



Piano Trios by Rachmaninov (Trio élégiaque, No. 1) & Tchaikovsky (Op. 50)

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The Tchaikovsky Piano Trio must be the most operatically effusive chamber work ever written. Its commanding piano part perfectly suits an outsize personality like Martha Argerich, who has recorded it magnificently (DG). You expect a claque in the balcony to explode with bravas. On the same label another world-striding pianist, Lang Lang, delivers a panoramic performance, and in both cases the celebrated violinist (Gideon Kremer, Vadim Repin) and cellist (Mischa Maisky times two) hardly needed to sneak off to a trainer for steroids, either. These are readings on the grand Romantic scale that the Tchaikovsky Trio demands.

In the spirit of the mouse that roared, the modestly celebrated Trio Testore, a German ensemble founded in 2000, presents the score just as grandly, daring any challengers. Pianist Hyun-Jung Kim-Schweiker has a sweeping technique and takes the lead role with as much personality as anyone I've ever encountered. Violinist Franziska Pietsch and cellist Hans-Christian Schweiker (the pianist's husband) play two beautifully matched 18th-century instruments made by the Testore family of Milan, hence the trio's name. These musicians are comfortable in emotional shades of purple, and the result is a top-flight reading.

This is all the more so because Audite's SACD sound, even when heard in two-channel stereo, is remarkably full, clear, and detailed. We are sitting inches away from the performers, and the balance is lifelike in every respect. The interpretation proceeds at first in broad gestures, but when we get to the work's second half, with its luscious theme and 12 variations, Trio Testore characterizes each section quite individually—the Tempo di valse of Variation 6 trips as light-heartedly as the Fuga of Variation 8 toils away earnestly and the Andante febrile of Variation 9 intimately sighs for lost love. Rachmaninoff's precocious Trio élégiaque, which the 19-year-old wrote over four days in January 1892, is couched in his signature mood of voluptuous mourning. It makes for a lovely if not very original filler. In all, a delightful disc that inspires me to hear the Trio Testore's highly praised debut recording of the Brahms piano trios. They also head a spring festival in the west of Germany in Alsdorf, a once grim coal mining town now given over to the muses.