

Gramophone

Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada



Miaskovsky · Shostakovich

Miaskovsky String Quartet No 13, Op 86
Shostakovich String Quartets - No 5, Op 92; No 6,
Op 101; No 7, Op 108; No 8, Op 110

Pacifica Quartet

Cedille © CATNOCDR 90000 127 (117' · DDD)



Pacifica pit Shostakovich against his senior Miaskovsky

Not long ago, battle lines were drawn between those who championed Shostakovich as a dissident and others who dismissed him as a Stalinist sympathiser and apologist. Now the crossfire has died down and musical priorities have shifted again. Performances once judged mainly by the level of red-blooded Russianness in the playing are now assessed by how well they fit his work within the musical canon.

Finding a balance between these perspectives – let's call them the front-line journalist versus the detached historian – comes naturally to the Chicago-based Pacifica Quartet, whose recordings for Cedille have succeeded best when linking early-modern and late-romantic repertory. The Pacifica, too young to be scarred by the political debate, garnered much attention last season with their Shostakovich cycle, which Cedille has released in the first of a four-volume series, each to include an additional string quartet by another notable Soviet-era composer.

The Pacifica's first volume starts with the Fifth Quartet (1952) and culminates in the Eighth (1960). The playing has neither the ferocious intensity of the Kronos Quartet in the Eighth, nor the riddled angst of the Borodin Quartet in general, but instead aims for greater sweep, structurally, offering a coherence and emotional integrity that link these works together. Nikolai

Miaskovsky, an older contemporary of Shostakovich, rounds out the disc with his String Quartet No 13 (1950). Dated two years before the other works here – and notably more conservative in style – the Miaskovsky proves that being traditional need not be at the cost of musical interest. But it succeeds best in placing Shostakovich as a blazing revolutionary by comparison.

Ken Smith

Shostakovich String Quartet No 8 – selected comparisons:

Kronos Quartet (4/91) (NONE) 7559-79242-2

Borodin Quartet (MELO) MEL.CD1001077

TUNE SURFING

American orchestras and labels online, and a fine Boston podcast

Shostakovich on Cedille

Cedille, one of the US's most reliably rewarding independent labels, now has its own online shop: cedillerecords.org/music/index.php The Chicago-based company's entire catalogue is available in both 256kbps MP3 and 16-bit FLAC format, more recent releases are also available as 24-bit FLAC files. I was bowled over by the first instalment of a new Shostakovich cycle by the Pacifica Quartet – Nos 5-8, cleverly coupled with Myaskovsky's gorgeous Quartet No 13 – gutsy performances, beautifully recorded. A generous 1993 collection of Vivaldi concertos featuring former Chicago Symphony principal oboist Alex Klein is also not to be missed.