




Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano Trio - Vol. 2

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 this is the second volume of a planned five from the Swiss Piano Trio and Audite. The first CD was released at the start of this year, and missed out on a review here. It included the first of the Opus 1 set and the Archduke. The Trio formed in 1998, and has a small but interesting discography for the German label Audite, including a well-received Mendelssohn disc (review) and two discs dedicated to the little-known Eduard Franck.

It was probably inevitable, given the Trio's longevity that they find themselves drawn to recording Beethoven, but they do find themselves in a very large pool with some very big fish. My benchmark is the Florestan Trio (Hyperion CDS44471/4) with Trio Wanderer (Harmonia Mundi HMC902100.3) very close behind. I wrote a comparison of the two earlier in the year (review). There are, of course, many other choices, the most obvious being the Beaux Arts Trio, which garnered most nominations in MWI Recommends for the Archduke Trio. You might also read my comments in the "B" section of my Piano Trio Survey. For the two trios presented here, Arkivmusic lists more than 30 of Op. 1/2 and 60 of the Ghost.

The Ghost trio is considered to be one of the two great works Beethoven wrote for this combination, the Archduke being the other. While this is undoubtedly true, I have a great affection for the second of the Op. 1 set, and find it makes a useful yardstick for judging performances. As an early work, it has a Haydnesque character which the Swiss Piano Trio's rather heavy touch doesn't capture. Their scherzo is too slow, and the joyously playful finale doesn't quite reach the standards of the Florestans and Wanderers. It is an approach closer to that more Romantic one of Ashkenazy, Perlman and Harrell. Perhaps that is your take on this work; if so, you should enjoy this more than I did. Not surprisingly this approach suits the later work more. It is a good performance of the Ghost, though not sufficient to change my preferences, and the Presto finale is still too intense and over-dramatised for me.

The notes are informative, the musical analysis not too academic. It is pleasing to see that Audite is starting to provide their booklets with downloads. The sound quality is a little resonant at high levels, but the sound of each instrument is very good.

This hasn't impressed me sufficiently to seek out the first Volume 1, but if you like your Beethoven trios to be dramatic rather than elegant, then you may well want both volumes. It must be said that five full-priced CDs – they are including the triple concerto – will be rather expensive, when compared to existing "complete" sets.