



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano Trio - Vol. 3

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Fanfare (Jerry Dubins - 1970.01.01)

I'm not sure what happened to Volume II in the Swiss Piano Trio's ongoing Beethoven cycle, but in 39:1 I gave high marks to the ensemble's Volume I, and here is Volume III. Volume II does exist. It was released a year ago and contained the G-Major Trio, op. 1/2, and the "Ghost" Trio, op. 70/1; but I know I didn't receive it, and it doesn't look like any of my colleagues did either. Be that as it may, I've received other Swiss Piano Trios releases that have come to me for review—namely Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Eduard Franck—and have had high praise for all of them. That continues to be the case with this new release.

In keeping to its commitment to record Beethoven's complete works for violin, cello, and piano—as have the Trio Élégiacque and others—the Swiss Piano Trio here includes one of the composer's early, offbeat works, the Variations on an Original Theme, op. 44. The advanced opus number reflects the date of publication by Franz Hoffmeister in 1804, a dozen years after the piece is believed to have been written in 1792. If the theme is "original" (questionable to begin with), little else about the score is.

Beethoven borrowed heavily from Carl von Dittersdorf's opera Das rote Käppchen (The Little Red Cap). Nonetheless, as Richard Rodda wrote, "Beethoven worked 14 conventional variations and a coda into this lean material, allowing all three instruments leading moments and eliciting some deeper emotions with two minor-key episodes. It's an example of Beethoven spinning gold, or at least silver, from humble materials." Beethoven's first works to receive official publication, his op. 1, was a set of three piano trios in 1795, but it's known that they were first performed in the house of Prince Lichnowsky, their dedicatee, in 1793, which means they had to be composed around the same time as the foregoing variations. Third in the set, the C-Minor Trio already exhibits the emotional intensity and angst that so shocked his early Viennese audiences and that catapulted his music from polite drawing-room society into the public arena.

Some 16 years later, in 1808, Beethoven set about composing another two piano trios, this time published as a pair under the opus number 70. It's rather amazing to think about the works Beethoven turned out in those intervening years, not just the number of them, but the import of those works to music history—six of his nine symphonies, all of his early and middle string quartets, 23 of his 32 piano sonatas, all but the last of his concertos, and the list goes on. But the second of Beethoven's two op. 70 Piano Trios, not unlike several of his other works, not to mention works by other composers as well, has been relegated to a lower status simply due to its proximity to another like work made popular by a nickname. Op. 70/1, dubbed the "Ghost," enjoys greater recognition because of its nickname.

Personally, I've always found its nameless companion, op. 70/2, included on the present release, the more interesting of the two works. For one thing, Beethoven devotes the first half of the development section to exploring the first movement's second theme, unusual enough in itself, but what he does with it is truly breathtaking, as he passes phrases back and forth between the instruments while modulating through a number of keys. Then midway through, there's a false recapitulation that fools you into thinking the reprise has arrived when, in fact, the development still hasn't run its course. The following Allegretto is one of those enigmatic scherzo-like movements that begins almost flippantly and then turns suddenly militant and menacing. Is it a joke? What does it mean? The third movement, another Allegretto, this time *ma non troppo*, is perhaps the most beautiful movement of all; if not that, then surely it points to those moments in Beethoven's late piano sonatas and string quartets in which he achieves a sense of ecstatic expectancy and quiet rapture in phrases that seem strangely incomplete, yet searching for fulfillment. The principal theme of this Allegretto poses the same sense of yearning for some resolution that Beethoven never gives us, as he repeats the melody over and over again. The finale is an explosion of pure unbridled joy that wants to break the bonds of the instruments that constraint it.

With this latest release by the Swiss Piano Trio I'm prepared to double down, even triple down on every admiring and praiseworthy thing I've said about this ensemble. For some time now, I've been extolling the virtues of the Trio Élégiacque's Beethoven piano trio cycle, and I'm not about to change my mind about it, but I will say that the Swiss Piano Trio's cycle is shaping up to be every bit as superb. These are exceptionally gifted players who perform with unerring technical perfection and instinctive musical intelligence that never misjudges the significance of a single note. Very, very strongly recommended.