

ORION STRING QUARTET



November/December 2007

BEETHOVEN: *Quartets 7-11*

Orion Quartet—Koch 7681 [3CD] 154 minutes

The Orion Quartet is based in New York, where they are in residence at both the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Mannes College of Music. In addition they are Artists in Residence at Indiana University. Their eclectic repertory extends from the traditional to the modern, including a partnership with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and works ranging from Zwilich and Schulhoff to Chick Corea and Wynton Marsalis. Their discography is fairly small, but it deserves to be much larger. They will be recording the rest of Beethoven's quartets.

These are lovely readings. The Orion plays Beethoven with a very appealing unforced beauty. Their playing is sensitive and expressive, but tempos are not pushed; nor do they try to extract every last possible ounce of drama from the pieces. In the Second *Razoumovsky*, for example, the opening movement is played without the sense of dire catastrophe that many groups bring to it. The slow movement is not the height of desolation, and III (the one you can never beat time to) is not rushed and for once does sound like an allegretto. The opening to the Third *Razoumovsky* arrives without a great deal of mystery. The fugal finale is quite fast, but beautifully controlled, so it sounds less frantic than it often does. Perhaps their most aggressive playing is

in the opening of the troubled Op. 95 (11), where they dig in with strength and virtuosity. The coda of IV is superb. Those who like Beethoven very dramatic with a slash-and-burn approach may find the Orion a little too neutral in some movements. But I find their *Harp* I and III wonderfully energetic and vital and not at all overplayed. In other words this strikes me as just right. In any case I look forward to their completion of the quartets.

Special credit should go to the engineers for making the music sound so good. The perspective is excellent: close enough to impress, but distant enough to escape unwelcome scraping. No particular credit, though, for spreading the five quartets over three discs. Maybe they won't fit on two, but the third has less than 22 minutes of music.

If you have a chance, look at the Orion's website, where they include dining suggestions in cities where they've played. In their words, they do like to eat.



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