



Johannes Brahms: The Complete Piano Trios

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This release of the Brahms piano trios is enhanced by the inclusion of both versions of his Opus 8, a great work that (along with the Schubert B-flat) I would nominate as Best Trio Ever. It was an early work (1854, when the composer was 21), but he revised it late in life (1889), basically by tightening it up and shortening it by about 11 minutes. We know Brahms was almost annoyingly self-critical, destroying sketches and works that didn't meet his standard, and this is the best example we have of Brahms the self-editor. The thematic material is pretty much the same, but if you know the later version, you will hear in the earlier version lots of different solutions (and a number of digressions that Brahms later removed). As I wrote some years back, I don't think anyone would listen to the two and feel the earlier version was stronger. On the other hand, weak Brahms is still better than pretty much anyone else, so the piece and the comparison are fascinating.

The Trio Testore gets its name from the family of violin makers. The violin here was made by Carlo Antonio Testore in 1751, the cello by Carlo Giuseppe Testore in 1711. The group's violinist, Franziska Pietsch was most recently concertmaster of the Luxembourg Philharmonic, and both pianist Hyun-Jung Kim-Schweiker and cellist Hans-Christian Schweiker teach at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz in Cologne; the group was founded in 2000.

From the first phrase of the Opus 8 I had a pretty good idea of what was coming. The theme, played by piano, is rendered with lots of subtle shadings and tugs at the rhythm, so I expected a warm, romantic reading. This approach is fine by me so long as the attention to little details does not sound episodic and thus obscure the big picture. And the music does not get caught up in sight-seeing; it has enough muscle and backbone to keep the movements coherent and interesting. I did notice on occasion, though, that while pianist Kim-Schweiker and cellist Schweiker seemed on the same expressive page, violinist Pietsch sometimes played in a less inflected style. At any rate this is very fine playing.

The last trio (C minor, Opus 101) has lots of fire and excitement, as does the scherzo from the second trio (C major, Opus 87). The slow movement from Opus 8, one of the loveliest in all of Brahms, is beautifully done, but I would appreciate a more sympathetic violinist in a few spots.

Bottom line? In recent years I've been drawn back to the Borodin Trio: deliberate tempos, depth and complexity in their interpretations. The Trio Testore is more flowing and a little less dark in sound. I guess I like the Testore a bit better, and the inclusion of the early Opus 8 makes this a winner.