

A1

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Complete String Quartets

Volume 1

Early String Quartets

CD 1

Quartet No. 1 in F major, Op. 18/1 (1798-1800) [28:49]

Quartet No. 2 in G major, Op. 18/2 (1798-1800) [23:50]

CD 2

Quartet No. 3 in D major, Op. 18/3 (1798-1800) [28:48]

Quartet No. 4 in C minor, Op. 18/4 (1798-1800) [23:48]

CD 3

Quartet No. 5 in A major, Op. 18/5 (1798-1800) [28:26]

Quartet No. 6 in B flat major, Op. 18/6 (1798-1800) [24:20]

Volume 2

Middle String Quartets

CD 1

Quartet No. 7 in F major, Op. 59/1 'Razumovsky' (1805/6) [41:11]

CD 2

Quartet No. 8 in E minor, Op. 59/2 'Razumovsky' (1805/6) [39:22]

Quartet No. 9 in C major, Op. 59/3 'Razumovsky' (1805/6) [30:59]

CD 3

Quartet No. 10 in E flat major, Op. 74 'The Harp' (pub. 1809) [30:53]

Quartet No. 11 in F minor, Op. 95 'Serioso' (1810) [20:51]

Volume 3

Late String Quartets

CD 1

Quartet No. 12 in E flat major, Op. 127 (1824-25) [37:19]

Quartet No. 14 in C sharp minor, Op. 131 (1826) [37:25]

CD 2

Quartet No. 13 in B flat major, Op. 130 (1825-26) [42:30]

Große Fuge in B flat major, Op. 133 (1825-26) [17:17]

CD 3

Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132 (1825) [44:54]

Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135 (1826) [24:42]



The Alexander String Quartet (Zakarias Grafilo (violin I); Frederick Lifszitz (violin II); Paul Yarbrough (viola); Sandy Wilson (cello))

rec. 9-13, 24-30 June and 10-16 November 2008, American Academy of Arts and

Letters, New York City, USA. DDD



FOGHORN CLASSICS CD2005 [9 CDs: 522:11]



"A majority of musicians would probably agree in regarding Beethoven's string quartets as the highest peak in the whole range of chamber music." Roger Fiske (*'Chamber Music'*, ed. Alec Robertson, Penguin Books, pub.1957)

Over the last decade or so I have had the opportunity to play and consider the merits of several sets of the complete Beethoven string quartets. In particular I recall the accounts from the Bartók Quartet/Hungaroton, Juilliard Quartet/Sony, Italian Quartet/Philips, Guarneri Quartet/BMG RCA, Alban Berg Quartet/EMI Classics, Lindsays/ASV, Medici Quartet/Nimbus, Amadeus Quartet/Deutsche Grammophon and Takács Quartet/Decca.

My benchmark of the complete quartets has been the series from the Takács on Decca. The 7 discs were recorded in 2001-04 at St. George's Church, Bristol and released on three separate volumes: early quartets 470 848-2, middle quartets 470 847-2 and late quartets 470 849-2. With the advantage of splendid sound quality the assured Takács play with impressive momentum, vitality and intensity. Their dynamics are broad yet their liberal use of vibrato never feels excessive. Perfectly matched, these are coherent performances without any hint of ostentation.

There are three sets of the late quartets and *Große Fuge* that deserve attention. I have enjoyed the Emerson accounts. They demonstrate awesome energy and robust character. They were recorded at the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, NYC in 1994-95 and issued on Deutsche Grammophon 474-341-2. Also deserving of praise are the Alban Berg Quartet (ABQ) who play with great intensity and impeccable security of ensemble. The ABQ were recorded live in 1989 at the Mozartsaal Konzerthaus, Vienna (EMI Classics 4 76820 2). I also admire the superbly performed historic accounts by the Busch Quartet recorded in mono at the Abbey Road Studios, London and the Liederkrantz Hall, NYC in 1932-37 (EMI Classics 5 09655 2). Although these are successfully remastered performances the Busch is not a set that I often play these days for pleasure as I find it hard to get past the seventy year old sound quality.

There are several single discs that can stand up to the very best accounts included in the late quartets or complete sets. One of the finest of these involve accounts of the *Quartet in B flat major*, Op. 18/6 and *Quartet in E flat major*, Op.

127 from the exceptional Henschel Quartet who recently celebrated their 15 year anniversary since formation. These performances, recorded in 2004 at Munich, are both sparkling and exhilarating and reveal considerable empathic insights (Arte Nova 82876 63996 2) ([see review](#)).

For performances on period instruments one need look no further than the accounts from Quatuor Mosaïques on Naïve. Mosaïques must surely be the greatest string quartet ensemble of our time performing on authentic instruments. Recorded at the Grafenegg Schloss, Alte Reitschule in Austria there are currently three single volumes: Op.18/5 and 6 from 1994 on Naïve E 8541, Op.18/1 and 4 from 2004 on Naïve E 8899 and Op.18/2 and 3 recorded in 2005 on Naïve E 8902. These beautifully played and recorded performances inhabit a rather reserved and unidiomatic world. For those who prefer their Beethoven string quartets played less cautiously with lashings of additional spirit on instruments with modern set-ups there are better opportunities in the catalogues. Yesterday in the *Times* 2 newspaper I read a review of the Mosaïques playing at the Edinburgh International Festival at the Usher Hall on 24 August 2009. Their recital was interrupted on four occasions: twice for illness in the audience and twice for broken gut strings. The fragility of using authentic instruments must undoubtedly be frustrating when playing in recital but thankfully technical malfunctions do not affect the enjoyment of their recordings.

Outside the USA the [Alexander String Quartet](#) (ASQ) may be new to some. The ASQ was formed in New York City in 1981 and are now San Francisco based. In 1985 they became the first American ensemble to win the London International String Quartet Competition gaining the jury's highest award and also the Audience Prize. It is a mark of their consistency and discipline that they celebrated their 25th Anniversary in 2006. In 1996/97 with former leader Ge-Fang Yang (their first violin from 1992-2002) the ASQ recorded their first complete Beethoven quartet cycle for BMG's Munich-based label Arte Nova. The recordings produced over a three year period at St. Stephens Church, Belvedere, Marin County in California seem to have been issued initially as nine individual discs, released as a set in 1999 on Arte Nova Classics on 74321-63637-2 and subsequently reissued and repackaged on Arte Nova ANO 636370 ([see review](#)).

For Foghorn these new performances were recorded in 2008 in three separate sessions over 19 days. "*For their superb sound qualities*" the ASQ have chosen to play the Ellen M. Egger quartet of loaned instruments constructed by the San Francisco maker Francis Kuttner about twenty years ago. Cellist Sandy Wilson tells me that the Kuttner set is, "*superb to play - wonderfully adjusted and I dare even say 'easy' and responsive in every way.*"

To record the complete Beethoven quartets is a marvellous achievement and I can

only imagine all the hard work and scrupulous preparation that the ASQ must have put in. I have enjoyed and have been consistently impressed with their excellent performances. They took this listener through the odyssey of Beethoven's string quartets reaching deep inside the core of the music. The performances are unfailingly fresh and musically compelling. The interpretations are crisp and polished, full of perceptively observed detail; alert to the smallest change of accent and nuance. Tempos are never over-forced and neither are the dynamic contrasts. At the same time they are never afraid of imparting a vigorous bite to the *Scherzos*. Especially impressive is their superb intonation and immaculate ensemble whilst each player remains a solidly characterised individual. First violin Zak Grafilo is smoothly expressive, responsive and flawless throughout. Today I would place Grafilo in the same elevated league as eminent quartet leaders: Christoph Henschel of the Henschel, Edward Dushinberre of the Takács, Jan Talich of the Talich, alternating leaders Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer of the Emerson and Corina Belcea-Fisher of the Belcea.

Their use of vibrato is careful. I was interested in comparing the amount of vibrato used by some of the rival sets. Quatuor Mosaïques, as one would expect with their authentic performance practice are extremely sparing yet I was also aware of their narrow dynamic range. The Henschels on Arte Nova employ vibrato judiciously with the Takács on Decca exercising a slightly more liberal approach. The accounts that employed vibrato more substantially included the Borodins on Chandos, the Italian Quartet on Philips, the Emerson on Deutsche Grammophon, the Alban Berg on EMI, the Amadeus on Deutsche Grammophon, the Lindsays on ASV and the Busch on EMI.

I have made some observations on the accounts that I have enjoyed the most. Divided into Beethoven's three stylist periods the Foghorn set follows a generally chronological order. The first volume comprises the op. 18 works, composed in 1798/1800 and dedicated to Prince Lobkowitz.

The *Quartet No. 1 in F major*, Op. 18/1 is the finest of the op. 18 set. I loved the grand gestures from the ASQ in the *Allegro con brio*. In the *Adagio affettuoso ed appassionato* the deep concentration from the players is remarkable, bringing out the music's tragic and intense nature said to be inspired by the tomb scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The glittering brilliance of the vivacious *Scherzo* is followed by the bubbly *Allegro, Finale* played with sureness and a 'light on its feet' quality.

The five middle quartets composed between 1805 and 1810 are on volume 2. The substantial *F major Quartet No. 8*, the first of the op. 59 '*Razumovsky*' set, is arguably the most impressive. There is a heady mixture of gritty determination and underlying tenderness in the opening *Allegro*. The awareness and ensemble from

the ASQ is impeccable in the idyllic mood of the *Scherzo*. Dreamy and melancholy, nothing is exaggerated and everything is refined in the *Adagio*; a magnificent movement and a great achievement. Based on a Russian folk-song in the *Allegro, Finale* the players convey a substantial feeling of intensity, maintaining shape and momentum.

A particular favourite is the *Quartet No. 10*, Op. 74 known as '*The Harp*'. The ASQ in the restless opening movement *Poco Adagio: Allegro* brim over with ideas, often sharp, brash and bold, sometimes mellow and submissive. I love the way the beautiful and refined song-like *Adagio ma non troppo* balances a sense of nostalgic longing with restraint. Hammering out its fierce rhythms the playing of the exultant *Scherzo* leaves one breathless. Impressive is the gear shift at 3:44 where the dynamic weight lessens markedly. Rather reserved in manner, the *Finale*, a graceful theme and set of variations, gives way to a short and thrilling *Coda*.

Evidently Beethoven himself gave the nickname '*Serioso*' to his *Quartet No. 11*, Op. 95. The terse and compact opening *Allegro con brio* feels hewn from stone, conveying a keen effect of forward motion. An underlying tension prevails in a *Adagio ma non troppo* that never allows the listener completely to relax. Boisterous by threat rather than by overt aggression the *Allegro assai vivace ma serio* serves as the *Scherzo*. I was struck by a slow introduction of dark foreboding in the *Finale* that shifts swiftly to music of a joyous celebratory character. At 4:15 the boisterous *Coda* brings an astonishing mood-change with a headlong race to the finishing post.

Volume 3 contains the five late great string quartets and the *Große Fuge* - all composed in 1824-26. Widely acknowledged as remarkable music and so ahead of its time this new dimension in chamber music still remains challenging for performers and listeners alike.

In the *Quartet No. 12 in E flat major*, Op. 127 I was especially impressed with the immense second movement *Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile*. It is almost twice as long as the next in length. Designed as a theme and variations with *Coda* this is full of glorious writing often of a contemplative quality played with passionate conviction. I found the *Allegro, Finale* a welcoming movement of childlike innocence. Some of the rhythms have a gypsy feel providing a contrast with a certain rustic simplicity.

An enigmatic masterpiece of the genre the *Quartet No. 13*, Op. 130 is a long work, lasting over 42 minutes in this performance. The score embraces a breathtaking ambit of emotions from the simply playful to ecstatic outpourings of tortured angst. The *Cavatina* marked *Adagio molto espressivo* is remarkable.

The *Quartet No. 14*, Op. 131 is said to be Beethoven's favourite of the late quartets. It consists of seven movements designed to be played without a break. The centre-piece is the fourth movement *Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile* - a set of six variations based on a simple theme. This is inspired playing here done with touching expression that yet demonstrates the ASQ's firm grip on the music. The *Finale, Allegro* is performed with vigour and exuberance. The assured players provide an almost relentless forward momentum that only briefly stops for breath.

Intended as Beethoven's original *Finale* to the *Quartet in B flat major*, Op. 130 the colossal *Große Fuge* in B flat major was published separately as his Op. 133. The individuality of the *Große Fuge* is remarkable. It comprises three fugal sections each with contrasting tempi. For many listeners it's a tough nut to crack. The ASQ are uncompromising in their power, intensity and spiritual depth.

In *A minor* the *Quartet No. 15*, Op. 132 has a conspicuous five movement arch-structure. It's a massive work that here takes some 45 minutes. The central movement *Molto Adagio - Andante*, at nearly 17 minutes, is by far the lengthiest and the keystone of the score. Written by Beethoven after a period of illness he named this movement his '*Holy Song of Thanksgiving by a Convalescent to the Divinity...*' This series of double variations uses a chorale melody contrasted with an energetic section. I was struck by the glorious playing of the ASQ. They offer rapt concentration and heartfelt intensity. It leaves a powerful impression.

The final work of the complete set is the *Quartet No. 16*, Op. 135. Lasting just under 25 minutes it never attempts to plumb the great emotional depths of the other late quartets. The opening movement *Allegretto* is splendidly played with the ASQ maintaining the prevailing pensive and rather gloomy mood. By contrast the *Scherzo* is performed with fiery petulant tone and jarring and syncopated rhythms.

I found the sound quality of this to be immediate and crystal clear. It is a pity that the comparative dryness of the recording inevitably means that some instrumental tone colour is lost. Closely recorded, the balance fits splendidly into the sound picture.

Of the rival versions the most satisfying sound to satisfy my ideal is from Quatuor Mosaïques on Naïve. The Mosaïques also have the advantage in performing on warmly recorded gloriously rich-toned authentic instruments fitted with gut strings and period bows. On Arte Nova the Henschel with their magnificent instruments in modern set-ups provide appealingly clear, slightly warm and well balanced sonics. Of the other accounts with modern strings and bows the Borodins on Chandos are warmly recorded and decently balanced as are the Italian Quartet on Philips on

their digitally remastered analogue accounts. I would describe the Emersons on Deutsche Grammophon and the Alban Berg Quartet on EMI as reasonably clear and well balanced. By contrast I was also impressed with the ice cool, vividly clear and well balanced sound from the Takács on Decca. Of the historical performances the mono accounts from the Busch Quartet on EMI have been digitally remastered to a standard exceptional for their age. Obviously a stumbling block for many, the mono sound is clearly no match for modern digital recordings.

To summarise: the ASQ provide a most natural feel to their interpretations. I admired their splendidly matched phrasing together with an intuitive grasp of structure. The dynamics are rarely overstated and their choice of tempi feels just right. The exceptionally clear and dry sound is closely caught. I loved the quite exceptional essays from musicologist Eric Bromberger. These add appeal to the overall presentation. The ASQ can take considerable credit from these superb interpretations. Their dedication and insight has paid off as this set is one of the very finest available. The Takács on Decca are now no longer clear first choice in the catalogue. This Foghorn set is unquestionably one of my 'Records of the Year' for 2009.

Michael Cookson

Also available in 3 separate volumes:

FOGHORN CLASSICS Vol. 1 CD1996 [3CDs: 52:45 + 48:37 + 52:53]

FOGHORN CLASSICS Vol. 2 CD1999 [3CDs: 41:11 + 70:29 + 51:50]

FOGHORN CLASSICS Vol. 3 CD2002 [3CDs: 74:54 + 59:51 + 69:41]

Read more: http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2009/Oct09/Beethoven_Alexander_CD2005.htm#ixzz4yVuCJxaU