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**Beethoven: String Quartet No. 11.**  
**Schubert: String Quartet No. 15.**  
 Oslo String Quartet. 2L (SACD +  
 Pure Audio Blu-ray).

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**Dvořák: String Quartet No. 12.**  
**Marsalis: String Quartet No. 1.**  
 Euclid Quartet. Afinat.

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**Last Leaf.** Danish String Quartet.  
 ECM.

The two works played by the Oslo String Quartet exemplify the transition from the Classical to the Romantic musical styles. While both reveal their creators' complete mastery of form, proportion, and structure, both are intensely dramatic and emotional outpourings as well. The program is titled "Major/Minor" because the music makes frequent shifts between major and minor key tonalities that impart an urgency and turbulence as the mood oscillates between light and dark. The Beethoven work, aptly subtitled by the composer "Serioso," is the more radical piece, with a brusque severity informing a large percentage of the work's 21 minutes. The Schubert is more expansive—it's twice as long—but an emotional roller coaster, nonetheless; the quartet may end in sunny G Major, but it's been an arduous journey. The Oslo String Quartet's performances are

gripping and technically secure. 2L provides both an SACD plus a music-only BD, and the sound is excellent, with the 5.1 version less immersive than many 2L productions.

For years Antonín Dvořák's Quartet in F Major ("American") has been viewed, along with the *New World* Symphony, as guidance from the Czech master to American composers that Black music could provide a basis for a national musical sensibility. Dvořák had spirituals in mind—the development of the most significantly original American music (jazz) was just ahead when the F Major Quartet was premiered in 1894. Wynton Marsalis composed his 45-minute String Quartet No. 1 ("At the Octoroon Balls") in 1995, and it's far more comprehensive in representing the vast scope of African-American music from slavery through the early 20th century. The seven-movement work uses Louisiana "Octoroon" culture for context. The first movement, a *tour de force* for solo violin, explores black country dance fiddling and subsequent sections reference other musical elements heard in New Orleans—call and response, West African rhythms, spirituals, blues, ragtime, and early jazz. Marsalis's integration of these musical flavors into a rigorous "classical" structure is masterful. The Euclid Quartet's reading of the Dvořák is undistinguished but the Marsalis is extraordinary.

Like Marsalis, the Danish String Quartet uses the chamber music medium to elaborate on a non-classical genre. They play arrangements of traditional Danish music, including holiday songs, funeral hymns, medieval ballads, and a variety of dances (plus a few like-minded originals by the group's cellist, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin). The players have dizzying fluency in folk fiddling techniques, and occasionally depart from their assigned instrument to contribute on harmonium, piano, double bass, and glockenspiel. ECM's sound has exceptional ease, textural detail, and transparency.

**Andrew Quint**

**Further Listening:** Monk Suite  
 (Kronos Quartet)