Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano Trio - Vol. 4

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American Record Guide

When it comes to Beethoven's trios, there is no short age of recordings, so when a new one comes along it's impossible not to ask what this one will add to the long history—in the case of the Swiss Piano Trio, quite a lot.

The energy level here is high, and though it seems trite to say it, these musicians apparently like performing together. Furthermore, they share their vision of Beethoven; in this instance, they are delving into the classical era incarnation of the man who would only later become the archetypal romantic composer. Much as I like the late quartets, I favor the early Beethoven.

The trio's biggest asset is undoubtedly pianist Martin Lucas Smith, who sometimes calls to mind Glenn Gould, in that he is thinking as he is playing, sculpting his notes rather than getting carried away with the opportunity for bombast. Much like Gould, Smith softens or restrains his piano sound sometimes, so that it resembles a fortepiano; but unlike Gould, Smith does not overshadow his collaborators.

Sounding newly minted, Op. 11 is lovely here, as is the brief Allegretto (Hess 48). The real surprise for me was the septet. While I realize that it is the gold standard of its kind, I have never much admired Beethoven's Septet, which always felt too long and uneventful. I had never heard his later adaptation of the piece for piano trio. Beethoven wasn't one to waste his time, so even the fact that he made the transcription (and gave it an opus number) testifies to his regard for both the original composition and the resulting trio.

This is quite simply a masterclass in chamber music performance. Many ensembles omit this piece from their "Complete Trios" recordings, but I can't imagine why. This isn't a novelty or transcription by some aficionado 50 years later; this is a very special example of Beethoven's genius for grasping all the possibilities of his music. Now I will have to go in search of the Swiss Piano Trio's other Beethoven recordings (J/A 2015, S/O 2016). They are likely just as essential as this one.

BEETHOVEN: *Trios, opp 11+38*
Swiss Piano Trio—Audite 97695—63 minutes

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