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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Complete String Trios

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Fanfare (01.02.2021)

A year ago, in 43:3, I reviewed virtually this identical program, performed by the Ssens Trio, and gave it a rave review. This release by the Jacques Thibaud String Trio is deserving of an equally rave recommendation, albeit for a reading of Mozart's great string trio, the Divertimento, K 563, that differs markedly in approach from that of the Ssens Trio.

First, however, let me clarify why the two programs are virtually identical. Mozart transcribed for string trio five fugues by J. S. Bach and one by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, prefaced four of them with Preludes of his own composition, and two of them with Preludes by their own composers. Here they are: [...]

The Ssens Trio included only the first three in the above table. The only reason I can think of for why is that they believed, or were told by their recording team, that there wasn't enough space for more of them, even though the total timing of the disc ended up at just under 67 minutes. Here, the Jacques Thibaud Trio and their recording team found room for two more of numbers—4 and 5—for a total disc timing of 82 minutes on the nose. But there still wasn't room for the last of them. However, Audite has made it available as a free download from its website, audite.de.

Now, to the differences between the two performances of the Divertimento. The Ssens's approach is serious—scrupulous in its observance of the written notes and immaculate in its execution. The players genuflect in the presence of a masterpiece, perhaps the masterpiece of the string trio literature. It's a divertimento in form—i.e., six movements with the customary two menuettos found in such works—but a string trio—i.e., violin, viola, and cello—in its instrumentation. It's also a late work in Mozart's canon, 1789, the same year that saw the composition of the Clarinet Quintet, K 581, and the antepenultimate string quartet, the No. 21 in D Major, K 575. These were works of a certain gravity, calling for readings respectful of their import.

But we don't need Peter Shaffer and Miloš Forman's movie, Amadeus, to know that up until his last days, Mozart could be a potty-mouthed cutup with a fun-filled zest for life. His association with Emanuel Schikaneder and the impresario's folk theater tells us that, as does Mozart's divertimento, Ein musikalischer Spaß (A Musical Joke), K 522, another relatively late work dating from 1787, and his funning around with Anton Stadler and the latter's basset horns and clarinets. The Jacques Thibaud Trio hears Mozart's string trio divertimento with different ears, ears that are attuned to a good deal of levity in the score, some of which, to be honest, I'd never really heard before.

I always knew that the theme and variations movement (4) was fall-down funny because I've played the work before. We even sang "Jack and Jill went up the hill ... " to its side-slipping chromatic slithers. And its looney-tune, animated-cartoon finale

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was laugh-out-loud too. But I never thought the Menuettos could contain the giggles that the Thibaud players find in them. Listen to the little flip phrasings and portamentos that poke fun at the stylistic formalities, turning the aristocratic politeness into parody and caricature. Even the Adagio (2) and more so the minor-key variation in 4 are articulated with a crocodile-tears, faux-tragic expression that brings a smile to my face.

To achieve these effects and affects, the players do take liberties—a little rubato here, a stretched ritard there, inhaling pauses and exhaling sighs—but all of it conveys a sense of personal familiarity the players have with who Mozart really was. He wasn't a carved alabaster figurine set upon an ivory pedestal. Perhaps more often than not, he could be that potty-mouthed cutup with a fun-filled zest for life depicted in Amadeus.

The Jacques Thibaud Trio has decided to have fun with the Divertimento, and, for me, it works wonderfully. I think I would sooner listen to this performance of the piece than I would any other; it's irreverent and utterly delightful. The prize-winning Jacques Thibaud String Trio has been around since 1994. The ensemble has received worldwide acclaim, more than justified I would say based on this release. Among the ensemble's previous albums have been a disc of string trios by Cras, Reger, Dohnányi, and Kodály, reviewed and recommended in 38:3 by Richard Kaplan, and a disc of trios by Milhaud, reviewed and recommended in 41:4 by Michael De Sapio. The Thibaud's latest effort goes to the very top of my list. The best in virtuosity applied to the best in music-making.

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