



Franz Schubert: String Quartets Vol. I

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[American Record Guide](#) (Althouse - 2009.07.01)

Schubert's early quartets were written for his family quartet, Franz playing the viola. With the Mandelring Quartet we come very close to these circumstances. Three of the Mandelrings are siblings (Sebastian, Nanette, and Bernhard Schmidt), the lone outsider being violist Roland Glassl. (The only all-sibling quartet I've come across is the Ying Quartet, but there may be others.) This release is the first of three Schubert CDs, each with a mature quartet coupled with an early one. The early one here (D 87 in E-flat) dates from 1813, when Schubert was 16, and was published posthumously in 1840 as Op. 125:1. Death and the Maiden (14) was his next-to-last quartet, written in 1824.

The Mandelrings have an affinity for Schubert. They phrase gracefully and avoid pushing tempos, thus giving the music a chance to breathe. Following with a score, I noted they are meticulous in observing Schubert's dynamic markings and rhythmic intricacies.

While this is certainly a good performance, I would not place it above several on my shelf: Emerson and Italiano come to mind. Neither of those observes the exposition repeat (which with the Mandelring results in an opening movement of almost 17 minutes), and the Audite recording has an up-close graininess to the sound that is well below the quality of the others. In fairness I should report that Audite's is a hybrid disc, and I haven't heard it as an SACD.

The E-flat Quartet is quite a nice piece, particularly in this performance. It is easy to judge this teenager's piece as juvenilia, feel a bit nervous about its quality, and push it to stimulate excitement and avoid tedium. The Mandelring, though, seem to take the piece more seriously. They don't press tempos or strive for effect, so the music unfolds naturally and beautifully. The thematic material isn't particularly distinctive, but the execution is beautifully done, with no hitches or embarrassing moments.

In sum, then, a good recording, but not one I would urge on you.