

ORION STRING QUARTET

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Quartet clicks on the details

CLASSICAL CD REVIEW: Orion delivers Beethoven's intricate strings

By Lawson Taitte

Contemporary American string quartets have the reputation of machinelike virtuosity – and often, frankly, of not much soul. It's interesting, then, that Orion doesn't fit the mold at all.

Clearly it ranks among our top three or four such ensembles; its residencies at Lincoln Center and the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival are evidence of that. But this new version of Beethoven's groundbreaking middle quartets is full of the kind of seasoned wisdom you'd associate with quartets from Central Europe a half century ago.

The first thing you notice in listening to these five performances (spread over three CDs, but costing less than two full-price ones) is the enormous amount of loving detail Orion invests in them. The careful attention to delicate changes of dynamics and intricate but never fussy phrasing really opens up these famous pieces in fresh ways. Each of the three Op. 59 quartets that Beethoven dedicated to the music-loving Russian ambassador, Count Rasumovsky,

receives individualized treatment. The first of these works is among the greatest of the composer's expansively lyrical creations that range from the Violin Concerto to the Archduke Quartet. The Orion players keep it mellow but never go slack. They emphasize the melancholy edge of the second, and are especially eloquent in the slow movement. In the third, they show they can keep up with their hard-driven colleagues with a super-fast, hell-for-leather approach.

The only drawback to these wonderful performances is that the violin tone occasionally turns harsh. The two violinists, who happen to be brothers, switch first and second chairs in various works, but I wasn't able to find a pattern that would put the blame on one or the other.

That blemish won't keep me from returning for the many insights here.

Beethoven

Grade:A-

Middle String Quartets. Orion String Quartet (Koch International Classics)

