

Beethoven Complete String Quartets, Vol. 3: The Late Quartets - AllMusic Review

Dover Quartet - AllMusic Rating: 4 1/2*/5*

Beethoven Complete String Quartets, Vol. 3: The Late Quartets Review by James Manheim

Given the modest size of the audience for chamber music in the U.S., the country has produced a remarkable number of world-class string quartets dating back to the 1960s. Now comes the Dover Quartet, which formed at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute in 2008 and has gained wide acclaim for a cycle of **Beethoven** quartets that concludes with this third volume. It covers the late quartets, plus the Grosse Fuge, Op. 133, originally attached to the String Quartet No. 13 in B flat major, Op. 130, but later published by **Beethoven** as an independent work. The Great Fugue is a technically perilous piece with a contrapuntal energy that seems to overflow the boundaries of the decorous string quartet medium, and it makes a good place to begin appreciating the virtues of the Dover Quartet's performances. The performance is precise, with no sign of strain. In general, precision is a major attraction here, with perfect intonation and a wealth of small detail, but precision doesn't foreclose a certain lightness that is particularly appropriate in the late quartets, built as they often are from seemingly artless tunes. The Dover Quartet never overdoes the slow movements, letting a piece like the Lydian-mode "Prayer of a Recovered Person to the Godhead" in the String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132, speak for itself rather than freighting it with retrospective notions of transcendence. Of the existing **Beethoven** cycles, this one perhaps follows most closely to that of the **Emerson Quartet**, but it has a flavor of its own. The Cedille label provides unfussy engineering from an auditorium at Goshen College in Indiana.

The Guardian Review - Andrew Clements Rating: 4*/5*

Beethoven: Complete String Quartets album review – up there with the best

Dover Quartet

(Cédille) - The group's complete Beethoven quartet cycle – brought together now in a single set – showcases their characteristically clear and elegant style

The **Dover Quartet** released their **Beethoven** cycle in three instalments between

2019 and 2022, and it's now been brought together in a single set. The individual installments have been very positively reviewed, especially in the US, where the group is based (they came together at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia in 2008) and it's easy to understand why their performances have been well received. Everything about the playing is immaculate – tempi are invariably uncontroversial, phrasing is elegant, textures always crystal clear – and many will feel very comfortable with the neutral approach that they adopt, especially in their stylish performances of the Op 18 quartets and the three Rasumovskys Op 59. Alongside the finest recorded cycles – those of the Takács and Alban Berg quartets in the digital era, and of the majestic Quartetto Italiano from an earlier generation – the Dover's performances may seem to lack a bit of character and intensity, while the rather insistent vibrato of the leader won't be to all tastes; it can become rather intrusive, especially in the slow movements of the late quartets, such as the Cavatina of the B flat, Op 130 and the adagio of the A minor, Op 132. But it's a fine achievement, up there with the best Beethoven of recent times.

Classical CD Reviews

<https://www.davidsclassicalcds.com/blog/at-last-the-final-beethoven-installment-from-the-dover-quartet-is-here-and-what-a-fantastic-complete-set-it-is>

At last, the Dover Quartet completes their Beethoven cycle with Volume 3 in the series. And lucky for us, they managed to get that done before losing their violist, Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, who announced earlier this year that at the conclusion of the summer concert tour she was leaving the group and moving on to "bigger and better things". (What could possibly be "better" than playing with these guys?!) The Dover now have a new viola player on deck to play with them for a one-year trial period. I will be most interested to hear what happens.

Unfortunately, they had not yet begun these latest recording sessions before losing their recording/sound engineer at Cedille Records, Bruce Egge, who was responsible for the amazing recorded sound heard in their previous recordings. So I was somewhat apprehensive about what I would hear in this new set. I needn't have worried; the sound continues to be among the very best.

This review applies to the complete set – issued on 8 CDs in 3 Volumes, in 2019, 2021 and 2022. I reviewed this group's 2nd installment earlier this year and some of those observations are repurposed here, as they apply to the complete set as a whole. Thus I'll begin with the exact same statement that I started with before: I'm so moved by the Dover Quartet's playing of these Quartets I am literally left speechless. This is simply some of the most heartfelt, joyous and life-affirming

Beethoven I have ever experienced; thus it is difficult to describe in words.

Listening to this newest volume, I hear nothing to change that view and plenty to confirm it.

Starting with the basics, all the hallmarks which make the Dover Quartet so incredibly special are in evidence - primarily a unified approach which many quartets simply cannot equal. 1) Their ability to play with crisp, clean, incisive precision of articulation, unified as if just one player, is not only phenomenal, it is thrilling; 2) their unified command of dynamics; 3) a musical expression which is involving and vigorous, and at all times imbued with a marvelous sweetness of tone; and 4) a unified blend and uniform tonality.

It's also how these players can vary their tone and vibrato intensity as musically appropriate. There is a lightness of touch here, followed by a vigorous fortissimo there, and the variety and contrasts are stunning. Further, in those passages when they play with minimal vibrato, the sound does not result in a bright, icy thinness of tone which is so often heard. Even without vibrato, their tone remains sweet and expressive. And it is positively glorious.

Further, there is a pervading naturalness to their musical expression which is breathtaking. Many groups try so hard - to sound larger than life, or go out of their way to make a musical point. But the Dover Quartet is so very accomplished, and their musicianship so finely tuned, that the music is always the priority.

As I noted in my previous review of the Dover Quartet, the playing of 1st violinist, Joel Link, is exceptional. And that certainly continues in this latest set of recordings. His sweet tone and singing lines are the heart of these performances. Yet, it's the precision of articulation in the inner voices (2nd violin/viola) and a lightness of touch from the cello which really drive these readings - with involvement, energy and propulsion. That these 4 musicians can so successfully and consistently play as one is extraordinary. This is string quartet playing which redefines the art - not only for its perfection, but for its sheer musicianship and musical involvement.

Tempos, always such an important ingredient in Beethoven, are perfectly chosen all through this set - alive, involving and invigorating. There is never a hint of routine; every phrase is infused with life and spontaneity. Slow movements are kept moving with momentum and sweeping lines, never weighted down unnecessarily with excess emoting, though fervent musical expression permeates every phrase. All the drama of Beethoven is there, with boundless energy and power, but there's also an intimacy which makes this music, as played by the Dover Quartet, go straight to the heart.

And with their recording of the late Beethoven Quartets comes poise - a distinct maturity and depth of insight joining all the irresistible freshness and invigoration heard in the earlier works. And this group's commanding dynamic range continues to be impressive, bringing an involvement rarely encountered. And while transparency and clarity of inner textures remain primary factors, their singular blend creates a sound just rich enough to provide a touch of gravitas perfectly suited to these Quartets.

Instantly with Opus 127 on disc one, a fervent introspection pervades the music-making, which is touching and powerfully moving. Opus 130, then, is just as elegant and compelling as one could ever wish. The scope and variety of characterization and expression here - and in Op 131 - are truly captivating. And with the final two, the Dover find an even greater rhapsodic soaring to the melodic lines - never too intense, and never sacrificing any of the qualities noted before. They even manage to relate them more than usually to the Symphonies. For instance, the slow movement of the Ninth came to mind during the heartfelt Adagio of Op 132, while the Sixth was definitely conjured up in the Vivace of Op 135.

All through these mature works there is never a sense this group is pushing to sound bigger than they are. They create contrasts with whispering pianissimos followed by sudden fortes, without ever sounding deliberately grandiose or at all forced. As noted before, it's an utter naturalness to the music-making which is remarkable. This is emotional Beethoven without the heaviness.

Two final observations which are of extreme importance to me must be made. As a musician and collector, I am thrilled the Dover Quartet and Cedille Records have seen fit to record and release these Quartets in chronological order. This makes for easy navigation and adds enormously to overall musical enjoyment. Moreover, there is a consistency from start to finish which is unmatched in my experience listening to recorded Beethoven cycles.

And last, but certainly not least, is the superlative recorded sound which plays such an important role in the success of this set. As mentioned above, a change in recording engineer has not affected the new release in the slightest. Cedille continues to provide sound which exemplifies all the musical characteristics described above. Indeed, the recorded sound afforded this quartet is simply spectacular in its ability to illuminate all the qualities I cherish in their playing. There is an immediacy and palpable presence, without ever being at all pushy or gruff, plus a spectacular (but realistic) dynamic range and a 3-dimensional realism which bring the performances into one's listening room as in a live performance. The end result is one of the most immersive, musically rewarding and completely

satisfying recordings of a string quartet I have yet heard.

I listen to a lot of string quartet music and I've listened to many complete Beethoven sets. And I can confidently proclaim that the Dover Quartet's Beethoven is second to none. The playing is transcendent and the recorded sound is as good as it gets. This is a monumental achievement by one of the best string quartets playing today.

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) - MusicWeb Review
Complete String Quartets Volume 1 – Opus 18

Quartet No 1 in F major [28:52]

Quartet No 2 in G major [23:35]

Quartet No 3 in D major [24:52]

Quartet No 4 in C minor [23:14]

Quartet No 5 in A major [28:36]

Quartet No 6 in B-flat major [25:25]

Dover Quartet

rec. 2018-2019, Sauder Concert Hall, Goshen College Music Center, Goshen, USA

CEDILLE RECORDS CDR90000198 [77:28 + 77:28]

Quartet 6 in B-flat major is the most striking. It begins in Beethoven's most convivial manner, the Dover Quartet niftily and merrily enjoying life with the constant repartee of echoing phrases between first violin and cello, then first and second violins before gleeful rising scales in the first violin leave it in the heavens. But shining sun and ice in turn cross the quizzical second theme (CD2, tr. 9, 0:34) as its phrases alternate between F major and F minor before this is all jettisoned as the exposition is rounded off with the original jollity. The development gets to G minor (3:18) to give more airing to those rising scales at the end of the first theme before working round, via lovely new pairings of the upper and lower parts in turn, to a wonderful sense of stillness and resolution that the Dovers convey before the recapitulation and the catchy figure that heads the first theme is duplicated further with tremendous gusto by the Dovers and the melody itself extended (4:42).

I compare with the most recent recording of the Op 18 set, released in 2019 by the Quatuor Sine Nomine (Claves CD191920). Sine Nomine is less merry than the Dovers, but more scintillant: their playing has more finesse in its clarity, balance, brilliance and discipline. Yet the Dovers bring more personality, drama and colour: in particular they reveal the disquiet within the F minor phrases of the second theme where Sine Nomine styles these as a variation of the elegant whole. Recording is also a factor: the Dovers are given one quite close and intimate; Sine Nomine's is more perspectived, making the first violin in high tessitura seem especially ethereal.

The slow movement starts simply, gracefully from the first violin, soon joined in duet by the second, the second part of the first theme (tr. 10, 0:48) of more affectionate character as the accompaniment becomes denser and warmer. When the first violin starts a more elaborate version of the theme, an independent descending figure 'these notes well marked' (1:16) alternates between viola and cello. In the movement's second section the second part of the theme goes into the minor (1:39) and the second violin traces a woeful path (2:05) to a first violin descant of forlorn eloquence. As before, all instruments are soon involved and as the sforzandos cut across the texture you feel as if all the Dovers are wringing their hands. Short rests create silences in the line for more pondering. Happy ornaments like the recall of the hemidemisemiquaver fours in the first theme opening section now become sad (3:32). Only a resourceful first violin solo of chromatic rising then falling demisemiquavers can release us back to the opening section. This makes the return of this all the sweeter, with all parts, including 'these notes well marked' further elaborated. When the second section returns you shiver. But almost straightaway comes a salving chord and phrase with the cello playing in octaves with a low C bass drone. The coda from the Dovers (6:56) is poised and charming. They follow the movement's progress intently: you share in a difficult experience.

Sine Nomine, timing at 7:01 to the Dovers' 8:05, take more note of the latter aspect of Beethoven's marking *Adagio ma non troppo*. This complements their dispassionate approach: the second part of the first theme homely but not affectionate; the minor key material keenly appreciated as a different rather than, with the Dovers, disturbing experience. Sine Nomine's sforzandos are observed as part of the stresses of the line, not an intense emotional response. So, you miss the Dovers' emotion, but you may feel that's overdone. Sine Nomine honours Beethoven's exquisite crafting. The hemidemisemiquavers are for all seasons and it's easy to return to the happier material where the first violin's high tessitura is pristine brightness.

The Dovers also make the Scherzo an uneasy experience. Since Bartok its wealth of syncopation and rhythmic displacement between the two upper and two lower instruments doesn't seem especially reckless, but the way the Dovers hammer the abrupt contrasts of dynamic and sforzandos from the second strain and the elation of the closing *ff* climax signal mania. The Trio (tr. 11, 1:36) is a slight, flibbertigibbety interlude showcasing the first violin, but Beethoven's transition to the Scherzo return (2:12), an *ff* prequel of its *p* start a reminder of the Scherzo's more bullish second strain, is given full force by the Dovers. Sine Nomine, from its more uniform start, bleaker second strain but less vigorous than the Dovers, and its heavier Trio, provides less colour and elan.

The finale, headed *La Malinconia*, is an extraordinary depiction of mental and

physical disturbance. It begins *Adagio*, *pp* and serene, but at the end of the phrase that is its essence the repeated last note is prefaced by effectively a triple 'appoggiatura' of instability, an 'appoggiatura' which then recurs twenty times, like a bayonet being twisted. The Dovers play all this intently with clear dynamic contrasts and nervous expectancy, *sforzando* shudders working to a searing convulsion-like *ff* climax. Then comes an *Allegretto quasi-Allegro* country dance (tr. 12, 3:30), niftily done by the Dovers and yet still seeming under a shadow. At its climax the opening theme returns. The dance fails to reassert itself first time but regains composure the second, a rosy *poco adagio* version of it (7:42) finding again the movement's opening serenity which permits a breezy *Prestissimo* close (7:55), despite which the Dovers leave me haunted by a belief the melancholy will return.

Sine Nomine's opening has more sense of specialty and eeriness: the dynamic changes and dissonances starker, the illness more advanced. The country dance at first goes spikily through the motions, but there's a sense of disorientation. The Dovers here give it more swing and attempted heartiness with a sweeter first violin.

Ask me which is this second most striking quartet of this set and I'd say **Quartet 3**. If you want to know why, I refer you to my recent [review](#) of the Chiaroscuro Quartet's performance where you will also find a detailed consideration of the Dover's account in the discs under review here used as a comparison.

Best of the rest? For me, two slow movements, the first from **Quartet 1**, the *Adagio* in D minor, marked *affettuoso ed appassionato*, a lament presented by the Dovers with emotive warmth and communal support in grief and commemoration, echoing phrases shared by the group members. Happy memories come with the F major second theme (tr. 2, 2:08), beautifully done by the Dovers. With the development comes the first *f*, the opening theme returning, angry and pained from the Dovers' second violin and viola (3:57), anguished decorations from the first violin, silences of emptiness as the passion subsides, a solemn recap from the first violin but affronted protest from the second violin and viola. The second theme return the Dovers welcome for its roseate consolation; but the cello's return to the first theme is attacked by splenetic first violin ascents then both violins in a sudden nightmare to the *ff* climax before the pathos of the Dovers' reserved coda (8:29).

My second choice, the slow movement from **Quartet 2**, a C major *Adagio cantabile*, measured and savoured but serene from the Dovers. The first violin quite naturally, even relaxedly, taking up the ornamentation from the end of the second phrase to develop it into showers of demisemiquavers. The Dovers' cello is allowed to shine (tr. 6, 1:14) and the *fp* climax of the opening section is fervently as well as sunnily realized. The middle section (2:17) is *Allegro* and F major, a frisky

chase in semiquavers, yet not just light and soft but with determination in its crescendos and loud endings. The return of the *Adagio* finds the first violin's ornamentation in hemidemisemiquavers (3:53) and from 4:46 all the Dovers, beautifully balanced, exchanging eight demisemiquaver figures.

Michael Greenhalgh

BEETHOVEN: The Complete String Quartets, Vol. 3 – Dover Quartet – Cedille

Audiofile Audition

BEETHOVEN: The Complete String Quartets, Vol. 3 (The Late Quartets Opuses 127, 130, 131, 132, 135, Grosse Fuge, op. 133) – Dover Quartet – Cedille CDR 90000 215 (3 CDs), 3:13:20 *****:

Yet another remarkable set from the Dover to conclude their Beethoven effort. And honestly, it was not at all what I was expecting! That's not a bad thing, even though, based on their two previous sets, I was anticipating something extraordinary. This also supports that appellation, but in an entirely unexpected way. Let me explain.

For most quartets tackling these fiendish opuses, which is to say, most quartets period, the classical elegance (or supposed elegance) found in the early opus 18 works slowly metamorphoses into the fiercely independent, radical, and oh-so-serious take on the late ones. After all, they were indeed all of these things when they first appeared, but because of their difficulties and nuances, most string ensembles believe they must approach these works with their adult pants on, gearing up for unimagined profundity from the first notes of opus 127. A good example of this—and maybe the best—is the Decca recording by the Takacs Quartet. That highly-regarded set—with good reason—brings all the burnished passion and fervor one could ask for, amazing depth and technical fluency that dazzles from first to last.

But is that all these quartets are? Or are they something entirely different? Regarding the last, no, they are not entirely different than what is usually presented to us. But they are more than what we normally hear. In fact, good argumentation can be made for the idea that what is present in opus 18 is still present in many ways in the favorite five of the last years. Beethoven was setting the stage in the early quartets for what was to come in the later ones, and to neglect this important point is to miss many of the felicities and cleverness of the last works. The Dover seems to understand this—not that I have spoken to them, so I can't confirm it—but their take on these pieces is anything but the "grand idea", or the "summation" of Beethoven's entire life. There is no fierceness or striving for ultimate profundity in these readings. But there is a lot of sweeping lyrical propensity, bold harmonic and dynamic contrasts, and a certain suavity that

approaches the Telarc Cleveland Quartet readings while maintaining a subtle "classical" sensibility. In other words, they see these pieces as a culmination and fulfillment of Beethoven's lifelong developmental processes, and not a simple thrust into the music of the future sans connection to the past.

This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the opus 131 C-minor, that wildly juxtaposed set of interlocked yet emotionally disparate sequences of what feels like completely independent episodes. The Dover does not imbue each of these with a radically different emotive context; in fact, they—to use a horribly overwrought and overused phrase—let Beethoven's music "speak for itself" (if such a thing is possible) without providing any additional gravitas. The result is, maybe for the first time in my hearing, an ability to get through the entire piece without breaking into a sweat. It's elegant lines and beautifully contoured phrases evolve and manifest themselves in a manner that bespeaks a congruency of musical thought that is often missing in more emphatic renderings of this work. The same applies to the other four quartets in the set.

A word about the Grosse Fuge. There is no question that Beethoven's original conception is to end the opus 130 with this superb and completely unanticipated finale. In fact, it contains snippets of varying types (especially harmonic) from the other five movements but is nearly as long as all of them put together. Because of the enormous difficulties of the work, the publisher begged Beethoven to publish it separately and add another movement to serve as the finale. Most recordings as of late—meaning the last 30 years or so—use the Grosse Fuge as the ending of no. 13, in keeping with the composer's original conception. The Dover does not, and I think it a good idea, though admittedly I have waffled with the idea over the years. The reasons are simple: the Grosse Fuge is such a fearsome and wildly different piece, so dominating and exhausting in many ways, that it makes one forget what came before, and there are many wonderful things in the op. 130; and Beethoven's redone ending sounds ridiculous when played as a stand alone (even following the Grosse Fuge in some performances, which is ludicrous) and deserves to be heard and not relegated as an appendix, as it is on many recordings.

This is a most desirable release, recorded in great sound, and a fitting end to a formidable cycle.

—Steven Ritter

Dover Quartet: Beethoven - Vol. 1 - The Strad Review

Beautifully judged traversal of op.18 quartets never fails to hit the mark

Dover Quartet: Beethoven

THE STRAD RECOMMENDS

The Strad Issue: December 2020

Description: Beautifully judged traversal of op.18 quartets never fails to hit the mark

Musicians: Dover Quartet

Works: Beethoven: String Quartets op.18 nos.1–6

Catalogue number: CEDILLE CDR 90000 198 (2 CDs)

If in its recent complete survey of Beethoven's cycle of 16 quartets (reviewed in the October issue), Quatuor Ébène rewrites the semantic rule book, recapturing this groundbreaking music's bracing modernity for a contemporary audience, the Dover Quartet returns us to the post-Romantic sound world of, say, the Guarneri and Budapest quartets, but with a beguiling freshness and spontaneity that creates the impression of these relatively early masterworks arriving hot off the press.

If there is a general tendency in op.18 for quartets to fall in one of three main camps: those who focus on technical polish, those who revel in the music's internal structural logic and ingenuity, and those who go behind the notes to uncover hidden expressive continuities – the Dover players manage to unite all three to a remarkable degree. Meticulously balanced (captured in perfectly distanced, undistractingly natural sound), technically clean-as-a-whistle and intonationally immaculate, this fine ensemble – violinists Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt and cellist Camden Shaw – never sound interpretatively inhibited by a desire for absolute precision. In the dancing opening Allegro of no.5, for example, it is their collective sensitivity to mood and atmosphere that leaves a lasting impression, rather than their fine-honed tonal matching.

In the tricky D minor Adagio slow movement of no.1, some ensembles come perilously near to campiness in their fervent desire to wring the last ounce of 'appassionato' intensity out of the music's inexorable, pulsating tread. By comparison the Dover, at a gently flowing tempo, captures the sense of tragic despair with a tantalising poignancy that is deeply touching without resorting to sledgehammer rhetoric. Rarely has Beethoven's C minor expressive archetype been so exquisitely handled as by the Dover players in no.4, whose Mozart-on-steroids emotional trajectory is never allowed to swamp the composer's innate Classicism. Finest of all is the final B flat major Quartet, which is kept invigoratingly and smilingly en pointe, where others have a tendency to don musical hobnail boots.

JULIAN HAYLOCK

Dover Quartet: Beethoven - The Strad - review of Vol. 3

A stylish American quartet concludes its Beethoven cycle

The Strad Issue: March 2023

Description: A stylish American quartet concludes its Beethoven cycle

Musicians: Dover Quartet

Works: Beethoven: Complete String Quartets vol.3: no.12 in E flat major op.127,

no.13 in B flat major op.130, no.14 in C sharp minor op.131, no.15 in A minor op.132, no.16 in F major op.135, Grosse Fuge in B flat major op.133

Catalogue number: CEDILLE CDR90000 215 (3CDs)

In this final volume of its Beethoven quartet cycle the Dover Quartet maintains the qualities admired by Julian Haylock in the op.18 set (The Strad, December 2020): technical polish, thorough understanding of the music's internal structural logic and ingenuity, and rigorous exploration of its hidden expressive continuities. Add to these aspects unanimity of ensemble, tonal sonority, meticulous internal blend and balance, carefully determined and flexible tempos and fidelity to Beethoven's performance indications (though within a somewhat limited dynamic spectrum) and this is undoubtedly a Beethoven cycle to savour.

A comprehensive list of performance highlights would require far more than my allotted space. Suffice it, therefore, to praise these players' sublime Adagio and robust finale in op.127, their mercurial opening movement, graceful Alla danza tedesca and deeply expressive Cavatina in op.130, topped off by an animated and strikingly rhythmic account of that work's substitute finale. The Dover also offers a powerfully dramatic rendition of the Grosse Fuge to searching and perceptive effect, as is its contrapuntal interweaving in op.131's tranquil opening fugue and finale. The first movement of op.132 is arguably the least convincing reading here, but the players' seamless Heiliger Dankgesang is outstanding, with leader Joel Link's c.1710 Pietro Guarneri of Mantua sounding radiant throughout. Impressive too is the Dover's faithful reproduction of the countless mood changes in the Vivace of op.135 and its sustained cantabile playing in the subsequent movement. Captured in a natural concert hall acoustic, Cedille's recorded sound offers a fine balance of individual detail and ensemble resonance.

ROBIN STOWELL