



Piano Trios by Rachmaninov (Trio élégiaque, No. 1) & Tchaikovsky (Op. 50)

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The notes to many of my Tchaikovsky chamber music discs begin by saying Tchaikovsky was not very interested in chamber music. Well, he may not have written much of it, but what exists is great! In fact, for someone like me, who likes chamber music more than orchestral music, his three quartets and this trio more than do the job when I'm looking for a Tchaikovsky "fix".

Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio was dedicated to the pianist and composer Nikolai Rubinstein. Tchaikovsky had long intended to write something to show Rubinstein's gift for playing with other musicians, but Rubinstein's premature death, which touched Tchaikovsky deeply, meant that he could only compose a work in memory of him.

Both of these readings are excellent. The Cho and Testore Trios both do a fine job with the first movement, bringing tenderness and sensitivity to the work's sad moments, energy to powerful parts. With the Cho the piano sounds thin when playing alone, but the balance is good when the whole ensemble plays.

Most of the work is composed of a Theme and Variations, and it is here that one can point out differences in the two interpretations. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. In the Theme, which opens with a piano solo, the Testore plays with simple sweetness. Cho's piano again sounds thin. Variation I, which gives the melody to the strings, sounds better played by the Cho, and their delivery of variation V is magically toy-like. I like Testore's fugue in variation VIII better than the Cho's, which feels too bogged down. At their best, the Cho Trio sounds really brilliant, but I think they get hung up on details. Both groups play the Finale beautifully. In the end, it's really a toss-up between the two. I enjoy both more than the Moscow Trio (Sept/Oct 2013).

As for the remaining works, Testore includes Rachmaninoff's Trio 1. It is not known to whom, if anyone, the elegy was dedicated, unlike Trio 2, which was dedicated to Tchaikovsky, and was modeled after his trio. The one played here is a very early work, not published until after Rachmaninoff's death. The notes to this release theorize that this work, too, was meant as an homage to Tchaikovsky, and points out several clear stylistic references. Whether or not this is true, it sounds very Russian, if not very much like mature Rachmaninoff. The Testore give it a very Russian interpretation, romantic and (after the gentle beginning) muscular.

I was extremely impressed with the other works offered by the Cho Trio. I've always enjoyed Ax-Ma-Perlman's Mendelssohn trios, but this is every bit as good. From its ghostly opening and moments of sublime lyricism to its many intense episodes, the ensemble displays remarkable expressive range. In III the constantly spinning figures dance and sparkle. Always there is playfulness and bite.

Like their Tchaikovsky, the Cho's Arensky surpasses the Moscow Trio's (included on that 2013 release). I was delighted by the humor and inventiveness of the work, especially the quirkiness of II. Cho's delivery is stunning! The passagework in the piano is brilliant. I even enjoyed their reading of Shostakovich's Trio 2, a work I don't

care for, simply for their variety of color. If you like Shostakovich, you'll like this performance.

