



Robert & Clara Schumann: Piano Trios Op. 17, 88, 110

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Formulae, somewhat wearily manipulated ... evidence of the composer's declining powers.' Poor Schumann! His G minor Piano Trio, the third of three, has come in for a lot of stick over the years. Joan Chissell was the doyenne of Schumann commentators in her day, the authoritative author of the book on the composer in the respected Master Musicians series. In those days, critics did not shrink from passing judgement de haut en bas on works they considered sub-standard. Some of the other verdicts one can read, on this same piece, are the reproach that it is too dominated by the middle register of each instrument, and congested as a result in terms of its textures; also that the working out of some of the material is laboured and predictable. That glimpse of a fugue in the finale, for instance.

Maybe there is some truth in all this; one might concede that Op. 110 is not quite the equal of its two fine predecessors, even while echoing their layout and structure in many ways. Something to do with the memorability – or otherwise? – of the melodic material, something to do with a clash between public utterance and private, domestic music-making: the piano trio, that arch-Romantic genre, often seems poised on just this uneasy cusp. Still, the members of the Swiss Piano Trio, who have previously set down Opp. 63 and 80 for the same German label and evidently know and love their Schumann, seem to me to hold the balance nicely: the long opening 'Allegro' is nicely paced, not too fast but with something in reserve for the end, the inner movements (both half the length of the outer) also sure of themselves as character-pieces. The sound – the recording was made in a converted Huguenot church in Neuchâtel, last year – is agreeable, as you would perhaps hear it a few rows back, with the piano in proper perspective, i.e. not too close. Eight pages of comprehensive notes by Wolfgang Rathert offer a comprehensive survey of Schumann's chamber music, concentrating in particular on key-relationships in these trios, and are for the most part deftly translated by Viola Scheffel.

It is when Op. 110 is set against the Op. 88 Phantasiestücke for the same combination that one scratches one's head, again. Despite the high opus number these 'Fantasy Pieces' date in essence from 1842. And though the four pieces certainly don't suggest an organic Trio – the long and lively 'Humoreske' in the middle for a start would upset the balance of the movements – I can't help the entirely subjective feeling that the composer's inspiration was indeed burning rather brighter here. The short opening 'Romanze' and the upbeat march-like finale have that indefinable something that all lovers of this composer will recognize: something to do with energy and uplift, is it, or the arc of the melodies?

By way of further contrast, the Swiss Piano Trio opts to let husband and wife go head to head by putting Clara's sole example of the genre – in the same key as her husband's, be it noted – as the first item on the release. It can certainly stand the

scrutiny and there are plenty of original touches: for instance, the second movement is a scherzo but in the manner of a minuet, and in it, the trio section indulges in some Baroque-style dotted rhythms. The players respect the 'Allegretto' marking of the finale, even while recognizing that it is a vigorous piece, complete with predictable fugato, that benefits from a firm hand on the tiller. Clara's G minor Trio dates from 1846, Robert's from 1851. I sense no rivalry at work, only the desire to write good music. In their own way each succeeded, and it is good to have their vision as nicely represented as it is here.

