



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. III

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Shostakovich's String Quartets are, alongside those of Bartók, Villa-Lobos, and possibly Bloch, the towering achievements in that art-form. They confidently burden the weight of examples Haydn and Beethoven had set. And if Shostakovich's symphonies can be regarded as exemplifying his public face, the quartets are a window into his more private side. Even if you don't buy into the largely Western reception of Shostakovich as the freedom-fighter in musical code, with every symphony somehow having anti-communist messages woven into every other movement, the quartets will reveal a much more troubled and torn man than the symphonies would on their own.

Just as it has become the norm for every better orchestra to record a Mahler symphony cycle in the last ten years, it's part of the good tone for aspiring and established string quartets to delve into Shostakovich cycles. After the pioneering Beethoven (Legendary Treasure), Shostakovich (Regis), Fitzwilliam (Decca), and Borodin String Quartets (an early cycle on Chandos Historical and a complete one on Melodiya) had completed their cycles, there was little to challenge the primacy especially of the latter two until the Emerson String Quartet darted into the relative void with their squeaky clean, live cycle from Aspen on DG. Since then complete cycles have been added by the Brodsky (Warner), Sorrel (Chandos), St. Petersburg (Hyperion), Éder (Naxos), Manhattan (Ess.a.y), Danel (Fuga Libera), and Rasumovsky Quartets.

One of the most exciting prospects for a cycle of Shostakovich quartets these days is the Israeli-Russian Jerusalem Quartet. They have two recordings of DSCH out, so far, and the leisurely pace seems to be beneficial to the project, assuming a whole cycle is planned. Definitely planning a complete cycle is the Mandelring Quartett from Germany who have arrived on volume three of five of their multi-channel SACD project. I have enjoyed them live and on disc – and in particular their innovative Brahms cycle - coupled with neglected contemporaries like Dessoff - has piqued my interest.

The first two instalments of this group, consisting of the siblings Sebastian, Nanette, and Bernhard Schmidt (violins and cello, respectively) as well as violist Roland Glasl, have already picked up several recommendations – promises of excellence that the third, which includes String Quartets nos. 5, 7, and 9, seems to hold.

Serving as my primary comparison for these recordings is the second Borodin cycle – newly re-mastered and released on Melodiya and more than ever my favorite for the emotional grit and grip that they exude. The sound, formerly “good enough” is now very fine indeed; the background hiss audible, but even on headphones never intrusive – a definite improvement on the old BMG-distributed cycle.

String Quartet no.7, a sorrowful little number dedicated to the memory of his first wife Nina Vassilyevna Shostakovich who had died of cancer in 1954, is – in the inimitably translated liner notes of the Melodiya release – “a more little of all Shostakovich’s quartets. But there’s said a lot – and said newly.”. Indeed. The opening movement (Allegretto) has a light flexibility, deliberate elasticity with the Mandelring Quartett (3:34); the Borodin is notably faster (3:19) with more anguished peaks. The Hagen Quartett, whose latest disc includes this quartet (as well as nos.3 and 8), is more like spun silver threads; a perfection of individual voices.

The slow Lento movement highlights the Hagen’s individual excellence and separation again – whereas the Mandelrings sound a little hazier. But whereas the Hagens are utterly gloomy here, catching a grove only very late in the shortest of movements (2:46 with the Hagen, 2:52 with the Mandelring, and 3:34 with the Borodin), the Mandelring is comparatively bright. The Hagen Quartet seems to celebrate slacking dystopia and shapelessness, the Mandelring finds more purpose. Neither could possibly sustain the movement over three and a half minutes in the way that the Borodin does, without ever dropping the musical thread. Their take is not gloomy but steady – offering a constantly moving pulse throughout, lyrical toward the end, and almost unnoticeably slow.

Even the speedy and wild(er) third movement – Allegro – has a dark, melancholic, even lethargic undertone, a trace that all the busyness on the surface cannot dispel. It’s not unlike the 8th Symphony, in a way, but a merciful 50 minutes shorter. The Mandelring (5:11) buzz along with abandon and the superb sound on this Audite disc comes to the fore, especially where Bernhard Schmidt’s cello gets all the room to bloom that it needs. Just one detail, a possible caveat: alone, they sound pretty nice, even at the densest and wildest moments. Cut to the Borodin (at 5:35 again the slowest of the three) – and you notice the difference. The latter rip into the music with more pointed accentuation and a gusto that seems to put their poor instruments in immediate danger.

At high volumes the Mandelring quartet sounds weighty and beautiful, the Borodin shrill to the point of unbearable. Which of these two you find a recommendation or warning in a Shostakovich quartet will depend entirely on what it is that you want to get out of these works. If you have made proper acquaintance with them, you will undoubtedly have a preference already. The Hagen (5:16), not unlike the Borodin, but with frightening assuredness and accuracy, instead of frighteningly free-wheeling, rip through the first three minutes like the half-demented.

Judging by the Seventh Quartet, one might expect the Fifth Quartet to be something slightly mellower in the hands of the Mandelring Quartett by comparison with the Borodin’s version. Instead, they bulldoze through the opening Allegro non troppo with an intensity that rivals the Borodin every step of the way. Only at their wildest moments – this time due to the better, fuller sound, not because of lacking aggressiveness – are they less shrill than the Borodin’s who have the more delicate, even sweet, moments in the gentle, pizzicato-dominated closing pages.

In String Quartet no.9, the Borodin are at their most bracing. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that - like Quartet no.6 and the Piano Quintet with Sviatoslav Richter - it was recorded live. Some additional background noise, more reverberation and curious balances make the difference between Audite’s impeccable and Melodiya’s raw sound far more notable.

Listen to the third movement (Allegretto furioso), where the Mandelring Quartett doesn’t gallop into this movement like mad, as does the Borodin Quartet. Rather it

starts as a graceful, agile dance, replaced by sudden vigour and anxious terror. The Borodin move from madly riveting to a brutal, metallic harshness that disabuses the listener of the idea that this might be the “Quartet for Children” that Shostakovich had promised the Beethoven Quartet for their 40th anniversary. Unless the same misunderstanding regarding “Toys and spending time in the open air” occurred here as it did in his 15th Symphony – distinctly not a toy-shop symphony, despite Shostakovich’s claims to that effect – the 1964 9th String Quartet is in fact a different, new work than the one he promised to produce with those words in 1952. You could also consider a link between the reoccurring galloping spiccato beat of the Allegretto to the “William Tell” quotes in the 15th Symphony, but if the similarity is anything but coincidental would be difficult to prove. When it finally saw the light, Shostakovich dedicated the quartet to his new, third, wife, Irina Supinskaya.

When anxiety and strife give way to the agonizing Adagio, the calm deliberation and the atmospheric sound of the Mandelring Quartet (3:03) are every bit as raw and tender as the much slower Borodin (4:04). Their concluding Allegretto is a strident highpoint of this release.

The peaks and extremes of the Borodin, not to mention the frequently abrasive sound - which I find quite appropriate most of the time - make that cycle stand out more and may be more immediately captivating or exciting. But especially on repeat- and closer listening, the Mandelring’s carefully considered, always unpredictable ways are a treasure, not only for audiophiles but for all who want more than the “authentic Russian” version of the Borodin, Beethoven, or Shostakovich Quartets.