



Felix Mendelssohn: Piano Trios

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THEORY REVIEW

That Schumann considered Mendelssohn to be a natural successor to Beethoven, and went on to prize his piano trios so ardently, was a strong indication that these works were set to assume a prestigious place in the chamber music repertory. In Schumann's eyes, at least, Mendelssohn's was truly the music of the present, if not the future. Schumann would compose piano trios of his own, of course, albeit rather more brooding and emotionally driven.

Written six years apart, in 1839 and 1845, Mendelssohn's trios are cast in four movements and have a similar duration. Additionally, they are both in minor keys, suggestive of something rather splendid or perhaps even narrative in vein. Wolfgang Rathert, author of the erudite if slightly scholarly notes, reminds us of the especial function of minor keys in Beethoven, as well as in Mozart, and argues that Mendelssohn's particular use of minor tonality holds a mirror to the nineteenth century's increasingly sophisticated tastes. Interestingly, both trios, which in general make rather more of the piano part than of the strings, are radiant and optimistic in their dramatic gestures, not in the least bit introspective or doleful, even in their second movements. This new recording from the Swiss Piano Trio is beautifully presented by Audite, with sharp graphics and a nicely contemporary feel to the fold-out cardboard box.

The Trio in D minor, Op. 49 is confidently captured by the players – a nicely impulsive opening movement with a good sense of lyricism and a clear overview in place. Pianist Martin Lucas Staub drives the impetus assertively with an ambitious tempo, and the strings sustain a robust connection with the music's agitated under current. The individual contributions are strong, although I feel the ensemble's best intentions have not always been fully realized in this region of the recording as regards balance. I'd like a fraction more of the piano when all parts are busy, and indeed when there are short-lived soloistic interjections to enjoy (the opening and closing sections to the Andante con moto tranquillo are good examples of this, too). Conversely, the violin seems to be just a little too forward in the mix, overall, particularly during the more impassioned sections, so that the equally important piano and cello textures come over as a little hemmed in. That said, there are some precious softer moments in the ensemble, both in this movement and in the conclusion to the Scherzo, which is ably done. The finale has good drive and the overall impact improved here quite noticeably – the ensemble seemed to relax, introducing greater ingenuity and freedom into this amiable Schubertian melody. There can be no doubting the youthful verve of these musicians, and the closing stages to this movement are as fiery and effervescent as you could hope for, if perhaps slightly missing some of the opportunities to drop the dynamic before picking up the intensity once again.

The Op. 66 Trio, dedicated to Louis Spohr, is in C minor, and it was in this key that Mendelssohn first explored the idea of a piano trio while still a young man; it emerged as more of an experiment than an accomplished work, however. As I hinted at earlier, the similarities in approach to the formal construction and sense of dramatic destiny in both the published trios are such that Mendelssohn clearly felt satisfied with what he had achieved in his D minor Trio. The Swiss Trio seems more at ease with the elasticity of this slightly later work, grabbing my attention rather more quickly than in the D minor. I particularly enjoy the Andante espressivo, which has a lovely serenity to it and some delightful coupling from the strings. The Scherzo is very successful too, with sterling work from Staub, whose glycerine fingerwork carries the momentum without any hint of compromise; here too, a better sense of balance and of the leggiero lines emerges, and the sudden switches in temperament are very well thought through.

My impression of the playing, and indeed of the recording as a whole, grew quite significantly during my survey of this disc. I would very much like to hear these players in the flesh, where I am sure they are capable of even greater vitality and communication.