Eduard Franck: Piano Trios

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Now here's the perfect gift for chamber music fans who have everything: the only available recording of two superbly performed and engineered piano trios written in standard 19th-century four-movement form by little-known German composer Eduard Franck (1817-93). Trio 1 in E minor (Opus 11) is a bit thin in the first movement: rather than using counterpoint, all too often one instrument merely repeats what another has just played. But in the Adagio Franck exhibits his lovely gift for melody, and the Scherzo with trio has the infectiousness of Schubert and Schumann. By IV I caught myself foot-tapping and swaying in this fiddler's mini-feast.

By the time Franck wrote Trio 4 in D (Opus 58) his melodic phrases had become more long-lined, his harmonic progressions more imaginative and affecting, and his development of ideas less imitative and more expansive. The first movement is highly engaging, the Scherzo playful, the Andante a Schubertian "walking" tune, and IV a folk-inspired, Schumannesque, really clever finale. I was completely engrossed from beginning to end. And what players these are, each superb in his or her own right: Edinger is never on autopilot, lyrical but never dominating. Claret understands how his cello line functions harmonically and melodically. And Hellwig can make even low bass chords and lines transparent and buoyant. But it is as an ensemble they absolutely excel, shaping phrases with sensitivity and deep expression as they balance Franck's cleverly woven lines. They turn playfulness into buoyancy, and their grasp of harmonic movement keeps the flow forward-looking yet without any impetuousness. These players are not sensationalists by any means. Their approach is as modest as the

engineering, which serves up an utterly natural, integrated, concert-hall palette without any exaggerated effects. Both players and producers are at the full service of Eduard Franck— sounds like a cliche, but this is one instance where it's true.