



Dmitri Shostakovich: Complete String Quartets Vol. IV

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The Mandelring Quartett (three siblings and a violist!) is now one volume shy of completing its Shostakovich cycle; presumably Quartets Nos. 11, 13 and 15 will follow in due course. Although the Eighth will likely remain Shostakovich's most popular string quartet, there is good reason to argue that these later quartets present the composer's essential qualities in their most concentrated form. Less public than the symphonies, they were an opportunity for Shostakovich to be brutally honest about himself and his milieu, as well as to mourn, and to dream of something better.

Among these three quartets, the Tenth is most accessible. Completed in 1964 (two years after Symphony No. 13), it is relatively conventional in form, but hardly ordinary in its mood, which is reminiscent of the Eighth Symphony and the Cello Concerto No. 1. Stylistic fingerprints, such as the prevalence of an anapestic rhythm, provide reassurance, but the Allegretto furioso second movement viciously drives that away. Without sacrificing accuracy or tonal quality, the Mandelring Quartett dig in fearlessly, and in the succeeding Adagio, the musicians are by turns painfully eloquent and emotionally stunned.

Quartet No. 12 (1968) is described in the booklet notes as 'moderately dodecaphonic', although it is important to realize that Shostakovich used dodecaphonic elements only as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. Tonality is not rejected – the Quartet begins and ends in D flat major. The opening is darkly lyrical and here the members of the Mandelring display the beauty of their playing as individuals, and their ability to listen to and match each other. The lengthy second movement, with its obsessive working over of its opening gesture, is masterfully shaped by these musicians. Even this movement's biting pizzicato passages are delivered with expressiveness by first violinist Sebastian Schmidt.

A further step towards the darkness is taken in Quartet No. 14 (1973). Just as Quartet No. 12 was dedicated to first violinist Dmitri Tsyganov of the Beethoven Quartet, Quartet No. 14 was dedicated to that same ensemble's cellist, Sergei Shirinsky. As one might expect, the cello plays a prominent role. The second movement and parts of the third, suggest a lullaby, but it is Death that is in the cradle. Rage has been burned away, and what remains is wonderfully equivocal in its tenuous balancing between calm resignation and morbid self-examination.

The Mandelring Quartett, more than any other ensemble I've heard in these three quartets, brings out the music's essential equivocations. (The Fitzwilliam Quartet, once regarded as the sine qua non in this repertory, now seem lacking in imagination.) That they do so with a luxurious sound and with unanimity of intention is reason enough to welcome this release and its predecessors (Volumes 2 and 3 were reviewed in October 2007 and June 2008) and to give it a strong vote as the

Shostakovich cycle of choice. This is uncanny playing and it has been recorded with uncanny clarity and presence by Audite's engineers. The booklet notes are thorough, and have been translated into idiomatic English.

