

STRINGS

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Beethoven: String Quartets No. 11, Op. 95; No. 7, Op. 59/1. Artemis Quartet: Natalia Prischepenko and Heime Müller, violins; Volker Jacobsen, viola; and Eckart Runge, cello. (Virgin Classics 45738 2)



Here's a stunning beginning to the Artemis Quartet's new contract with Virgin: lively and vibrant performances of two of Beethoven's middle quartets. The compact Opus 95, the *Serioso*, is full of drama and tension here, the fast movements forceful and impulsive with a full, symphonic sound, with lots of natural reverberation. In the slow movement, the Artemis rightly gets out of your face, offering respite from the surrounding ferocity with a reading that sounds something like Bach's restrained *Art of the Fugue* with hot flashes. The earlier First Razumovsky quartet begins with a good-natured urgency, yet doesn't feel rushed; the group eases off a bit for the remainder of the exposition. In the scherzo, pointed humor alternates with stern outbursts, and this high contrast carries into the slow movement, where intense climaxes punctuate passages of quiet weepiness. In the finale, the cellist and first violinist refuse to phrase the primary tune the same way, which provides the performance more character than corporate unity. This is splendid, hot-blooded, full-bodied Beethoven.

—JAMES REEL