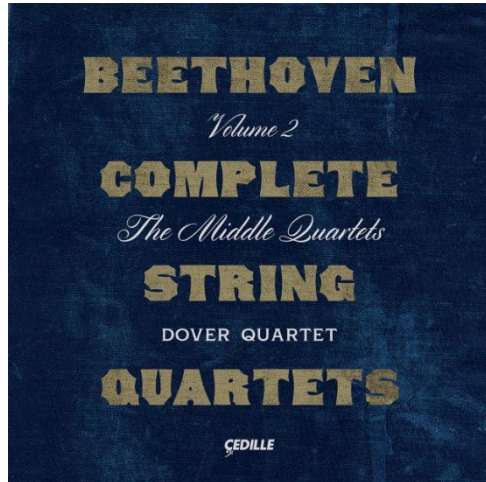


Fanfare Magazine

Review: Beethoven Complete String Quartets, Volume 2 — The Middle Quartets

Huntley Dent | January 2022



For whatever reason, the immensely well-regarded Dover Quartet has a slim discography, so it was a major event when Cedille, a boutique label dedicated to recording artists and composers in the Chicago area, began a complete Beethoven quartet cycle with the Dover. (Their Chicago connection is as artists in residence at Northwestern University. They also serve as faculty at the Curtis Institute, where the group was formed, and hold a residency at the Kennedy Center. They took the name Dover in commemoration of Dover Beach, by another Curtis graduate, Samuel Barber.) The three volumes are appearing steadily but slowly. This set of the Middle Quartets was preceded by the six quartets of op. 18 last January. As I understand it, the exigencies of a small label

dictate the extended release schedule, but any waiting period is worth it when such outstanding musicians are involved.

In recital one is immediately struck by the solo caliber of each member—violins Joel Link and Bryan Lee, viola Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, and cellist Camden Shaw—enabling their individual and group sound to be powerful and charismatic. That can never be a drawback, but reviewing the Early Quartets (Fanfare 44:3), I felt that the more delicate and Classical aspects of op. 18 were trampled upon here and there. I expected the “Razumovsky” Quartets to be a better fit, and so it proves. The rich, beautiful sonority that opens op. 59/1, aided by close-up miking, is captivating. There is perfect unanimity in the phrasing and ensemble balances. The Dover Quartet has performed three complete Beethoven cycles in recital along with many readings of individual quartets, and their experience shows.

I should add that the first “Razumovsky” doesn’t feel too finished. Anyone devoted to Beethoven’s string quartets has heard readings of the second-movement Allegretto, for example, where a certain mechanical quality sets in—it isn’t easy to convey the marking of *sempre scherzando* in music that isn’t overtly humorous. By using a wealth of small expressive touches, the Dovers do as well as anyone I’ve ever heard, including my two touchstones, the Alban Berg and Elias Quartets. Masterpieces can show road wear, and it’s a real achievement from all three ensembles that their “Razumovsky” readings take you back to the first time you fell in love with these three quartets.

One particular area of improvement over Volume 1 occurs in the slow movements, which are now fully mature, patient, and yet pulsating with life. The Adagio of op. 59/1 is marked *mesto* (mournful), which braces me for pious dullness. Here the playing is so expressive and imaginative that this movement becomes a worthy precursor to the Heiliger Dankgesang of op. 132. The final requirement in this quartet is that the *Thème russe* finale be high-spirited and joyous, as it is here.

I don't think there's much to add in detail about the second and third "Razumovskys," which unfold as close to the ideal as the first one. If I reflect on the historical sequence of great quartets whose Beethoven has moved me the most, the Léner, Busch, Budapest, Alban Berg, and Elias Quartets have distinctly different personalities, but they all appeal to me because the music comes alive, the playing shows great commitment, musicality, and alertness, and the stature of each work is fully recognized. The ABQ has somewhat more weight and authority than the Dover Quartet; the Elias is a fraction more detailed and thoughtful from phrase to phrase. But the essential thing for me is that the Dover belongs in this elite group in the first place.

They represent a step in the evolution of American quartets when approaching Beethoven. Ever since the Juilliard Quartet rose to prominence, the attitude towards traditional European groups was "You play sweeter, but we play better." The culmination of this attitude, to my mind, was the intense but frigid Beethoven cycle released by the Emerson Quartet (DG), where efficiency was maximized and sweetness was banished. The ABQ exploded the stereotype of lazy Europeans by being superb technically—like the Dover, each member was of soloist caliber. With the appearance on the scene of the Dovers, America evened the playing field with an ensemble who deliver expressive interpretations that go beyond the Juilliard, Guarneri, and Cleveland Quartets, although some influence of each is present.

Not everyone is likely to agree with my generalizations, but at least I've said why I esteem this ensemble as highly as I do. This release ends with the "Harp" and "Serioso" Quartets, which tend to be aficionado pieces overshadowed by the immense popularity of the "Razumovsky" Quartets. The gentle soul of the "Harp" Quartet, with its hints of remembered Haydn, seems like a resting place after the imaginative splendor of the "Razumovsky"s. The Dover reading is unusually varied and dynamic, which benefits the score's communicative ability.

The terseness of the "Serioso" Quartet and its acerbic mood tempt some performers into pushing the tension to extremes. For a well-balanced reading that still has sufficient impact, I favor the Artemis Quartet (Erato), the leading successors in Germany to the ABQ in Vienna. In recital I found the Dover too aggressive in this quartet, but here they have smoothed things out just enough to preserve excitement and show off their unanimity at high speed without turning abrasive. More importantly, they overcome any sense that the "Serioso" Quartet is emotionally one-dimensional. The work as a whole is a set of acute angles without rounded corners, but here we get so much variety of tone, technique, and mood that this superb release receives an outstanding conclusion.

The excellent program notes and vivid, lifelike recorded sound are also worth praising. Not many modern string quartets produce Beethoven performances that are a must-listen, but these definitely qualify.

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