



Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio, Op. 50

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Some might argue in favour of his String Quartet No. 1, and others for the string sextet *Souvenir de Florence*. For me, however, Tchaikovsky's most lovable chamber work is his Piano Trio, a work composed during the winter of 1881-82 'in memory of a great artist'. The great artist in question was Nikolai Rubinstein, who had died the previous March in Paris of tuberculosis. It was Rubinstein, of course, who savaged Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 when the composer played it for him late in 1874, causing a major falling out between the two. Tchaikovsky apparently forgave him, although it would be difficult to say that he forgot.

Another factor which might make the Piano Trio an unlikely work, in some ways, was the composer's antipathy for this combination of instruments. The booklet note quotes his letter to Nadezhda von Meck in which he claimed that it was 'an agony' for him to hear a piano trio, owing to the perceived 'artificiality' of balancing two string instruments against a piano. 'I had to impart a bit of violence on myself', he later wrote, 'in order to become used to an ensemble of instruments which my ears dislike.' I abhor violence, yet I am glad that Tchaikovsky was able to effect this change in his perception!

The Piano Trio has been lucky on disc. Two approaches have been taken to recording it. One is to assemble a great pianist, a great violinist and a great cellist, whether or not they have performed together extensively, and let them at it. The most famous example of this is the so-called 'Million Dollar Trio' of Arthur Rubinstein, Jascha Heifetz and Gregor Piatigorsky. This is an ensemble that looks great on paper, and the performance has many fine moments, although most of those moments are not the result of interaction between the musicians. Boris Berezovsky, Vadim Repin and Dmitry Yablonsky are more successful because they are more like-minded, and their reading throbs with a dark passion.

The other and more obvious approach is the one taken here – that is, to have an established piano trio play the work. The Swiss Piano Trio was formed in 1998, won major chamber music awards in 2003 and 2005, and has made several recordings, including Mendelssohn and Schumann SACDs for Audite (reviewed in May and July / August 2011). This ensemble received 'important artistic impulses' (the booklet's phrase, not mine!) from the granddaddy of all modern-day string trios, the Beaux Arts Trio, whose members were no strangers to this work. (Their 1970 recording, in many ways a keeper, unfortunately is disqualified by the decision to omit Variation VIII (Fuga) in the second movement.)

I know it will seem like damning with faint praise, but the present disc will probably appeal most to those who want to have Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio on a fine-sounding, well-balanced SACD. (It is not quite the only SACD of this work, but I have not heard

the competition.) This is a goodish reading in which nothing goes terribly wrong, but not enough goes terrifically right to make it memorable. There's undeniable rapport among the three musicians and no sense of grandstanding. The work is played with dignity, although one could argue that some of its great moments are almost thrown away. I'm thinking of the moment near the end of the second movement when Tchaikovsky brings back the opening theme of the first. This can be devastating, but the Swiss Piano Trio remains dry-eyed. The closing funeral march can leave the listener feeling empty inside, much like the end of the Sixth Symphony, but again the musicians retreat from the cliff's edge. If you want to be wrecked by this music (and most of the time I do), the aforementioned Erato disc is the way to go.

I have some other reservations. At just over 50 minutes, this is quite a slow reading. The Erato performance is a full ten minutes faster, and the 'Million Dollar Trio' is just a tad slower than that. On this disc, some of the tempos drag. For example, the statement of the second movement's theme is marked *Andante con moto*, but *con moto* appears to have disappeared from the Swiss musicians' scores! Also, there's some wooden phrasing and a lack of general flexibility that make the music seem not only less dramatic but also less charming. Again, this could still be enjoyable in a concert hall, but not over and over again. I will keep this disc, but mostly because I am fixated on Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio!