

# THE Strad

July 2005



**\*Strad Selection - Chamber disc  
Mendelssohn: Complete String Quartets  
Pacifica Quartet  
Cedille Records CDR 90000 082**

Suddenly the Mendelssohn quartets are back in fashion. And this outstanding set from the US goes straight to the top of the class for playing and recording.

The Pacifica Quartet, which holds university residences at both Urbana-Champaign and Chicago, impressed me with its Dvorák CD but, whereas those performances seemed studio-inhibited, these Mendelssohn interpretations burst with energy.

Purely on a mechanical level, the ensemble is of superb quality, with fine, focused tone in all departments, marvelous chording and uncanny rhythmic sureness, intonation is very sensitive – leader Simin Ganatra has the knack of introducing pathos into her legato line without flattening too much, as in the Andante of the E minor Quartet op. 44 no.2.

Once or twice the group's tone is a little too fat for Mendelssohn, as the start of the *Adagio non lento* of the A minor Quartet op. 13, but the players' innate taste always reasserts itself. Movements in medium tempo have a nice lilt and fast music goes like the wind, without sounding forced.

I did wonder about the brilliance of the opening movement of the D major Quartet op. 44 no.1, where the first violin takes off like a rocket and the quieter second subject is given out very plainly; but I am getting used to it.

Working in the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, Evanston, Illinois, over some 18 months, Judith Sherman (assisted by Bill Maylone) has produced recordings that are consistently superb, allowing every instrument to have its say – and the players have also conspired to give us excellent balance.

What does 'complete' mean in this context? The Pacifica provides seven quartets, including the 1823 apprentice E flat major Quartet – a charming work with a fugal finale and a perky Minuet in which the musicians have some fun – as well as the four pieces of op. 81. The newly reissued Bartholdy Quartet (Arts) gives a similar package at budget price, whereas the Henschel (Arte Nova) omits the early E flat major. The Cherubini (EMI) offers just six quartets but is generous with repeats – the Pacifica omits exposition repeats in op. 44 nos. 1 and 3. With the players equally at home in the early works as much as in the central op. 44 set and the feverish late op. 80, perhaps this recording has the best of all worlds.

-Tully Potter