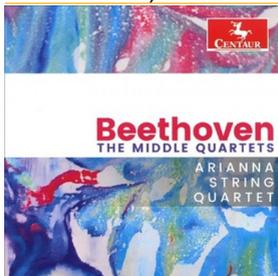


 **BEETHOVEN String Quartets: No. 7 in F; No. 8 in e; No. 9 in C; No. 10 in E ♭; No. 11 in f** • Arianna Str Qt • CENTAUR [3544/3545/3546](#) (3 CDs: 162:20)

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A *Fanfare* colleague once lamented that it was much harder to write a positive review than a negative one. I agree. One can criticize a performance on details of technique and style, as well as observance of repeats and the myriad interpretive guideposts that are laid out in the score. Failure in one or more of those areas becomes justification for withholding a recommendation, or worse, totally rejecting the effort at hand. The same criteria can be used to support a positive, even a glowing, review, but here's the rub. Even when technique and style are beyond reproach, and the myriad interpretive guideposts that are laid out in the score are scrupulously observed, that cannot explain the mystery, the ineffable quality that makes a performance stir the emotions in a way that no other performance does. It's an intuitive feeling one has that's quite inexpressible in words.

I think it can be stipulated that all relatively recent string quartet ensembles to appear on the scene play Beethoven's quartets with surpassing technical perfection and stylistic rapprochement. So, to speak of the Arianna String Quartet's unimpeachable intonation, fluent bowing, flawless finger-to-bow coordination, great beauty of tone, and conscientious attention to tempo indications, dynamic markings, and articulation instructions would be redundant. It's what we have come to expect and invariably get from today's young players. Beyond that, I'm not sure I can put into words what it is about the Arianna's readings of Beethoven's middle quartets that so transported me to a place of nirvana-like revelation. I can only say that the players seem to have discovered and disclosed secret places in these works that I don't believe I've ever visited before. Every note speaks with special meaning, and even the rests have something important to say.

In 39:1, I expressed a minor reservation or two about the Arianna Quartet's set of Beethoven's early, op. 18, quartets. I have no such reservations about this new set of the middle quartets. From the moment the players put bows to strings in the F-Major Quartet, op. 59/1, they draw from the opening theme a slightly hesitant, haunted feeling that casts it in a different light than in the one usually heard in the straightforward, outgoing way it's normally played. No matter how many times I listen to these quartets I still marvel at how Beethoven arrived at this juncture.

There is a quantum leap in the conception of string quartet writing between the last of the op. 18 quartets and the so-called "Razumovsky" (op. 59) set, even more so than the distance traveled from the middle quartets to the late quartets.

The final five quartets expand upon and experiment further with techniques that are already mostly in evidence in the middle quartets, but for the middle quartets those techniques and ideas had to be invented anew. There's nothing I know of in the early quartets—or in the quartets of any composer prior to Beethoven for that matter—in which pizzicato is used in the way it is in the *Adagio molto e mesto* of op. 59/1; in the *Andante con moto quasi Allegretto* of op. 59/3; and, of course, in the first movement of op. 74, the so-called "Harp" Quartet. There is not a slow, uninterrupted evolution from op. 18 to op. 59; it's sudden and wrenching, rather analogous, I think, to the Great Permian Extinction, or so called "Great Dying," in which almost all living species became extinct, to be replaced by new species in the Triassic period. But just as with the geological record of that time, with Beethoven, too, there's a break in the strata or boundary that separates the periods. Something happened in between; we just don't know what it was. We only know that suddenly everything is new and different. The newness and difference are illuminated by the Arianna String Quartet in ways both glorious and at times frightening, as in the angst of the "Razumovsky" No. 2 in E Minor and in the hellish burning and churning of the F-Minor Quartet, op. 95.

I simply don't know what else to say. I can't stop listening to these performances. They thrill me, enthrall me, and arouse emotional responses in me of an intensity that can't be described. I am prepared to state and defend my belief that these may just be the greatest performances of Beethoven's middle quartets in recorded history.

With the Arianna's set of the late quartets still to come, I'm crossing my fingers and holding my breath that the ensemble isn't going to let me down by placing the *Grosse Fuge* after the alternate finale. If any of the players are reading this, please, please don't spoil your fantastic Beethoven cycle with a wrongheaded act. Program the *Grosse Fuge* in its proper place as the only proper finale to the op. 130 Quartet.

**Jerry Dubins**