

CD REVIEWS

Beethoven

The Complete Music for Piano Trio, vol. 1
Piano Trios op. 70

The Florestan Trio
Anthony Marwood *vn* Richard Lester *vc* Susan Tomes *pf*
Hyperion CDA67327 (60 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

The Florestan Trio's excellent new disc offers exceptionally fine interpretations of Beethoven's op. 70 nos 1 and 2, as well as the beautiful yet seldom heard single-movement Allegretto in B flat, WoO 39. Coupling Beethoven's op. 70 piano trios on the same disc is not unusual, but it does remind us of the differing fortunes of the two works. Op. 70 no. 1 in D ('Ghost') is by far the more popular, its robust rhetoric typifying the 'heroic' idiom of middle-period chamber music such as the 'Razumovsky' quartets and the A major cello sonata. Conversely, its neglected E flat sister exemplifies what is often called the 'other Beethoven' – lyrical rather than dramatic; more classicizing than romantic. Like the 'Harp' Quartet op. 74, the trios reflect the mature Beethoven's Haydnesque turn: the two composers were reconciled after the 1808 performance of *The Creation*, and Haydn's death in 1809 – the year op. 70 was completed – seemed to release the pupil's repressed affection for his teacher. This retrospective air is particularly borne out by the E flat trio, which nods at aspects of the 'Drumroll' Symphony (no. 103) in the same key, such as the return of a slow introduction at the end of the first movement, and the middle movement in Haydn's favourite double-variation form. More generally, seen from the perspective of the lyrical phase which links Beethoven's second and third periods (what Dahlhaus called the 'fourth period'), the E flat trio is arguably the more typical and progressive of the two. As would become increasingly common in the works of 1812–17, the piece revisits classical idioms (including Beethoven's own early music) in an experimental light which anticipates his late style. The anticipations in op. 70 no. 2 are highly specific, and pertain to the E flat quartet op. 127: after tentative openings, both pieces confirm the tonic with a big 'tutti' theme which is practically the same (bars 21 ff. in the trio; bars 22 ff. in the quartet). Moreover, the unusual E flat–G–C tonal scheme of the trio's finale (first subject in E flat, second subject in G, reprised in C) foreshadows that of the quartet's first movement. Given the stylistic opposition of the two trios – no. 1 'heroic', no. 2 (neo-)classicizing – it is the paradoxical outcome of the Florestan's performance that the E flat trio persuades only in so far as it is heard to partake of the world of the 'Ghost'; in other words, their interpretation brings out commonalities between the siblings rather than differences – by understating what is so 'odd'

about the E flat work. To be sure, the trios share some striking family resemblances, including most notably a mannerism which interrupts the 'Ghost' in its fifth bar: a sustained cello note, profiled against a piano and violin quaver, projecting the F natural harmonic surprise. This is a kind of gesture which emerges from the very guts of the trio idiom, and punctuates the piece at moments of dramatic import, such as the volcanic climax of the Largo (bar 46). But it also features in all the movements of the E flat trio, such as the B flat climax of the tonic group in the first movement, and the unsettling B naturals of the Allegretto ma non troppo (from bar 24). Although these 'gestures' are rooted in their immediate harmonic contexts, they are basically textural, and connect with each other like signposts. These rhetorical signposts are the most audible indication that the two trios share a common language. Even so, this language is inflected in the E flat trio by quintessentially classical accents, and I would argue that a more authentic, 'early-music', approach, availing itself of the sharper articulation of a fortepiano, would do these accents better justice. The 'oddness' of op. 70 no. 2, in brief, is its inking of a flatter, decentred dynamic which would blossom in the late style; in 1809, this aesthetic sounds like an odd duck. Mellifluous and nuanced as it is, the Florestan's reading nevertheless rounds out the very edges which make the E flat trio so interesting.

But this is to quibble. In most respects, the performances are musical, technically flawless, and exciting. The first movement of no. 1 has real verve, the instrumental dialogue acting out Beethoven's formal syncopations with compelling drama and narrative, such that we don't mind that they follow *both* Beethoven's repeat indications (exposition *and* development-cum-reprise). Compared to the great trios of Haydn and Mozart, the texture of the 'Ghost' is curious, in that the three instruments are disposed neither as equals nor as a glorified piano sonata. Rather, the violin and cello combine like a single, super-extended string instrument, so that the trio sounds like a hybrid between a cello and violin sonata. It is not a trio so much as a reinforced 'duo' (just as Brahms's violin sonatas are really 'trios'). The neatest example comes in the coda of the finale, where cello and violin complete each other's scales; Anthony Marwood's violin and Richard Lester's cello dovetail into each other seamlessly, so we really can't hear the timbral joins. The players also pull off the trio's hardest challenge, which is to shape the Largo which gave the 'Ghost' its name – Beethoven's slowest, and most difficult, slow movement. The Largo is dominated by a reiterated volcanic gesture much imitated by Schubert in late works such as the slow movement of the great E flat major Piano Trio, and that of the posthumous A major piano sonata. The secret of the Largo's architecture is to reserve the true climax to the eruption of bar 45 – the first marked fortissimo – and to tone down the earlier one at bar 29 (only a forte). This the Florestan do; they also bring out the curious fade-outs which puncture these climaxes – a distinctive variant on Beethoven's more common subito-piano mannerism.

The D major trio is generally easier to pull off. By contrast, the symmetrical, classical phrasing of the E flat is much harder to project without a sense of tautology, since Beethoven at his most neoclassical never managed to recuperate Haydn or Mozart's formal suppleness. The key to the Allegro ma non troppo is Beethoven's precise dynamic markings. The antecedent phrases are forte; the consequents are piano, the dynamic asymmetry thereby offsetting the mechanical periodicity. In other words, the phrases unfold in the shade of the forte opening gambits – a device Beethoven had perfected with the brusque

opening of the E minor quartet op. 59 no. 2. The isolated fortes create an architecture which keeps the music flowing, generally in a teleological fashion towards the ends of units: the big 'tutti' theme of the tonic group, the coda, and ultimately the finale, which is the trio's deferred centre of gravity. The trio thus exacts a difficult test of pacing and long-range planning, a test which the Florestan pass admirably. Their architecture is transparent, while their detail is nuanced. I would have liked the articulation of the introduction to be sharper – the staccatos are swallowed up by the mellifluous tone. But the attacks in the finale have real bite. The heavenly length of the Allegretto *ma non troppo* (which foreshadows the finale of op. 90) is curtailed by omitting some repeats – advisedly so. The players bring out the more independent part writing of the E flat trio, as in the deliciously contrapuntal reprise, and the extremely high concertante passagework in the finale. Here and there, they pull the tempo around, but always in keeping with the rubato which Beethoven's own pupil Czerny advised in his theory books. For instance, the tempo of the development relaxes around the harmonic 'purple patches' (digressions into C flat, D flat, and E major). And the players successfully wrong-foot the listener with Beethoven's strange retransition from the flat seventh key of D flat major (Beethoven had approached E flat from D natural, as in the E flat Sonata op. 7, but never before from the flat seventh – another intimation of lateness). As a 'crypto-late' piece, the trio is 'flattest' in its unusual architecture: the middle movements are both Allegrettos, not markedly slower than the first movement (compare with op. 31 no. 3). The Florestan pick up on this hint of tempo continuity, creating a convincing anacrusic arch to the finale, which (like the finale of the C sharp minor Quartet op. 131) is the first structural downbeat of the work. In the midst of the piece, the listener can safely wallow in the sheer gorgeousness of sound, in which Beethoven revisits middle-Haydn idioms (the Allegretto is as wittily po-faced as the 'La Roxolane' movement from Symphony no. 63 in C), and the inimitably suave melodies of his early period. This is a disc worth savouring.

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