



Eduard Franck: Piano Trios II

aud 97.690

EAN: 4022143976901



American Record Guide (Gil French - 2014.09.01)

Audite is doing a great service by bringing us another album (the 10th) devoted to the music of little-known German composer Eduard Franck (1817–93). I gave a strong thumbs up to their recording of Trios (Sept/Oct 2009). Here the Swiss Piano Trio, now in their 10th season, give superb performances to the early Trio in E (1835) plus Op 22 (1859) and 53 (1886). The first and last are world premieres.

These three works cover most of Franck's life as a composer. True, the early work is not profound and sounds more like early Mendelssohn (his teacher), yet it's very satisfying musically. Even at the age of 18, Franck really had a feel for making each of the instruments interesting as they intertwine.

While Franck's writing is certainly more mature in the two later trios, his overall style did not change much in 51 years. While he writes splendid sonata-allegro movements, his development sections are less contrapuntal than imitative, each instrument repeating or modulating what another has just played. Perhaps this is one reason why his music is not convoluted like Brahms's can be; Franck's textures are always transparent, which is such a delight because my ears were consistently tuned to each instrument. No one plays mere filler for more than four measures; I was constantly held in a state of anticipation.

Also, all three works are in major keys, another reason this music is so consistently sunny. In Opus 22 the Scherzo is as inventive and fresh as Schubert or Mendelssohn at their best, especially given the bright, light, upbeat, and uplifted phrasing of violinist Angela Golubeva, cellist Sebastien Singer, and pianist Martin Lucas Staub. They also make the Andante con Moto most soulful and the final Allegro Molto Vivace absolutely foot-tapping. All of these qualities are typical of their playing in all three works.

In Opus 53, as in the others, the players' wonderful grasp of form translates into joyous forward motion that can still linger at certain points without impeding the progress. They also give full voice to Franck's splendid gift for melody and lyricism. Also, they adapt their style to each movement: the waltz-scherzo-like II, the tender Andante, and the fleet final Allegro con Fuoco. In all works, I must admit that, while I'm normally critical of players who have little tone color, it's a "failure" I forgive here because of their extremely wide palette of expression, especially their manner of shaping phrases.

The only other limitation here is the engineering. Balances are superb, including the piano's full range from firm bass to treble. But the ambience is what happens all too often when ensembles like this are recorded in a church (Temple du Bas in Neuchatel, Switzerland). A kind of hollow aura results, leaving the players somewhat distant. I wish they sounded a degree more present so that the violin wasn't so

consistently thin and the ensemble as a whole without a rich dramatic depth. Franck's music has it, and I'm sure the players themselves do. I love the album; I just wish that the full experience weren't locked behind a pastel curtain.



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