



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Quartets

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Ordinarily, in our headers, we adopt Americanized spellings and abbreviations for ensemble names. In normal circumstances then, I would have given the name of the Quartetto di Cremona as Cremona Qrt. But as far back as 2000, in issue 23:3, John Lambert reviewed a two-CD Musical Heritage Society set titled Julian Bream and Friends, which featured an ensemble named Cremona String Quartet. ArkivMusic lists that still available entry along with this new Audite release under the same Cremona String Quartet heading, but unless every single member of the ensemble has changed since the MHS recording, it's very doubtful that the current Quartetto di Cremona is the same Cremona String Quartet of yore, which is why I spelled out its formal, official name.

Members of the Quartetto di Cremona ensemble are Cristiano Gualco and Paolo Andreoli, violins; Simone Gramaglia, viola; and Giovanni Scaglione, cello; and the present album is announced as Volume 1 in a new cycle of Beethoven's complete string quartets. The reader, not to mention the reviewer, glutted with a seemingly endless supply of these works, may shrug his shoulders, yawn, and say, "ho-hum," but this latest entry is one that compels you to sit up and take notice. Here we have performances that go beyond the now expected new normal of execution-perfect in every way, and that enter into that special domain reserved for the exceptional and the exalted among surveyors of this repertoire.

What stands out in these readings more than anything else is the rhythmic point-making; not that it exaggerates or distorts the written notes, but that it finds within them a dimension of elasticity that reveals specific passages in a new light. Here are some examples:

(1): In the scherzo movement of the B \flat -Major Quartet, already rhythmically askew with syncopations and notes tied across bar-lines that undercut the 3/4 time signature, Beethoven adds a further twist in the form of a sforzando (Sf) to the first and second violin parts on the last beats of bars 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. The players give this an extra zetz (Yiddish for strong blow or punch) that makes the passage sound even giddier in its destabilized derangement than usual. It's as if the music has lost all mooring to its meter, which, I believe, is exactly what Beethoven intended.

(2): I wouldn't want to suggest that Audite's recording favors the viola and cello—in fact, the balance is ideal—but because it's so open and spacious, details in the lower voices are heard more prominently than is often the case; and, as a result, one can hear just how meticulous the Cremona's rhythmic articulation is. A case in point is the eighth-note, sixteenth-note rest, eighth note figure at bar 5 of the cello part in the third movement of the F-Minor Quartet. Instead of marveling at hearing a particular note, one marvels at hearing the rests. Because of the low frequency of the notes

and the length of the cello's vibrating strings, the sounded notes often tend to "bleed" over into the rests, but not here. Beethoven wrote the rests, and rests are what we get.

(3): The whole first movement of the F-Major Quartet, of course, is a rhythmic riot. But this time it's the beginning of the second movement (Vivace) that receives distinctive articulation, and again, it's the cello, with its insistent, metrically regular end-of-measure upbeats to the downbeats of the following measures, which set off the limping syncopations in the first and second violins that clarify what Beethoven is up to in a way I've rarely heard.

Personally, it wouldn't have been my choice to program the quartets in this way; presenting the final quartet from each of Beethoven's three periods is an interesting concept, but it's not particularly a sequence in which I wish to hear them, and it raises a question as to how the quartets in subsequent volumes of this cycle are going to be ordered. But that has nothing to do with the performances or the recording, which I would predict, based on this first release, is going to end up one of the best Beethoven string quartet surveys yet. Here then is another strong Want List candidate that you should not be without.