



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quartet in E flat major (Op. 44 No. 3), Four Pieces for String Quartet (Op. 81) & Octet in E flat major (Op. 20)

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International Record Review (Michael Jameson - 2014.01.01)

To date, most integral surveys of Mendelssohn's string quartets seem to have failed, for one reason or another, to entirely live up to the sum of their parts. Amongst the most extreme instances has been a budget six-disc box from Brilliant Classics, which featured authoritative, even definitive accounts of the six quartets by the Gewandhaus Quartett, coupled with wearisomely indifferent performances of all the other chamber works for strings from a variety of ensembles, all proving a powerful deterrent. Then there's the now dated 1970s DG set from the Melos Quartet of Stuttgart, with its shrill and edgy recorded sound marring otherwise superb playing, while from Decca's budget Trio series, the Ysaÿe Quartet's cycle was all too often wayward and disappointing.

Amongst more recent contenders, however, the three-CD survey from the Emerson Quartet on DG seems to have the most to recommend it generally, with insightful and alert playing that's at its best exquisitely refined, and recordings of impressive naturalness and clarity to boot. Still, the hard-driven scherzo and surging, unrelenting passion of the playing in the finale of the E flat major Quartet, Op. 44 No. 3 might well induce plenty of physical excitement, but the sheer vehemence of the Emerson's approach here might not tell the whole story as far as this most serious of Mendelssohn's string quartets is concerned.

However, the ongoing Mendelssohn series from the award-winning Mandelring Quartett seems to grow in stature with each successive release in its Audite survey. Volume 3 of its traversal of the complete chamber music for strings includes Op. 44 No. 3 and two of the Op. 81 pieces for string quartet, though the major inducement here will doubtless be this prodigally brilliant performance of the Op. 20 Octet for strings, in which the Mandelring players are joined by the Quartetto di Cremona.

These eight accomplished players make an ideally blended and well-balanced team and their collaboration in this youthfully brilliant and constantly engaging masterpiece could be no more effective nor felicitous. While the bounding opening movement leaps and dazzles, as it surely should, the constant attentiveness to dynamic markings means that for once, contrapuntal exchanges between the inner voices are clearly audible, so the ear is constantly being alerted to happenings in the middle registers that often pass unnoticed, simply because for once, they can actually be heard as the composer intended! After a bewitching account of the songful Andante, the final two movements will amaze as much, as they will delight, such is the puckish effortlessness and lightness of touch in the Scherzo and the mercurial brilliance of the closing Presto.

Heard on its own, the Mandelring Quartett gives a severe and gritty reading of the E flat major Quartet, imbued with a tensile rigour and courageousness that's perhaps

not what one might automatically expect to encounter in this piece, but the difference is that here the musical gestures add up to something more meaningful than the headlong, occasionally mannered rhetoric of the Emerson performance. Especially good is the Mandelring's deeply reflective yet never indulgent account of the Adagio, one of Mendelssohn's greatest paragraphs, surely, even if it requires playing as unsentimental as this to make us appreciate its full worth after the more saccharine musings of the Emersons in this movement.

In sum, this is another outstanding release in this valuable series and, as with Volume I, reviewed in July/August 2012, it may be recommended without qualification.

