



Johannes Brahms: The Complete Piano Trios

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[Fanfare](#) (Richard A. Kaplan - 01.09.2013)

Trio Testore—named for the family of 18th-Century instrument-makers who produced the violin and cello played by members Franziska Pietsch and Hans-Christian Schweiker—makes what I think is the best decision regarding what constitutes the “complete” piano trios of Brahms: they include both versions of op. 8, and skip the dubiously authentic (and insipid) Trio in A that has sometimes been attributed to him.

As I mentioned in a recent review (see *Fanfare* 36:5), the Trio in B Major, op. 8 has a unique history: upon its republication 35 years after the original version was completed, Brahms not so much revised as completely rewrote the piece. What’s more, he allowed the first version to remain in print—surprisingly, given his practice of destroying works that didn’t meet his exacting standards—so we can hear not only his first thoughts, but also exactly where the changes occur in the revision. It makes for a revealing study of an astoundingly disciplined musical mind; not only did he jettison pages of music, but in every case made exactly the right decision regarding what to change and what to allow to remain. The result is that following the sweeping opening theme, which is retained almost unchanged, the entire first movement is new, but in the Scherzo only the coda is altered; the Adagio gets a new middle section and loses a somewhat bizarre departure in mid-reprise; and, the last movement, like the first, is completely rewritten after the opening theme. The 1854 version is valuable not because it is intrinsically as good as the revision—it’s not even close—but because of what the comparison tells us about Brahms’s ability to retain what’s musically compelling and rethink what is not.

A quick personal anecdote, finally, about the B-Major: the first time I heard it live, I was struck by the link between the Scherzo and the Adagio—the high F over low B that ends the former and begins the latter—and was incredulous that I’d never noticed this connection before. Then I realized that this was where you turned over the LP.

To cut to the chase: this set is one of the most beautiful recordings of Brahms chamber music I’ve heard in a long time. After hearing any number of run-of-the-mill readings of various chamber works over the past weeks and months, it was clear as early as the first theme of the B-Major that this was going to be anything but a routine run-through. Phrasings are carefully and lovingly thought-out and intensely expressive; the musicians’ deep commitment shows in their unanimity of conception. In contrast with interpretations that sound as though on autopilot, these readings are consistently eventful without being arbitrary. Only the habit of slowing at cadences took some getting used to, but this helps the listener hear the musical structure. The balances between the strings and pianist Hyun-Jung Kim-Schweiker are perfect. Ensemble and intonation are spot-on. Exposition repeats in the two versions of op. 8

are taken. As for the recording, on the CD layer it's as lifelike a chamber recording as I've heard; the multi-channel layer adds ambience without taking away from immediacy.

It should by now come as no surprise that this set is going directly onto my Want List. Urgently recommended!

