

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Contrapunctus XVIII; LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN: String Quartet Op. 131; ERNST KRENEK: String Quartet No. 1 Op. 6 – Beethoven Quartet – Audiomax (MD&G) multichannel SACD 2+2+2 plus multichannel DVD-Video (2 disc set) - Audiomax

Everything is here you wanted to know, hear and see about the art of fugue and were afraid to ask.

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JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Contrapunctus XVIII; BEETHOVEN: String Quartet Op. 131; ERNST KRENEK: String Quartet No. 1 Op. 6 – Beethoven Quartet – Audiomax (MD&G) multichannel SACD 2+2+2 and multichannel DVD-Video (2 disc set) - Audiomax 946 1517-6, SACD, 69:17 and DVD-Video, 102:52 - Performance *** Sound *****:**

The common denominator in these two discs is Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) *Die Kunst der Fuge's (The Art of Fugue) Contrapunctus 14*, a prodigious contrapuntal exercise that was never finished; *Contrapunctus 18* is an arrangement of the same for string quartet. It is widely thought that C14 was left unfinished intentionally with the express idea that only a select few that "really" understood the art of Bach would be able to complete it for themselves. It may seem at times that Bach composed this work (C14) never to be performed just as well; there are enough indications that it might have been a theoretical exercise in [music](#) and mathematical logic - a testament of sorts. This hypothesis has been thoroughly explored by Douglas Hofstadter in *GÖDEL-ESCHER-BACH: an Eternal Golden Braid*, especially in Chapters 1 and 5 (a marvel of a book in my opinion).

C18 is a fugue and of all things a triple fugue of a possible quadruple fugue, the latter is the missing part – we might call this the "unfinished fugue" by Bach. Like all fugues it is based on a motif (B-A-C-H - his surname) which in English music notation consists of a sequence of four notes: B flat, A, C and B natural. Please note that four is the minimum number of notes within which a note sequence can function as a motivic cell. Briefly the first four notes that make measure 1 of C18 are: B flat, A, C and B natural, from this motif Bach built a contrapuntal masterpiece up to the point that the only thing left undone when it fades out at 6:07 (Track 1), was a quadruple fugue.

Beethoven's String Quartet No. 14 is also for many reasons considered to be a testament of sorts; he finished it shortly before his death in 1827. Beethoven thought of it as the best of his late string quartets, one written for his own pleasure and not a paid commission; as a string quartet it is rather unusual in that it has seven movements to be played without a break. Much has been said about this work - all of it good of course; presumably, Franz Schubert remarked after the first performance of this work: "...after this, what is left for us to write?"

Ernst Krenek (1900-1991) composed his String Quartet No. 1 much to everyone's astonishment within a Schönbergian free atonal idiom quoting in every one of the eight movements the now famous B-A-C-H motif of C14 and C18 - this piece caused a real scandal

at the music festival where it was premiered in 1921. Krenek's notoriety in certain circles derives from the fact that he was married for less than one year to Gustav Mahler's daughter Anna and that he was also asked by Alma Mahler to finish Mahler's unfinished Tenth Symphony, but he never did. Krenek modeled his String Quartet No. 1 after Beethoven's String Quartet No. 14, op. 13, but with eight movements played without a break instead of seven. In every sense of the word this string quartet is intellectually demanding with a very cerebral and expressionistic surface that despite its obvious brilliance shows a rather uncompromising musical attitude as well as a somber temper - Krenek was by all accounts a confirmed nonconformist musician.

As to the performance itself by the Beethoven Quartet I should say that it is at times somewhat rough, it does not have the polished gleam of some other quartet ensembles I have heard but it is very endearing and at the same time "knowledgeable" - whatever that may mean. Their phrasing is clear and brilliant without any obvious personality affectation and that's an asset in my mind.

The sound in the SACD multichannel 2+2+2 disc is absolutely magnificent - it lends presence as well as 3D ambience to what is normally found in a regular recording of a string quartet. [[See This for an explanation of the 2+2+2 format.](#)] In reference to the [DVD-Video](#) it should be mentioned that the same performance for the above Beethoven string quartet was captured in [video](#) on six (3/2.1) channels of Dolby surround sound. The latter is still very effective but it does not have the 3D brilliance of the SACD 2+2+2 version; in my opinion it would have been a greater asset to have it done in 2+2+2 surround as well (is it technically possible?). It should be noted that the sound for all the performances was recorded and engineered by MDG, the well-known German recording label, in 2+2+2 Hi-Def surround sound. The video also includes a nice discussion (66 minutes long) between the members of the Beethoven Quartet and the producers and directors of the video - very informative and educational, and highly recommended.

Final words: everything is here you wanted to know, hear and see about the art of fugue and were afraid to ask - I will be listening to this disc much more in the future, my ears like it very much.

Included in the SACD 2+2+2 disc and in the DVD-Video (*):

BACH: Contrapunctus 18 from Die Kunst der Fuge BWV 1080 (ca. 1748)

BEETHOVEN: String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, op. 131 (1826) (*)

KRENEK: String Quartet op. 6 (1921)

Discussion with English subtitles (*)

-- John Nematic

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