Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete String Trios Op. 3, 8 & 9

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Gramophone (Harriet Smith - 01.09.2015)

GRAMOPHONE

A new set of Beethoven's string trios is always a welcome event, and this one, by a group named after one of the greatest of all chamber musicians, is a useful addition to the catalogue. In the Op 8 Serenade the Jacques Thibaud Trio capture well the outdoorsy character, particularly in the uproarious March, while the voicing in the second movement is judged to a nicety. By comparison, the Leopold and Zimmermann trios are more unbuttoned still.

I like, too, the tempo the Thibaud Trio choose for the first movement of Op 3, which is faster than some (though Trio Zimmermann are fleeter still), giving Beethoven's abrupt changes of mood a sense of complete inevitability. They capture the changeability – and sheer sparkle – of the opening Allegro of Op 9 No 1 very well, relishing the drama of the development section. But turn to Trio Zimmermann and you get playing that is even more reactive, particularly effective in their ability to fine down their tone to near-inaudibility. In the Scherzo I found the Leopold Trio's more refined tone particularly alluring, the new version sounding a touch thick-toned by comparison. And in the Presto finale it's the Trio Zimmermann who really fly, combining precision engineering with a glorious airiness that the Thibaud can't quite match.

Beethoven ends the last of the Op 9 trios with another Presto, though utterly different in mood than that of the G major and given with due drama by the Thibaud Trio. In between is a warm reading of the D major Trio, the group revealing the first movement's conviviality and the touching pathos of the Andante. Audite has given them a suitably naturalistic recording. If Trio Zimmermann is too extreme for your tastes, the Thibaud Trio may well appeal.

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