

ORION STRING QUARTET

Fantare

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Classical Reviews - Composers & Works

Orion Str Qrt: **BEETHOVEN** String Quartets on KOCH

by Jerry Dubins

BEETHOVEN String Quartets: No. 12 in E \flat ; No. 13 in B \flat ; No. 13: alt. finale; No. 14 in c \sharp ; No. 15 in a; No. 16 in F • Orion Str Qrt • KOCH 7683 (3 CDs: 199:54)

But for the occasional misfire among newly recorded releases (see my review of the Tokyo String Quartet's remake of Beethoven's op. 18 quartets in 31:4), every recent version of these monumental works I've received for consideration seems only to surpass the ones before it. And so it is with these 2006–07 readings of the late quartets by the Orion String Quartet (Daniel Phillips and Todd Phillips, violins; Steven Tenenbom, viola; and Timothy Eddy, cello). In past reviews, I've opined that we are living in a golden age of string-playing; that for young players, in particular those who have chosen to form quartet ensembles in lieu of pursuing high profile solo careers, Beethoven's once technically daunting and musically elusive middle and late string quartets have become so thoroughly assimilated and integrated into the common vernacular that they now sound normal and natural. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so quick to characterize this as a generational phenomenon; for in the Orion String Quartet we have a seasoned ensemble, the quartet-in-residence of The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and New York's Mannes College of Music for the past 20 years. Founded in 1987, its members can hardly be called youngsters. Yet they have not, until now, committed their Beethoven to disc, though their live performances of the entire cycle in 2000 at Alice Tully Hall received high critical acclaim, after which

they took the show on the road to Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Deerfield, Massachusetts, and Indiana University in Bloomington. The lion's share of the Orion's repertoire has consisted of modern American composers—Chick Corea, John Harbison, Leon Kirchner, Peter Lieberson, Wynton Marsalis, and others—though they have regularly presented mixed programs that also include

BEETHOVEN CDs 127, 138, 131, 132, 138 & 135
STRING QUARTETS **LATE**



works by Haydn, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and Bartók.

Given my well-publicized antipathies to much late 20th- and early 21st-century music, it is hardly surprising that my CD collection, but for one exception, is short on the Orion's recordings. That exception is a very fine performance, apparently nla, of Dvořák's great A-Major Piano Quintet with Peter Serkin on the Arabesque label. Nothing in that reading, however, could have prepared me for the Orion's



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Beethoven. Every critical plaudit I've come across speaks of the "unforced beauty" of the playing, of the "spot-on accuracy and rich tonal blend," of the "expressive warmth," and of the "careful attention to detail and nuance." But not even the singing of such praises really captures the essence of these remarkable performances.

Edith Eisler, in a review of the Orion's previous release of the middle quartets, comes close to putting her finger on it when she describes the "control of voicing," the tone that is "homogeneous but individually distinctive," and the way "within a luminous texture, lines stand out and recede naturally and unobtrusively, connecting seamlessly in sound and expression." What I'm about to say may sound like a bad thing, but it's not. It's almost as if each player was recorded separately and the tracks then merged, that is how pristinely one hears the inner workings of each part. Of course they weren't recorded separately, but it's the laying bare of every swell and ebb of every subtle dynamic shading and expressive marking and of the life pulse of every phrase, all united in a single living, breathing organism that is what I believe Eisler meant by "homogeneous but individually distinctive."

But there is more, so much more, I'm not sure I can find the words to describe it. At one point in the B \flat -Major Quartet—in the Alla danza tedesca movement—this is so embarrassing—I felt something wet on my shirt. At first I thought that Licorice, my black cat, who is fond of sitting in my lap and drooling, had slobbered on me. I'm lucky if I can wear the same shirt twice without having to wash it. But no, this was something else. Not even aware of it at first, I realized there were tears running down my cheeks. The Orion had found a way of giving that dancing-in-tears little tune a lift and lilt such as I had never heard before. For once you hear that, yes, it is a dance, but a dance filled with a sadness no words can express.

Again and again throughout the set, you will hear little catches of the breath, the

tenderness of a portamento perfectly placed, and the slightest hesitation leading into a cadence to heighten its sense of arrival. All of this is accomplished with a tonal luster that allows for no abrasiveness, even in Beethoven's most go-for-broke passages—which brings me to the subject of the Grosse Fuge. You will observe that I have not listed it in the headnote, opting instead to list the alternate finale to the B \flat -Major Quartet. That is because the Orion places the Grosse Fuge where it rightfully belongs. The alternate finale is given as an additional track after the Grosse Fuge, a lesson that seems not yet to have been embraced by even some renowned ensembles that have recently recorded the work—namely the Leipzig Quartet (see 30:6). Also worth mentioning is that the Orion takes the quite lengthy exposition repeat in the first movement of the B \flat Quartet.

I have heard countless recordings of these works, but none in my experience compares to these. In fact, so overwhelmed was I by these performances that I rushed right out on my own and bought the Orion's set of the middle quartets, which, until I'd received the current set of late quartets for review, I'd not been aware of. The performances were recorded at LeFrak Concert Hall, Queens College, New York. Daniel and Todd Phillips, who are brothers, take turns playing first and second fiddle; Daniel plays first in the C \flat -Minor, A-Minor, and F-Major Quartets; Todd in the E \flat -Major and B \flat -Major Quartets.

If I have any complaint at all, it's against Koch. It really is inexcusable not to provide any timings anywhere on the back plate or in the booklet track listings. For a release of this significance, that smacks of production negligence and rank amateurism.

That carp aside, you must acquire the Orion's Beethoven quartets. That is not a recommendation; it's an obligation for anyone who cares seriously about this music.