

ORION STRING QUARTET



BEETHOVEN: *Quartets 12-16; Grosse Fuge*
Orion Quartet
Koch 7683 [3CD] 200 minutes

Both as performance and recording, this is an unceasingly beautiful set of the late Beethoven quartets. The Orion Quartet has been in business since 1987, and the group's performances bespeak years of getting to know this music—and getting it right. Now they are putting it on records apparently for the first time. The Orion not only brings understanding and wisdom to these readings, but often leads us into that transcendental spiritual world that separates the late quartets from all others. Further, the sound comes off the discs with wonderful presence, for which producer and engineer Adam Abeshouse certainly deserves immense credit.

The Orion succeeds by the simple device of not trying to overdo things. They are not out to "wow" anyone. They really do want the music to speak for itself. It may sound glib to put it that way, but that is the effect the performances have on the listener. Of course, the music has to come through the Orion filter. They have to play it. But it is an authentic, even exciting filter possessed of light years of interpretive believability and proper proportions.

The Orion performs as with one voice. The violinists are brothers who regularly exchange seats and from a musical point of view do it seamlessly. Todd Phillips sits in the first chair for 12, 13, and the *Grosse Fuge*, Daniel for 14, 15, and 16. Steven Tenenbom is the violist, Timothy Eddy the cellist. The recordings were made from June 2006 to November 2007 in the LeFrak Concert Hall at Queens College in New York City. The LeFrak enjoys a robust, transparent acoustical ambiance. The tone of the group is consistently warm and rich. Their blending is masterly, and Beethoven's counterpoint has rarely been better defined.

The group actually seems to enjoy playing the *Grosse Fuge*. When is the last time one could say that about a performance? They are not reaching for the heavens here. Mere mortal man is enough. Not that Beethoven wanted the work to be easy—certainly the group could not be said to be taking things easy. As the composer originally wrote No. 13, the great Op. 130, the *Grosse Fuge* came immediately after and in total contrast to the ravishing 'Cavatina', and that is how the work ended. How many publishers today would have the conviction and courage of Beethoven's (Matthias Arctoria) to say to him, "Er, hold on just a minute, Ludwig. It's about this last movement." And so, as all the musical world knows, they agreed to publish it separately. Beethoven thereupon came up with another finale—an utterly charming nine-minute allegro, the last thing he ever wrote. The Orion, unable to forget that contrast between Cavatina and Fuge, goes back to Beethoven's original idea and places the *Grosse Fuge* immediately after the Cavatina. Then they give us the allegro. Both are on the same disc, giving the listener an easy choice. It is very effective. This was the arrangement adopted by the Tokyo Quartet in its RCA recording, but not by the Quartetto Italiano on Philips, nor even the Budapest in their celebrated readings on Strads for Columbia from the Library of Congress in the early 1950s.

The field of recommendable recordings is not crowded, but not thin either. ARG's recent Overview gave high marks to the Guarneri, the Italiano, and the Kodaly, in addition to the Tokyo (Nov/Dec 2006). The Orion now rivals the Guarneri and Tokyo at the top of the field. And of late there has been an astonishingly good set of the late quartets by a baroque-sized string orchestra, the Camerata Nordica of Sweden (May/June 2008). That overview did a good job summing up the pros and cons that have arisen over the years about these works. It also spoke of the "ruined structures of the last quartets". Not everyone would agree with that, though Richard Strauss might have: he did not care for late Beethoven at all.

14 years separated the last of the middle quartets from the first of the late, and it is a strength of the Orion players that they see that Beethoven was carving out new things to say and new ways to organize them. His structures are not ruined, just different. As the Orion demonstrates over and over, the late quartets are not that inaccessible if you accept what Beethoven gives you, not what he does not. Do not look for Haydn or Mozart here. You may have to give Beethoven time and patience, but it will invariably pay off.

No. 12 is initially the easiest of the five, but is especially remarkable for a 15-minute slow movement that is faithful to its barely noticeable variation structure but also sectionalized and daring in its abrupt changes and still terribly sweet and glorious. The sectionalizing is an idea that Beethoven would apotheosize in IV of No. 14. The Orion ties 12's slow movement together with adroit phrasing and a relaxed set of stylings that are both penetrating and enthusiastic about the composer's new language.

The fugue that opens 14 is essentially sad music, but the Orion lets it speak honestly and with conviction at an ideal length of 6:46. IV is adorned with its fair share of trills as Beethoven reaches back to his baroque roots. In addition, the players bring an unforced beauty to the movement that exemplifies what the English writer JWN Sullivan meant when in his classic 1927 book *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* he said that the composer's creativity had "taken on a very high degree of organization" and that the last quartets testify to a "higher degree of consciousness, probably, than is manifested anywhere else in art".

If one may be permitted to pick a favorite among all these wonders, it is No. 15, where the Orion draws us close to that level of consciousness where, as Sullivan tells us, Beethoven has put his suffering behind him and seems to be achieving his own kind of peace with the world. Not that the performers are saintly about what they are doing. They really dig into the first movement, and in the three-quarter-time II it is such a pleasure to hear this familiar music given such fresh voice. The *Heiliger Dankgesang* (III) is a sacred hymn

of thanks for the composer's recovery from a serious illness. The Orion brings it off brilliantly by paying primary attention to the notes, producing warm string tone in the introduction, dazzling violin play in the prayer, real string bite toward the end.

Most record companies these days will help the listener by listing timings in the album booklet and titles on the CD itself. Alas, Koch does neither here.

BENDER



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