



Johannes Brahms: The Complete Piano Trios

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[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 2013.10.17)

I've wasted too much ink in these pages trashing the original 1854 version of Brahms's B-Major Trio to go on about it again. I'm just relieved that the Trio Testore's decision to include it didn't come at the expense of excluding the revised final version, something that one or two other ensembles, inconceivably, have done, though I can't tell you which ones they were because those recordings met with a horribly disfiguring, unnatural demise. The Testore might have been better advised, however, to include the Piano Trio in A Major attributed to Brahms instead; it may not be authentic, but it makes for a better listen than the first version of the B-Major Trio.

This entry will be brief because the Brahms piano trios are very well represented on disc, and they've been exhaustively covered in numerous past reviews. The Trio Testore is new to me and nearly so, it seems, to records, though a single-disc Audite album, containing a performance of Shostakovich's E-Minor Trio, op. 67, plus what is assumed to be the same performance of Brahms's Piano Trio No. 2 that's included in this two-disc set, is available as a download only.

So, being unfamiliar with the group, naturally, I checked out its official website. How's this for publicity hype? At least since the publication of the complete recording of piano trios by Brahms (SACD Audite), which caused a sensation around the world, the TRIO TESTORE, known for the intensity and originality of its interpretations, has become a household name in the music world. Why yes, the ensemble's Brahms trios made international headlines, Twitter was all a-tweet, and just yesterday the Trio Testore was the topic of conversation around countless dinner tables.

Despite the Italian name it has taken for itself after the Testore family of 18th-century string instrument makers the Trio Testore is of German pedigree. Violinist Franziska Pietsch hails from Berlin, studied with the famed Dorothy DeLay in New York, won a number of competitions, and has soloed with several renowned orchestras and conductors. She plays a 1751 Carlo Antonio Testore violin. Cellist Hans-Christian Schweiker currently calls Cologne home, has partnered with members of the Amadeus Quartet, and has concertized widely throughout Europe. He plays a 1711 Carlo Giuseppe Testore cello. The instruments are set up and strung to modern standards. Pianist Hyun-Jung Kim-Schweiker, presumably Hans-Christian's wife, made her debut at 13 with the Royal Philharmonic of Pusan, then traveled to Germany, where she studied at the Cologne University of Music, and has since made an international career for herself.

I really wanted to love these performances, especially since this is the first and only complete survey of the Brahms trios I know of on SACD. The Storioni Trio of Amsterdam recorded the first and second trios for PentaTone, but thus far hasn't followed through with the third.

Unfortunately, the Trio Testore's interpretive approach left me feeling queasy. Great swells on notes, no doubt meant to dramatize their emotional significance, are followed by sudden ebbs, lending a feeling of waves rising and falling. Complementing the dynamic crests and troughs are the rhythmic surging and slackening that expand and contract the shapes of the phrases. Tempos are consistently on the slow side, and violinist Pietsch is of a mind that the shortest distance between two notes is a portamento. All of this, I'm sure, is carried out with the best of intentions; Brahms, after all, can't be trusted to express his true emotions without serious intervention, not to mention a good deal of slippery slithering and sliding around.

If you judge the Trio Testore strictly on the merits of its technical execution, no criticism can be lodged. But there's more to performing music than playing the notes in tune. I wouldn't go quite so far as to say about the Trio Testore something I once...

