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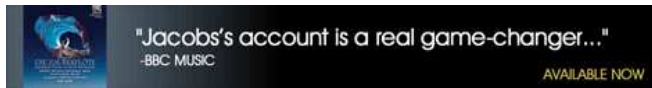
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**\* MENDELSSOHN: String Quartet in D Major, Op. 44 No. 1; Amdante and Scherzo, Op. 81, Nos. 1 and 2; String Quartet in E-flat, Op. 44 No. 3 – Zemlinsky Quartet – Praga Digitals**

\*\*\*\*\* MULTICHANNEL DISC OF THE MONTH \*\*\*\*\*  
*Mendelssohn playing of the highest order.*

Published on January 30, 2011



**MENDELSSOHN: String Quartet in D Major, Op. 44 No. 1; Amdante and Scherzo, Op. 81, Nos. 1 and 2; String Quartet in E-flat, Op. 44 No. 3 – Zemlinsky Quartet – Praga Digitals multichannel SACD PRD/DSD 250269, 70:28 [Distr. by Harmonia mundi] \*\*\*\*\*:**

Following the remarkably advanced *Quartet Op. 13* written when Mendelssohn was just eighteen, the composer retrogressed, according to some critics. His next quartet appeared two years later, and then another eight years passed before he essayed the form again. The *Opus 44 Quartets*, written between 1837 and 1839, when Mendelssohn was at the height of his fame and popularity, may seem to represent a step backward to a comfortable place where Classical restraint tempers the Romantic passions of the first quartet from his pen. In reality, they evince the impeccable craftsmanship of Mendelssohn's maturity and, in knock-out performances such as those on this Praga Digitals SACD, make a grand impression indeed.

*Op. 44 No. 1* was the first Mendelssohn quartet I ever heard, in a performance by the Julliard Quartet on an Epic LP (anybody else remember this subsidiary of the Columbia label?). I was bowled over then and have remained a fan of this dazzling piece ever since. It starts with a whirlwind of a *Molto allegro vivace*, the first violin sailing along over a frothy sea of tremolos. The rest of the movement is almost nonstop brio except for statements of the sweet, minor-key second melody. Mendelssohn is more urbane and relaxed in the *Menuetto* second movement and the *Andante* that follows, but the fire returns in the *Presto con brio* finale. Perhaps this isn't the passionate utterance of the teenage Mendelssohn, but it's thrilling greatly entertaining music nonetheless.

The revelation for me, however, is how fine *Op. 44 No. 3* (actually the first of the three in order of composition) is when given the kind of truly riveting performance the Zemlinsky Quartet affords it. I had come to regard this quartet as an amiable but backward sibling of *Op. 44 No. 1*, but the Zemlinsky surprises me. There is much more to this work than the sort of Hausmusik coziness I attributed to it before hearing their rendition. Certainly, it's a more comfortable work than the first of *Op. 44*, but it has charms and beauties in abundance, not the least its quicksilver scherzo, with Mendelssohn at the top of his scherzo game (and nobody did it better), plus a *Molto allegro con fuoco* finale that zips along with unrestrained vigor, at least in the Zemlinsky's capable hands. The slow movement, though, is the emotional heart of the quartet. With its interplay of major and minor tonality, it's one of Mendelssohn's most deeply felt and touching adagios.

The *Andante and Scherzo* were published posthumously, along with two other unrelated quartet movements, as *Op. 81*. The *Andante and Scherzo* of 1847 probably represent pieces of an abandoned or otherwise unfinished quartet of Mendelssohn's last year. The pair make for a pleasant interlude between the two main works on the bill of fare, the whole adding up to a generous as well as musically satisfying program. These performances represent Mendelssohn playing of the highest order, and I can't praise them enough. Along with Praga's beautifully open and airy SACD sonics, this disc is not to be missed.

-- Lee Passarella



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