



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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Any of these collections would be perfect for someone who wants a good introduction to the vast world of the Beethoven quartets. I listened to all of these while following the score, looking for mistakes and overlooked details or tuning problems. There aren't any. The sound on all of them is exemplary, and the interpretations are intelligent and expressive. Furthermore, very informative and detailed notes are included with each release.

The Delian Quartet (whose name usually appears as "delian::quartett") have been in existence since 2007 and in just that short time (I have socks that have been together longer), they have amassed an impressive list of accolades. Here they present an early quartet, No 6, in an appropriately classical interpretation. Their sound is consistently sweet and elegant, and while fans of older recordings may find it too much so, I could listen to them all day. For two works they are joined by violist Gerard Causse. The Quintet, Op 29, is played with the same sublime smoothness, and Causse's beautiful tone often gets center stage. Since this work tends to be overlooked, hearing such a gorgeous performance is a treat, especially the final movement, which has some humorous touches. Also included is the Fugue in D, which despite the late opus number (137) should not be confused with the Great Fugue, though it is a great little fugue.

The Quartetto Di Cremona is named after the Italian city that was home to many of the greatest luthiers, including Guarneri and Stradivari. In this, Cremona's first volume of the Beethoven cycle, we are offered an early quartet, a middle quartet, and a late quartet. Their rendition of No 6 is very good, but unlike the Delian's, their reading is very romantic—perhaps too much so. I find the lighter reading by the Artemis Quartet (Sept/Oct 2010) somewhat more appropriate. Cremona's reading of No 11 is even more muscular, but here it works splendidly. From the audacious opening statement to the torrential finale, the sparks really fly. No 16 is one of the most enigmatic works in Beethoven's oeuvre, known to mystify listeners on the first hearing. For such a work, a good introduction is perhaps a relatively straightforward performance, which is what Cremona delivers here, sticking to the score very faithfully. I don't mean to say that their performance is bland; on the contrary, it is a very expressive and beautiful reading. It's just "safe".

The Miro Quartet presents Quartets 7, 8, and 9—the Rasoumovsky Quartets, in knockout performances. The opening statement in the cello was so gorgeous that I immediately replayed it—twice—just to hear it again. The playing is intense and full of character. I question their tempo on the last movement of No 9, which is a bit fast and seems to result in misplaced accents. Although some performances (Guarneri, Emerson) are even faster, it's marked *allegro molto*, not *presto*. The Kodaly Quartet (Naxos) plays it slower, and while it's not as great a recording, it's a better tempo.

Despite this, the Miro plays with a panache that recalls some of the great quartet recordings of yesteryear.

