

Fanfare Magazine: Dover Quartet Beethoven String Quartets Volume 1

Jerry Dubins – January/Feb 2021 Issue



Two years ago, or maybe it has been three now—one tends to lose track of the weeks and months in this time of COVID-19—I took a chance on an ensemble of young American players, billing itself as the Dover Quartet. It had been booked to perform a program of all three of Beethoven’s “Razumovsky” Quartets in a single evening at the Chamber Music Northwest summer festival in Portland, Oregon. And so, I bought a ticket and went to the concert.

I believe I’ve described my reactions previously in these pages. I was stunned, thrilled, riveted in my seat, as my heart raced and my palms perspired with a combination of overwhelming excitement and sheer awe. Never had I experienced playing of such dramatic intensity in tandem with such technical virtuosity, especially in a live concert setting with its ever-present chance of heat-of-the-moment slips. There were none that evening.

Since then, the ensemble has shown us on record what it can do in Mozart and Schumann, proving that what I heard that night at the CMNW concert was no fluke. The Dover Quartet is the real deal, easily rising to the very top of the heap, and not just the heap of the many dynamic new arrivals that have burst onto the scene in recent years, but even to the top of that very select tier of the most venerated ensembles in the string quartet domain.

I don’t know if the in-concert performances of the “Razumovsky” Quartets I attended that night were recorded, and if so, whether those recordings will now be used for what is announced here as Volume 1 in a cycle of Beethoven’s complete string quartets; or if the three op. 59 Quartets will be recorded anew. Either way, first to be released is this two-disc set of the six op. 18 Quartets, commonly referred to as the composer’s “early” quartets. These works require no introductions. They have been recorded countless times, are familiar to every serious music lover, collector, and student, and have been analyzed, dissected, and explored at length here and elsewhere. Therefore, I am going to make very short work of this review.

As it was formed as recently as 2008, some might question whether the Dover Quartet is ready to undertake a complete cycle of Beethoven’s string quartets. I would question whether Beethoven is ready for the Dover. If he were alive today and hadn’t lost his hearing yet, Beethoven would find it hard to believe that his quartets could be played with such perfection of execution, such beauty of tone, such nuance of expression, and such keen understanding of his music’s meaning and intent. Seldom heard details emerge from these performances in ways that will light up your face with an “ah ha” surprise. You’ve heard it before, but never quite that way, as the viola or cello jumps into the fray with a riposte

to the first violin's assertion, or a note that always passed by unremarked on suddenly stands out, making you take notice of it as you never have before. With music-making like this, the golden age of string playing I've previously held we were blessed to be living in has come to an end. The Dover Quartet now ushers into a new period, the rhodium age. This is an imperative purchase for anyone who cares profoundly for this music and its realization.

If, perchance, the members of the Dover Quartet are reading this, it is my fervent plea that when they get to the late quartets, namely op. 130, they will observe Beethoven's original intentions, as is now widespread, virtually standard practice among players, which is to put the Grosse Fuge in its proper place, immediately following the Cavatina, as the work's true and official finale. If they wish to offer the alternate finale as an afterword, fine, but please don't spoil what promises to be a for-the-ages effort.

http://www.fanfarearchive.com/articles/atop/44_3/4430890.az_BEETHOVEN_String_Quartets_Nos.htm
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