



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano Trio - Vol. 4

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It might be helpful to make an accounting of where the Swiss Piano Trio stands in its survey in relation to the long-completed Trio Élégiaque's set. First off, let's address the matter of numbering. Not counting either the few pieces of juvenilia he wrote for violin, cello, and piano, or the later works he arranged for piano trio from pieces originally scored for different media, Beethoven composed six distinct piano trios. The first three, composed in 1795 and bearing the collective opus number 1, were Beethoven's first officially published works. Logically, we refer to them as the Piano Trios Nos. 1, 2, and 3. Not so logically, the next two distinct piano trios are No. 5, "Ghost," and No. 6, composed together as a pair in 1808 and published as opp. 70/1 and 70/2. Beethoven would write only one more distinct piano trio, and that would be No. 7, the "Archduke" in 1811, published as op. 97.

Right away, something doesn't add up here. There are only six trios, but they're numbered 1–3 and 5–7. Is there a number 4 and, if so, what happened to it? Well, there is and there isn't. In 1797, Beethoven composed a trio, which he dedicated to the Countess Maria Wilhelmina von Thun, but that work was not scored for violin, cello, and piano. It was scored for clarinet (or violin), cello (or bassoon), and piano, and published the following year as op. 11. Beethoven originally conceived the work for clarinet, but because it could be played as a standard piano trio with violin, and it was the next trio work Beethoven wrote after the first three piano trios, by default it became No. 4. The Swiss Piano Trio gives us this trio in its violin version on the present album. The familiar "Gassenhauer" nickname derives from the variations theme in the finale, "Pria ch'io l'impegno" (Before I go to work) from the *dramma giocoso*, *L'amor marinaro ossia Il corsaro* by Joseph Weigl. It's said that the tune was so popular people would sing or whistle it in Vienna's alleyways and streets—Gassen in German.

The Trio in E♭ Major, op. 38, was too far removed from a standard piano trio in its original instrumentation to be numbered as one of them. It wasn't a matter of simply exchanging one instrument for another of similar range. This transformation required significant surgery, for op. 38 is in fact a reduction and adaptation of Beethoven's



Septet, op. 20, originally scored for clarinet, horn, bassoon, violin, viola, cello, and double bass. There wasn't even a piano part in the original; that had to be derived and fleshed out in idiomatic pianistic writing from the harmonic framework of the piece. Performed as a trio for violin, cello, and piano, as it is here and elsewhere, it's actually one step removed from the original version of the arrangement, for Beethoven retained the clarinet as the lead soprano voice, doing away with the violin altogether and not indicating it as an alternate for the clarinet, as he did in the "Gassenhauer" Trio. The Septet enjoyed such popularity that Beethoven is said to have come to resent that it was held in higher esteem than some of his later works which he considered superior, which begs the question of why he decided to adapt it as a trio. No doubt the answer was money.

To confuse matters a bit, a piano trio by Beethoven in the same key and believed to have been composed in 1790 or 1791 was discovered among his manuscripts following his death. It was published posthumously in 1830, and was subsequently entered into his catalog as WoO 38. So, we have two piano trios, both in E♭ Major, one tagged op. 38—that's this one, the Septet arrangement—the other tagged WoO 38. So far, the Swiss Piano Trio hasn't gotten to any of the WoO numbers, and whether it will or not, I don't know, though the inclusion of the Hess-numbered Allegretto in E♭ Major on this fourth volume would seem to suggest the affirmative.

Trio *Élégiaque*'s set, of course, includes not only the Hess item and the WoO numbers, but also the composer's piano trio adaptations of his Symphony No. 2 and his String Quintet, op. 4, the latter arrangement having its own assigned opus number, 63. The trio version of the String Quintet, however, is actually twice removed from the original work, which was the Octet in E♭ Major, op. 103. The Octet's high opus number reflects its posthumous publication date of 1837; its actual composition date is 1792–93.

Unless and until the Swiss Piano Trio matches the Trio *Élégiaque* for completeness, I will continue to promote the latter on that aspect of its survey. With respect to the performances, however, that preference is beginning to lessen just a bit, and that speaks to how superbly well the Swiss Piano Trio acquits itself in these works. The playing is of a glorious tonal purity and beauty, enhanced by Audite's exquisite recording. Interpretively, the players exercise what strikes me as an intuitively perfect sense of timing in balancing the music's humor against its moments of touching emotional expression. These are really outstanding performances.

At this point, I'd hate to have to choose between the Swiss Piano Trio and the Trio *Élégiaque*, and luckily, I don't have to. You wouldn't go wrong with either of them; however, two factors may sway you in one direction or another. The Trio *Élégiaque*'s five-disc set on Brilliant Classics is selling on ArkivMusic for \$17.99, or approximately \$3.60 per disc, while Audite's releases, not yet available as a boxed set, continue to sell for a pricey \$18.99 per disc. The other factor is that Audite's recordings are available from the label's website, audite.de, as downloads in HD format. The Trio *Élégiaque*'s recordings can also be downloaded from iTunes and Spotify, but not in HD format, as far as I can tell. Those considerations aside, basing my conclusions solely on the performances and the quality of the reviewed download, I have to accord this release my strongest recommendation.

BEETHOVEN Piano Trios: No. 4 in Bb, "Gassenhauer", in Eb, op. 38 (adapted from Septet, op. 20). **Allegretto in Eb, Hess 48 • Swiss Pn Tr • AUDITE 97.695** (Download: 63:20)
 Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

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