



Johannes Brahms: The Complete Piano Trios

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RECORD REVIEW

It's good to have two new sets of the Brahms Piano Trios, and though both are described as 'The Complete Piano Trios', the contents of each one is different. The Trio Testore set includes the early and the revised versions of the B major Trio, Op. 8, along with the two other trios for piano, violin and cello. The Smetana Trio includes only the revision of Op. 8, but its Supraphon set adds the trios with horn and clarinet. Only one recent set know brings all of these together: the Gould Piano Trio includes both versions of Op. 8, the Trios, Opp. 87 and 101 and the Horn and Clarinet Trios; it even adds the spurious (but beautiful) A major Piano Trio in an invaluable box of three discs.

Let me try to summarize the qualities of the two new sets. The first thing to say about the Trio Testore set is that it has been exceptionally well recorded by Audite: a really natural sound caught in an ideal acoustic. But while this ensemble's collective sonority is often beautiful, there is a tendency to micro-manage the expressiveness of the music: this is highly nuanced playing and, while flexibility is certainly an admirable trait in Brahms performances, I find these players prone to over-shape phrases: they are apparently reluctant to let the music speak for itself. The Trio Testore is also inclined to take its time in places: the first movement of the B major Trio – especially in its original version – is arguably a little too expansive for its own good in this performance. Having said that, there is much to enjoy in the playing: it's heartfelt, sophisticated, affectionate and polished. The snag – to my ears at least – is that it all feels a little too self-conscious, and this can rob the music of some of its tensile strength in, for example, the first movement of the C major Trio. Collectors looking for new recordings of these works might respond more positively than I did to the Trio Testore's elegantly sculpted approach, so I'd certainly suggest having a listen: this is an imaginative ensemble captured in superb sound.

The Smetana Trio is a different matter. This is a very fine set marked by passionate, big-hearted and exciting playing. It has none of what – to me – is the rather fussy overexpressiveness of the Trio Testore, but it is red-blooded and eloquent. Among other things, I like the quite swift 'Andante con moto' second movement of the C major Trio (more than a minute quicker than the Trio Testore and a little swifter than the Goulds) and all the way through I greatly enjoyed the controlled energy and warmth of these performances. I know I'll return to them many times in the future: these players have a wonderful sense of musical line and a collective sense of musical direction that is powerful and engrossing.

So is either of these new releases a Brahms trio cycle to own? While I've my doubts about the Trio Testore, I'd say a most definite 'yes' in the case of the Smetana Trio: there is spontaneous engagement with the music and such a heroic sweep to the playing. Moreover, the clarinet and horn soloists are extremely fine as well (Ludmila

Peterková's clarinet playing in the Op. 114 Trio is absolutely magical), and all five performances are of very high quality. The recording is a little boxy compared with Audite's sound but it's eminently acceptable and the musical rewards are compelling.

The Smetana Trio is thus at or near the top of my short-list of relatively recent recordings of these glorious works, but so, too, are the discs by the Gould Piano Trio – available in a three-disc set at a special price that includes both incarnations of Op. 8 and the A major Trio as well as all the works in the Supraphon set. Comparing the performances of these two ensembles makes me very glad to have both: the Smetana Trio is sometimes more muscular, a little more grainy and – unsurprisingly – more Central European in its approach, while the Goulds have a transparency and liveness that are vastly appealing. I've not discussed classic accounts by the likes of the Beaux Arts Trio (Decca), the Stern-Rose-Istomin Trio (Sony) or the Trio di Trieste (DG), all of which belong in a comprehensive collection of Brahms chamber music on record. So, too, do the younger generation of Brahmsians, now so impressively represented by the Gould Piano Trio and the Smetana Trio.