



Ludwig van Beethoven: String Trios Op. 9

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[American Record Guide](#) (Jason Sundram - 01.01.2005)

No American new recording by the old master and his pals. The Jacques Thibaud String Trio is a Berlin ensemble that chose its namesake for his dedication to chamber music. The Thibauds perform all their concerts without a score; the liner notes explain that this is because it "facilitates spontaneous communication". I don't know if they recorded this without looking at the score, but their playing does have a nice intimacy to it.

Beethoven wrote five string trios in the 1790s: Opus 3, the three of Opus 9, and a transcription of the Opus 87 trio for two oboes and English horn. After he started writing quartets, he abandoned this territory. Some of the material here prefigures the quartets; this is especially true in Trio 3, one of his earliest works in C minor. The C-minor speaks with more of Beethoven's mature voice than the other two trios. Though not Beethoven's most serious music, these trios are not mere trifles (take a look at the playing time!). But they are very enjoyable pieces, and the Thibauds sound like they are enjoying themselves.

The program opens with a big G-major chord, and for a moment I was sure I had put the wrong disc in because it sounded like a string orchestra. Seconds later, the ensemble quieted to a piano and began to sound like a string trio.

The Thibauds have given us some very playful Beethoven: it's hard not to envision games of cat-and-mouse when listening. That's not to say their playing is cartoonish. It's not. The theatricality in their playing comes from their attention to the small gestures in the music. That they manage to amplify these gestures without exaggerating them or emphasizing them in preference to musical phrasing is a testament to their imagination and skill. But there are some minor intonation problems.

To listen to these early works is to be charmed by them. There are several recordings of the complete trios you might also consider: the Leopold Trio (Hyperion 67253), Grumiaux Trio (Philips 456317), and Perlman-Zukerman-Harrell (EMI 54198). I recommend the first two, but the only mistake you can make is not to listen to these works at all.