



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: String Quintets in A major (Op. 18 No. 1) & in B flat major (Op. 87 No. 2) & Four Pieces for String Quartet (Op. 81)

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International Record Review (Michael Jameson - 2014.06.01)

Mendelssohn's quintets for strings provide an engaging addendum to his string quartets and to the Octet in E flat major, Op. 20, though neither is especially well known nor frequently performed. Adopting the Mozartian model, adding a second viola to the conventional string quartet instrumentation (Schubert's C major Quintet, D956 followed Boccherini's example, incorporating a second cello), they are of particular interest historically, coming from opposing phases of Mendelssohn's creative life, with two decades separating the A minor Quintet, Op. 18 of 1826 from its mature successor in B minor, Op. 87, composed in 1845.

These expert and sophisticated new performances bring the Mandelring Quartett's survey of Mendelssohn's string chamber music to its close, with the same qualities of passionate and authoritative playing that distinguished previous issues in this series (Volumes 1 and 3 were reviewed in July / August 2012 and January 2014 respectively). The players are joined by the violist Gunter Teuffel, who is a respected chamber musician in his own right as well as being principal viola of the SWR Radiosinfonieorchester Stuttgart.

Those following this series will probably want to obtain this recording anyway, but listeners still unfamiliar with the Mandelrings' playing will find plenty to enjoy in these dedicated and attractive performances. The early Op. 18 Quintet, written in the composer's seventeenth year, shares much of the prodigal inventiveness and originality of Mendelssohn's other youthful works. Not quite as dazzling as the Octet, the Quintet nevertheless displays a remarkable assurance and formal mastery, and the Mandelrings play it with panache and commitment in this vibrantly wide-ranging SACD recording.

The later Op. 87 Quintet, however, seems to have had a more troubled gestation. Ignaz Moscheles described how the finale in particular unsettled the composer, who revised it several times, explaining that 'Mendelssohn purports that the last piece isn't good'. It may well prove that the finale is perhaps too lightweight to counterpoise the more sonorously reflective tone of the other movements, but whatever the case, Mendelssohn saw to it that the piece was not issued during his lifetime.

However, on the basis of this spirited and insightful new account, his concerns would seem largely unfounded, and the Mandelrings play the work fondly and attentively. But while this new disc of the String Quintets eclipses Hyperion's slightly edgy recording (now reissued on the budget Helios label) from the Raphael Ensemble, there's not a great deal to choose between these accounts in performance terms. Both offer well-judged, absorbing playing that lacks nothing technically, but Audite's SACD sonics bring a spatial depth and realism combined with huge dynamic range not matched by the Helios CD.

There remains another strong contender here, in the form of the Newton Classics coupling featuring the cellist Anner Bylsma's period-performance group, L'Archibudelli. Playing on gut strings, and using bows and instrumental set-ups which closely resemble those of Mendelssohn's era, L' Archibudelli's accounts have a lighter touch and a naturally expressive warmth which proves especially pleasing in the slow movements. What you don't get to the same degree, though, is the pungency of attack and sustaining power that modern practices afford, and the whole effect seems just a little undernourished by comparison with the excellent Mandelring accounts.

For the sake of completeness, Audite has found room here for two of the four posthumously issued pieces for string quartet, published as Mendelssohn's Op. 81 in 1849, the 'Capriccio' and 'Fugue'. If the latter seems to resemble a formally erudite contrapuntal study, the verve and brilliance of the former ensures that the Mandelring's Mendelssohn traversal reaches an exciting and assured conclusion. This has been a happy adventure from the start and this series must now be rated as a prime option of choice in these works. Michael Struck-Schloen's engaging booklet notes make out just as compelling a case for these marginalized works as the performances themselves. Recommended.