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ROctet

AFANASIEV: Double Quartet; MENDELSSOHN: Octet; SHOSTAKOVICH: 2 Pieces ROctet Challenge 72822—63 minutes "ROctet" stands for radio octet, eight players from the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic who have formed a string octet. Orchestra members usually don't make good soloists— not even concertmasters of major orchestras—I suspect because most their talent is devoted to an entirely different kind of music-making—ensemble performance. But that is not a problem here! Not only is ROctet's ensemble perfect, but so is their tuning, rhythm, and manner of shaping phrases. The album claims that this is the first recording of the Double Quartet in D (Housewarming) by Nikolai Afanasiev (1821–98), a 23-minute, well-written, tuneful, unmistakably Russian work. The engineering honors the title with a complete string quartet left and another right; the resulting stereo helps clarify the textures. My only reservation is in I: the textures are very thick when the entire ensemble is playing at full volume. After having listened to the entire album, I think the problem is not the composer's but the engineer's—the microphones seem too close to the players. II, a 6/8 scherzo, has much more air around the players because of Afanasiev's semi-staccato rapid beats and the players' buoyant rhythms and transparent tone colors. The brief coda is especially clever: a 5/4 rhythm simply dissolves into 6/8. III is reminiscent of Tchaikovsky with its hymn-like chorale, sweetly played on muted strings with lyrically shaped minor-key phrases. The refined use of portamento and vibrato, especially in the cellos, is not just beautiful but poignant. The recitative ending with a violin solo punctuated by full chords leads directly into IV, a vigorous Allegro that is pure Russian folk dance, as in Tchaikovsky. It's can't-sit-still music, especially with the dialog left and right. Shostakovich's Two Pieces, Opus 11, for string octet are a Prelude, which ROctet turns into a genuine statement with brooding atmosphere and suspension, and a Scherzo, here exceptionally brusque and edgy, with quick attacks making it feel almost like the ensemble is stalking someone. Here's the whole package from dark seriousness to utter panache in 11 minutes. Mendelssohn's Octet, however, has several problems. The marking for I is *allegro moderato ma con fuoco*. With ROctet delete "moderato" and underline "fuoco" (fire, burning). They play it with high energy, faster than normal; yet their ensemble, articulation, phrasing, and lyricism are impeccable. But it is here that that earlier engineering problem became clear: at such a volume and pace, the sound is indeed cluttered and congested. Also, I had to boost the volume a few notches to match the level of the other two works. The Andante is just the opposite—calm, almost distant, with clear textures, harmonic movement, and rhythmic flow. It's an example of how to play faster than usual yet serenely. It brings to mind Mendelssohn saying that "all the instruments are to be played in the style of a symphony, attending to all the dynamic contrasts". The famous Scherzo here is quite remarkable as the players convey flashes of light, tremblings, mists, the flying of night clouds—pure will-o'-the-wisp atmosphere. It's a pity then that the Presto finale has very badly tuned cellos opening the furious fugue, followed by muddled violas as well. As the rest of

the ensemble joins in, the tempo increases even further. There's no steady pulse, and the playing becomes wild. With Mozart– and Handel–like fugal counterpoint like this, a steady tempo is essential. Also, toward the end of the development, the sound becomes congested once again. What a disappointing ending! FRENCH