



Eduard Franck: Piano Trios II

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The piano trio emerged as one of the more important genres in the nineteenth century, from amidst an ever-complex, ever-volatile, ever-vibrant period of artistic endeavour. Indeed, the piano, having demonstrated itself invaluable in its gently supporting role for the immensely popular duos and trio sonatas that emerged during the latter part of the previous century, now showed itself ideally suited to a centre-stage role within the wider milieu of chamber music. The instrument's capacities for romanticism, virtuosity and at the same time introspection rendered it indispensable in helping to affect the transition from essentially a domestic setting to the concert stage, and from Beethoven onwards a new, seemingly limitless range of possibilities was now up for grabs.

Aged 17, Eduard Franck (1817-93) was a pupil and disciple of Mendelssohn, and during his three lessons per week Mendelssohn appears to have given Franck the courage and social mobility to move in circles inhabited by the likes of Hiller, Joachim, Chopin, Brahms and Schumann, though his reputation as pianist would somewhat overshadow his accomplishments as composer, at least for the time being. Interestingly, though Franck apparently never aligned himself with the so-called 'New German' circle, populated conspicuously by Liszt and Wagner, nor did he overtly trumpet the cause of the thoroughly grounded Germanic tradition, it is perhaps due to occupying something of a diplomatic middle ground that he would eventually garner the resources to carve an important niche for himself as a composer.

Besides occupying a stalwart position within a vibrant cultural scene, Franck was able to weave in his considerable expertise as pianist into a handful of superb piano trios, which, according to Sebastian Bolz, author of the detailed notes for this new Swiss Piano Trio recording for Audite, may possibly contain one other in addition to the five already known. These exploit the piano's ability to generate intensity and drama, while at the same time drawing out plenty of excitement from the violin and cello parts. Bolz suggests that Franck's treatment of these instruments is directly indebted to his formative time under Mendelssohn's wing. (My review of the Swiss Trio in May 2011, also for Audite, was indeed the Mendelssohn Trios, in which I praised some 'fiery and effervescent' playing). Over a period of just over 50 years Franck would pen piano trios of appreciable distinction, and yet two of those featuring on this recording are premieres: the E major of 1835 and the D major, Op. 53, of 1886. This disc, which rounds off the Swiss Piano Trio's project to record all of the piano trios, also holds the E flat major, Op. 22, of 1859.

What strikes me most about the music overall is its affable buoyancy and willingness to move around freely within the blueprint of four strategically positioned movements. While each work contains a racy finale and a thoughtful Andante, only two have

scherzos, the E major exhibiting a youthful exuberance and no-holds-barred approach to the Romantic piano part. The players attack this earliest work with decisive, uncompromising tempos, and the sense of enthusiasm is especially palpable in the concluding Presto, where the tight-knit playing comes across as amply spontaneous and ebullient. In the E flat Piano Trio, the longest and perhaps most intriguing of the three due to its sprawling opening movement, Allegro moderato con espressione, there is playing of especial vibrancy and a thoroughly absorbing communication between the players. Notable too are the cheeky Scherzo to the E major and the doleful, heartfelt Andante to the D major, where each instrument claims its territory in a beautifully empathetic way.

Recorded last year at the Temple du Bas in Switzerland, the sound is as sympathetic to the expressive movements as it is to the faster-moving music, and the one or two quibbles I raised about the balance of instruments in relation to the aforementioned Mendelssohn disc are entirely not the case in this splendidly charismatic SACD. It marks the conclusion of an impressive Eduard Franck celebration consisting of a dozen releases from Audite embracing orchestral works, string sextets, quintets and quartets, as well as music for cello and piano.