movements are lengthier than the corresponding movements in the composer's first two published quartets which came four and six years later.

Those first two official quartets, as is well known, were published in reverse order, resulting in the E♭-Major work, op. 12, written in 1829, receiving a lower number than the A-Minor score, op. 13, which was written in 1827. But that's a minor discrepancy, compared to the chronological disconnect between opus numbers and composition dates in Mendelssohn's work catalog generally.

For the most part, the Mandelring's readings tend to be less constrained by the bar line than the Emerson's. There's a rhythmic freedom to the Mandelring's playing which both stretches and compresses phrases in ways that sometimes works and sometimes doesn't. The little hesitations and pressings forward can be effective. They suggest a degree of spontaneity that's less evident in the Emerson's more controlled approach. But at other times, as in bars 9–10 of the Allegro tardante in the op. 12 quartet, as just one example, the quickening of the pace results in rhythmic instability, not to mention that it contravenes Mendelssohn's "tardante" qualifier, which is taken to mean delaying or holding back.

Another thing that bothers me just a tad is the Mandelring's tendency to schmaltz things up a bit in slow movements and slower-moving passages with, in my opinion,

too many portamentos and a generous application of vibrato. When it comes to the really fast movements, namely the finales of opp. 12 and 13, technically, the Mandelring is no match for either the Emerson Quartet or the astonishing Pacifica Quartet. Coordination among the players is not as tight and, even more displeasingly, their digging in with the bows often turns the tone abrasive and coarse.

The perfect is, as ever, the enemy of the good. In a sea of Mendelssohn string quartet recordings, if the Emerson and Pacifica didn't exist, the Mandelring would rise to the top of the food chain, but in that ocean there swim more formidable creatures. If having these works in multichannel, surround-sound format is a major incentive for acquiring this release, then you will be happy with your purchase. The recording is exemplary and the performances, despite my nitpicking, are excellent. It's just that, in my opinion, this first volume in the Mandelring's cycle does not improve upon either the Emerson's or the Pacifica's efforts.