Eduard Franck: Piano Trios

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Fanfare (Michael Cameron - 2009.11.01)

No, this is not Cesar Franck, nor even a relative, nor, unfortunately, is his music nearly as effective as that of the French master. This disc of two piano trios is presumably a reasonably representative sample, since what little fame he achieved was in the genre of chamber music. Apt parallels are with the German chamber-music titans of the early and middle 19th century. These trios feature melodies that are pleasant, if somewhat four-square and predictable, and his harmonic palette is rather tame and pedantic. Occasionally, the melodic content aims higher, such as in the principal tune in the slow movement of the E-Minor Trio. Unfortunately an oddly pedestrian piano accompaniment dulls its effect. The Scherzo of the same trio is one of stronger movements, with a simple but effective ascending melodic trajectory that bears some kinship with Mendelssohn, a contemporary and mentor. A rare moment of genuine novelty occurs in the opening of the finale, which consists of an extended passage of unaccompanied violin, an unusual texture indeed in a trio.

In the D-Major Trio, the influences shift to Schumann and perhaps early Brahms. Harmonies are bit more advanced, yet still conservative for the era during which he composed. Melodies are more compact than in the earlier trio, and phrase lengths a measure less predictable. The slow movement has a moment or two of harmonic daring, but there is no follow-through that allows them dramatic weight. Again, the melodies are attractive but adorned with strangely dreary piano accompaniment. The frolicsome last movement bears the imprint of some of Brahms's rustic finales.

While there are many passages that are mildly effective, the trios as a whole are hampered by excessive length, a trait he perhaps borrowed from Schubert but could not manage nearly as well. Even in a first hearing, the ear is aware of unaltered repetitions and cookie-cutter structures.

It is hard to find fault with the view of this music heard through the fingers of the three musicians. They sound as though they have lived with the trios for more than just a recording session or two, and consistently play with sensitivity and insight. Their ensemble is secure and tightly integrated for the most part, though intonation from the strings is sometimes wanting, including a curious tendency to shrink leading tones to nearly the size of a quarter tone.

Those who have had their fill of the standard Romantic chamber music repertoire may wish to give Eduard Franck's music a listen. It certainly makes for pleasant, uncomplicated listening, but if you're looking for an unsung hero of the 19th century, you will most likely need to continue your search.

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