

MOZART: Quartets 21-23

Engegard Quartet

Lawo 1123—67 mins

There can be little question that Mozart died in his artistic prime, or having nearly reached it; think of the strength of his final symphonies, piano concertos, operas, and in this case, string quartets. Joseph Haydn felt that Mozart's quartets and Requiem would have sufficed to make him immortal, and there's no reason to dispute the claim of someone who knew so much about quartets and masses.

Written for King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, these quartets have choice parts for cello, the king's instrument. Still, this isn't hack work, even if these pieces aren't as innovative as the ones Mozart wrote for Haydn.

Enter the Engegard Quartet, a Norwegian ensemble formed in 2006. A significant portion of their recorded output has been devoted to composers from Northern Europe, namely Grieg, Sibelius, and Norway's own Catherinus Elling, though they have made forays into traditional Germanic fare by Beethoven and Schubert. Mozart inhabits a different era from all of these, so I was curious to see what their approach might be. I am pleased to say that these performances are devoid of any sort of modern revisionism or Nordic restraint.

In Quartet 21 in D the Engegard plays with a youthful verve—one might almost say with abandon. It still sounds as if they are in control, and the result feels quite Mozartean. We have all heard Mozart played as if it is mere background music, but not here; in their bio, the group makes "bold, fresh interpretations" their mission statement.

Quartet 22 in B-flat is all elegance here, and the Larghetto is ravishing. Best of the lot, Quartet 23 in F is performed with pure joy, even ecstasy. The final movement contains hints of drama, even conflict, but these are swept away. The stop-on-a-dime ending of this piece subverts expectations in a way that perfectly suits Mozart.

The liner notes expound at length on the strained relations between Prussia and Austria, Mozart's interest in freemasonry, and other matters only tangential to the Prussian Quartets, but really there's no great sin in that.

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