Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Complete String Trios

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Mozart was admitted as an apprentice mason to the lodge known as Zur Wohltätigkeit (Beneficence) in December 1784; within months he would achieve the most senior rank of master mason and over subsequent years he would embrace his new status with sufficient zeal to produce a heap of music for the organisation. Freemasonry is of course ultimately a brotherhood and Mozart was never too shy to exploit its benefits when he encountered his well-documented financial problems in his latter years. A key figure in the lodge at the time was the textile merchant Michael Puchberg (1741-1822); Mozart's friendship with him was both timely and convenient as his fiscal situation worsened. His requests for loans from Puchberg at this time increased in both frequency and desperation. It is revealing then that the Divertimento in E flat, K 563 was written for the individual who effectively financed its composition. In comparison to many of Mozart's late masterpieces it is little known; it's designation as a String Trio (as opposed to a Quartet) may have proved a hindrance in this regard as may its 'heavenly length' – at 45 minutes its dimensions far exceed any other chamber work he composed. Nor should the appellation Divertimento lull the unsuspecting listener into assuming it is all as light as air. Of its six movements the two Minuets (movements 3 and 5) might fit that bill but the outer Allegros incorporate unexpected changes of mood while the second movement Adagio is surely as perfect and profound as any other single span of Mozart's chamber music.

The more familiar the Divertimento becomes the more it seems to creep up on one. It is neither recorded nor played especially frequently (Amazon lists 13 recordings although I suspect others are available as part of 'complete works' packages) but then it is a trio, and as such tends to be of interest to either scratch groups of star soloists or ensembles dedicated to the form, and they aren't exactly thick on the ground. I seem to recall I received the Hyperion recording by the Leopold Trio (review) as a fortieth birthday gift what seems like aeons ago – I wasn't a great Mozartean at the time and it gathered dust on my shelves for a good few years before a broadcast during a BBC lunchtime concert prompted me to give it a spin. I was soon hooked by both the piece and the marvellous recording (it was The Times 'Disc of the Year' in 2002) and have never felt the need to find an alternative.

Enter the Jacques Thibaud String Trio; their spirited yet extremely musical account has distinctive qualities and certainly dragged me out of my comfort zone. I'm familiar with a couple of their previous Audite discs of twentieth century fare (invigorating Milhaud and Martinu - review, and a collection of Reger, Dohnanyi, Kodaly topped by the magnificent, underappreciated trio by Jean Cras on AUDITE 97534) and their

open-hearted, vivacious playing on those issues is present here in spades. In my experience the Audite engineers typically strive for a sound picture which leaves little to the imagination, a vivid, close-up image which in many cases approaches what one might hear in a live recital sitting close to the stage. It is an approach which can pay thrilling dividends (eg in the outstanding Mendelssohn cycle by the Mandelring Quartet (review) and in many of the Quartetto di Cremona's fine Beethoven Quartet recordings). In terms of the present issue my initial impression on hearing the opening bars of the Divertimento's initial Allegro was that the alpine freshness comes at the expense of domestic intimacy, especially compared to the Hyperion disc. But it's extraordinary how quickly the ear adjusts and one settles back to enjoy the Thibauds' scintillating, characterful playing. The beating heart of the work surely lies in the great second movement Adagio; I was aghast to find the Thibauds' clip three and a half minutes off the Leopold's timing for this panel – it certainly doesn't feel too fast. In terms of comparing the two performances I suspect listeners' preferences are more likely to be determined by the very different sonics – the exquisitely realised chamber mood of the Hyperion or the concert hall precision of the Thibauds. The latter are wonderfully lithe and mobile in the two Minuet movements whilst they find elegance and wit aplenty in the delicate intricacies of the theme and variations of the Andante that separates them. Their Allegro finale is robust and refreshing. If Mozart's solo writing is unusually virtuosic for a string trio (as the booklet suggests) the Thibauds' approach utterly eschews unnecessary showiness but retains a level of compulsive excitement. I was certainly glad to have made the acquaintance of this new reading of the Divertimento – although it is unlikely to displace the Leopold Trio's account in my affection it offers a valid, bracing alternative. Perhaps one that's better suited to the quality speakers in the living room, enabling the connoisseur to reserve the Leopold disc for cold winter West Pennine nights under the duvet with a decent pair of headphones and a tot of Jura.

The disc is entitled, rather grandly, Mozart's 'Complete String Trios'; in fact the coupling consists of five (out of a set of six) Adagios and Fugues K404a. These were among the fruits of Mozart's intensive study of Johann Sebastian Bach's fugues, investigations he conducted with his friend (another patron) Baron Gottfried von Swieten early in 1782. The first three feature Adagios of Mozart's own devising, while the fourth and fifth Adagios and all five of the Fugues are basically three-part arrangements of Bach's own music. Unsurprisingly the latter are drawn from the '48' and 'The Art of Fugue'. (A sixth Adagio and Fugue after Wihelm Friedemann Bach is available from Audite as a free download, together with an Allegro string trio fragment in G minor, identified as K 562e; I haven't as yet listened to these). Whilst these pairings are far from insubstantial, they are but chippings from the master's workshop in comparison with the mighty Divertimento; having said that they are perfectly satisfying in their own right and superbly played and recorded, an apt homage from one great master to another.

Norbert Hornig has contributed a most informative note for this issue which has been neatly translated. It completes a most generously filled issue replete with distinguished playing and sound.

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Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791)
Complete String Trios
Divertimento in E flat major for string trio, K 563 (1788)
[44:30]
MOZART/Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)
Adagios and Fugues Nos 1-5 for string trio, K 404a (1782)
[37:30]
rec. 2020, Traumton Studio, Berlin
AUDITE 97.773 [82:00]

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Richard Hanlon