



Robert Schumann: Piano Trios Nos 1 & 2 (Op. 63 & 80)

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Fanfare (Steven E. Ritter - 2011.09.01)

Schumann did not start his chamber music efforts in earnest until immediately following the “song” year of 1840, though until that point he had exerted no little effort in the study of the genre, even to the point of hosting six semi-public “quartet mornings” at his home, devoted to the study of music he hoped would be found as worthy successors of Beethoven. The latter, Schumann knew all too well, had reached a point of no return in his exuberant and mystical excursions in territory only hinted at in the briefest manner by lesser lights. Yet Mendelssohn had shown a third way apart from the avant-garde of Beethoven and the classical models of Bach, one that made use of a nascent Romantic classicism, and this idea spurned Schumann to reflect even more intensely on his other old idol, J. S. Bach, for new guidance.

Because of this look back, and no doubt a real and genuine feeling of inferiority in the chamber realm, the Beethovenian extremes are avoided in his chamber music and a new, raw, and laid-bare sense of contrapuntal activity is present in almost all of his work in this area. Even then it did not appear to be enough—Schumann was never to be known for his small-ensemble music during his lifetime. Only in the last century was this music to make a comeback. The Schumann year (2010) brought a renewed interest in this work, though the music had been trending positive for some time before. Now his string quartets and violin sonatas are becoming the standards they should be, along with the Piano Quintet and Quartet, and the miscellaneous short single-instrument and piano character pieces. But it was only after Schumann created these that he decided to turn to the piano trio as a medium.

Clara in a way paved the way. Her effort was more than respectable, and perhaps broke through some creative block that Schumann was harboring toward the form. Couple that with a desire to find a way to broaden her concert repertoire—the Romantics were far more practical in this regard than we give them credit for—and he was ready to spin off three works that occupied him in 1847 (the two on this disc) and 1851 (op. 110).

The music is not easy—it doesn’t grab you the way a lot of his other music does; in fact, I might be one of the few who feels that Brahms’s chamber music doesn’t grab you either, for the most part. Both of these composers have hidden secrets in their chamber music that take a lot of exposure in order to grasp the essence, and both composers said very different things in the chamber realm than in other mediums. This is especially true for Schumann, being a spurt writer, and whose overall message/communicative ability was closely tied in with the musical medium he was involved with at the time. With the piano trios it is first and foremost a condensing of motives and great variance in harmonic interplay. One must revel in the whole instead of simply latching on to a great melody. This is especially true of the First Trio; the Second is more relaxed, so that Clara thought it a work that would

“completely warm and delight my soul from beginning to end.” In fact this Second Trio integrates references to his own song material, and achieves amiability not so obvious in the more terse and intense First.

I am assuming that the Swiss Piano Trio will most likely complete the set in a future Volume 2 (maybe with Clara's included—please?). As it stands, this leaps to the top of my (admittedly short) list of recommended versions of these two pieces. The old standby is the Beaux Arts Trio, maybe not the most perfect Schumann interpreters, but cheap and complete, and really tuned into the idiom, while Eric Le Sage's ongoing series of the composer's piano and chamber music (with Gordan Nicolitch and Christophe Coin) continues to impress me, as evidenced in my review in Fanfare 34:1. The youngish members of the Swiss Piano Trio (founded 1998) are about the age of Schumann when he penned these works, and their approach is one of considerable abandon, at times fiercely digging into the music while never losing either control or tonal luster. I felt as though I was learning a lot about music that I already know so well while listening to this recording, and Audite's fabulous SACD surround sound puts them right in front of you. An essential recording.