Piano Trios by Rachmaninov (Trio élégiaque, No. 1) & Tchaikovsky (Op. 50)

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubbins - 2015.03.26)

My first encounter with the Trio Testore was fairly recent. In 37:2, I reviewed the group's two-disc set of Brahms's piano trios and hated it for all the expressive conceits, slowish tempos, and rhythmic instability. Richard Kaplan, on the other hand, who reviewed the set in the same issue, loved it. In fact, he loved it so much that he put it at the top of his 2013 Want List.

Sometimes I wonder what readers must make of these diametrically opposing views. It's like the philosophical paradox of the card that reads on one side, "The statement on the other side of this card is true," and on the flip side, "The statement on the other side of this card is false." I think in such situations what it comes down to is not so much about the specifics of what each reviewer says, as it is about which reviewer the reader tends to personally like and trust more. Obviously, Kaplan and I hear Brahms differently.

The heart-on-sleeve emotionalism of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff is perhaps more tolerant of the Trio Testore's inclination towards Romantic effusiveness and excess, but, as with the group's Brahms, the players take considerable liberties with the score as they push and pull tempos about, stretch notes for expressive effect, pour on portamento—even between adjacent notes, with little regard for how cloying it can be—and most troubling of all, rewrite the printed notes to suit their own purposes.

It was quite shocking, for example, to hear and see what violinist Franziska Pietsch does in measure eight of the Tchaikovsky. In the second half of the bar, the composer wrote the notes E, F, E, D, E, all in one beat, in a rhythm of a 16th note, two 32nd notes, and two 16th notes. When played as notated, it's a written-out, in rhythm, turn: da-deedle-ah-da. But Ms. Pietsch knows better. Instead, she plays D, C, D, E, and evens out the rhythm to sound like basically four 16th notes: da-da-da-da. The pity of it is that she is either blithely or willfully ignorant of the fact that four bars earlier, starting on a B in the tenor clef, the cello has exactly the same note and rhythmic pattern Tchaikovsky wrote for the violin. And by the way, cellist Han-Christian Schweiker plays it correctly as written. Does Pietsch not understand that her part is supposed to echo the cello?

It's that sort of playing fast and loose with the score that really turns me off to Trio Testore. It's what I heard in the ensemble's Brahms and, taken to even further extremes, it's what I hear in these Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff readings. I would invite colleague Kaplan to listen to these performances while following the scores, and tell me if this release doesn't alter his earlier opinion of the Trio Testore.

For this same coupling of works, I'd recommend the Kempf Trio on BIS for

performances that deliver plenty of Russian brooding and emotional intensity, while managing to preserve the composers' integrity and the musicians' self-respect.

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